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Annabelle Lever

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## Reviving Electoral Democracy: American Philosophical Association Blog

Annabelle Lever ([annabelle.lever@sciencespo.fr](mailto:annabelle.lever@sciencespo.fr)) Sept. 11, 2024

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It sometimes seems that we approach the theory and practice of democracy with one hand clasped firmly behind our back. Although reams of ink are spilled on the right to vote by philosophers and social scientists, there is next to no literature on the right to stand as a candidate for election to a national legislature. Such a discrepancy is particularly surprising because voters can only vote for the alternatives available, and therefore citizens' ability to effectively exercise their right to vote is predicated on there being an adequate choice of candidates from which to select. Whereas the right to vote enables citizens to take part in selecting a government or its opposition, the right to stand, if successfully exercised, gives them the powers of a legislator, and the rights and duties that go with it. Consequently, to neglect the right to stand is to neglect a right that is critical to electoral democracy, and to the distinction between democratic and undemocratic elections.

There are many philosophical and practical questions involved in determining what a right to stand is a right to be, to do and to have. A purely formal right risks turning electoral democracy into elected oligarchy, as only the privileged, or those who they patronize, will have the resources to compete for office. On the other hand, no one has a right to be elected and citizens may reasonably disagree on the qualities and qualifications required of candidates. So, sorting out what rights, opportunities and resources are needed for a democratic right to stand is going to be complicated and cannot be reduced to debates about campaign finance reform or legislative quotas, familiar from philosophical and political debates in the past thirty years.

Setting those thorny issues to one side, it can be helpful to look at a different set of issues which influence citizens' willingness to take part in politics as the representative of others. One of the core challenges of democratic politics – though too infrequently acknowledged – is the problem of how to organize and finance citizen participation in a world where most citizens work and must, increasingly, look

after children, the sick and the elderly. Our failure to adequately answer this question underpins much of cynicism and disillusion with democratic politics in established, as well as more recent, democracies. This may surprise those aware of, and troubled by, citizens' unwillingness to vote – a topic that generates wails of anguish in the media, although their unwillingness or inability to stand 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 those of anyone they know.

So, what can we do to make 'electoral democracy' seem less of a deceptive promise or a contradiction in terms? Let's consider three things we might do, though none is likely to be sufficient and all are likely to be controversial.

### **1. Job sharing**

Until the twentieth century being a legislator in most countries was not a full-time job. Legislation took up a smaller part of a representative's time than nowadays, as did scrutinizing the executive. Hence, (unpaid) legislators could occupy themselves with other things. That is no longer the case. 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 could improve its appeal. Job sharing, whether in groups of two or three, or in larger groups, as has been tried in Brazil), could also facilitate on-the-job training in legislative procedure, which is often arcane, and improve the transition into national politics from local government, or from other occupations.

### **2. Increasing the scope for non-party representation in legislatures**

Representative democracy is largely party democracy, because political parties make it easier for representatives to cooperate in ways that limit the free-riding, buck-passing and credit-claiming that makes it hard for citizens to hold their representatives to account for what they did or failed to do. However, voters are increasingly alienated not just by the parties from which they must choose, but by a cartelization of politics that makes organized parties the arbiters of electoral politics

– selecting and grooming candidates but often also selecting the voters for whom they wish to compete.

More options for party-independent ways to compete for legislative office might help to address both problems. 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 labor – increasing the number of paths into electoral politics is fundamental. 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 successfully compete for electoral office. While the use of quotas, reserved seats and the like can pressure parties to recruit and promote more widely, support for party-independent paths to elected office will probably be needed too.

### **3. 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. But even if we could relocate our national legislatures to avoid the concentration of economic, cultural and political power in a capital, we should also consider whether ministries have to be located in the capital, and around the legislature, as well. Departments of education, health, welfare and the environment, for example, don’t require regular contact with foreign dignitaries, and much of their work is constrained by budgets fixed in advance. In fact, most ministries could be disaggregated and devolved to facilitate their geographical dispersal and, therefore, the ability of people living far from the capital to visit, observe and identify with 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.

### **4. Shortening the working week**

Democratic politics is time-consuming and people who must earn their livings and care for others will have few chances to learn about and practice it consistently. 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 retain employees. 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, the distribution of paid and unpaid work, as well as the relationship between work and politics. But we can change things for the better. Female MPs in the UK have insisted that sexual equality and democracy require Parliament to provide the facilities for pregnant and lactating women required in other workplaces, that childcare be available to legislators, and that hours of work reflect the fact that MPs are not, and should not be assumed to be, men with wives at home to look after the children (for other changes, see also [professor Sarah Child's 2016 report from 2016](#)). But, while adapting the customs, buildings and location of our legislatures is important so that they become more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic, we still need to adapt the working day to better accommodate electoral, as well as non-electoral, politics.

## **Conclusion**

Democratic political rights are meant to be rights that all citizens can exercise, without manifesting special abilities or ambitions, the ownership of special resources, or unusually fortunate or favored circumstances. That is not to say that most people must be representatives – however large and multiple our legislative bodies are, that is not possible. But between a right that most people never consider exercising – however interested they are in politics, or however capable – and one that all can exercise as they want, there lies a wide range, which can be

conceptualized philosophically and institutionalized politically. By drawing attention to the right to stand and its importance for electoral democracy, I have tried to respond to the anger, despair and helplessness occasioned by the persistence of forms of power and authority that democracy was supposed to replace. But they are just steps on one of the many paths to a more democratic society that we can, and should, take.