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Are democratic innovations better at breaking the link between inequality and democracy?

by Carly Walker-Dawson

What are democratic innovations and why do we need them?

Democratic innovations are ways to engage people in decision-making outside of traditional democratic structures. By traditional democratic structures I mean voting and contacting your elected representatives. In some cases, this might also mean taking part in consultations — usually online and usually one-way. When I refer to public engagement in decision-making, it is how people who are not elected representatives can influence decisions in policy, programmes, services or initiatives. What is important here is that decision-making feeds into something concrete, beyond asking people broadly what they think about a topic, as this type of input is easy to ignore.

So why are democratic innovations increasing in popularity and becoming more common in the democratic discourse? People are opting out of the representative democratic system across Europe. Members of the public are disillusioned, disengaged and feel like they don't have the means to influence decision-making. This reality is reflected in voter turnout, which has been on the decline since the end of the last century across Europe [[International IDEA Institute](#)]. And the people whose trust has been broken the most by the establishment are people from low income and disenfranchised groups who face the greatest barriers in accessing the democratic system [[IIPPR](#)]. We need to reignite people's fire for democratic engagement and we need alternative means to be able to do this.

So what is the link between inequality and democracy?

Inequality is a deeply political issue. The economy and its inherent inequities are a product of politics. Policy-making as a whole favours those with money and power. For example, the tax burden in the UK firmly sits with the poorest [\[ONS\]](#). Elected representatives rarely represent the working class anymore, the UK are following the trend across Europe that MPs are becoming ever more homogenous [\[TD O'Grady\]](#). The reduction of the trade union route into UK politics and the huge expectation of time and money to become a political candidate has caused the 'class ceiling' phenomenon [\[IPPR\]](#). And unsurprisingly the people who are least likely to engage in political life are the poorest in society [\[House of Commons Library\]](#).

People need time, energy, resources and the understanding about how to make the democratic system work for them — something in combination that is out of reach for those furthest from power. Ultimately, we need alternative ways to overcome the inequity within the representative democratic system over and above what has already been tried to rebalance this power.

Democratic innovations as a way to increase participation

Democratic innovations reach beyond those who can already navigate and influence the democratic system. These alternatives — participatory and deliberate democratic approaches — extends to those who are less-heard in our democracies.

Democratic innovations work by recognising people are experts in their own lived experience. Put simply, the everyday person knows their own reality, needs, preferences and desires, therefore they know what policy, programmes and services work for them. Members of the public have a collective power — they can generate new ideas that might not otherwise be put on the table. Their life experiences mean they come up with solutions that may not even be on the radar of policy-makers.

There are different ways to do alternative democratic processes. Perhaps the most well-known and celebrated innovation is the Citizens' Assembly. These have gained popularity across Europe thanks to famous processes like those from Ireland that recommended legalising gay marriage and then abortion — both prompting radical law changes. 30 hours of deliberation on a specific topic can have a transformational effect on the individual. Recently, an expert speaker at a Citizens' Assembly shared that they felt the Assembly Members ended up becoming as much of an expert of the topic area as them by the end of the process.

But the time, money, expertise and preparation required for a Citizens' Assembly makes a national roll out significantly challenging. We need to think beyond Citizens' Assemblies if we want to roll out democratic innovations. We need to be creative and harness different ways to do participation and deliberation, and on different levels. Democratic innovations are not the sole responsibility of the national government — although that alone would be transformational — we need to work with grassroots movements, community organisations, statutory bodies, the arts and cultural sector, and business to make a systems-wide change.

So what are other types of democratic innovations? We have access to boundless numbers of methods. [Distributed dialogue](#) asks actors and citizen groups to set up their own workshops to discuss a topic, following prompts from the decision-makers about what should be discussed and the outputs needed to make their decision. [Co-production](#) brings together decision-makers and members of the public and/or other actors to implement policy or service together. And it is not just the role of policy-makers to do the engagement — just as important is to harness the work of existing organisations working in communities. This challenges engagement fatigue or, in other words, prevents the 'we've already told you this' response to your attempted engagement. Innovative initiatives such as [Detroit Soup](#) demonstrate how you can open up a space to empower communities to take collaborative decision-making into their own

hands. Democratic innovations such as these engage many new people who would have otherwise opted out of the democratic system.

Engaging lower-income and disenfranchised groups

It is not enough to simply introduce different ways of doing democracy. This assumes a level playing field, without recognising the barriers to participation that exist regardless of the method. We need to do things differently if we want to engage lower-income and disenfranchised groups — in short, those who are furthest away from power. I've outlined five considerations to think about when engaging people from these groups through democratic innovations:

1. **Go beyond self-selection:** we often only hear from the usual suspects, also known as the vocal minority, when we open up our decision-making through public and community engagement. It's no wonder decision-makers are scared of engaging the public when they are confronted with the same loud and often oppositional voices. We want to reach out to people like the everyday working mum who has to juggle childcare, the home and work. We can do this by selecting representative or diverse groups of the population, selected based on demographics, geography and sometimes attitudes on a topic. This allows us to reach out to the silent majority. We recommend complementing this approach with targeting specific groups who are disproportionately affected by a decision or who you are least sighted of (this is often people furthest from power).
2. **Recognising people's time:** remember how I said that a person needs time, energy, resources and the understanding about how to make democracy work for them? If you want to engage those who don't usually have this, such as the working mum I mentioned, you have to offer incentivisation. At minimum, you should cover expenses such as travel expenses and accessibility costs (such as childcare, personal assistant costs and interpretation). Ideally, you should also offer financial remuneration or vouchers equivalent to the living wage in your country. Only then will you engage someone working on a zero hours contract who has to give up their paid work to input into your process. This is especially important if you want to get beyond surface-level opinions by giving time for dialogue and deliberation. To make real impact, you'll want to go beyond the observable positions someone may have on a topic, and take time to really understand the needs, fears and desires of those most affected by policy. [Oliver Escobar](#) describes this effect of deliberation as lowering the visibility line. We can't expect people to do this for free, especially those from low income groups whose time means money that means survival.
3. **Be clear what you're asking (and not) and why:** you want to be able to give people a clear understanding of what is required of them in an engagement process. This sets the expectations of what is happening and what you will do with the outputs from a process to which people have invested time and energy. This is especially important to those people who have the least trust in the system — lower-income and disillusioned groups of people. And don't forget to feedback what changes have been made as a result of the engagement after, or how else will they know what they've said has been acted on?
4. **Think about who are your messengers:** when you're dealing with issues of trust and legitimacy, who you have fronting an alternative democratic is vital. People want to speak with people who look like them and sound like them. If the decision-makers opening up a question to members of the public are not viewed favourably in the eyes of the community, think about who is trusted and get

them to support you or lead a process. Do you have key community leaders who you can collaborate with? Do local government officers hold more gravitas than members of parliament? A great example of this is [MH:2K](#), where young people were trained to run workshops with their peers on the topic of mental health. The impact of this project was profound — both changing mental health provision significantly and changing the way decisions were made about youth mental health in the long-term.

5. **Go to where people are:** there is nothing more off-putting for someone from a disenfranchised group to be told that in order to engage they have to go somewhere that is unfamiliar. Worse, that they associate negatively with institutional power. Make sure the place where you're doing engagement is accessible to those you are targeting. This might mean going to existing community events, going to places where people already visit like the supermarket or the local cafe. Or think about how you can reach people through community, voluntary and faith organisations.

So can democratic innovations get rid of inequality?

Democratic innovations can open up democracy to people who have either stepped back from the system or have not yet engaged. Alternative ways of doing democracy can start to build trust in the system if it's truly two-way and not extractive. In turn, this can motivate people to get more involved in democracy

in other ways. One example of this is Sue, a former fishmonger from Bath, who took part in [Climate Assembly UK](#). She said the experience 'awakened' her, giving her a sense of both a right and a responsibility to have a say on how we tackle climate change. She became a national spokesperson on the need to tackle climate change, receiving coverage in the national press. From there, she was able to become an elected representative in her community, the main reason being that she wanted to engage in local politics.

But there is still power in who commissions democratic innovations, and the questions that are asked can influence the outcome. No method is perfect, which is why we advocate for mixed method approaches and bottom-up empowerment of communities and their work. Certain groups are very hard to reach, such as people experiencing homelessness and those who are acutely socially isolated. To do democracy well takes time, energy and resources. So commissioners often cut corners. I firmly believe that bad engagement is worse than no engagement at all, as a negative experience can put someone off for life.

Democratic innovations done right can bridge a gap. They can give people renewed hope. They can repair broken trust in institutions and decision-makers. They can combat generations of disillusionment. They can decrease the gap where those with wealth and power have a disproportionate say over policy. Of course there is no magic wand and this will take time. But little by little, we can make our democratic system more equitable to move towards a democracy that is owned by the people. Only by doing things differently, rather than tweaking the existing system, are we going to break the link between democracy and inequality.

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[Involve](https://www.involve.org.uk/) is the UK's leading public participation charity. We develop, support and campaign for new ways to involve people in decisions that affect their lives. Since 2003, we have been working with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and the public to create and deliver new forms of public participation that re-vitalise democracy and improve decision-making.

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