

Gender equality in Parliament: how random selection could get us there

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By Democratic Audit UK

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Would choosing the second chamber by sortition be an effective way to achieve a 50:50 balance between men and women? **John Dryzek** argues that the upper chamber – in Australia as in the UK, a deliberative forum – would be a good place to start, and looks at ways to ensure women sitting in deliberative assemblies get an equal voice and hearing.



Women's Equality Party supporters join the Pride march in London, 2016. The WEP wants equal representation for women in Parliament. Photo: [patrickdevries2003](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Sortition constitutes political assemblies not by election, but rather by random selection from the citizenry. It has been around longer than elections, and was used over 2500 years ago in ancient Athens.

Today, random selection of citizens to make vital community decisions is most familiar when it comes to the jury in criminal cases. However, there is increased interest in random selection to constitute deliberative citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, and similar forums. Most of these have an advisory role on a policy issue (such as human biotechnology, or city planning), so do not legislate. But the failures of existing legislative assemblies have led to recent advocacy of sortition to select legislatures – dispensing with elected politicians. David van Reybrouck's book [Against Elections: The Case for Democracy](#) is a recent prominent statement along these lines. (*Editor's note: You can read a review of van Reybrouck's book [here](#).*)

A good place to start would be the upper house. We have evidence that shows ordinary citizens are much better than professional politicians when it comes to the key virtue of reflection: willingness to change one's mind if persuaded. Upper houses like the Australian Senate are supposed to be houses of review and reflection – not just mirrors of the partisan advocacy that goes on in the lower house.

In ancient Athens, all the citizens were male, and so sortition did nothing for gender equality. Today, of course, around 50% of citizens are female, and so sortition would automatically yield 50-50 representation.

Yet 50-50 representation is not enough to yield real equality. Twenty years ago Iris Marion Young [pointed out](#) that **enthusiasm for deliberative democracy – which puts meaningful communication at the heart of politics – could still lead to what she called the 'internal' exclusion of women (and others)**. Iris Young was a leading political theorist, best known for her work on justice and communicative democracy. For Young, internal inclusion

occurs when deliberation is restricted to dispassionate rational argument, which she believed privileged the speaking style of white, well-educated males. Young highlighted forms of communication such as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling to counteract this privilege. Most deliberative democrats now accept this, though we are also wary of the subtle exclusions that can accompany these alternative modes.

Back in 1996, Young didn't have much evidence. Today, we have substantial evidence that tells a more complex story. In their 2012 book [The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation and Institutions](#), Christopher Markowitz and Tali Mendelberg show that equal voice and influence is elusive, but can be enhanced by careful attention to institutional rules. Notably, they find that **women's voice is further disadvantaged (beyond simple numbers) when they are in a minority in groups featuring majority rule**. A decision rule of unanimity helps – but only so long as women remain in a minority. If women are a majority then their voice is advantaged by majority rule. Unfortunately these results do not tell us exactly what to do when the balance is 50/50, but the general point that institutional rules matter is important.

There is more to the deliberative story: Facilitators of deliberative citizen forums know that achieving equal voice for women is hard work, but there are things that facilitators can do to help. For example, [Hans Asenbaum in a recent article](#) shows that having participants address the facilitator, rather than other participants directly, promotes equality; and that a moderately (but not excessively) assertive facilitator who encourages the telling of personal stories can help equalise communicative influence.

To conclude: one way to achieve 50/50 by 2030 is through sortition accompanied by deliberation – but we have to be very careful how deliberation is designed.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It first appeared at the [BroadAgenda Blog](#).

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