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Research and Development Note

Can we better represent people who do not vote?

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Can we better represent people who do not vote?

What is the question?

How can we better represent people who do not cast a valid vote?

Why does it matter?

Voting remains the main mechanism for everyday people to have a say in politics. But, many people choose not to vote, even in countries with compulsory voting legislation such as Australia and Belgium.

Why people choose not to vote is an open question. The steady decline in public trust in our political institutions, misinformation, fear campaigns or whether people do not like the options presented are among the most common reasons offered.

Whatever their motives, when people choose not to participate in our political system, it narrows the group of people our politicians are appealing to when they're seeking votes. It depends who isn't voting but this can mean that politicians only need to appeal to the more extreme factions of their voter base while more moderate voices are turned off.

One of the key issues is that in our party-based electoral democracies, people are forced to vote for a small selection of political parties and candidates, so when they find that their views aren't included in the selection provided to them, some people may feel like extreme candidates are the only other alternatives to the political establishment.

This phenomenon can result in divisions and decreased social cohesion and can have very visible and dangerous consequences – the January 6th, 2021 US Capitol riot is an example. The problem is further exacerbated by social media echo chambers fuelled by algorithms that prioritise engagement over the exchange of balanced and accurate information.

How have other countries responded?

In most countries, high levels of abstention and disaffection are perceived as problematic but are not usually treated as a pressing issue that needs an urgent remedy. Countries tend to focus their efforts on increasing voter turnouts through "get out the vote" and similar public awareness campaigns and more practical approaches such as the introduction of postal, online voting and auto-enrolment. These approaches centred around voting, however, don't usually make much difference, and a few countries are now also trialling more robust alternatives based on a democratic lottery system.

The 2007-2011 Belgian political crisis (over 500 days to form a government following the 2007 election) exemplified some key problems with electoral democracy and led citizens to take matters into their own hands and organise citizen-led deliberations (the G1000 initiative) to discuss and make recommendations on issues that mattered to everyday people.

The yellow-vest protest which started in 2018 in France also led to the awareness of a growing disconnect between electoral politics and large segments of the French population and the importance of including everyday people in politics. In France and other countries, this disconnect has led voters to shift toward candidates at either extreme. If countries want

to avoid this potential danger to democracy, innovative solutions to disaffection are required.

As a result of political crises, the two aforementioned countries have now started to use democratic lotteries in a still restricted, but much more systematic, manner as a method for selecting representatives. In these cases, randomly selected citizens work alongside elected representatives to complement their work.

Two regional governments in Belgium have adopted this approach, yet in a distinct way. In East Belgium, citizens are selected via a democratic lottery and are given agenda-setting power, deliberate amongst themselves, and then go and interact with the elected members of the regional parliament. In Brussels, 45 randomly selected citizens are part of a parliamentary committee and interact directly with 12/15 legislators to work on well-defined tasks. In the case of Brussels, randomly selected people work alongside and deliberate with MPs. Paris has also recently introduced a permanent standing citizens' assembly of 100 randomly selected citizens.

What new answers are there?

While elections and random selection are, in many aspects, opposites in terms of selecting and justifying the role of representatives, our creativity can enable us to imagine several mechanisms that would enable the two systems to cohabit. Representing non-voters is one way to design a stronger democratic system, and creates a mechanism that enables disaffected people to have a voice. Further, such a system gives them an alternative to extremist candidates—an important step in building legitimate institutions.

The models that use democratic lottery described in the previous section are already genuine democratic improvements but another mechanism that focuses on non-voters could also be implemented: filling a proportion of seats in parliament with randomly selected citizens *based on the level of abstention at an election*.

This approach would integrate elements of a democratic lottery with parliamentary democratic institutions while being consistent with electoral democracy. The fact that 100% of the seats are occupied by MPs even when abstention levels are, for example, over 20% is an oddity with no clear justification. Leaving a percentage of seats empty does not offer an intuitively satisfactory solution.

Instead, if an election results in 20% of the eligible voting population not actually voting, then 20% of seats could be occupied by MPs chosen via a democratic lottery. These lottery MPs would be drafted after the government is formed (they would not be “kingmakers”) and their focus would be on contributing to policy decisions and legislative votes by forming an informed judgement through deliberative processes and casting a valid vote. How these lottery MPs arrive at their votes, whether alone or as a group in a deliberative environment is an open question. Both options have their merits.

For example, New Zealand has an MMP-based unicameral system which lends itself to representing non-voters. At the 2020 New Zealand general election, the estimated eligible voting population was 3,898,574 and 2,894,486 people cast a valid vote (74% of the eligible voting population). Using our proposed method of proportionally representing non-voters, the 2020 general election would have resulted in 31 seats out of 120 being occupied by lottery MPs.

In a bicameral system like Australia, non-voters could be represented by additional MPs in the Senate (where the government has not held a majority since 2007). At the 2019 Australian Federal Election, 83% of the eligible population cast a vote. If we were to retain the same amount of Senators but complement them with additional MPs to make up the participation gap we would have added 15 lottery MPs to the current 76 elected members following the 2019 election.

It is likely that factors such as the electoral system, political culture, and demographics of nations would require different ways of implementing this approach to representation. For example, nations following a consociational system (power-sharing between different ethnic/religious groups following a quota system) would have a variety of options available regarding the stratification and addition of their lottery MPs to their parliamentary institutions.

Countries with a high number of parties in parliament and an evenly distributed vote are less likely to depend on the vote of lottery MPs as ruling parties may be able to create stable voting majorities without reliance on lottery MPs through careful coalitions. Conversely, the role of lottery MPs would be much more salient in countries with only two parties garnering most of the votes. As mentioned earlier, important details such as how lottery MPs arrive at their votes (individually or as a block) may be dictated by the electoral systems and culture of each individual country.

What are the benefits?

There are five main benefits to this approach.

First, this solution would continue the shift towards broadening the franchise. An important ambition of those who believe strongly in democracy is universal voting. Over decades, enfranchisement has been widened. We have moved far beyond propertied males only, to all men, all women, younger people (in some countries the voting age is 16 years), and culturally-diverse people. Marginalised and low socio-economic groups, however, tend to have lower voter participation and using a stratified random sample of the population to fill non-voter seats would likely increase their representation in democratic institutions.

Second, this model would give an option to people who don't trust politicians and are disillusioned with the system. As discussed earlier, disaffected people are currently tempted to vote for fringe extremist leaders as they do not feel represented by "the establishment". Giving them the option to vote for "people like them" could mitigate the increasing popularity of extremist political figures and build trust in democratic institutions.

Third, this approach offers a counterbalancing mechanism for both electoral representation and lottery. In other words, if citizens are unhappy with politicians, they can just abstain and give their "non-vote" to lottery MPs. A mechanism could be included for a "none-of-the-above" that achieved the same result. Conversely, if people dislike the idea of lottery MPs sitting in parliament and/or the lottery MPs perform poorly, people will go and vote for candidates in the usual way and abstention rates will decrease.

Fourth, the proposed method for representing non-voters would allow the lottery MPs to side with different parties on a case by case basis depending on the issue at stake. At the moment, people vote for parties and/or politicians and MPs in parliaments tend to vote as party blocs. Voting for ideas as such is not an option except for referenda which come with a number of shortcomings. In this system, lottery MPs could side with different parties on

issues such as environmental policy, taxation and health care. This could create a more dynamic environment in parliament and, while government reforms are often stymied by empty slogans and scare campaigns, this approach would offer an option to go beyond slogans, misinformation, and fear. Instead, this approach would create the ideal conditions and incentives for people to deeply consider different positions and engage constructively with all sides.

Fifth, using the abstention rate to allocate seats to lottery MPs would offer a more objective way of deciding how to divide seats between politicians and randomly selected citizens. Until now, governments such as Brussels, East Belgium, and Paris appear to assign the number of seats allocated to randomly selected citizens quite arbitrarily.

What's required for success?

Elected representatives' buy-in is key to the implementation of this proposed system but it is also the hardest task because systems involving randomly selected citizens may be perceived as replacing MPs. This need not be the case.

In the proposed model, increasing the total number of seats, for example, would ensure that the number of MPs remains the same. Similarly, small parties could feel threatened by this proposal as their impact in parliament would likely decrease and, in some cases, would completely cease. This could be easily mitigated, however, by decreasing the threshold for representation in parliament. New Zealand, for example, currently has a 5% threshold condition (or winning an electorate seat) for parties to be represented in parliament because of their MMP system. Lowering that threshold to 3%, for example, would increase the chance of small parties to be represented in Parliament.

If the main goal of this approach, however, is to improve democracy and increase the quality participation of citizens, then our attention should focus on the "lottery MPs".

People who are not professional politicians usually have jobs and asking them to leave their jobs for 3-5 years is not always realistic (even if, for some low and middle-income people, 3-5 years receiving an MP's salary would probably be a good deal). This can be remedied by having a rotation mechanism: every six months or a year, one third or half of the lottery MPs are changed, again using a lottery (but not all of them for continuity reasons). This means that people would need to commit for between one year and three years depending on the term and rotation. This would also multiply the total number of everyday citizens participating in parliamentary debates. Of course, lottery MPs would need to be offered a salary, child care arrangements, and job security for when they return to their normal jobs. Importantly, there need to be mechanisms to ensure that the principles of deliberative democracy apply to these citizens' deliberations. There is very little benefit in adopting such a system if the randomly selected citizens are going to be reduced to pawns in parliamentary debates and end up as an extremely small sample of the population casting votes in a referendum manner. This means that they should have enough time and a place to deliberate amongst themselves, do research, receive neutral expert advice, etc. The deliberative approach to information could decrease the overall impact of misinformation on democratic debate and reduce the potential risk associated with strong partisan views amongst some of the lottery MPs.

This idea is currently only in its infancy and more research is necessary to ensure such a system would meet its goals. For example, the method could easily be trialled for 12-24 months, then analysed and refined, before being trialled again after the next election. While

further research and an eventual trial period are required, it is fair to say, that this approach would solve the problem of representing “non-voters” and would give disaffected citizens an alternative to potentially dangerous fringe politicians. The benefits are clear: the creation of more stable and legitimate democratic institutions that are resilient to the current challenges democracies face globally.