

Lend us your ears: fixing the crisis of legitimacy in politics

 democraticaudit.com /2017/06/05/lend-us-your-ears-fixing-the-crisis-of-legitimacy-in-politics/

By Democratic Audit UK

2017-6-5

*A crisis in legitimacy afflicts British and American politics. Voters complain their voices go unheard. Democratic Audit editor **Ros Taylor** asks Harvard democracy professor **Jane Mansbridge** how politicians about why, in a society where new channels of communication are opening up, politicians are increasingly distanced from the electorate. How does it help to explain Donald Trump's success – and what are the lessons for the Democratic Party?*



Drawings of ears in Giovanni Battista Cipriani's Rudiments of Drawing. [Wellcome Trust](#) via a [CC BY 4.0 licence](#)

You argue that there's been a breakdown in trust between voters and their elected representatives in the US and UK. Yet it's arguably easier than ever before for them to contact each other. Are the representatives not listening, or do voters find it difficult to use new methods of communication to convey their concerns?

I argue that we should have a new ideal of recursive communication among representatives and constituents. The new methods of communication of which you speak are all essentially one-way. **What today we call “two-way” communication usually consists of two separate one-way communications: constituents making demands and representatives making claims. Instead, we need both constituents and representatives to listen, hear, digest, and respond to one another on the basis of what they hear the other saying.** Michael Neblo, a political theorist in the US, and his colleagues have developed technologies that make online small-group discussions of this sort possible between representatives and randomly selected groups of constituents. That's one new method. We might also repurpose surgeries to have a stronger policy component. The goal is the representative as interlocutor. If we keep the ideal of recursive communication in mind, we can invent new methods of communication to approach that ideal.

What did Trump understand about voters disadvantaged by globalisation that Clinton didn't?

Trump tests my ideal of “recursive communication” between voters and their representatives because his speeches capture the bad side of recursivity. He himself stated that his speech-making technique was to say something and if the crowd was enthusiastic, repeat it; if they were bored, he tried something else. To the degree that this is true, he did not so much understand them as let himself be shaped by them. As many know, Clinton's speeches were more scripted by coastal elites and consultants, although based on her convictions. These speeches were relatively sensitive to the concerns of minorities and women but not so sensitive to the concerns, and also the language and

world-views, of the disadvantaged working class. Trump picked up on the festering anger, tied it to immigration, and ran with it.

In the US, voters are worried about outsourcing; in the UK, immigration. Protectionism and closed borders have been presented as appealing solutions, with politicians like Trump and Theresa May arguing that they are what voters actually want. How can we challenge politicians who claim to channel the popular will, without patronising voters?

I think we listen to the voters. When I speak of “the representative as interlocutor,” I mean a representative who listens carefully to what people in her constituency are saying, processes that, responds to constituents recursively on the basis of what she has heard, and then tries to communicate what she has heard to other representatives from possibly very different constituencies. Every citizen – every person – has implicit biases, both about people like her and about people unlike her. Sometimes those biases amount to outright xenophobia. When we can recognise those biases we ought to respond to them sensitively, not building the biases into policy but recognising the experiences that create them and finding ways to meet real needs. Politicians who claim to challenge the popular will are falsely denying the plurality that makes a polity wise and strong, as Aristotle and many after him recognised.

Clinton’s motto, “Stronger together,” was right. But she herself knew that she communicated that message better through her life than through her speech-making abilities. When she faced a 40-year campaign to demonise her, starting when she was First Lady in Arkansas, it became hard to show others the lesson behind her life. I think in other circumstances she could have made understandable the lesson of strength together, and I think other leaders can do so going forward. Each one of us knows from our own lives that we need players with different abilities on the team. When those other players are perceived incorrectly as, for example, taking one’s job, I believe that it is possible to correct that mistake on a basis of equal respect, not patronisation. When the perception is correct, however, it is the job of political leaders to do something about it – by intervening to create new jobs and facilitate mobility, as in Denmark, by protecting jobs, or even by restricting (not stopping) immigration. When people complained in France about “Polish plumbers” taking their jobs, they were laughed at. That’s not a good response.

What do the Democrats need to do to reconnect with voters?

Build the Democratic Party from the counties and states up. Nurture and encourage to run for office what I think of as “people in place” – people who have grown up in an area, speak the language and understand the perspectives of those who live there. Working class people and women particularly need encouragement. They respond to expressions of confidence backed with support. In the US, however, the Democratic Party is too weak to perform these functions adequately or even at all. In the United Kingdom and the Continent party strength has declined dramatically, but it is still greater than in the US. **People often don’t understand that one of the major jobs of parties is, and ought to be, seeking out those who might want to run for office and helping them make the often difficult transition to the political world. If parties don’t do that, who will?** Like representatives, parties also should be interlocutors, helping citizens to communicate and explaining them to one another.

Jane Mansbridge delivered a lecture on 15 May 2017 at the LSE, [Listening to One’s Constituents? Now, There’s an Idea](#). Listen to the [podcast](#) or see her [presentation](#).

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

[Jane Mansbridge](#) is Charles F. Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values at the John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard.

