

LET'S IMPROVE ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

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We know less about democracy than we often think, forgetting that universal suffrage in most countries is quite recent, and that women were excluded from the vote as late as the 1940s in France and the 1970s in Switzerland. In fact, universal male suffrage was usually no such thing, as it was riddled with the exclusion of groups such as domestic servants, and those on welfare benefits who were, like women and children, supposed to lack the independence of mind and action required for self-government. In view of that history, it should be no surprise that we know so little about the theory and practice of democracy and, most particularly, so little about how to organize and finance it in a world where most citizens work and are liable to share in the unpaid care of children and elderly relatives.

Representative democracy, as Schumpeter suggested, is part of the answer to these problems¹. However, Schumpeter's idea of legislative representation was of a specialized profession to which few will aspire – so that being a politician is a bit like being a heart surgeon, requiring years of training and knowledge that is inaccessible to most. Such a view of representative democracy inevitably raises the question whether electoral democracy can be distinguished from elected oligarchy – or the reproduction of a small increasingly in-bred political elite, given that most people are unlikely to serve as the elected representative of others.

Our difficulty in answering that question – how to organize democratic politics when citizens are workers and carers for others – underpins much of the disillusion, frustration and anger evident in established democracies, as well as in those of more recent vintage. Democracy promises to be government *by* the people, not just *for* them – to be a break with paternalistic forms of government, however benign, constitutional, liberal or republican. In part, democracy is based on the thought that government will not reliably be *for* us, if it is not *by* us as well – not simply because power corrupts, but because without

institutionalised ways to inform governments about our needs, ideals and capacities, and to make sure that they act upon that information, the pressure of events makes it likely that they will be ignored or that mistaken ideas about our interests will prevail. But democratic government also rests on the thought that there is something wrong – infantilizing, condescending, insulting – about trying to govern for others who are otherwise capable of governing themselves. Hence, if our governments look more like elected oligarchies, even plutocracies, than democracies it is not surprising that people should feel ill-governed, misused, instrumentalized, and ignored and that even if their lives are not going too badly, they should feel patronized, bossed around, insulted and humiliated by their governments.

The response to this situation can take several forms: to give up on democracy on the grounds that it generates unrealizable hopes (and fears) that put stable, effective and constitutional government at risk; to supplement or replace electoral democracy by some combination of more direct forms of representation such as referenda, by non-electoral forms of representative such as e-delegation or 'liquid' democracy, or the use of randomly selected 'citizen assemblies' of lay citizens. The first of these options does not seem particularly appealing, not least because – like Brexit – everything turns on *which* of the imaginable options is selected, by whom and how. The others all have some appeal *qua* attempts to improve electoral democracy, although they inevitably raise questions (as with second chambers) about competing sources of legitimacy and how far, in practice, they respond to the core problem of how people are to combine significant forms of electoral engagement with their obligations to family members and employers.

My hunch, then, is that there is no response to the malaise of contemporary democracy without attending to citizens' opportunities to stand for elective office (both national and local), and not merely

¹ See Schumpeter, J. (1942). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Harper & Brothers, especially chapters 21 and 22.

to elect others to such offices on occasion. This hunch may appear surprising for those aware of, and troubled by, citizens' increasing unwillingness to vote at elections – a topic that regularly receives attention and elicits wails of anguish in the media, although people's unwillingness or inability to present themselves as candidates for election passes all but unnoticed. Yet the two are related. Those who cannot see the point of voting may, quite simply, find it hard to identify the *democratic* interest of choosing amongst legislative candidates whose social background, occupation and experiences are so far removed from anyone they know.

If the point of democracy is to be able to shape the way we are governed, the huge distance between most professional politicians and their fellow citizens makes it seem very unlikely that voting for one rather than another of them will do much to make that possible. In any case, differentiating democratic from undemocratic elections would clearly be easier if more people could take being a candidate seriously, rather than seeing it as unlikely as a trip to the moon, and no more relevant to their lives.

So, how might one change things, so that 'electoral democracy' seems less like a deceptive promise or a contradiction in terms, and more like a way to realise the goods of self-government for people who must earn their own living and shoulder the burdens of unpaid care of others? There are several things that are worth considering, though none is likely to be sufficient and all are likely to be controversial. The first is to consider the job of elected representative as a job that can be shared amongst two or more people; the second is to facilitate the candidacy of people who are politically independent or lacking any party affiliation; the third is to consider more devolved sites for legislative politics, especially at national level and the scope for greater use of remote or hybrid work. Finally, the fourth is to consider shortening the working week – in line with recent, largely promising, experiments with a four-day working week. Clearly these options are not mutually exclusive and might be expected to work best when combined. They are, also, obviously controversial and while some would require relatively modest changes in the way democratic politics is conducted in most of our countries, others would require quite substantial and, perhaps, challenging changes. The point of sketching them here, then, is simply to illustrate the ways we might try to expand the theory and practice of democracy – given how limited and imperfect are the examples of it with which we are familiar – rather than to present yet

another blue-print for some radically new form of government whose bearing on democracy as we know it, however imperfectly, is far from clear.

JOB SHARING AND THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATION

Until the twentieth century in most countries being a legislator in a national parliament was not a full-time job. The idea of regularly budgeting beyond the life of a parliament was considered illegitimate (funding war debt being the notable exception) and because, without income taxes until later in the nineteenth century², only ideas of what governments could and should do were limited. Legislation therefore took up a much smaller part of a representative's time than is now the case, as did the task of overseeing the administration of government. Unpaid legislators could therefore occupy themselves gainfully for much of their time, and the dangers of over-work, exhaustion and stress were limited to those who held the highest offices or were unusually conscientious.

Since the end of the second world war and the development of the administrative democratic state we inhabit a very different world, even if our legislatures are still in the same buildings and the protocols and procedures are often the same. The advent of the 24-hour news-cycle and of the internet has clearly made the burdens of political office much greater, as politicians now need to be seen to be doing useful things to a degree that would have been unthinkable earlier – but the challenges of government as a profession, not an amateur pursuit, go back much further. If, on the one hand, they suggest that some degree of specialized knowledge and dedicated practice – not simply a salary and professional support – are requirements of the job, the idea that each representative should hold their position alone, *qua representative* bears reconsideration.

Given the complexities of the job – the need for contact with local representatives, with one's constituency (in electoral systems based on geographic representation), with one's political party inside and outside the legislature, with the media, and with interest groups, charities, think-tanks, civil servants and experts of all sorts – job-sharing and the ability to work part-time might do much to improve the appeal of the position to people who do not want to devote their working lives to politics, nor to have it take over the whole of their lives. Job-sharing (whether in groups of two or three, or in larger groups, as has been tried in Brazil), could facilitate on the job training and avoid the problem, highlighted in Etienne Ollion's

² The UK introduced income tax in 1842, Sweden in 1861, Italy in 1864, Prussia between 1891 and 1903, the Netherlands in 1893 and France only in 1914.

recent book, that mastery of legislative procedures and tempos at national level is so difficult, even for those experienced in local politics, that they are regularly left behind by those who have worked as a parliamentary assistants, and therefore are familiar with the intricacies of parliamentary procedure, however limited their political knowledge and experience in other respects³.

INCREASING THE SCOPE FOR NON-PARTY REPRESENTATION IN LEGISLATURES

As Weber foresaw, representative democracy is largely party democracy, because even the most brilliant individuals cannot hope to exert parliamentary influence by themselves. Instead, representatives must share collectively in the work of forming the government of the day – or of opposing it – and party discipline is necessary to prevent free-riding, grandstanding and accountability to the electorate and to the legislature. But voters are increasingly alienated not just by the parties amongst which they are asked to choose, but by the cartelization of politics, which turns them into spectators of the performance of others; and which reduces the scope for independent judgement and action by representatives, who are bullied and bribed into voting on party lines. Likewise, serving a party for long stretches of time in unpaid or poorly paid and temporary roles is now a prerequisite for a legislative career, unless one is exceptionally fortunate, well-connected or well-known (see Ollion). But that level of professionalization and exclusive desire, and the ability to maintain it for long periods of time, inevitably makes politicians seem unusual and, often, deeply unappealing to the vast majority of those for whom public service and/or political participation is necessarily more episodic and varied than this. More options for party-independent ways to compete for legislative office and to serve might therefore help to make the exercise of our rights to stand as the representative of others a credible alternative for people who might be unwilling to devote their lives to politics, but perfectly able and willing to serve at some points in their lives.

If we want more ‘civil society’ representatives within parliament – people who have worked as teachers, in health care, as social workers, administrators, as engineers and in manual labour – paths into electoral politics independent of political parties are clearly important. In some countries, such as Portugal and Italy, independent MPs are grouped together, for the purposes of allocating office space, research

assistance, parliamentary time and duties – and it might be possible to consider access to campaign funds and resources based on such a model as well. At all events, if elected democracy is to be distinguishable from elected oligarchy, it is necessary to broaden the range of people who can be candidates for elected office and while the use of quotas, reserved seats and the like may be helpful in forcing parties to recruit and promote more widely than hitherto, support for party-independent paths into the legislature is worth considering as well.

DEVOLVING OUR LEGISLATURES

It is usual to house democratic legislatures in a nation's capital, although there is no theoretical or practical necessity for that. Indeed, given that national capitals are often peripheral geographically, and are usually extremely privileged locations economically, socially and culturally, equality and social solidarity might suggest relocating them geographically. But even if this is not an option, it is worth considering whether national ministries all have to be located in the capital, and around the legislature as well. After all, the departments of education, of health, of social work, the environment and so on are unlikely to require regular contact with foreign dignitaries, as might the Foreign Office; and much of their work is constrained by budgets that are largely fixed and therefore don't require constant contact with national exchequers. In fact, most ministries could probably be disaggregated and devolved in various ways that would facilitate their geographical dispersal and, therefore, the ability of people living far from the national capital to visit, observe and identify with a physical embodiment of their national government. Granted that debates and votes within legislatures and some forms of committee work may still require representatives, advisors and civil servants to meet in person, and to do so within the national legislature, much of the work of elected representatives could be done remotely (but securely) or in physical locations other than the national legislature.

Alexander Guerrero's idea of creating a multitude of single-issue legislative bodies – whether randomly selected, as he prefers, or elected – inadequately reflects the needs for coordination amongst legislative debates and decisions across subject areas, and the extent to which, for example, matters of foreign policy, international development, the environment and trade are likely to be connected. Nonetheless, the idea of trying to disaggregate and geographically devolve the highly diverse, historically shaped and, often, expensive, inefficient location of national

³ Ollion, E. (2021). *Les candidats: Novices et professionnels en politique*. PUF.

governments is worth considering. It might help to alleviate the feeling of geographic and physical disconnection that national peripheries often feel from their centres; help to break through intellectual and emotional bubbles created by the concentration of political, cultural and economic power in national capitals; and might physically realise the idea that democratic government is by and for people of all social classes, backgrounds and cultures, rather than by a privileged elite on behalf of everyone else.

SHORTENING THE WORKING WEEK

Democratic politics is time-consuming and people who must earn their livings and care for others are unlikely to have much chance consistently to learn about and practice it. That makes it unlikely that they will be able to gain the experience, connections and confidence to make exercising their right to stand worthwhile. It is encouraging, therefore, that recent experiments with a four-day working week (for a salary based on 5 full days of work) show positive results for economic productivity as well as worker satisfaction and the ability of employers to retention employees⁴. Such experiments suggest that current patterns for distributing hours of paid work, like those in the distribution of unpaid work, might be revised in the interests of democratic equality and participation rather than, as is more usually the case, employer convenience and 'efficiency'.

The legacy of undemocratic government - the long shadow cast by the past on the present - shapes the length and structure of the working day, and the relationship of paid work to politics, seen largely as a leisure activity for most people and a profession as well as a vocation for a few. But there is no more reason to accept this view of the subordinate

importance of democracy to economic imperatives, national traditions, sentiments and conventions than to suppose that the separation of the workplace from the home, associated with the industrial revolution, should continue to structure our lives. Female MPs, in the UK, have insisted that sexual equality and democracy require Parliament, as a workplace, to provide the facilities for pregnant and lactating women required in other workplaces; that childcare be available and that hours of work reflect the fact that MPs can no longer be assumed to be men with wives at home full time to look after the children. But while adapting the customs, buildings and location of our legislatures to make them more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic is important, it is no less essential to adapt the ways we think about paid and unpaid work to create the necessary and supportive conditions for democratic politics.

CONCLUSION

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CITATION

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⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2024/feb/21/four-day-week-made-permanent-for-most-uk-firms-in-worlds-biggest-trial> ; and

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/jul/08/largest-uk-public-sector-trial-four-day-week-sees-huge-benefits-research-finds>