Deep Democracy: a proposal for governance in the age of populism

Ropes and referenda: communicating unrepresented views

On 7 June 2020, with ropes strung around his bronze head, Edward Colston's statue was pulled from his stone plinth in the centre of Bristol and thrown into the water at Bristol harbour – a fate mirroring that of thousands of African people who died on Colston's slave ships bound for the Americas. The event was a result of years of leadership indecision over what to do about the statue and other relics of the past. Frustrated by the inability of those in power to act, the people of Bristol took matters, quite literally, into their own hands.

Four years earlier in June 2016, to the shock of many political commentators, the UK voted to leave the European Union in a historic referendum. Leaving the EU had been hailed by many political leaders as the definitive solution to a vast swathe of social and economic issues and the ultimate way to "take back control".

The connection between these two events might not seem immediately obvious, but they share two key features; a sense that the views of those involved had not been reflected in political decisions; and a conclusion that the normal governance systems of democracy would have to be circumvented.

Populism is often characterised as a politically extreme ideology intent on democratic disruption. Indeed, many well-known theories of populism overwhelmingly focus on the threat of populism to representative democracy – Yascha Mounk's is one such example.[1] But what if many instances of public frustration with governance processes were motivated instead by a desire to preserve and strengthen representative democracy? Through a citizen-focused perspective on populism, I argue that the felling of Colston's statue, the vote to leave the EU and many other poignant political acts reflect a shared appeal for reform, rather than destruction, of representative democracy. But met with no systemic response, and left open to political manipulation, populist leaders have transformed this appeal into a demand for the short-circuiting of democratic processes, exposing the survival of representative democracy to major threats.

However, the legitimacy deficit suffered by twenty-first century democracy can be mitigated. The remedies for the sense of disempowerment and disengagement that characterise the age of populism will need to be multiple. They include widening access to democracy and further diversification of elected representatives. However, this proposal focuses on one particular element: the potential of increasingly sophisticated deliberative tools to deliver what I term 'deep democracy'. Good governance *is* possible in the age of populism as long as public input is the focus of democratic development and populism is viewed as the mobilising discourse that creates the right environment for this re-imagining of the practices of democracy.

A citizen-focused perspective on populism

Whether by ropes or referenda, returning power to 'the people' is a key tenet of populism. Populist leaders push the idea of an antagonistic relationship between 'the people' (the general public) and 'the elite' (mainly, elected representatives) in which the former, guided by common sense, know the right way to govern for the general good and the latter, guided by selfish-

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[1] Y. Mounk, *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Harvard University Press, 2019)

interests, wilfully ignore the people in favour of serving themselves.[2] Much has been written about the agendas of populist leaders and parties, but much less so about what motivates citizens with populist leanings.[3] While populist leaders often present direct democracy - for instance the increased use of referenda – or authoritarian governance as the solution to the deficiencies of representative democracy, studies have found that citizens with populist sympathies are actually in favour of maintaining aspects of representation found in the parliamentary model.

A study of citizens' perceptions of populism, democracy and political participation in the Netherlands found that those with populist leanings did not want to do away with elected representatives, but rather they wanted more ways to participate in decision making processes on the policies that affect their lives.[4] Another study found that suggestions that 'the people' should be the sole reference point for political decisions received limited support from populist citizens.[5] Approaching populism from this bottom-up perspective, starting with the citizens, enables a reframing of populism as a mobilising discourse that agitates for better governance, rather than an ideology fundamentally opposed to representative democracy.[6] This driving force - an appeal to improve the quality of decision making processes and the responsiveness of democratic institutions - can be detected in many political moments of recent years, from the protests of Extinction Rebellion to the campaigns on free school meals. However, the political response to populism has rarely focused on revising decision-making practices.

Measuring governance: what makes a 'good' democracy?

The quality of a democracy and its governance is often measured through an evaluation of the policy performance - the ability to deliver policies that are effective according to objective tests.[7] However, by overlooking citizens' perceptions of political efficacy, these indices of 'output' legitimacy can only provide a partial view of the quality of a democracy. By discounting 'input' legitimacy, many democratic systems focus attention away from citizens' dissatisfaction with decision-making processes. Incorporating this 'input' legitimacy recalibrates assessments of what makes democratic governance 'good' by placing more weight on citizens' evaluation of the procedural fairness of democracy.[8] The challenge of populism has so far, however, been met with renewed focus on 'output' legitimacy - appealing to specific demands from across the spectrum of populism by proposing simple policy solutions to complex social dilemmas.[9]

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[2] E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005) p. 84-85 and C. Mudde and C.R. Koltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

[3] A. Zaslove et al, 'Power to the people? Populism, democracy, and political participation: a citizen's perspective', *West European Politics* (2020)

[4] Ibid.

[5] B. Spruyt et al, 'Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?', *Political Research Quarterly* (June 2016, Vol. 69, No. 2) pp. 335-346

[6] P. Aslanidis, 'Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective', *Political Studies* (2016, Vol. 64) pp. 88–104

[7] Pickel et al, 'Measuring the quality of democracy', *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* (November 2016, Vol. 37, No. 5) pp. 645-655

[8] Ibid and F.W. Scharpf, *Problem-Solving Effectiveness and Democratic Accountability in the EU. MPIfG Working Paper 03/1.* (Köln: Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, 2003)

[9] Former US President Donald Trump's proposal to build a wall on the border with Mexico is perhaps the most convincing example of how a simplistic policy solution will not solve a complex set of social and economic issues.

The democratic malaise nascent in many of the world's most populous democracies stems in a large part from a sense of detachment from the decision-making process[10]. I argue that, if people are to feel that they have a real stake in the decisions that affect them, much deeper forms of democratic participation are required.

The risks of maintaining the status quo

For most of the electorate, opportunities for participation in decision making appear as sporadic bursts of engagement, in the form of a vote in an election or referendum. These tests of public preference are not only infrequent, they are also blunt - presenting citizens with binary or simplistic choices. Public preferences on the details of policies - the aspects that touch people's everyday lives - are not systematically sought out. While the work of individual MPs in representing the interests of their constituents through parliamentary or informal means is invaluable, many people still feel disconnected from the decisions that affect their lives and frustration when policies appear to work against their interests. Dwindling rates of political party and trade union membership have also contributed to what Colin Crouch has termed the "march towards post-democracy"- a dulled democracy characterised by declining levels of civic engagement.[11]

This growing disillusionment with the status quo has worrying consequences for the institutions of democracy and the key actors within them. Politicians face derision and threats, commonly directed towards already marginalised communities such as women and those from a BAME backgrounds.[12] Social media has become a key outlet for people to voice their views on policy (and politicians) - adding weight to the feeling that politicians *do* have access to the people's views, but are choosing to ignore them. Without a sense that democratic institutions offer genuine self-determination, people increasingly turn to all-powerful authoritarian figures who offer 'real change'.[13] If democracy is to prevail in the age of populism, the political system needs to meet the demand for a form of governance that responds to public preferences on a more continuous basis.

Engagement with the public is, of course, present in the parliamentary model. As a Clerk at the House of Commons I have seen how select committees function as the organs of the UK Parliament which engage with people in a structured way, advocate continuous dialogue on policy, and make policy through conversation rather than assertion. However, deeper democracy calls for further engagement still. Recently, select committees themselves have recognised this by exploring the power of deliberative tools.

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[10] R.S. Klassen, A. Wenger, D. Rand, A. and M. Slade, 'Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?' (Cambridge, 2003) p.11
Centre for the Future of Democracy

[11] C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Polity, 2004) and W. A. Galston, 'The Enduring Vulnerability of Liberal Democracy', *Journal of Democracy* (July 2020, Volume 31, Issue 3) pp. 8-24.

[12] Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association: Threats to MPs,* First Report of Session 2019-20 (October 2019, HC 37)

[13] S. Gandesha, 'Understanding Right and Left Populism' in J. Morelock, (ed.) *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, (University of Westminster Press, 2018) pp. 49–70

Looking forward: 'deep democracy' through deliberation

A 'deep democracy' that reinstates public confidence in political efficacy can be created by establishing governance mechanisms that value deliberation and consensus-building in decision making. Deliberative tools, that preserve and strengthen rather than replace representative institutions[14], enable citizens to trace a direct line to policy decisions and endorse democratic processes.[15]

Many theories of populism[16] argue that deliberative tools represent a more plural form of democracy at odds with the demands made by populists. However, a citizen-focused perspective on populism suggests otherwise: research has found that people with populist views are in fact *more* inclined to support deliberative forms of participation.[17] Democracies that incorporate deliberation are grounded in the ideal of people from a range of backgrounds coming together to discuss political issues and, on the basis of those discussions, reaching a consensus on the policies that will affect their lives.[18] A range of deliberative tools aimed at building consensus are at the disposal of a polity that wants to deepen democracy. Innovative techniques such as mini-publics, co-production and citizens' advisory groups can be used throughout the policy-making life cycle to strengthen existing democratic institutions *and* public perceptions of political efficacy.[19]

Citizens' assemblies: a tried and tested deliberative tool

Parliaments and governments around the world are increasingly using deliberative tools to ensure policy decisions are informed by relevant lived experience and a range of public perspectives. Citizens' assemblies (a form of mini-public) have been used to forge consensus on policy issues recently across the world including in the UK, Ireland, France and Mongolia.[20] Citizens' assemblies provide policymakers with evidence on the informed preferences of a representative sample of the population, by bringing together a random group of people selected through sortition to reflect the wider population.[21] Demographic and attitudinal stratification criteria ensure that the participants contribute a range of life experiences and views to the deliberation process, which is structured around the principle of respect for one another's views. An assembly is always facilitated independently of the commissioning body, helping to ensure that the process is unbiased. A range of expert witnesses provide information and an insight into different potential solutions, but crucially it is the participants themselves that guide the process and formulate policy responses. The culmination of an assembly's work usually takes the form of a report back to the commissioning body, with a clear set of policy

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[14] S. Elstub, 'Deliberative and Participatory Democracy' in A. Bächtiger et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

[15] C. Lafont, *Democracy Without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020)

[16] For instance, S. Rummens, 'Populism as a threat to liberal democracy' in C.R. Kaltwasser et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

[17] Zaslove et al, 'Power to the people?

[18] A. Bächtiger et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*

[19] In France randomly selected citizens will be appointed to the Social, Environment and Economic Council to systematise deliberative processes. https://www.lecese.fr/content/louverture-du-cese-la-parole-citoyenne

[20] D. Farrell et al, 'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation: the 2016–18 citizens' assembly in Ireland, *Irish Political Studies* (November 2018)

[21] Climate Assembly UK, *The Path to Net Zero* (September 2020)

recommendations. This report acts as a credible body of evidence on considered public preferences and enriches the sources of information available to decision makers.

This deeper democratic participation leads to improved policies and increased satisfaction with decision-making processes and the role of politicians. In essence, deliberation can deliver better input *and* output legitimacy.

Political efficacy benefits: input legitimacy

The power of deliberative tools to deliver an increased sense of self-determination enables citizens to own and identify with the institutions of democracy. Deliberative tools improve trust in democratic institutions and desire for participation in democratic processes[22]. Deliberation gives citizens first-hand experience of the trade-offs and compromises needed to reach consensus, which has been shown to increase trust in politicians and engagement with democratic institutions.[23] When deliberative tools are given adequate communication support, these benefits are felt on a wider public level. Analysis of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review, a mini-public designed to inform public referenda in Oregon, has shown that this micro-level exercise had an 'emanating effect' of shaping the internal deliberations of the wider public.[24]

Procedural fairness is a crucial aspect of input legitimacy. The UK Parliament has recently used the model of citizens' assemblies to help establish a structured and transparent way of feeding informed public preferences into the policy debate on complex issues.[25] The results of Climate Assembly UK – the citizens' assembly on climate change commissioned by six select committees – demonstrated that a diverse group of the public can reach consensus on how to reduce the UK's emissions to net zero by 2050.[26] By making the process of Climate Assembly UK publicly available, parliamentarians can seed trust in the procedures of decision-making and drive public buy-in on otherwise difficult policy measures on issues including travel, diet and energy production.

Policy benefits: output legitimacy

States that employ the use of deliberative tools have also found a substantial increase in levels of public satisfaction with policies - the democratic 'output' - by creating the time, space and structure to feed public preference into complex policy decisions. In 2012 the Oxleas NHS Mental Health Trust delivered improvements to the ward admissions process through an experience-based co-design that captured the views of patients, carers and staff through discussion, observation and filmed interviews. The exercise delivered high levels of patient

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[22] S. Evans and H. Boyte, *Free Spaces: the sources of democratic change in America*, (University of Chicago Press, 1992) Evans and Boyte argue that avenues for participation can be 'schools of democracy', and theorise that participation begets participation.

[23] S. Boulianne, 'Building Faith in Democracy: Deliberative Events, Political Trust and Efficacy', *Political Studies* (2019, Vol. 67, 1) pp. 4-30

[24] K. Knobloch et al, 'Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on Voters' Political Efficacy, *Political Studies* (2020, Vol. 68, 2) pp. 426-445

[25] In 2018, a citizens' assembly on social care was also commissioned by two House of Commons select committees.

[26] Climate Assembly UK, *The Path to Net Zero*

satisfaction, with an 80% reduction in complaints over 14 months, and both patients and staff reporting a sense of empowerment.[27]

The cost of running deliberative processes varies depending on the scale and method, but expense is often cited as a barrier to using them. However, the costs of implementing and then reforming or withdrawing ineffective policies makes the case for diverting more resource to ensuring policies are informed by lived experience from the outset.

Deliberative tools can also lead to improved democratic output by unblocking political indecision on intractable policy issues, such as climate change and social care. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, which pre-empted the 2018 referendum on the country's abortion law, helped to create the political space for a difficult policy decision. The Irish Constitution's Eighth Amendment was a source of significant moral and political consternation, and the Citizens' Assembly enabled both policy makers and the public to make a radical decision on an issue that had been beset by deadlock in representative institutions. Polls showed high levels of awareness of the assembly's recommendation during the referendum campaign.[28] Interview evidence suggests that people found that the assembly's deliberations helped to focus the campaign on balanced information rather than emotions, and that having assembly-backed replacement legislation ahead of the referendum provided a touchstone around which the country could form consensus.[29]

Conclusion

I have set out the case for systematising the use of deliberative tools to meet populism's demand for a system of governance that is more representative of, and responsive to, the people.

However, political will is key to an effective deep democracy. Deliberative tools must be harnessed in a symbiotic relationship with the more traditional institutions of representative democracy to ensure that disillusionment is not fuelled further. Institutions and politicians must endorse, engage with and respond to deliberative exercises to reinstate faith in representative democracy. The engagement of many democracies with deliberative processes is a promising signal, but realising their full potential will require both a self-reflexive analysis of governance mechanisms and a commitment of resources to the creation of a sustainable and shared policy sphere.

Populism, from a citizens' perspective, can be seen as a corrective force that should prompt democratic reform. If adopted, deep democracy will be more resilient to exogenous and uncontrollable threats – and less at the mercy of those who offer simple solutions to complex problems.

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[27] https://www.pointofcarefoundation.org.uk/resource/experience-based-co-design-ebcd-toolkit/case-studies/case-study-1-oxleas-mental-health-trust/

[28] J. Suiter, 'Deliberation in Action – Ireland's Abortion Referendum', *Political Insight*, (2018, Vol. 9, Issue 3) pp. 30-32

[29] The Guardian, *'Transparency and fairness': Irish readers on why the Citizens' Assembly worked* (January 2019)