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Now is the Time for Augmented Democracy

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How to maximize collective intelligence to solve pressing issues more effectively

Democracy is intended to be the power of the people, for the people, and by the people. Unfortunately, as Yale Professor Hélène Landemore reminds us in *Democratic Reason – Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the many*, over time, few politicians, thinkers, and even citizens have had much faith in the electorate's ability to be intelligent collectively. Winston Churchill once famously said, "The best argument against

democracy is a 5-minute conversation with the average voter.” Doesn’t this comment resonate with most of us today?

Yet, in the past few years, deliberate experiments in new forms of public collaboration around the world have proven that such skepticism may be overblown. National issues forums, democracy festivals, consensus conferences, participatory budgeting, and unusual approaches such as the Forum Theater are building a more fruitful relationship between citizens and public authorities. For example, in India, following the *jan sunwai* public hearings approach, officials and people that have been affected by a particular action or decision of the administration settle legal disputes in front of a public that laughs, applauds, or boos. In Grenoble and Charleroi in France, through *Parlons-en* events, people who are homeless are invited to discuss their difficulties with their fellow citizens. In Chile, the Consensus Table offers indigenous peoples a unique opportunity to talk with government agents.

Moving from Democratic “Supplements” to a Healthy “Diet”

Such initiatives are welcome supplements in the diet of a poorly nourished political body. The good news is that by bringing people together, they strengthen civic education, engagement, and public conversation. But even as these efforts grow in importance, they remain relatively marginal. The conversation is too often unbalanced and ill informed, and the resulting decisions remain (or at least are perceived as) sub-optimal. Such initiatives are also insufficient in the face of growing challenges and opportunities: Demagogues prosper while people become more frustrated; new digital tools enhance citizens’ expectation to have more say but also

democracy, starting in Europe.

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unleash disinformation; and new social movements and innovative experiments continue to grow in number and impact.

To ensure more legitimate *and* effective policies, we need a structurally healthy diet of democracy that incorporates sustained dialogue. As H  l  ne Landemore comments, “For most political problems and under conditions conducive to proper deliberation and proper use of majority rule, a democratic decision procedure is likely to be a better decision procedure than any nondemocratic decision procedures.”

Fortunately, we know from many experiments the conditions that allow a group of diverse people to solve societal issues with creative, efficient, effective, and timely solutions. Building on such practices and insights, now is the time for what I call “Augmented Democracy.”

The Seven Pillars of Augmented Democracy

Policy makers readily admit that they are not equipped to communicate with their constituents, as a **recent survey of government communications leaders** conducted by communications firm WPP revealed. Spanning 40 countries, it indicates that only half of respondents believe they have the right tools and resources to do their jobs. Only 14% have had any training in public engagement. Is it therefore surprising that, while today’s institutions understand the importance of investing in collective intelligence, they are unsure how to do so properly?

Experiments in participatory and deliberative democracy, creativity, and collective intelligence show that high-quality deliberation requires at least the

following seven ingredients:

1. Participants should be engaged through a “T-shaped” approach that combines deep technical expertise with a wide range of user perspectives.
2. Relevant public authorities should be closely involved and make a clear commitment as to how they treat the outputs of the process. The higher up they go on Sherry Arnstein’s **participation ladder**, the more likely they are to generate interest and a positive outcome.
3. Participants need to be given access to reasonably accurate information that they believe to be relevant to the issue.
4. Participants should represent the diversity of positions in the public. The benefits of cognitive diversity and the legitimacy of the process are best ensured by a sufficiently large – and, if possible, truly representative – sample of a given population.
5. Arguments offered by one side should be answered by considerations offered by those who hold other perspectives.
6. Participants should be allowed to sincerely weigh the merits of the arguments, and arguments offered by all participants should be considered on the merits, regardless of which participants offer them.
7. The process should be transparent, through the media and on- and offline interaction with a wider public, in order to increase the legitimacy of the solutions proposed and to tap into wider cognitive diversity.

What Augmented Democracy Could Look Like

Different combinations of methodologies can be brought together to meet the above principles. In fact, “Augmented Democracy” should be seen as a

commitment to a sustained “democratic R&D” approach as opposed to a rigidly defined tool. For the sake of illustration, I will highlight a possible combination of social and policy labs, transformative scenario planning, deliberative polling, civic tech, and creativity techniques that together increase impact, convergence between stakeholders, and public acceptance of outcomes.

Imagine that, as a government official, you are required to define the policy and regulatory reforms required to address an issue with system-wide implications, complex ethical dilemmas, and long-term impacts (all characteristics that our current governance mechanisms struggle with). This challenge could be the transformation of healthcare through the digital and genomics revolutions, the repercussions on our economies and societies of autonomous vehicles, or the impact on jobs of artificial intelligence. We would recommend that someone in this position follow this sequence of actions:

- You partner with other government departments to design a process, ensure their buy-in, and secure initial funding.
- You then bring together 30-40 key players from industry, civil society, academia, and public administration with relevant expertise, the ability to act, and diverging viewpoints. You may want to leverage this diversity of perspectives to enroll additional funding. You ask this group to agree on the three or four likely scenarios for your issue for the medium term, that is, where it will be in 10-20 years, depending on the investment and regulatory choices that could be made today. They will not agree on what scenario they would like to see

emerge, but they'll concur that these three or four scenarios are highly plausible if certain decisions are made. Reos Partners has pioneered this approach with **policy labs** and **Transformative Scenario Planning (TSP)**.

- You then bring together a representative group of citizens to examine the 3-4 possible scenarios. Using the **deliberative polling** methodology, you survey the participants for their “top-of-the-head” opinion on the topic before bringing them together to thoroughly examine the different scenarios. In the process, you elicit what scenario they favor, taking into account the options, trade-offs, and ethical dilemmas.
- You may then want to leverage the diversity of views present to conduct ideation sessions for possible new policy/regulatory approaches to overcome some of the trade-offs the group identified.
- At this point, you have convergence among the relevant stakeholders around the potential options, a rich set of data from citizens showing the direction of their preference, and practical ideas for implementing the vision that's emerging. In this way, the approach provides a rich and practical template for more creative, effective, efficient, and timely policy-making.

Throughout the process, you can involve a wider set of players and citizens online, integrating their input with in-person discussions. Such an approach thus combines the breadth of perspectives that a variety of citizens and stakeholders bring (you can use deliberative polling and civic tech tools here), while allowing for the depth of expertise needed to ground the process in an informed consideration of options and trade-offs (TSP and Policy

Labs are useful at this point). Importantly, you involve *key people* to make things happen with *more people* in order to enrich the vision of possible futures and legitimacy of the choices made to implement this vision.

Experimenting with Augmented Democracy

This is an illustration of what “Augmented Democracy” could look like. I don’t pretend it’s a one-size-fits-all solution to all issues. The example given here is particularly well suited to issues that require a combination of technical expertise, ethical debates, and long-term vision, such as those that emerge at different levels of government.

Like many other experimental approaches, the “Augmented Democracy” approach will need to be evaluated and improved. Yet, it could “augment” our system of representation without completely tearing it down. Implemented with adequate resources, regularity, and proper commitment on the part of public authorities, it could transform politics. Are we ready for more than the 5-minute conversation with the average voter?

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