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► To cite this version:

Annabelle Lever. Democracy: Should We Replace Elections With Random Selection?. Danish Year-book of Philosophy, In press. hal-03891035v1

HAL Id: hal-03891035

<https://hal.science/hal-03891035v1>

Submitted on 4 Jan 2023 (v1), last revised 21 Jul 2023 (v2)

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Democracy: Should We Replace Elections With Random Selection?

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Democracy and the Ethics of Voting:

Over the past ten years or so, a lively debate has developed about how democratic voting should take place and, to a lesser extent, on the considerations that should guide citizens when exercising their right to vote. However, just as the ethics of voting has become an interesting subset of the literature in political theory, another literature has taken off, which suggests that, if one cares about democracy, thinking about voting is likely to be a waste of time. Thus, some people claim that voting is not really a democratic way to select people for positions of power and authority and should be replaced in whole or in part by random selection or sortition, as it is often called. (Abizadeh 2021; Landemore 2020; Owen and Smith 2018; OECD 2020; Sintomer 2020; Smith 2021) If right, there would be no gain to democratic theory or practice in considering whether voting should be secret, mandatory, strategic or not and whether or not it should be focused on the common good of one's country rather than other moral or political considerations. (Engelen 2013; 2009; Umbers 2020; Lever 2007; Lever and Volacu 2018; Lever 2016; G. Brennan and Pettit 1990; J. Brennan 2012; J. Brennan 2009) From such a perspective, it is probably a mistake to take such matters seriously, if one cares about democracy. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the claim that lotteries are more democratic than elections as, in principle, it seems possible to think that there are a variety of uses for randomly assorted assemblies without supposing that they are inherently more democratic than elections. (Stone 2011; Delannoi and Dowlen 2016; Duxbury 1999) Hence, this paper starts by looking at the two main forms of equality which make lotteries seem so democratically appealing; it then argues that these two forms of equality come apart and that, unfortunately, their appeal is likely to prove more apparent than real. Finally, the paper considers the reasons to value randomly selected assemblies even if their egalitarian claims are easily overstated.

Sortition and democratic equality.

In his wonderful *The Principles of Representative Government*, Bernard Manin (Manin 1997) reminded his readers that the association of representative government with democracy is relatively new, not simply because elections with universal suffrage and

equally weighted votes are a recent phenomenon, but because the ancient and renaissance republics considered elections to be an aristocratic, not a democratic, way to select people for political office. Elections were considered aristocratic because they enabled voters to select those they thought best qualified to rule, and to choose them again and again, if they so wished. By contrast, Manin explained, lotteries were thought of as democratic selection devices because they gave everyone the same chance of holding office and, when repeated, were likely to favour the rotation of people in power, thereby militating against the creation of a political elite. However, until recently no one seems to have thought that this means that elections, even with universal suffrage, are less democratic than sortition or that it would be a gain for democracy if people replaced one or more of their legislative bodies with a chamber created by sortition, or random selection. (Abizadeh 2021; Buchstein 2010; Chwalisz 2021 A. Guerrero 2014; A. Guerrero 2021; Landemore 2020; Van Reybrouck et al. 2014;)

So, what can be said in favour of the democratic credentials of sortition – bearing in mind that the use of lotteries, often in conjunction with elections, was used to prop up oligarchical regimes in the renaissance republics of Venice and Florence and, even as late as the nineteenth century, in Swiss cantons like Berne? (Mellina, Dupuis, and Chollet 2021; Delannoi 2019) The obvious point, and one repeatedly cited by contemporary fans of random selection, is the idea that lotteries, when suitably constructed, answer to the democratic idea that people are equally entitled to participate in politics, and to take part in ruling, as well as being ruled. The equal opportunity to hold office created by unweighted lotteries, as well as the rotation in office that they promise, seem to speak directly, and in an intuitively appealing way, to the idea that democratic citizens are each entitled to take part in the government of their society and are, in principle, equal, even interchangeable, in their claims to political power and responsibility. (Owen and Smith 2018; Landemore 2020, 90) Where it is impossible to share a good equally, random selection amongst claimants preserves the commitment to treating them as equals by avoiding invidious, destructive and unfair comparisons amongst them. (Dworkin 2002)(Saunders 2008) When justified by randomisation, unequal rewards do not impugn the virtues, capacities, status, needs or desires of those who lose out and therefore provide no grounds for arrogance or preening on the part of winners, or of self-abasement on the part of losers. (Delannoi 2019, 95-7; Montesquieu 1748, Book II, Ch. 3)Hence, it might seem, unweighted lotteries are the democratically ideal way to distribute goods, including political office, to which all have equal claim but which it is impossible or undesirable to share amongst everyone at once.

Some additional considerations about randomisation are also relevant to recent arguments in favour of its democratic credentials. Where the randomly selected body is sufficiently large relative to the total population, and where everyone selected participates, unweighted lotteries create assemblies that are a microcosm of the larger population. That is, the randomly selected assembly, though smaller than the whole population, will be made up of different groups in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole. (Delannoi and Dowlen 2016, 14; Landemore 2020, 90) This will be true for the invisible as well as visible attributes of citizens and it will therefore be possible to treat the smaller group as an exact replica of the larger one, and an accurate replacement for it for certain purposes. Although randomisation with smaller bodies is likely to result in clusters that mean the smaller group won't be a microcosm of the larger one, as long as the assembly is large enough relative to the total population such problems will disappear – for the same reason that, over a large enough number of coin tosses heads will fall face up 50% of the time, although for smaller stretches of time tails may dominate, or vice-versa.

Randomisation then can be compatible with microcosmic selection, or mirror representation as Pitkin called it and descriptive representation, as it is now usually called. (Pitkin 1967) Thus, without having to make any politically controversial decisions about who or what deserves to be represented, those who have not been selected by a random draw can be confident that there will be people like them in their assembly, and in numbers proportionate to their total in the population. In these ways, individually equal opportunities to be selected for the assembly will coexist with, and generate, equality of results in the representation of everyone's visible and invisible, ascriptive and voluntary characteristics. Put otherwise, while randomisation in these circumstances still means that many – perhaps most of us – will not be part of a legislative assembly, we will know that we had the same chance to be selected as everyone else, and that despite our absence, we will be represented by others who think, feel and live like us in numbers that fairly represent their frequency in the population. (A. A. Guerrero 2014, 167)

Unfortunately, for reasons both of relative size and of people's willingness and ability to participate, it is impossible to create deliberative assemblies that preserve both an equal opportunity for individuals to be selected and a microcosmic or descriptively representative character. Unweighted lotteries standardly create assemblies that don't look at all like the citizen body – both because they are too small for all the different characteristics of citizens to be represented proportionately and because citizens are often unwilling and/or unable to participate, if selected. (Jacquet 2017; 2020) Both problems are non-trivial. Evidence from the larger citizen assemblies, such as the

Scottish assembly on climate change, suggests that only 3% of those selected randomly respond positively to the invitation; and while much higher proportions have been found for smaller and less onerous assemblies, the existing average positive response rate for all assemblies is a bare 15% of those invited. (J.-M. Fourniau 2019; J. M. Fourniau, Apouey, and Tournus 2020) We may hope, with Guerrero, that high salaries, help relocating, and other forms of support and encouragement might persuade people selected at random to take on the onerous responsibilities of a legislative body (A. Guerrero 2014, 156; A. Guerrero 2021, 170) – but realism suggests that most people are unlikely to want to devote large amounts of their time to politics, even for a relatively finite period, and to disrupt their professional and private relationships in order to shoulder responsibilities for which they may have no taste or affinity. In such circumstances, equal opportunity for individuals comes at the cost of the equal representation of groups, understood as the proportionate representation of people's visible and invisible, ascriptive and voluntary ties to other members of the population.

So, it seems that we must choose amongst the two forms of equality that make random selection look so appealingly democratic, as we cannot have both formally equal individual opportunities and descriptively representation, or the equal representation of groups as well. Under modern circumstances – where populations are too large for everyone to participate together in a deliberative assembly, it is impossible to see how equal opportunity amongst individuals and the equal representation of groups are to be preserved, for the same reasons that short runs of coin tosses with tails on top are statistically possible, even probable. The problem is exacerbated, but not created, by a commitment to voluntary rather than mandatory participation, in that the unequal representation of groups that voluntariness creates is likely to be skewed heavily towards the self-confident, politically motivated and those with the time and resources to devote themselves to politics, rather than to personal or professional matters. Thus, the impartiality that gives randomisation its egalitarian appeal looks significantly less democratic once formally equal opportunities become the means through which inegalitarian life-chances and resources are transmuted directly into membership in legislative bodies.

Moreover, the rationale for using lotteries, rather than other means to create our legislative bodies, will seem much less egalitarian when we are not selecting, as were the Greeks, amongst a bunch of volunteers with equal claims on power, rather than from a mixed bag of people some of whom see office as a burden to be avoided, while others see it as an opportunity to be welcomed. Lotteries are a fair way to distribute burdens amongst a group of people who are *equally liable to bear them*, just as they can be a

fair way to distribute goods and opportunities to people with *equal claims on them*. However, where we are dealing with a population who disagree about the value of the good to be distributed, this egalitarian rationale for using lotteries vanishes. Thus, the random selection of citizen assemblies does not enable us to avoid the dilemmas dogging elections and appointment – namely, how to evaluate the relative importance of equal opportunity for individuals as opposed to groups, and whether formally equal opportunities for political office have democratic value at all?

Faced with the predictable consequences of unweighted lotteries, it is scarcely surprising that most citizen assemblies use weighted, not unweighted lotteries, to determine their membership. They therefore must give up the claim to be democratic because they give everyone the same chance to be selected to the assembly, and instead rest their democratic credentials on the claim that stratified sampling means we can construct randomly selected assemblies that look like the general population, at least in certain respects. Unfortunately, clarity about this trade-off, and the choices made, is not common in the literature, where it is still customary to assert that sortition assemblies are both descriptively representative and examples of individual equality of opportunity. (eg Abizadeh 2021 798) Still, the ability to combine randomisation with an assembly that looks like us has democratic appeal, even if the justification of the quotas used for stratified sampling is no more self-evident, or self-evidently justified, than their use in the creation of more descriptively representative elected or appointed bodies.

At present, the stratified sampling used to create citizen assemblies is generally based on such characteristics as age, sex, education, geography and income. However, in the United Kingdom it is common to stratify based on ethnicity as well and the climate assemblies in the UK, as distinct from the one in France, also stratified based on people's opinions on climate change.¹ The key point, however, is that given the small size of most assemblies relative to the population – a large assembly contains 200-300 people, and small ones will contain fewer than 50 – stratification cannot ensure the proportionate representation of the whole population. The construction of the lottery must therefore involve some morally and politically significant choices about who does and doesn't deserve proportionate representation in the assembly. These decisions are likely to be more consequential and controversial in future because, as is true of elections and

¹ <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/en/> ; <https://www.climateassembly.uk/> ; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-climate-assembly-research-report-process-impact-assembly-member-experience/>

appointment, groups who are not represented proportionately may well not be represented at all!

It might therefore seem that the democratic appeal of randomly selected assemblies consists in this: that they enable citizens who are strangers to each other to come together as equals to deliberate on matters of collective importance, based on shared access to the best available evidence. This is of enormous importance. So too is the fact that the organisers and theoreticians of sortition assemblies now spend a lot of time trying to make the process of deliberation as inclusive and supportive as possible, even though a lot remains to be done in these matters. However, when one considers the two forms of equality that gave sortition its democratic appeal – the equal chance to be selected, and the equal representation of voluntary and ascriptive groups – one must conclude that their appeal is more apparent than real.

There are all sorts of ways in which we can create assemblies that look like the general population out of a small and atypical bunch of volunteers by supplementing their membership through the use of weighted lotteries designed to make the resultant assembly look descriptively representative and/or by selecting members of the assembly from that group of volunteers through the use of quotas. Indeed, elections using cumulative and proportional voting, reserved seats and quotas as well as affirmative outreach and support may make it possible to create assemblies that look like us on some dimensions from a pool of volunteers chosen by voters that does not look much like us at all. It is an open question, then, what moral, political or epistemic virtues we should attribute to randomly selected assemblies even if we can create them to look like us on some dimensions. Weighted lotteries preclude formally equal opportunities to serve but also provide no assurance that people have been selected in ways that make them sufficiently diverse to be epistemically valuable or to show that individuals had substantively equal opportunities despite the different ascriptive and voluntary groups to which they belong. In short, while statistical finesse may make it possible for an assembly to look like us on some dimensions, that is no reason to think that the atypical bunch of people who were randomly selected and willing and able to serve in fact have the moral, political and epistemic qualities that made a randomly selected assembly seem democratically appealing. (Compare A. Guerrero 2021) The same, of course, could be said for representative bodies created by elections or appointment – but with this difference: that in *their* case, those authorised to decide who should be a member of the legislature can compare the merits of volunteers through an open evaluative process. Hence, we may have reasons to prefer choice to chance in the selection of our

legislatures, as of our military and medical personnel even though the combination of choice and chance is no guarantee of democratic virtues.

Implications and Challenges

Sortition has many virtues as a way to distribute benefits and burdens amongst equals where neither rotation nor sharing are possible. Its unpredictability makes favouritism harder, even impossible – and this can be true even when weighted lotteries are used to distribute benefits and burdens amongst a large group of people. Unweighted lotteries give everyone the same chance of being selected, and that can be appealing in cases where formal equality of opportunity is a preeminent good. Weighted lotteries enable forms of proportionality which can be appealing in cases where formal equality of opportunity is either irrelevant or seems less significant than ensuring certain types of equality of outcome. However, while weighted lotteries can enable us to pattern random outcomes in ways that reflect our values, they cannot ensure substantively equal opportunities for individuals or groups, as they do nothing to change the unfairness in people's circumstances which prevent them from taking up the opportunities that they are offered – or correctly recognising an opportunity for what it is. The forms of descriptive representation that lotteries create, therefore, do not change the unequal circumstances facing individuals and may, unfortunately, hide and justify them – at least as long as participation is voluntary, not compulsory.

If our assemblies look like microcosms of our society and answer to some idea of fair representation amongst groups, it is easy to forget that this fairness can be created by purely statistical means, with no bearing on the substantive opportunities that people face. The designers of citizen assemblies now make every effort to facilitate participation for those who might otherwise find it difficult – the organisers of NICE's Citizen Council, for instance, used to buy transport tickets and arrange and pay for childcare so that the financial and other costs of arranging such things would not dissuade people from taking part. It is possible, then, to supplement statistical finesse with forms of support that reduce inequalities in the ability to participate for those who have been selected by lot. This is welcome, limited though the consequences of such interventions may be for the randomly selected few, let alone for the infinitely larger population who were not selected to begin with.

Randomly created citizen assemblies, then, can be a contribution to democratic practice and theory, even if their democratic credentials are very much weaker than is claimed by their proponents. It is important that citizens have numerous and varied opportunities to participate with others in considering public policy, and in providing a considered

opinion on the performance of their government, of other public officials, and of the common institutional framework within which they operate. Citizen assemblies can be important contributions to informed public opinion, to the deliberation of others – whether professional or lay – and provide a means to use public resources to educate and engage citizens in ways that help to instantiate the idea that government is there to serve citizens, not the other way round. There are lots of different ways in which citizen assemblies might be constructed, their deliberations organised, and the results of their efforts formulated and made available to others, especially once it is clear that there is nothing especially egalitarian about current ways of constructing and organising them. There is huge room for progress and experimentation in these matters, and that is exciting. But from what we have seen, democratic principles do not justify ascribing significant decisional power to randomly selected assemblies, and there is no reason at present to suppose they can substitute for elections in the creation of democratic legislatures.

Indeed, surprising as it might seem, the questions about secrecy, voluntariness, accountability, equality, and legitimacy that characterise the philosophical literature on voting are likely to find their place in the theory and practice of sortition assemblies – once more progress is made in considering their democratic appeal and limitations. (Vandamme 2018; Engelen 2009; 2013; Lever 2007; Lever 2010; Lever and Volacu 2018) Unanimity in deliberative assemblies is unlikely when people are free to dissent and have no prior reasons to agree with each other, as is the case for people selected at random, as well as those chosen for their competing and partisan beliefs and experiences. The willingness publicly to accept or reject a particular decision, opinion or person therefore remains, and with it the need to consider the merits of majority rule and even minority and majority reports, as compared to other ways of closing deliberation. (See also Lafont 2019) Above all, in so far as citizen assemblies, however constituted, seek to contribute to public debate on behalf of all citizens, deeper reflection on the relationship between their procedures and their outcomes is unavoidable, as is the evaluation of both procedures and outcomes in terms of democratic values, aspirations and experience.

The ethics of voting, then, is relevant to the construction of sortition assemblies, as to elected and appointed ones. The ways in which we construct democratic assemblies has implications for the permissions, prohibitions, and obligations that members face, whether they are selected randomly, by appointment or mass elections. In turn, the incentives and disincentives to good behaviour created by these constitutive and operative rules affect assembly members' ability to cooperate as equals, and to be seen

as peers, rather than as aliens, servants or rulers, by non-members. However, the ready reference to Athenian democracy, by proponents of sortition, can obscure the importance and difficulty of deciding what constitutive and operative rules sortition assemblies might use.

In democratic Athens all citizens were entitled to participate in the law-making body. The use of lotteries was therefore reserved for *additional* public offices for which citizens could volunteer, and these offices were largely individual, with the exception of juries, in which many could participate. These points are important, because both lotteries and appointment in Athens coexisted with the pre-eminence of a law-making assembly in which all were equal, even if they could *also* volunteer for other offices. Thus, the equal citizenship and rights of citizens were protected despite the existence of positions of power and responsibility which could only be filled by relatively few people at any time.

Nowadays, however, there is no such politically preeminent body in which all citizens can assemble as equals. Some other way must therefore be found to make plain the political equality of citizens despite their differential access to political office. If the arguments against the secret ballot and mandatory voting are correct, we cannot solve this problem by forcing people to participate in sortition assemblies. Apart from the hardship involved, and the difficulty of ensuring that the burdens of participation are shared fairly, forcing people to participate in politics, even as voters, implies that their interests are less important than those of others, so mandatory participation in citizen assemblies is unlikely to be consistent with deliberating as equals. The problem is particularly acute in so far as the aim of citizen assemblies is to represent the interests of the general population, rather than their members' interests, and for everyone to be able to see members as their peers, rather than their servants or superiors.

Concluding Thoughts

We have seen, then, that sortition, like elections and appointment, can serve democratic purposes and express democratic values even if there is nothing inherently democratic in any of them. As we are now learning, the practice of representative democracy can accommodate direct democracy, including citizen-initiated referendums. (Cheneval and el-Wakil 2018; El-Wakil and McKay 2020) Likewise, our notions of representative democracy are sufficiently capacious to accommodate sortition, as well as elections and appointment when distributing political opportunities to citizens.

I take all of this to be good news for democracy, and our capacities to secure different forms of equality, liberty, and solidarity – as well as other values. Democratic citizens *should* be able to deliberate on matters of public policy together and have access to the

best available evidence to do so. How else, otherwise, can they see each other as political equals, with claims to determine the rules under which they live? While sortition assemblies are only one way to realise and affirm citizens' claims in this respect, they are a salutary contribution to the theory and practice of democracy.

However, comparing democracy in ancient Athens to contemporary democracy is sobering as well as exhilarating. As we have seen, the relatively simple assumptions about democratic equality that made unweighted lotteries seem so democratic are hard to square with the demands of equality in a world in which political rights can be held by women as well as men with little more in common than their citizenship. Publicly recognising our equality, therefore, is a much more complicated matter than in ancient Athens. Nor are we helped by the fact that there is no ready equivalent to the Athenian assembly in which all could participate as legislators.

Proponents of sortition rightly want to challenge unthinking assumptions about how political power should be distributed and who should have it. But whether we use sortition, election or appointment, political power and responsibilities can be held only by a few of us at any one time, even if we enlarge the scope for direct democracy and increase the occasions for collective deliberation and decision- as we ought. So, perhaps, it is time to rethink again about the nature and value of formal equality of opportunity, with the differences between democratic and undemocratic forms of government firmly in mind? How might we try to embody the values of openness and inclusion, as well as procedural fairness that, as we've seen, give unweighted lotteries their democratic appeal, while acknowledging that, as we currently understand it, formal equality of opportunity has little, if any, bearing on many forms of political equality?

The insistence that reasonable women, as well as men, should figure in court procedures for determining guilt and innocence – particularly in cases of rape and domestic violence – might be an inspiration to us here. Rather than jettisoning demands for formal equality before the law because ways of conceiving it were depressingly sexist and all too likely to perpetuate and justify substantively unequal results, feminists demanded that women's as well as men's perspectives and experiences figure explicitly in the standards used to determine reasonableness for legal purposes. In that sense, reflection on the ways that current forms of formal equality generate problematically inequalitarian results, might help us to improve our practices of formal equality in politics as well as in law.

We have also seen that there is something democratically appealing about descriptive representation, even if it is at odds with giving people the same opportunities, whether

as individuals or as groups. Having a mirror of ourselves as citizens can be democratically helpful, even desirable, even if that mirror is tarnished or distorted in some respects. It is likely, therefore, that the attractions of descriptive representation in the construction of appointed, randomly selected, or elected bodies is that it can shape our views of ourselves as peers, in circumstances where our opportunities for office cannot be substantively equal. Descriptive representation, even if it fails to answer to ideals of equality of opportunity or outcome, can offer a contextual and functional conception of who 'we' are and of the relevant features of 'us' that it is desirable to highlight for various purposes. For example, when deliberating about welfare, an assembly that tries to be descriptively representative of those on welfare can answer to ideals of inclusive and egalitarian deliberation in ways that supplement, but also throw a critical light on, our efforts to create democratically egalitarian elected and appointed bodies. Because weighted lotteries enable the constitution of lots of different assemblies, which can cumulatively illuminate the breadth and depth of our differences and similarities as citizens. In these ways, randomly selected assemblies can help citizens to envisage the demands of formal equality, even as they contribute the deliberative reflection and information necessary for citizens to treat each other substantively as equals. Thus, sortition can be an important contribution to democratic forms of equality even if its claims to be especially egalitarian are, as we've seen, very much weaker than they might first appear.

Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to Chiara Destri, Attila Mraz and, above all Antje Gimmmler and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Aalborg University for inviting me to give the lecture on which this paper is based.

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