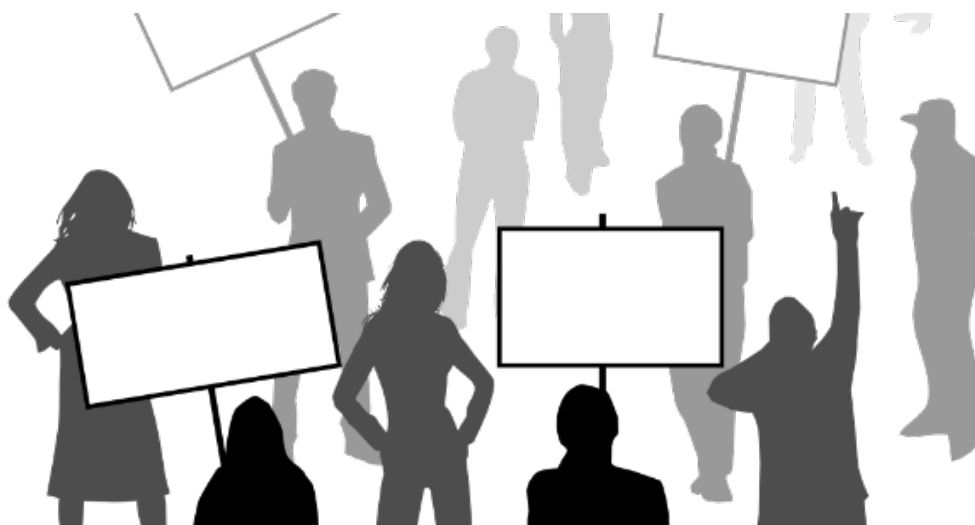


Citizen-centred democratic theory is dead. Long live citizen-centred theory! It's time we designed a politics for citizens as they really are, not how we'd like them to be

*Forms of democracy that depend on high levels of public participation and civic deliberation are unrealistic, argues **Phil Parvin**. Instead, political reform should focus less on increased participation and more on representation, in particular to counter the effects of elite lobbying by economically powerful interest groups.*



Picture: [Public domain](#)

Democracy doesn't work the way many democrats think it does, or would like it to. It's not clear that it ever did. Many democrats are waking up to this fact. Many democratic theorists in the US and UK were shocked and dismayed at the result of the 2016 EU referendum and the election of President Trump. The problem wasn't the results in themselves, which some academics had predicted, it was the political process that produced them, which was characterised by almost none of the behaviours and virtues that democrats defend as necessary democratic fundamentals.

The story we are used to telling ourselves about democracy is well known and ingrained in the structure of our political discourse: that power lies with the people, who transfer it to representatives who govern on their behalf. Citizens participate, and in doing so they afford legitimacy to government and the wider political system, and provide crucial on-the-ground insights into political problems which representatives can use to form solutions. But they don't. Or, at least, many don't. And those that do, don't do so in the ways that democracy requires. There is in much democratic theory an optimism about what citizens can and will do, and how they can and will think, that is misplaced and unfounded. Early defenders of [deliberative democracy](#), for example, envisaged a system in which citizens would debate rationally and reasonably in good faith, constrained by norms of civility. Democracy was a process: a conversation among free and equal individuals motivated to produce fair outcomes. The infeasibility of this view, and its idealism, was revealed long before Trump and Brexit, however, and it didn't take long for the majority of deliberative democrats to abandon the project of encouraging deliberation at the level of the mass public.

Neither this view nor the optimism has gone away completely, however. Some continue to argue that the problems of democracy will be solved by *more democracy*; that the answer to our democratic ills lies in mining the epistemic insights of [ordinary citizens](#). Our politics should be 'citizen centred', these democrats say: its future lies in building institutions that afford citizens greater control. The citizen-centred approach sounds emancipatory and positive. But neither democratic politics nor citizens are like this.

For the citizen-centred approach to work, we need to work with citizens *as they are*, and not as we would like them to be. You don't do democracy, or citizens, any favours by building a conception of politics around citizens as capable of doing things, or willing to do things, that they can't or won't do.

But this is precisely what the majority of democrats do. They foreground reason, debate and the willingness of citizens to respond rationally to evidence and argument even though people don't act this way. Cognitive biases, tribal mentalities, partisan loyalties, group memberships, social norms, and countless other factors exert pressure on individuals to think and act in ways which do not fit the rationalist liberal model. People do not, in general, engage in political argument as a reasonable process of finding consensus. They do it to *win*. And in the struggle to win, facts are left aside, evidence is ignored or derided as 'fake', civility is often replaced by anger, and truth is lost among raised voices and rancour.

We see this in the debates among representatives in legislatures around the world, as well as in the conduct of political campaigns. As philosopher [Jason Brennan](#) recently noted, political debate doesn't bring people together, or make people empathetic, or produce rationally justifiable consensus. It makes people angry, and produces divisions between people that democracy itself cannot resolve. Because democracy is the problem, more democracy makes the problem worse, not better.

None of this is strictly the fault of citizens, or even contemporary politicians. Liberal democratic states have over the past three-quarters of a century experienced structural changes that have left citizens, and the poorest citizens in particular, marginalised from the democratic system. Citizens have seen their role in politics diminish and the business of governance retreat further and further from them. Decisions, in general, aren't made by representatives in consultation with their electors, but by representatives in consultation with a community of elite-level insider organisations. The views of the people are not communicated up to politicians by grassroots organisations and traditional associations, as many democrats believe is crucial: such groups have all but disappeared and been replaced by a dense network of hierarchical lobby organisations which operate at a distance from citizens, and even from their [own members](#).

Consequently, citizens know little about politics, and the poorest know the least. Citizens do not participate much in democratic life, and the poorest participate the least. Democracy *itself* created this problem. It relies on citizens to do what they cannot or will not do, to think, to approach political debate, to understand the world, in ways they do not or cannot. In doing so it has been forced to reconfigure itself in ways which insulate it against the reality of what people can *actually* do, and what they *actually* think. Democracies have turned inwards, and shifted power upwards.

What we need is not *faux* citizen-centredness. We need to adopt a *genuinely* citizen-centred approach: one that is built on a realistic and accurate understanding of citizens, including their flaws, rather than an idealistic fantasy. We need, to quote [Achen and Bartels](#), a 'democracy for realists'.

The challenge isn't to increase opportunities for participation. It's to reform liberal democratic states in ways that enable them to produce fair and just outcomes *in the absence* of widespread, knowledgeable, rational, civil citizen participation. It's to build a democratic politics that takes citizens as they are, and which is as resilient as it can be to the problems caused by the cognitive biases, political ignorance, irrationality, and group-think which characterises citizens' behaviour in the real world.

The challenge is to reform democratic institutions in such a way that they are able to give citizens a fair hearing while also subjecting the popular will to appropriate constraint, and to break up the entrenched concentrations of power which have, over the past three-quarters of a century, allowed private interest groups to leverage their economic advantage.

It's not an easy project. But it's a necessary one if democracy is going to remain viable. The answer, I believe, is to focus less on *participation* and more on *representation*. We need to seek innovative ways of reforming democratic institutions to better enable them to represent citizens' interests without requiring them to participate as often, or in overly idealised ways. There are many possible opportunities for doing so. For example, citizens' voices could be incorporated into the business of governance through mini-publics and other focused mechanisms which bypass the problems of mass-level political debate, and which could be fed into new stages of the legislative process. In the UK, for example, the power of the committee system could be harnessed to better include conclusions emanating from suitably structured debates. The process of affording powers of scrutiny and policy development to non-majoritarian organisations could be extended; new regulations governing the activities of lobby groups and other insider organisations might be introduced.

The scale of the public's marginalisation from politics means that more meaningful progress will be made by adopting a strategy of top-down institutional reform than a strategy of bottom-up civic renewal. Such a strategy has the benefit of taking seriously the structural impediments that make it difficult for many people, especially the least advantaged, to participate in the system on a free and equal basis, and the long-term challenge posed by these impediments. Finding ways of easing the pressure on citizens to participate, and of enabling representative institutions to drive the political process on citizens' behalf, would be better for democracy and for citizens: more feasible, more realistic, and more wedded to the lived experience of citizens and representatives in the 21st century.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on his article, ['Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era'](#), published in Res Publica.

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