THE ARGUMENT

The Unfinished Democracy

Notes toward an upgrade

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10 CHAPTERS **35** PAGES **45** MINUTES

Before the blog, there was the question. This is the answer — or at least, the beginning of one. From structural diagnosis to the case for AI-powered solutions, from voter psychology to the philosophers who saw it coming: a complete framework for understanding why democracy is underperforming, and what technology could do about it.

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CHAPTER ONE

"I Am 42"

The opening. Personal, direct, and designed to make you stay.

I am 42 years old, and I live in Belgium — a country with six governments, three official languages, and the world record for the longest period without a federal government. I build AI automations for small and medium-sized businesses. I am not a political scientist, a philosopher, or an elected representative. I am a citizen who pays taxes, votes in every election because the law requires it, and watches, with growing unease, as the political system around me fails to address the challenges that will define my children's lives.

Here is what troubles me most: across Europe, politicians are engaged in a heated debate about how to finance pensions twenty-five years from now. I will be sixty-six then. By that time, artificial intelligence and robotics will have transformed the labour market beyond recognition. What today's large language models are doing to knowledge work, humanoid robots will do to manual labour within a decade. The jobs that fund today's pension system may simply not exist in the form we know them. And yet, the debate proceeds as if none of this is happening — as if the world of 2050 will look roughly like the world of 2005, just slightly older.

> *The debate is not merely insufficient. It is addressing the wrong question entirely.*

This is not a complaint about individual politicians. Most of them are intelligent, hard-working people operating within a system that structurally prevents them from doing what needs to be done. The incentives are misaligned. The timelines are too short. The complexity is too great. And the public, largely disengaged from the mechanics of governance, oscillates between apathy and rage — neither of which produces good outcomes.

I started writing this because I needed to organise my own thinking. I had been having conversations — with political party officials, with fellow entrepreneurs, with friends at dinner tables — and I kept arriving at the same conclusion: the problem is not that we lack solutions. The problem is that the system, as currently designed, is structurally incapable of implementing them. Not because of malice. Because of architecture.

Belgium is a useful place from which to make this argument. Not because it is worse than other democracies — in many ways, it functions remarkably well for a country of its complexity. But because its complexity makes visible what other countries manage to hide: the cracks, the inefficiencies, the absurdities that exist everywhere but are easier to ignore in simpler systems. Belgium is democracy under a magnifying glass. Everything that is wrong with modern democratic governance is a little more wrong here, a little more obvious, a little harder to deny.

This text is the condensed version of a larger argument. It diagnoses what is broken and why. It does not present solutions — those are developed in the series of articles that follows, The Unfinished Democracy, published weekly. What it does is lay the groundwork: the honest accounting of where we are, without which any proposal for where we should go is premature.

> *I write this not because the system is bad, but because I believe we can understand it better — and because understanding is the first step toward improvement.*

A note on tone: this text is deliberately direct. It does not hedge every statement with academic qualifiers. It names problems plainly. Some readers will find it too blunt. Others will find it too optimistic. Both reactions are valid. What I ask is that you engage with the argument, not the tone.

Let us begin with what is broken.

CHAPTER TWO

The System Was Built for a Different World

Incentives, visibility, coalitions, accountability, asymmetry.

The core institutions of modern democracy — parliaments, parties, election cycles, coalition agreements — were designed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for a world in which information travelled slowly, most citizens were illiterate, and the complexity of governance was a fraction of what it is today. They were, and remain, a remarkable achievement. But they are showing their age.

The most fundamental flaw is not ideological but structural: the incentive system. A politician is not rewarded for making good decisions. A politician is rewarded for being re-elected. These are two profoundly different things. Decisions that yield results in twenty years — infrastructure investment, educational reform, pension restructuring, climate adaptation — bring no electoral reward in four. Decisions that are visible, emotional, and immediate — a tax cut before an election, a tough-sounding statement on immigration, a ribbon-cutting ceremony — bring votes regardless of their long-term merit.

> *The system does not select for wisdom. It selects for electability. And electability, increasingly, has nothing to do with the capacity to govern well.*

This is compounded by the visibility problem. A press conference generates more political capital than a year of committee work. A tweet reaches more people than a policy paper. Politicians, rationally responding to their incentive environment, invest disproportionate time in communication and disproportionately little in substance. The ones who do the opposite — the quiet, competent legislators who master complex dossiers — are systematically undervalued by a system that rewards performance over substance.

Then there is the coalition tax. In most European democracies, and especially in Belgium, governments are coalitions of parties with divergent interests. Every policy is a compromise. The result is rarely the best solution — it is the most compromise-able solution. And every party in the coalition must defend policies it never wanted, while being unable to implement policies it promised. The voter, watching this, feels betrayed — not by politics in the abstract, but by the specific party they voted for. This is not a failure of will. It is a feature of the system.

The accountability structure is equally flawed. In the private sector, sustained poor performance leads to consequences. In politics, failures can almost always be attributed to predecessors, coalition partners, or external circumstances. There is no bankruptcy mechanism for bad governance. The feedback loop between decision and consequence is so long and so noisy that causation becomes nearly impossible to establish.

Information asymmetry completes the picture. Politicians must make decisions about healthcare, defence, digitalisation, agriculture, energy, and education — without being experts in any of them. The actual knowledge resides with lobbyists, industry specialists, and senior bureaucrats, who have enormous influence precisely because they hold what elected officials lack: deep domain expertise. This is not corruption in the legal sense. It is a structural dependency that consistently tilts policy toward the interests of the knowledgeable few over the needs of the uninformed many.

None of these problems are new. Political scientists have documented them for decades. What is new is the scale of the mismatch between the system's capacity and the challenges it faces. Climate change, artificial intelligence, demographic shifts, global pandemics, financial system instability, geopolitical realignment — these are problems of a complexity and interconnectedness that the eighteenth-century architects of democratic institutions could not have imagined. We are attempting to navigate the twenty-first century with an eighteenth-century operating system. It is not surprising that the system struggles. It would be surprising if it did not.

CHAPTER THREE

The Voter in the Mirror

The demand side of democratic dysfunction.

Most critiques of democracy focus on the supply side: politicians are corrupt, parties are self-serving, institutions are sclerotic. This is comfortable because it places the blame elsewhere. But an honest analysis must also examine the demand side — the voter. And here, the picture is equally troubling.

There is a phenomenon I observe consistently, in Belgium and across Europe, that no one discusses openly: the use of politics as a psychological punching bag. People who are frustrated with their jobs, their relationships, their financial situation, their sense of purpose, project that frustration onto "the politicians." The mechanism is understandable. It provides a target for diffuse discontent. It externalises responsibility. It creates a villain in a story that might otherwise have none. But it is corrosive, because it replaces analysis with emotion and makes rational political engagement nearly impossible.

> *The less someone engages with politics, the more certain they are that "those at the top" are incompetent. This is not a paradox. It is the defining feature of democratic disengagement.*

Closely related is what I call the comfort of cynicism. "They're all the same" is perhaps the most intellectually lazy sentence in political discourse. It absolves the speaker of the obligation to differentiate, to inform themselves, to engage. It is a lifestyle choice disguised as an insight. And it is devastatingly effective at preventing exactly the kind of civic participation that could address the problems the cynic complains about.

Then there is the entitlement paradox: the same citizen who demands lower taxes also expects excellent healthcare, well-maintained roads, generous pensions, affordable education, and a responsive police force. The gap between what people expect from the state and what they are willing to contribute — in taxes, in patience,

in acceptance of compromise — is vast and growing. Politicians who point this out are punished electorally. Politicians who pretend both are possible simultaneously are rewarded. The voter, in this sense, gets exactly the politics they incentivise.

This is not an argument against democracy or against the intelligence of ordinary citizens. It is an argument about conditions. Most people are capable of thoughtful, nuanced political judgment. But the conditions under which they form that judgment are terrible. The information environment rewards outrage over understanding. Social media algorithms optimise for engagement, and engagement is maximised by anger, not by reflection. A furious post about “the elite” receives five hundred likes. A nuanced analysis of pension reform receives three. The voter is not stupid. The voter is operating in an environment that makes stupidity rational.

CHAPTER FOUR

Why People Choose the Extreme

Dignity, simplicity, belonging, and the failure of the centre.

If the previous chapter risks sounding dismissive of citizens who vote for radical parties, this one aims to correct that. Understanding why people choose the extreme is not the same as endorsing it. And the understanding reveals something uncomfortable: in most cases, the choice is neither irrational nor contemptible. It is a response to a system that has failed to provide what every citizen needs — dignity, comprehensibility, and belonging.

The dignity deficit is perhaps the most powerful and least discussed driver of radicalisation. Across Western democracies, there is a growing population of people who feel not merely ignored by the political system, but actively disrespected. The factory worker whose job was automated and who was told to "retrain." The nurse who was applauded during Covid and then denied a meaningful pay rise. The tradesman who watches a university graduate explain on television what is good for him. This is not primarily an economic grievance. It is a grievance of recognition. The meritocratic society sends an implicit message: if you are at the bottom, you deserve to be there. The resentment this generates is enormous, and radical movements exploit it by offering what the political centre refuses to give — the feeling of being seen.

> *Radical parties do not win arguments. They win emotions. And the emotion they win most consistently is dignity.*

Equally powerful is the simplicity premium. Political reality is complex. A pension reform has forty-seven sub-clauses. A coalition agreement runs to two hundred pages. And then someone says: "The problem is the immigrants" or "The elite is cheating you." This is wrong. But it is cognitively comfortable. Populists serve this need. The political centre does not, and thereby loses the battle for attention, if not for truth.

There is also what might be called the belonging trap. Radical movements offer something that traditional parties have largely lost: community. Local groups, regular meetings, shared channels, common enemies that bind people together. The established parties have hollowed out their grassroots structures over decades. Radical movements fill this vacuum. And once your social circle is embedded in a movement, leaving it means losing your friends — not because of ideology, but because of human bonds.

These mechanisms — dignity, simplicity, belonging, idealism, information silos, generational fracture — overlap and reinforce each other in every individual voter. There is no single explanation for radicalisation, and therefore no single remedy. Education alone does not solve a dignity problem. Economic redistribution alone does not solve an information problem. Better arguments alone are useless when the algorithm ensures they never arrive. The response must be as layered as the problem.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hollow Centre

Why centrist politics is structurally weak.

If radical parties are rising, it is not only because they are strong. It is because the centre is structurally weak — and not for lack of competence or good intentions, but because of a set of traps inherent to centrist politics.

The most fundamental is the compromise curse. Centrist parties are compromise. That is their function, their identity, their raison d'être. But compromise is the hardest product to sell in the political marketplace. Try inspiring someone with the sentence: "We have found a solution that fully satisfies no one but is acceptable to most." This is substantively correct and emotionally dead. Radical parties promise purity. Purity inspires. Compromise sobers. And in an attention economy, inspiration always defeats sobriety.

Then there is the identity vacuum. Ask a hundred people what a centrist party stands for and you receive a hundred vague answers: "Reason." "Stability." "Pragmatism." These are not identities. They are absences of identity. Radical parties have a clear narrative: "Us against them." The centre offers no story. It offers administration.

> *The centre does not lose the argument. It loses the narrative, the aesthetics, the emotional energy — and ultimately, the voter's sense of belonging.*

The Overton drift compounds this. Centrist parties define themselves relatively. When the margins shift, the centre shifts automatically. Positions that were considered far-right twenty years ago are now debatable within mainstream parties. Each time a centrist party adopts a radical position "in moderate form," it legitimises the radicals and alienates its own base.

Perhaps the most important question this argument can ask is therefore not "How do we fight the radicals?" but "Is it possible to hold a centrist position that provides as much energy, identity, and dignity as the margins — without adopting their

simplification and destructiveness?" The answer to this question may determine the future of European democracy.

CHAPTER SIX

The Parasite Economy

Who profits when the state can no longer think for itself.

There is a third actor in the democratic dysfunction that is rarely discussed: the ecosystem of external service providers that profits from the state's structural weaknesses. Consulting firms, law firms, advisory agencies, and outsourcing companies form a shadow economy that extracts enormous value from public budgets while often delivering questionable results.

The numbers are staggering. In France, the so-called McKinseyGate scandal revealed that the Macron government had paid private consulting firms 2.4 billion euros since 2018. In the United Kingdom, public sector consulting contracts rose from 700 million pounds in 2016 to 2.6 billion pounds by 2022. The mechanism is structural, not criminal. Governments have systematically hollowed out their own expertise over decades, following the advice of — ironically — consulting firms. Today, many government departments literally cannot evaluate the quality of the advice they are paying for, because the people who could evaluate it have been replaced by the consultants themselves.

> *This is not consulting. It is rent-seeking with PowerPoint.*

The revolving door completes the picture. Consultants write the programme of a presidential candidate. The candidate wins. The consultants receive government contracts. Former consultants take positions in government. Former government officials take positions at consulting firms. The cycle is closed. No one within it has an incentive to break it.

The question this chapter poses is uncomfortable but necessary: how much of the state's budget is spent not on serving citizens but on feeding an ecosystem that has made itself indispensable? And what would happen if we built the tools to make that ecosystem visible — in real time, in public, for everyone to see?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The School That Forgot to Teach Democracy

Why civic illiteracy is not an accident.

Nearly every problem diagnosed in these pages leads back to a single root: education. The voter who projects frustration onto politics was never taught how politics works. The citizen who falls for populist simplification was never trained in critical thinking. The young person who cannot distinguish a news report from an opinion piece was never given media literacy. The taxpayer who demands lower taxes and better services was never taught what a budget is.

Our educational system was designed in the nineteenth century for the industrial revolution: discipline, repetition, obedience, standardisation. It produces people who can follow instructions — not people who can understand complex systems and make autonomous decisions. Children learn the mitosis of cells by heart but not how a state budget works. They can calculate integrals but cannot read a coalition agreement.

> *A citizen who has never been taught how democracy works cannot meaningfully participate in it. And a democracy whose citizens cannot meaningfully participate is a democracy in name only.*

The counter-evidence is clear. Finland invests heavily in media literacy from primary school onward. The result: Finland consistently ranks among the countries with the highest trust in democratic institutions and the lowest susceptibility to disinformation in Europe. This is not coincidence. It is the result of a deliberate decision to treat media literacy as a matter of national security.

Perhaps most importantly, schools should teach the trade-off. Every political decision has costs. Every programme has opportunity costs. Every winner implies a loser. If young people never learn this, they will, as adults, expect the impossible from politics

— and be disappointed when it fails to materialise. That disappointment feeds the cynicism that feeds the populists.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Silent Disruption

The economic transformation that no one is debating.

While the political system struggles with its eighteenth-century architecture and the educational system fails to equip citizens for the twenty-first century, a transformation is underway that will make every current political debate look quaint in retrospect.

Productivity is decoupling from labour. A freelancer with AI workflow tools and a laptop now produces what a team of five produced a decade ago. What today's large language models are doing to knowledge work — writing, analysis, programming, customer service, legal research, financial modelling — humanoid robots will do to manual labour within ten years. The factory, the warehouse, the construction site, the care home: all will be transformed. The question is not whether this will happen, but how fast and how completely.

> *Where LLMs are reshaping knowledge work today, humanoid robots will reshape manual labour tomorrow. Completely. Irreversibly. Across every industry.*

The political implications are seismic, and almost entirely unaddressed. The entire European welfare state is financed through levies on labour — income tax, social security contributions, payroll taxes. Belgium has the highest tax burden on labour in the entire European Union. If machines increasingly perform the labour, the revenue base evaporates. The social protection system loses its funding mechanism — not through policy failure, but through structural economic transformation.

The arithmetic is straightforward. If productivity shifts from human labour to machine capital, taxation must follow. A value-creation levy rather than a labour tax. Capital gains taxation weighted to reflect the shift. Transaction and data taxes as the digital equivalent of the value-added tax. These are not radical ideas. They are the

logical adaptation of a tax system designed for the twentieth century to a twenty-first century economy.

The concept that connects this economic transformation to the democratic challenge is what I call augmentation. AI does not replace human judgment. It amplifies it. In our work with small and medium businesses, we see this every day: the human decides, the machine executes and scales. This model applies not only to a company with ten employees but to a society with eleven million citizens.

The political system's inability to engage with this transformation is not merely frustrating. It is dangerous. Every month of delay makes the eventual adjustment more painful. And the people who will bear the cost of that delay are not the politicians who avoided the topic — it is the citizens who trusted them to look ahead.

CHAPTER NINE

What Comes Next

From diagnosis to direction.

The diagnosis is clear. The political system has structural flaws. Voters are part of the problem. An ecosystem of parasitic service providers profits from the status quo. The educational system fails to prepare citizens. And an economic transformation of historic proportions is being ignored.

The question, then, is not whether change is needed, but what form it should take.

The answer I propose is not revolution. It is augmentation. Democracy does not need to be replaced. It needs to be equipped with the tools that the twenty-first century provides and the twenty-first century demands. AI can serve as the operating system upgrade that democratic institutions need — not to make decisions, but to make human decision-making radically better informed, more transparent, and more accountable.

I believe a set of tools can be built — tools that make budgets transparent, laws readable, rhetoric visible, consequences projectable, and deliberation scalable. Tools that treat citizens as capable adults rather than passive consumers of political product. Tools that are governed independently, built on open-source principles, and designed for the citizen who has the least access, not the one who has the most.

> *The principle is simple: human judgment, amplified by machine analysis, within a transparent process. The machine informs. The citizen decides. Always.*

The weekly article series that accompanies this text — The Unfinished Democracy — develops these tools in detail: what they do, how they work, what could go wrong, and who should govern them. It also examines the institutional reforms that must accompany the technology: citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets, civic education infrastructure, and the philosophical tradition from Plato to the present that has wrestled with these questions for twenty-three centuries.

This is the diagnosis. The series is the construction plan. Both are invitations to think, not instructions to follow.

CHAPTER TEN

An Invitation, Not an Answer

Radical self-criticism, personal stakes, and the conversation that cannot happen without you.

This argument has covered a great deal of ground: structural failures, voter complicity, radical movements, the hollow centre, parasitic ecosystems, educational neglect, and economic disruption. It would be dishonest to end with a neat conclusion, as if all of these threads tie together into a single answer. They do not.

What they do is form a diagnosis. And the diagnosis suggests that democracy's crisis is not primarily one of values or ideology, but of capacity. The democratic system was designed for a simpler world. The challenges it now faces exceed its original specifications. Upgrading that capacity is not a betrayal of democratic ideals. It is their most urgent defence.

But this text must also end with radical self-criticism. What if AI democracy tools cause more harm than good? What if they concentrate power further among those who control the technology? What if they create the illusion of participation without delivering its substance? What if the answer to democracy's crisis is not technology at all, but something much older: community, conversation, proximity, time?

> *Democracy itself is an unfinished project. It has always been. That is not its weakness. That is its definition.*

These possibilities must remain in the room. Not as surrender, but as intellectual honesty. The proposal is not: build these tools and democracy will be saved. The proposal is: build these tools carefully, transparently, reversibly — and be honest enough to dismantle them if they fail.

I write this from Voeren, a small municipality in eastern Belgium where German, Dutch, and French cultures intersect. The questions in these pages have occupied me since my youth — long before I had the vocabulary or the tools to articulate them. I spent most of my career in digital strategy, and only pivoted to AI automation a year

ago, when the technology I had been advising clients on made my own previous role obsolete. I was, in a small and personal way, one of the first people in my own professional circle to be displaced by AI. That experience sharpened the argument considerably. But the real reason I write this is simpler. I have two children, aged three and six. The democracy they will inherit is the one we are shaping now — or failing to shape. Every structural failure described in these pages is a failure they will live with longer than I will. That is not an abstraction. It is a bedtime thought.

This is an invitation. Not to agree, but to think. Not to adopt a programme, but to join a conversation.

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

The argument continues

New essays every Tuesday and Friday. No spam, no algorithms, no hollow optimism.

The Unfinished Democracy is published as a weekly article series. Each article takes one aspect of the diagnosis laid out here and develops it in depth — with evidence, with examples, with the nuance that a condensed argument must compress, and with the self-critique that any serious proposal demands.

The series is free. It began as my own attempt to grasp the full extent of the problem — to think it through from first principles, free from ideology, free from partisanship, free from the influence of anyone who profits from the status quo. I do not know whether I succeeded. But the attempt itself produced something that may be useful: a structured, honest, seventy-seven-part examination of what is broken, why it is broken, and what — if anything — can be done about it. It is written in English, from Belgium, for anyone who cares about the future of self-governance in an age of artificial intelligence.

If the diagnosis in these pages resonated with you — if you recognised the frustrations, the contradictions, the structural traps — then the series is for you.

Subscribe. Read. Disagree. Respond. Share it with someone who feels the same unease but has not yet found the words for it.

The conversation is 2,500 years old. It has never been more urgent. And it cannot happen without you.

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