



INNOVATING DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF CRISIS: SOLUTION OR UTOPIA?

PETER VERMEERSCH

Peter Vermeersch is a professor of political science at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium.

He has published widely on minority issues, diversity and nationalism in central and eastern Europe. He was a member of the academic team of the G1000 citizens' summit.

1. For more information, see g1000.org.

A country-wide citizens' summit called G1000 was held in Belgium on November 11th 2011.¹ One thousand citizens were selected randomly and invited to come together and sit down for a whole day at tables of ten to discuss the future of the country. The G1000 built on the growing engagement and belief of people in alternative forms of political participation. The purpose was to foster positive and constructive thinking about policy development, tap the creativity of the crowd, seek genuine debate about policy content outside the limiting framework of parties and elections, and search for solutions beyond adversarial party politics. The initiative was based on the idea that deliberation among citizens creates opportunities to engage more people meaningfully in politics through argument and narrative than is possible through strategic bargaining and the defence of fixed collective interests. Deliberation reflects an understanding of politics as a forum for the exchange of ideas and respectful disagreement, not necessarily along the lines of traditional ideologies.

As a member of the academic team behind the G1000, I have often been asked: Should this initiative be regarded as an exercise in wishful thinking, or do deliberative innovations like this truly have the potential to become a more central part of the democratic system as we know it? I believe that this question is based on a false premise. The G1000 was both utopian and practical. It *needed* to be both because democracy too is both utopian and practical.

Unlike other forms of government, democracy by necessity entails a balance between practical feasibility and wishful thinking. Although its ideal is to guarantee government by the people, and thus to give every member of the society power in matters that affect the entire polity, in practice a democracy only can approximate this goal. If everyone were to participate equally in matters of government, governing would become practically impossible.

This tension between a democratic ideal and inherent imperfection, however, is not necessarily a problem. It is to some extent even an opportunity, especially in the current crisis. To date, the practical implementation of democracy has relied heavily, even almost exclusively, on an important Renaissance tradition: the institutions of representative democracy. We have built on the principles of territorially based competitive elections, legislative and executive offices and supporting administrative agencies. These mechanisms for democratic representation have been fine tuned over the last two centuries. But the current frustration in the face of the financial crisis makes it increasingly clear that further development is needed, and that the classical structures need rethinking. In fact, new ways of

addressing the inherent imperfection of democracy ultimately may be the only way to save democracy.

Why are the classical structures not sufficient? One reason is that political parties, especially in Europe, in recent decades have lost much of their traditional status as legitimate channels for political participation; party membership is decreasing and party loyalty is diminishing. Similarly, classic civil society organisations such as trade unions and welfare agencies are no longer seen as key channels between decision-makers and the public. The protests both worldwide and in Europe, from Greece to Slovenia, also show that there is a more general public distrust of politics – particularly party politics – in many democratic countries.

Instead of deploring citizen disengagement from and disillusionment with the formal structures of representative democracy, one can find hope in the opportunities for engagement presented by alternative forms of political participation. Although direct political engagement in the established channels of democracy seems to have declined, citizens increasingly engage in other ways. They are, for example, more aware of public policy debates than ever before. This is facilitated by new media and digital technology that rapidly inform citizens of new developments. In addition, social media allows citizens to have a more direct say in the public debate and in the mainstream media. These developments also have radically changed the way in which politicians mobilise citizens. Social media and online forums make it more difficult for politicians to hide. Instead, they must reside in the public sphere where they can be questioned critically. We seriously should consider democratic practices that embrace these new developments, in particular those contemporary democratic innovations that go beyond representative democracy without invalidating its classic institutions. They create special spaces that give room to different opinions to emerge, diverge and converge, and provide an opportunity for new forms of democratic citizenship to grow. They allow many different opinions to coexist in spaces that are outside the regular institutions of representative democracy – where they rely on their own, new dynamic. The notion of citizen deliberation in particular opens up opportunities for governance, because it creates possibilities for something that is neither simply a political debate with winners or losers nor a process that relies entirely on consensus.

Could such deliberative spaces provide a path to transform democracy? Among scholars, the conviction seems to be growing that they can. A large and growing list of political scientists have theorised about the second transformation of democracy and have suggested

that liberal representative political systems should move beyond top-down polyarchies to new models that engage in more bottom-up processes involving deliberation among citizens. The last few years have also seen a surge in practical initiatives aimed at realising this theoretical claim. In addition to G1000 in Belgium, notable examples are the We the Citizens initiative in Ireland, the constitutional council in Iceland, the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia and the Citizens Forum in the Netherlands. These initiatives – as well as a host of smaller experiments – all rely on the participation of ordinary citizens.

How can these citizens' deliberations push democracy forward? One way in which they can do this is simply by showing that democracy is at its best when it is a creative process. Since citizens in established democracies have all the institutions of representative democracy in place, they tend to think of democracy as a completed process that does not require rethinking. But that view contradicts the spirit of the democratic process as always open and in need of change. It is therefore fruitful to conceptualise democracy as an on-going conversation between the governed and those who govern. Such a conversation needs multiple channels. Elections are one such channel, but more are needed. Citizens are more likely to create such channels than politicians, who today are often so focused on getting a mandate from the public through elections that they do not risk thinking more broadly about democracy. They think only in terms of the institutionalised bargaining process. Citizens, however, are more free to participate in politics in ways that bypass the limitations of elections and party politics. They do so by voicing their views through the internet, by occupying places, by protesting in numerous ways. That activity should be harvested, not ignored.

One perhaps could complain that the more or-less-spontaneous citizen initiatives that we have seen in recent times are too diverse to form a strong and persuasive movement for democratic change. Their goals and agendas are different and have emerged from different concerns. That is true. They are certainly not yet a unified movement. But what connects these initiatives is that they lay bare two aspects of democracy that are often forgotten in the context of the traditional mechanics of the democratic system: its necessary incompleteness and its reliance on creativity. The current engagements will not and cannot lead to a perfect democracy. Democracy will continue to be a balance between practical feasibility and wishful thinking. They point, however, to new ways in which this balance can be imagined. That is extremely valuable. It is only through constantly revitalising democracy that democracy will be kept alive.