



Power to the People: Democratic Innovations in the Future of US Government

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Defined by political scientists Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, democratic innovations are “processes or institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”. In a time where public perception of institutions is considerably weak, it is imperative to explore initiatives that strengthen the bond between man and state. This brief will examine what democratic innovations are—in theory and in practice—as well as cite methods from global case studies that can be implemented within the United States.

II. OVERVIEW

In the 2024 Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it was revealed that individuals who perceive that their opinions are taken into consideration in the government’s actions tend to trust their institutions more. Hence, the purpose of democratic innovations: to create additional opportunities for citizens to get involved in governance beyond the ballot box. Including participatory budgeting, citizen’s assemblies, digital democratic discussion platforms, and more, democratic innovations include any initiative that

enables and empowers constituents to take a more active role in the policies that shape their daily lives. While there have been attempts to expand pathways to participatory democracy in the United States, current efforts fall short due to difficulties in design, scaling, facilitation, and awareness. As dissatisfaction with American institutions rises, it is crucial to gain a complex understanding of the role democratic innovations play in strengthening our founding principles and how they can be implemented in ways that better promote community, equity, and trust.

A. Relevance

Professor Archon Fung at the Harvard Kennedy School frames the potential of democratic innovation as such: “Let’s make democracy work.” His implied message—that American democracy is not working currently—has merit. A 2024 poll from Gallup reported that the U.S. has hit a record low in satisfaction with how democracy is working: just 28% of U.S. citizens are content with American democracy. Diving into this trend further, the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for High Impact Philanthropy analyzes the strength of a democracy using five metrics: empowered citizens, fair processes, responsive policy, information and communication, and social cohesion. Examining recent attitudes and current events through these categories reveal why faith in democracy is so low. Empowered citizens and

responsive policy fall flat as over 80% of Americans believe elected officials don't care what people like them think, per the Pew Research Center. Fair processes appear to be dwindling as Texas makes a move to redistrict its map to create more Republican Congressional seats—a move that, if carried out, will likely spark retaliatory partisan gerrymandering in other states such as Illinois and California. The White House defunding of public broadcasting networks PBS and NPR as well as public and private universities points toward a media and academic ecosystem that places less emphasis on accuracy, accessibility, and fairness. Finally, with today's hyperpartisanship, the rise of the alt-right, recent attacks on transgender individuals and illegal immigrants, the idea of social cohesion feels like a distant memory. American democracy is faltering on many levels, and while they are not an end-all, be-all solution, democratic innovations do have the potential to combat aspects of this decline.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Though the U.S. Constitution was explicitly designed with the intent to exclude citizens from being directly involved in governance, forms of democratic innovations have sprung up throughout the history of the United States. New England town meetings took place as early as the 17th century, which allowed eligible citizens to deliberate and vote on local policies—a practice similar to citizen's assemblies today. Of course, one needed to be male, white, and own property to be eligible, thereby disenfranchising significant portions of these historical communities. The most historically similar call to today's participatory democracy originated in the late 19th century with the Populist Party. Composed

primarily of farmers and laborers, the group advocated for more direct involvement, calling for the direct election of senators as well as reforms such as the initiative, referendum, and recall, each of which became implemented nationwide during the Progressive Era of the early 20th century. These opportunities allowed citizens to directly propose new laws or constitutional amendments, ratify or veto laws that have already been passed by a legislature, and remove elected officials from office.

In the mid-20th century, community organizing and neighborhood associations rose in prominence, best evidenced by the unprecedented reach of the Civil Rights movement. The late 20th century saw marked improvements in expanding access to democratic institutions. One such innovation was James Fishkin's Deliberative Polling events, which presented the conclusions a more informed and more engaged public would reach about certain issues. Around the same time, organizations such as National Issues Forums and AmericaSpeaks were created, aiming to improve civic discussion around public policy topics.

In recent years, democratic innovations have become more structured and institutionalized in governments local to federal. In 2009, participatory budgeting was implemented for the first time in Chicago, and has spread across more than a dozen U.S. cities, a progression that will be elaborated on in a later section. Deliberative mini-publics, participatory processes in which a randomly selected and representative group of citizens cooperate to reflect on a specific issue, have had pilot programs in cities within California, Oregon, Colorado, and Utah. Digital

tools have also been created to reach more of the populace, with the Obama Administration having championed Regulations.gov, a website that receives online input on federal rulemaking.

Academia in recent years also reflects this growing interest in democratic innovations. The first session of the Global Innovations in Democracy: Parliamentary Exchange (GID) took place in 2022, bringing together experts from around the world to discuss methods to better engage their citizens in government. The GID was held again just last year, signalling the commitment of these institutions. Elite universities such as Harvard and Yale have steadily focused more research on democratic innovations, such as the latter holding weekly workshops on the topic for students and experts to participate in. These examples point to a widespread increase of interest and positive outlook on the potential of democratic innovations—not just from disenfranchised citizens, but from bodies that have traditionally consolidated political power.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

When proposing and implementing democratic innovations at any level, there are three primary stakeholders to be considered: citizens, governments, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

The goal of many democratic innovations is to reach and include the input of as many citizens as possible, regardless of their demographics. With that in mind, organizers do target specific groups when implementing these initiatives. Outreach

efforts to communities statistically underrepresented in democratic processes such as low-income or racial and ethnic minority groups are common, as including these perspectives is crucial to enact policies that promote equity and participation across the board, not just for those with the resources to do so. As political scientists and writers Christopher F. Karpowitz and Chad Raphael put it, “If participatory innovations merely engage already-engaged groups in new ways, perhaps they are not innovations after all.”

Governments are key stakeholders as well. Empirically, citizen participation rises in democratic initiatives when programs are endorsed by governmental bodies, as individuals then perceive that their voices have the increased potential to affect actual change in future policy recommendations. In the past, governments have codified certain democratic innovations, mandating that they take place. However, it is crucial for these institutions to both hold these opportunities on a regular basis and to actually consider the input from these programs; otherwise, citizens can become disenfranchised if they feel as if their efforts go ignored.

Finally, civil society organizations (CSOs) function as the glue between citizens and governments when crafting and implementing democratic innovations. From launching grassroots campaigns to creating accessible digital platforms, organizers and developers are key players in garnering as much participation from a society as possible.

B. Risks of Indifference

Not implementing any response to the climbing dissatisfaction with democracy in the United States can and has opened rifts across American

life. In a paper dissecting the importance of political trust, political scientist Gerry Stoker and policy analyst Mark Evans determine that trust is “the deciding factor in whether a society can function.” Non-negotiable ideals such as fairness, mutual values, and equal opportunity are upheld by institutions through the rule of law, proposed and enacted policies, representatives, and more. Without a certain level of political trust, voting numbers decline, long-term policy problems go unresolved with the lack of continued support, and individuals more willingly tolerate or commit acts of crime themselves. On rare occasions, people who perceive that their voice is not heard resort to extremist and violent efforts to convey their message. Moreover, when citizens feel that democracy is no longer working for them—economically, socially, politically—bad actors capitalize on and spread this negative sentiment to assume positions of power. With messages that promote polarization, empower grifters, and champion “us versus them” rhetoric, these individuals capitalize on the moment to turn uncertainty into unrest, distrust into damage, and confusion into political chaos. Distrust in democracy also sets the foundation for authoritarian rule to take over. Not understanding crucial characteristics of democracy—such as checks and balances—has historically paved the way for populist officials to take office, as many find a “strong leader” who bypasses institutions and upends the status quo preferable. Yet, as seen through past examples in Venezuela and Brazil, these officials also tend to bypass the rule of law. By remaining indifferent and not actively working towards improving citizens’ relationship with the state, the conditions that enable democratic backsliding worsen.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Increased citizen participation in government decisions is not a partisan issue; in fact, it has broad bipartisan support amongst constituents. The Yankelovich Democracy Monitor, an evolving study tracking Americans’ attitudes on democracy and how to strengthen it, found that support for democratic innovations ranges from 75% to almost 90% – without significant differences between parties. Democratic innovations aid policy-making that is more representative of a community’s needs, values, and identity than other established forms of civic participation.

V. TRIED POLICY

In the United States, the majority of tried policy related to democratic innovations has been restricted to participatory budgeting—a process where members of a community directly decide how to allocate a set amount of the city budget. Most prominent was New York City’s deliberative participatory budgeting process called The People’s Money (2022–2023). Endorsed by Mayor Eric Adams and led by NYC’s Civic Engagement Commission (CEC), the campaign garnered over 110,000 ballots that appropriated \$5 million in funding from the mayoral budget to develop the top-voted initiatives in each borough. Ranging from accessible senior care to environmental sustainability, the funded projects reflected the will of the communities involved. Furthermore, to ensure that these objectives were delivered upon, the CEC collaborated with local organizations to ensure projects were supported, monitored, and completed successfully. The People’s Money was included again in the

2023–2024 budget cycle and garnered nearly 140,000 ballots, illustrating its widespread approval. A separate participatory budgeting initiative is currently underway in Los Angeles called Los Angeles Reforms for Equity and Public Acknowledgement of Institutional Racism, or L.A. REPAIR. This project focuses on improving REPAIR Zones—communities historically harmed by systemic racism—by creating programming projects initiated by community-based partners founded on feedback from residents. Set to allocate a total of \$8.5 million across nine total zones, L.A. REPAIR reflects an increasing focus on empowering citizens.

It would be remiss to not mention global initiatives as well. From 2021 to 2024, the European Democracy Hub engaged in the Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations project, investigating ways to apply global democratic initiatives to their own institutions. Their findings can be broken down into three categories: participation through consultation, open participation, and connected participation. The first allows citizens to have input into new legislative proposals as well as frontline issues on the policy agenda. It also focuses on holding officials and government projects accountable. For example, Nigeria has in-person channels and digital platforms for people to monitor and share opinions on the progress of local government projects. The second type of democratic innovation, open participation, enables all citizens to participate. The “strength in numbers” approach has been gaining significant traction, as many experts argue that the sheer turnout some programs achieve make these initiatives highly representative of a society. Finally, connected

participation focuses on increasing pathways for citizens to participate in governance. These connections range from rewriting electoral rules in already established political parties to creating online forums as a method of promoting widespread engagement.

However, these initiatives have not been entirely successful. Despite allowing anyone 15+ years old who lived, worked, studied, or was the guardian of a student in the REPAIR Zone—without documentation necessary—to vote, L.A. REPAIR, for example, only received 5,500 ballots in its proposal phase, which is hardly representative of the nine cities included. Furthermore, many global democratic innovations struggle to gain traction due to lack of funding, awareness, and institutional support. Others tend to be hijacked by political interests. In order to institute effective democratic innovations, initiatives must take several factors into consideration to promote robust co-governance.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Establishing City Departments Dedicated to Improving Civic Engagement and Democracy

Dedicated government departments ensure initiatives are executed using means other organizations—civil society organizations, non-profits, individuals—typically do not have access to. They have more financial resources at their disposal, easier channels of communication if collaboration across departments is necessary, and a larger platform to spread information. Establishing a department also reflects how serious a city is committed to a cause and enables multiple efforts to occur simultaneously. For example, the aforementioned Civic Engagement

Commission in NYC not only implemented *The People's Money*, it also improved linguistic accessibility for voters at ballot boxes across NYC. Initiatives associated with the city are effective; however, they could have more impact and reach if directly incorporated into municipalities. For example, related initiatives that promote civic engagement in the City of Los Angeles, such as EmpowerLA's Neighborhood Councils and the LAUSD's Office of Development and Civic Engagement, are criticized for not being representative or accessible for residents that are younger, of color, and come from low-income/low-educational backgrounds. Establishing dedicated and structured departments is a must to work alongside constituents to construct a brighter future.

Instituting Open Forums to Increase Input and Hold Officials Accountable

As per the findings of the *Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations* project, increasing opportunities for all citizens to participate in government processes has proven to be a crucial method in combating democratic malaise. However, effectively implementing these forums require several guardrails to ensure they truly remain open, accessible, and productive. To remain a reliable and trustworthy platform, these forums must be held on a consistent basis. Furthermore, the government should remain transparent in the ways they consider feedback, whether or not they implement recommendations or not. That includes an enforcement committee to ensure that officials do not just pretend to listen; input in these forums must be deliberated on in a timely manner. A similar and largely effective process takes place in

India called the Social Audit. Every five years, citizens organize to evaluate the government's performance on particular infrastructure or welfare projects. Through public hearings, citizens are able to pressure public officials to respond to the people's interests and findings, preventing them from hiding failures and inefficiencies behind red tape. This effort has improved the government's capacity for public communication, curtailed poor practices, and improved responsiveness. As such, 85% village respondents feel more capable to converse with government officials on key welfare schemes. Incorporating aspects of the Social Audit in governments across the United States would go a long way to boost transparency and accountability between public officials and constituents.

Increasing Investment in Digital Tools

In recent years, online networks have vastly improved the range of topics able to be deliberated on by citizens. Gwanghwamoon 1st Street, a digital platform in South Korea, is an easy-to-use website that functions as an accessible forum for individuals to stay on top of discussions about policy issues. Citizens are also able to post suggestions on 1st Street, which are then sorted through and analyzed by research experts and government officials. The numbers prove the efficacy of this initiative: from 2017-2021, 229 policy proposals were put forward, with 176 reflected in actual policies.

With Americans generally having solid access to the Internet, investment must be made into national digital platforms like 1st Street to enhance participation in policymaking.

Furthermore, accurate and unbiased information collected together on such a forum would greatly combat disinformation and misinformation that plague American media outlets. Nonpartisan CSOs should collaborate with institutions to ensure that these websites foster productive and accurate discourse.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper, I have broken down the topic of democratic innovations—what they are, why they exist, and why their implementation is so pertinent in America today. Though there are a wide range of initiatives covered under the umbrella of democratic innovations, the most important to focus on is ways to increase access for citizens to deliberate and affect the very policies that shape their daily lives, be that through open forums or digital platforms.

In times of societal unrest and widespread distrust, it is also important to remember and continue to utilize other established avenues Americans have to affect political change. Speaking at local town halls, volunteering with interest groups, and calling or emailing one's representative are all effective ways of getting involved beyond the ballot box. Because it is precisely that—staying involved—which matters the most. Though distrust and fear certainly weaken a democracy, apathy is what does the most damage.

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