

Citizens can and should be involved in the process of shaping economic policy

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Economics has long been tainted by the label ‘the dismal science’ and an image of grey haired old men poring over statistics, but could there ever be a ‘citizens economics’? Here, **Reema Patel** discusses a new RSA project which seeks to create just that, and an event which aims to contribute to its creation.*



Paul Krugman (Credit: [Commonwealth Club, CC BY 2.0](#))

Economics for everyone

Events of the past ten years, and in particular, events of the past few weeks, have demonstrated that economics is a matter for everyone. That didn't become true overnight – UK voters have consistently ranked competence on the economy as one of their top three reasons for electing their representatives (and in some instances, voting them out). But the 2008 financial crisis and its impact on citizens brought international attention to the role of the citizen in contributing to conversations about economic policy. Attention has turned to the matter again after the Brexit vote led to a collapse in global stockmarkets as well as the value of the pound, and a hard-fought debate over the quality of information available during the referendum. Now, more than ever, there is a need to return to principles that promote informed, upstream citizen engagement in complex issues that affect their future.

The rise of groups such as the Occupy movement, the momentum behind groups such as student-led Rethinking Economics, and academic-led CORE – aiming to make economics more engaging and accessible, and the renewed interest in alternative narratives about the economy (from Thomas Piketty to Mariana Mazzucato) has drawn attention to the need to explore economics in a way that does justice to its status as a moral and political subject.

Isn't economics just for experts?

Economics has traditionally been treated as expert-led and an objective science – and that has often been used to exclude the layperson from important conversations about decisions that affect them. But the more expert-led a domain, the more likely that profound questions about values and ethics are neglected. For example, in science and technology, pipeline models of research and innovation can throw up questions about the ethics of genome editing, nanotechnology and synthetic biology – issues that can be overlooked if a purely expert-led and narrow approach is taken. The same risk applies to treating economics as a discipline only for the experts. This bolsters the case for greater transparency and accountability about the way in which decisions have been taken, the case for broadening engagement with the public, and the case for improving the quality of information, discussion and debate in economics.

The object of economics is the heart and soul

Our starting point is that citizens' lives are affected pervasively by economic policy, and that economic policy is concerned as much with what we prioritise and value, as it is with how we achieve those things. Margaret Thatcher, former UK Prime Minister, recognised this more than most. In a Sunday Times interview, she once declared that *'economics is the method – the object is to change the heart and soul'*. In saying this she understood that economics – the process, the methodology and the 'science' – ultimately has a purpose that relates to social outcomes that affect citizens.

Whether she thought citizens should then be involved in the process of shaping economic policy is another question – but we at the RSA make the case that they should.

About the Citizens' Economic Council

The Citizens' Economic Council is a programme that begins this process of involvement. This is a deliberative engagement process over the next two years which will work with a Council of 50 – 60 citizens who are independently selected from a diverse and stratified sample from across the UK. Citizens will have the opportunity to be informed about economic policy, to talk to policymakers, economists and politicians, and to collaborate with each other with a view to co-producing new economic policy ideas in time for the 2020 General Election. We will engage directly with hard-to-reach groups and communities through Economic Inclusion workshops, with 27,000 fellows at the RSA and with self-organising networks and groups who are discussing economic policy, supporting them to submit policy ideas to the Council. We will invite ideas from across the globe as well as from within the UK – recognising that countries across the world may be piloting and testing new policy ideas that may be of interest to the UK. The deliberations of the Council will be live streamed, and we will work with and empower citizens on the Council to advocate directly for their policies.

Our starting point in this journey is to ask whether citizens can be economists – and what the extent of their role in shaping and influencing policy might be. We'd like to invite you to join this conversation at the launch of our programme on **Wednesday 29th June at 6pm**, with our panel Simon Burall (Director of Involve), Paul Johnson (Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies), Julie Timbrell (Occupy Democracy) and Seema Malhotra MP (former Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury and MP for Feltham and Heston).

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You can [register and attend](#) here, held in London at RSA House, 8 **John Adam Street**, London, WC2N 6EZ. Find out more about the Citizens' Economic Council online [here](#).

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