

Participatory Democracy and Its Limits

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Abstract:

This review surveys the limits of participatory democracy and reconsiders its merits, with particular emphasis on the limited attention of citizens. I trace the development of participatory democracy within political science and democratic theory and suggest participation has fallen out of its previously central role as a criterion of democratic quality. What remains is a set of functions and pitfalls which I explore in a series of inquiries into participation 1) in lottocracy and electoral democracy, 2) in its relationship to representation, and 3) in local land use planning. I conclude with thoughts for future research informed by the discussion.

Keywords:

Participation, Participatory Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, Lottocracy, Political Attention, Representation

What can participatory democracy mean today? When Mark Warren (2002) posed this question at the turn of the 21st century, he highlighted the growth of interdependence and social complexity as apparently fatal for democracy in the participatory mode. Societies are too big and complicated for citizens to take direct control of today, he surmises, at least not in the ways imagined by previous generations of democratic reformers, theorists, and revolutionaries.

Yet Warren nonetheless concludes that this same explosion of size and complexity has generated innumerable opportunities for new forms of democratization. Within the social, economic, cultural, and political spaces opened up by expanding social complexity, reformers can imagine and build new democratic forms. Exploration of the growth of democracy into these opening social pores has since dominated both his scholarship and a growing body of political science research.

In this review I survey the limits of participatory democracy implicit in this literature to determine what belongs within its remit. Some of these inclusions reflect poorly on the paradigm and invite reconsideration of its merits. I also urge wider consideration in all participatory research of how citizens' attention is limited, individually directed, and socially allocated. My goal throughout is not polemic but rather to temper and redirect the enthusiasm of scholars and reformers from less to more promising forms of democratic participation. Tempering steel makes it stronger and more useful, and that's how I hope to affect the drive for democratic reform.¹

I first consider the significance of participation within political science and democratic theory, suggesting that in its historical development we have seen a reduction of its centrality to what we look for in democracy today. What is left of participation is a smattering of functions and pitfalls which I briefly survey and then explore in a series of inquiries into participation in

¹ Nicole Curato's (2019; 2024) research integrating critical, practical, and power-political concerns into the deliberative democracy paradigm provides a valuable template for this kind of work.

lottocracy and electoral democracy, in its relationship to representation, and in local land use planning. I then conclude with thoughts for future research informed by the discussion.

Participation's Decline

If democracy requires popular engagement in lawmaking and governance, to invoke participation is, in a sense, simply to name democracy itself. Yet the term has been used with a decidedly more specific meaning in the history of political science. Participatory democracy today is considerably diminished compared to the meaning it had at its inception. It has been demoted from the premier force for reshaping society toward the end of human emancipation to only one technocratic tool among others for promoting legitimate and effective public policy. This transformation took place in three acts.

The first was a response to the consolidation of a postwar political science in the United States and elsewhere that was centrally concerned with discovering the conditions for democratic survival. This agenda was chosen for the scholars of this era by the cataclysm of the Second World War. Such a thing, in all its horror, must never be allowed to recur. A key characteristic of this period was the turning of a gimlet eye toward the ideal of democracy (e.g. Schumpeter 1942; Berelson 1952; Dahl 1956).² Scholars were emphatically not concerned with envisioning a vibrant democracy full of flourishing people. Such a vision would be a gamble and hope for it a risky idealism. With the nightmares of Auschwitz, the Eastern Front, and Hiroshima fresh in collective memory, and with a cold war heating up, such risks could not be afforded (Moyn

² Although Dahl (1989) would later articulate more expansive ideals of democracy, his early work is explicitly concessive and descriptive, seeking to avoid the “maximizing” theories of Madisonian and populist democracy against which he posed the merely “satisfactory” theory of polyarchal democracy (Dahl 1956, 84).

2023). Dreaming of a better future was left to future generations, but only if hardheaded (democratic) realism today allowed them to be born (see Piano 2025).

And born those latter generations were. Indeed, the first act of our story begins as the baby boomers entered adulthood demanding more from their society. Crystallized poignantly in the Port Huron Statement (Students for a Democratic Society 1964)—but made apparent across a vast spectrum of radical and New Left political movements—was a demand for deeper and more meaningful forms of democratic life. Carole Pateman supplied the classic translation of these demands into political theory in her *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970). In addition to the Port Huron Statement, Pateman’s book is gainfully paired with Jane Mansbridge’s *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1980) and Benjamin Barber’s *Strong Democracy* (1984) to constitute a participatory democracy canon.

Pateman critiques the “realistic” approach of midcentury political science for its impoverished ambition and scientific pretensions. She seeks to replace them with a more ambitious vision derived from the work of earlier democratic theorists who envisioned a considerably more transformative purpose for democracy. Pateman recovers from Rousseau, J. S. Mill, and G. D. H. Cole a vision of democracy as individual and social transformation. Democracy, on her account, turns private individuals into citizens and unfree societies of militantly policed hierarchical relations into democratic societies of collectively self-governing equals. The key mechanism for these transformations is participation.

Participatory democracy in this original guise identifies unmediated participation as the central criterion of a truly authentic democracy. The more that ordinary people take direct part in governing social arrangements, the more genuinely democratic a society is. Crucially, this extends far beyond the narrow confines of government. Both Pateman and Mansbridge (1980)

emphasize workplaces as sites of participatory democracy, and Mansbridge (1980, vii) emphasizes other sites ubiquitous in 1960s America: “free schools, food co-ops, law communes, women’s centers, hot lines, and health clinics.”

The other key characteristic of participatory democracy in this period is its aim of comprehensive social emancipation. Barber (1984, 266) calls for “the liberation of women and men from bondage to others, and to privatism” via participatory democracy, while Pateman (1970, 110) says participatory governance is necessary for an individual to, “under modern conditions,...hope to have any real control over the course of his life or the development of the environment in which he lives.” Participation is necessary for meaningful freedom today. A key reason participatory democracy cannot be limited to the narrow sphere of government is that oppression pervades social space and must be met wherever it’s found. This was the heroic age of participatory democracy.

Although important practical work continued, such as that of Ned Crosby (e.g. 1995) and Peter Dienel (e.g. 1978), participatory democracy as both a social movement and an academic research program subsided through the 1970s (Florida 2018, 36–37). In the next phase of our story, participatory democracy is transmuted into deliberative democracy, serving as a crucial bridge in its development from its classic heroic form to its diminished contemporary one.

It is widely agreed that deliberative democracy emerged from participatory democracy (Pateman 2012; Elstub 2018; cf. Florida 2018, 37). Although the radical politics sustaining participatory social experiments subsided by the 1980s, the spirit of democratic reform persisted in activist and academic spaces. I omit recounting the early history of deliberative democracy and refer the reader to existing treatments (Chambers 2003; Thompson 2008; Mutz 2008;

Florida 2018; Elstub 2018). My purpose is to explain how deliberative democracy was participatory and why it represents a decline from the previous era.

Deliberative democracy began as a theory of democratic legitimacy, not of emergent practice as participatory democracy was. In the previous era, new socio-governmental forms were being tried and participatory theory was developed to make sense of them. Deliberative democracy, by contrast, started with theory about what a better democracy would entail, as enacted through familiar institutions. Joseph Bessette (1980), who coined the term “deliberative democracy,” used it to describe a particularly attractive way that politics within traditional US political institutions could work. Though much of this early deliberative theory was surely engaged with the politics of the day, there was no great upsurge of new democratic social movements to theorize.

So, in what sense is deliberative democracy participatory?³ The most important continuity is deliberative democracy’s focus on the direct engagement of citizens in public affairs; the main innovation was specifying the *manner* of that engagement. Deliberative democracy would always privilege face-to-face discussion, typically in structured environments that bring together different kinds of people. The classic accounts of participation reveal considerable overlap here. Mansbridge’s participatory “unitary” democracy, for instance, is explicitly oriented toward small-group consensus achieved through open discussion, and Barber’s (1984, 307) strong democracy tries to be as face-to-face as possible.

The two come apart when deliberation becomes *designed*. There is an artificiality alien to participatory democracy in its classic form to groups convened by someone other than the

³ There is an important strand of deliberative theory that is largely indifferent to participation in the relevant sense because it places reason-giving as the exclusive criterion of deliberative legitimacy, such that majorities rule legitimately when they provide cognizable reasons to minorities for why they use public power as they do. Bernard Manin (1987) and arguably Habermas (1996) adopt this position.

group's members and intentionally constituted to be diverse, as are most deliberative forums (e.g. Fishkin 2009). Those forums also typically have limited or no control at all over their agenda, sharing a common but lamentable failing of many democratic arrangements today (Carpenter 2023).⁴ By contrast, the kinds of groups participatory democracy theorized were typically self-constituted to some purpose or agenda of their own, such as a hotline dedicated to a community's unmet needs (Mansbridge 1980, 139ff).

We see then that one plausible way that deliberative democracy represents a decline from the heroic age of participatory democracy is in its domestication (Courant 2022, 170). Participatory democracy was characteristically something *wild*; scholars studied it as participant observers in the field, where, for a time, it thrived on its own. By contrast, even when it has been part of actual politics and not simply an academic exercise, deliberative democracy mainly occurs under lab conditions (Ryfe 2005; Floridia 2018, 39). Knowing the myriad ways deliberation can fail in public, advocates design it carefully to bring subjects together in controlled circumstances.

The prominence of design represents a decline in the importance of participation partly because it relocates the locus of agency. Whereas classical participatory organizations were self-starting, exercising agency directly by constituting themselves and developing their authority endogenously (cf. Woody 2023, 30–34), deliberative institutions are typically programmed by someone other than the participants themselves, often with the assistance of 'participation professionals' (Lee 2015). However well-meaning, these agents are not 'the people themselves.'

Yet designing deliberative participation is essential, if only for the sake of inclusion (Young 2000; Elliott 2023, 85–92). I said above that deliberative democracy privileges face-to-

⁴ Allocating agenda control is a problem that deliberative democrats andlottocrats are widely aware of but often struggle to address (Gastil and Richards 2013; Landemore 2020, 14, 207; Guerrero 2024, 161–64).

face discussion among different kinds of people. Yet ‘different kinds of people’ need to be brought together; inclusiveness in the relevant sense must be *made*. This brings us to a deep divide—indeed, an existential tradeoff—in democratic theory: does one favor the self-selected, self-starting authenticity of an uncontrolled participatory democracy or the truly diverse and inclusive deliberation of a domesticated deliberative democracy?

It is sufficient to acknowledge that the aspirations of the original participatory movement largely diminished among deliberative democrats. Whereas participatory democrats emphasized transformation of the self and society, deliberative democracy on the whole—though by no means lacking in visionary advocates—does not advance such a comprehensive ideal of human emancipation (Escobar and Bua 2025). Deliberative democracy was at first and still largely remains premised on the improvement of basically sound, if perhaps increasingly endangered, electoral democracies (e.g. Ackerman and Fishkin 2004).

The last phase of our story brings us to the present, wherein participation has been relegated to but one aim or tool in a wider democratic universe. The departure point is a series of sympathetic critiques of deliberative democracy starting around 2010 that faulted it for failing to adequately scale and to make the high-quality deliberations its advocates facilitated matter for mass politics.

Simone Chambers (2009) argued persuasively that there was a growing divide between “democratic deliberation” focused on small-scale deliberative forums and “deliberative democracy” which was concerned with the deliberative qualities of the wider public sphere. Shortly after, an eminent group of deliberative theorists including Chambers developed a “systemic approach to deliberative democracy” which embraced all of democracy’s components holistically via functional analysis (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Dryzek 2009). This

“deliberative systems” approach circumvents worries about abandoning mass politics by showing how non-deliberative components of democratic systems can together support deliberative politics.

Whereas much contemporary scholarship focused on the optimal characteristics of exemplary deliberative moments and institutions, this approach invites a comprehensive critical assessment of democratic institutions and practice. The deliberative systems view distributes deliberative functions across institutions and enables their theoretical integration via the systemic paradigm. In place of the dispiriting question of how a particular deliberative forum or assembly moved the needle on mass politics, since few could do so on their own (cf. Warren and Pearse 2008; Fournier et al. 2011; Farrell and Suiter 2019), one would ask instead how it contributed to overall deliberative democratic functioning.

Yet the ‘systems’ part of deliberative systems theory took on a life of its own. Once democratic theorists adopted the functional, systemic lens, the previous focus on deliberation dissolved (Saward 2021; Asenbaum 2022). As Saward (2021, 22) put it: “if a systemic view is what matters to our thinking about democracy, why is it not the democratic system, rather than the deliberative system, that is the focus?” Surely there ought to be room for “varied strands of equality, liberty, accountability, transparency, rights,” etc. in a democratic system, not just deliberation.

We see this wider systemic perspective at work in Warren’s (2017) problem-based approach to democratic theory.⁵ Warren seeks explicitly to displace a ‘model of democracy’ paradigm (Macpherson 1977; Held 2006), into which participatory democracy fits neatly. He

⁵ Another arguable instance of systemic democratic theory is Archon Fung’s (2006; 2015) “democracy cube,” which offers practitioners three dimensions to carefully consider when designing democratic processes: different sorts of participants, different ways of communicating, and different levels of empowerment.

supplies a systemic alternative to the deliberative systems approach which de-centers deliberation while keeping it among the tools democracies might deploy to address discrete problems they encounter (cf. Dean et al. 2019).

It is here, in generic democratic systems theory like Warren’s problem-based approach, that we find at last ‘participation’ in its diminished contemporary form. From such a systemic perspective, participation no longer commands a unique or categorical authority as the source of democratic legitimacy. Far from being pivotal to democratic authenticity, participation, in its distinctive deliberative form, emerges as but one characteristic or institutional modality among others. Viewing participation functionally thus removes its nostalgic aura and refocuses attention on the purposes it serves—and provides a vantage point to see how it might go awry.

The Functions of Participation

Political theorists today treat participation as a functional piece of the wider democratic fabric—bringing benefits and affordances, but also costs and dangers. I’ll briefly enumerate the main functions and pitfalls, before developing several in the sections that follow.

Classic functions: Participation is classically seen as necessary for empowered self-government, correcting electoral democracy’s failure to give citizens a meaningful say. It is also posited as a way to improve political equality, redistributing power downward against entrenched social, economic, and political hierarchies. Finally, it has long been valued for transformatively educating and developing the citizenry.

Contemporary functions: Today, these functions are more salient.

- Participation may *transmit information* from citizens into the political system, information which might otherwise be neglected (Dean 2017, 218–19). Such

information aggregation is a major theme in epistemic democratic theory (Landemore 2013; Schwartzberg 2015). Involving citizens can supply critical knowledge that governments sometimes use for the public good, like combating disease outbreaks, and other times for exploitation, including resource extraction or nightmarish programs of oppression (Scott 1998; Schwartzberg 2018, 448–49).

- Participation might *enhance the legitimacy* of the political system, either authentically or as “democracy washing,” whereby participatory forms serve as empty window-dressing (Warren 2025, 12) for a system that is actually indifferent to participatory input (Arnstein 1969).
- Participation can *decentralize power*, by rooting decisions in smaller, local bodies. Such devolved structures often intersect with arguments for subsidiarity and federalism (Bednar 2009, 25–56).
- Participation could *disintermediate collective decision-making*, reducing reliance on office-holding and mediating structures like parties and elected legislatures. This function, under various headings, fuels much recent enthusiasm for democratic innovations (Elstub and Escobar 2019).
- Participation might *deinstitutionalize democracy*, a more radical consequence or variation of disintermediation, whereby the circumvention of parties, parliaments, and interest groups in favor of randomly selected bodies or referenda leads the former set of intermediary institutions to wither away. Deinstitutionalization may end up empowering charismatic plebiscitarian leaders, as in caesarism or Bonapartism (Green 2010; Urbinati 2014), and could leave democracy with fewer consequential offices, permanently reducing its effective institutional complexity.

- Participation can *generate new forms of representation*, in which ordinary citizens represent one another through sortition, self-selection, or other avenues (Warren 2013). The possibility of non-electoral representation challenges a traditional opposition between participation and representation.
- Participation may *exemplify new horizons* of democratic possibility. This function is frequently appealed to in radical politics and has arguably animated some important activist efforts such as the 15M and Occupy movements, among others (CrimethInc Collective 2017; Wolin 1996). It can also be found in much of Erik Olin Wright’s Real Utopias Project (e.g. 2003a; 2019) and Gianpaolo Baiocchi’s (e.g. 2017, 139) work on participatory budgeting.

Dysfunctions: Participation can also backfire, sometimes spectacularly. It may create a paradox of empowerment, where costly participatory modes disproportionately advantage the already privileged because they can best afford to use them (Elliott 2023). It is also inefficient, burning up more social resources in the making of collective decisions than alternatives like delegation or representation. And participation imposes a burden on citizens, demanding that they divert time and attention from the quotidian needs of life to politics, a diversion many would struggle to afford.

The following sections explore one or more of the functions and dysfunctions surveyed above.

Lottocracy, Participation, and Representation

One of the liveliest areas of research in democratic theory—and of effort among actual democratic reformers (OECD 2020)—concerns sortition or “lottocracy.” I use these terms to

refer to arrangements in which important functions of governance or policymaking are discharged by persons invited to participate by a formal, random process.⁶ Although there have been precursors to lottocracy that empaneled merely consultative bodies to address a specific issue or delimited set of issues (e.g. Gastil and Richards 2013; Farrell and Suiter 2019; Gastil and Knobloch 2020; OECD 2020), the main debate has been over formally empowering such randomly invited citizens by having them supplement or even replace elected legislators (Landemore 2020; Abizadeh 2019; Guerrero 2024). The debate over lottocracy is thus over whether to transfer real authority to sortition-selected citizen-officials.

Lottocracy raises at least two key questions related to participatory democracy. One concerns its participatory credentials: is random selection actually a way to increase or improve participation compared to electoral democracy? The other question has to do with disintermediation and representation: does lottocracy displace an inauthentic form of democracy centered on electoral representation in favor of a more authentic disintermediated democracy in which ‘the people’ actually rule? In this section, I address these two questions in turn, arguing first that lottocracy likely reduces the amount of participation in a democratic system compared to one concentrating authority in elections. I then argue that although lottocracy cannot disintermediate democratic processes in the way participatory democracy sometimes promised to do, it does generate a promising new repertoire of representative practices wherein randomly invited citizens step into the role.

⁶ ‘Random selection’ is the common term used in this literature but it is usually assumed that those whose names are selected are merely invited and may refuse. This has been the practice of every actually existing quasi-lottocratic deliberative assembly, and it seems to give rise to considerable self-selection effects (Fournier et al. 2011). Landemore (2020, 90) accepts that refusal may generate problematic self-selection and proposes mandatory participation for those who are selected, as in jury duty.

Before we can tackle the first question about how lottocracy would affect participation, we must first clarify why this question matters. After all, if participation's significance in democratic theory has waned, one might wonder what the stakes of this question actually are. The answer is that, if lottocracy counts as participatory, then participation's customarily high reputation could be invoked to bolster its democratic authenticity. Lottocrats might seek a replay of the 1970s clash between electoral representative democracy and a more 'authentic' participatory one. In that earlier contest, participationists largely won in shaping the normative imaginations of theorists and reformers. Even if it never remade the world as hoped and an unimaginative realism reigned in empirical political science, participatory democracy endured as a touchstone for authentic democracy.

If today's debate recapitulates that one—with lottocrats as plucky upstarts against hidebound electoralists—it grants them not only the imprimatur of participatory democracy but perhaps the expectation of a similar victory: lottocracy as the new claimant to democracy's high ground. So, what are lottocracy's claims to be participatory—and indeed, more so than electoral democracy?

Landemore (2020, 14) suggests that her sortition-based theory of "open democracy" is in fact an instance of participatory democracy, though not one "premised on mass participation at all times." What's key for her is that open democracy removes the mediation of (elected) representatives such that ordinary citizens can have not just the "final say" as in a referendum, but the "first say, and indeed a say anytime we want" (Landemore 2020, 14). Participation for Landemore means disintermediation wherein citizens can be part of ongoing processes of collective decision-making open to their input, like the Icelandic constitutional convention (Landemore 2020, Ch. 7), in an authoritative and not merely advisory capacity.

Guerrero (2024, 324–29) gives considerable care to the question of lottocracy’s participatory bona fides. He argues that participation would be robust with his favored form of “single-issue lottocratic legislatures” (SILLs), which are deliberative assemblies of randomly selected citizens who legislate on specific areas of policy. First, he reinforces Landemore’s point about the participatory credentials of lottocratic institutions directly via a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the chances that an American would be randomly chosen to serve. He suggests his estimate of a 4 percent chance to be chosen over one’s lifetime constitutes a meaningful avenue of participation.

Guerrero also moots an indirect participatory route. In his proposal, compared to an election-based politics, there “still will be many of the exact same avenues of influence: protesting, petitioning, speaking, writing, assembling, organizing, creating and working within political parties and organizations, donating money and time to political issues that one cares about” (Guerrero 2024, 328). He sees citizens engaging with SILLs in ways directly analogous to existing electoral institutions, offering at least as much scope for participation.

Cristina Lafont (2019) rejects the participatory credentials of lottocracy because it involves, in her words, most democratic citizens “blindly deferring” to the tiny group who is randomly selected to authoritatively participate. On her account, sortition-based deliberative assemblies constitute objectionable “shortcuts” that circumvent the work of engaging and persuading mass publics of the merits of different courses of political action. Democracy with an authentic participatory pedigree must not rely upon such shortcuts for they short-circuit the opinion and will formation that makes collective self-rule possible in large modern societies.⁷

⁷ Warren (2020) objects persuasively that Lafont neglects the ways that democracy in complex societies is only made possible by a wide variety of such shortcuts. The question then becomes whether the sort of shortcut embodied in lottocratic institutions is wise for democracy to deploy, which Lafont sensibly doubts due to the short-circuiting discussed above.

Lafont and Nadia Urbinati (2024) press another point against lottocracy regarding its replacement of broad-based electoral participation with an infinitesimally small group. “For whichever political decisions lottocratic institutions have authority over...only the few randomly selected members will have the power to make those decisions and the rest of the citizenry would be excluded from exercising any power over them” (Lafont and Urbinati 2024, 176). Power, they claim, would be entirely stripped from the ordinary citizen in lottocracy compared to an electoral context wherein they have an equal vote.

Moreover, Lafont and Urbinati insist that the vote is not nearly as inconsequential a form of participation as more than a half century of mindless repetition that ‘a single vote doesn’t matter’ seems to suggest. They illustrate in detail the way the universal franchise kicks off a complex dance of representation and intermediation, calling into existence political parties and other organs in civil society, as well as political discourses aimed to engage and mobilize the mass public.

For example, as they discuss, Emilee Chapman (2022) has emphasized election campaigns’ “momentousness” as a society-wide event that coordinates social attention, interest, and activity through a vast network of channels. These include discussion and information-seeking in mass and social media, everyday social interaction with friends and neighbors, local civil society activities, campaign volunteerism, etc. Without the high-stakes, authoritative decision of the electoral moment—which lies in every set of hands via the franchise—we deprive ourselves of the key to this participatory bonanza.

Pevnick and Landa (2021, 53–54; 2025, 104) warn that lottocracy is likely to induce some forms of pathological participation. The concentration of power in the hands of randomly-selected political amateurs is likely to enhance the influence that coordinated pressure campaigns

and lobbying by wealthy interests can have on politics and policy (presenting another vector for the paradox of empowerment, which I discuss further below). The same pathways of openness emphasized by Guerrero may very well become both easier to capture and more influential when leading into the offices not of career politicians supported by mass electorates but complete neophytes elevated quite literally by dumb luck.

On balance, it seems fair to say that lottocracy commands no unique advantage over electoral democracy vis-à-vis participation. Considered realistically, both make at least some reasonable claims. It is difficult to entirely reject that a randomly invited body of citizens is more ‘participatory’ in some sense than one composed of elected officials because it lowers the costs of, and removes barriers to, amateur citizens occupying positions of power. But empowering such a body at the cost of elections comes at an enormous participatory cost since electoral democracy is more participatory than it’s usually given credit for. The more authority is relocated to lottocratic bodies, the more it weakens the significance of the franchise and denudes the public of the engaging momentousness of election campaigns—both of which reduce the motivation of the citizenry to attend to politics in their daily lives. Displacing elections also threatens to deinstitutionalize democracy by robbing political parties of their reason for existing (Elliott 2023, 193–94). Overall, then, lottocracy would likely reduce the overall level of participation in democracies compared to election-centered alternatives.

I turn now to the second question about lottocracy and participation: does lottocracy successfully disintermediate democratic processes, thus making it more authentically democratic than alternatives like electoral representative democracy? The discussion above prefigures the first half of my answer: I argue it does not. Yet lottocracy nonetheless unlocks new possibilities

for novel representative practices, and a new relationship between participation and representation, which some scholars have begun to explore.

Random selection is often said to generate a ‘mirror’ or “microcosm” of the population, at least in the demographic categories stratified in selection (Fishkin 2009; Guerrero 2024). Insofar as this authentic mirror is positioned against a ‘distinguished’ or aristocratic set of elected representatives (Manin 1997; Van Reybrouck 2018; Landemore 2020), it seems to make ‘the people’ immediately present, grounding a participatory claim for lottocracy based on disintermediation.

Yet random selection does not and cannot make ‘the people’ present in government. This is not merely due to its specific limitations but more fundamentally because there is no ‘people’ that could be made present. ‘The people’ as a political actor exists exclusively in the populist imagination; in reality, only individuals who belong to various groups exist.

Consider that although the people administering a random selection process might stratify its sampling to ensure, say, that people of lower educational attainment are present in the group by inviting as many as necessary to meet the quota, they cannot stratify along every politically relevant dimension of difference (Elliott 2023, 76–77). Seeking, for instance, vocational diversity such that ‘white collar’ professionals do not dominate a randomly selected body invites acute questions about what kinds of work ought to be controlled for and made present. ‘White’ & ‘blue’ collar categories are too coarse-grained to capture a large polity’s vocational diversity; consider the systematic neglect of ‘pink’ collar jobs (Barnes et al. 2021; Winant 2021). Every demographic category one tries to control for obscures diversity internal to it and so cannot reflect the true diversity of any actually existing demos. Henry Farrell and Hahrie Han (2025) call this “lossy representation” of the demos, wherein random selection creates “living

photographs of the public” that blur details but capture the main features of the far more complex whole.

My point is not to deny that randomly selected bodies can be made considerably more representative in a descriptive sense than elected ones. That claim cannot be disputed. It is rather that being more descriptively representative does not make them ‘the people’ themselves. Randomly selecting lottocratic bodies does not make them participatory in that sense. They are, at best, another set of representatives.

It turns out that as an empirical matter many citizens randomly invited to high-profile citizen assemblies do indeed see themselves as representatives. In the French Citizens’ Convention on Climate, 22% of participants saw themselves as representatives of people like them and 19% as representatives of the broader public. Another 21% saw themselves as representatives of particular causes (Giraudet et al. 2022, 12). In sum, then, fully 62% of the participants thought of themselves as representatives for someone or something other than themselves—a mere 36% said they spoke only for themselves.

If empowered lottocratic institutions follow this same pattern, we would expect most of their members to conceive their role as a representative one, not as one of disintermediation. They seem to reject the notion that they are ‘the people themselves,’ made immediately present in the empowered spaces of government.

This rejection suggests that representation and participation do not stand in tension, as is often thought, but rather that David Plotke (1997) is more nearly right that representation *is* democracy, and that its opposite isn’t participation but rather exclusion. (And that the opposite of participation is abstention). When we pursue this line of thought, we end up back where we began with Warren, after a fashion. Plotke (1997, 24) says that if he’s right, the task is to

“improve and expand representative practices,” which I take to mean embrace a wider set of democratic locations, actions, and institutions—the pores of a complex society.

If representation is democracy, and if representation should be expanded to cover many non-electoral practices and spaces, then we’re talking about ‘representation-izing’ the same sorts of complex social spaces that Warren suggests democratizing. This is a hugely promising approach for future research. Indeed, much recent work in democratic theory extends representation into new spaces and practices (Rubenstein 2014; Disch 2021; Chambers 2024, 151–76; Salkin 2024), including deliberative and participatory ones (Warren 2013; Montanaro 2018; Landemore 2020; Landemore and Fourniau 2022). Saward’s (2010) theory of representative claim-making, in which audiences and constituencies contest the claims of would-be representatives and accept or reject them as their judgment dictates, provides a compelling framework merging deliberative and representative theory and delineating considerable space for participatory-representative activities (cf. Salkin 2024).

Yet this departs dramatically from participatory democracy in its heroic form since there, citizens are governing themselves *for* themselves. If participation is fundamentally reconceived as offering opportunities for citizens to govern on behalf of others via non-electoral practices of representation, then we’ve well and truly left that paradigm behind. With it must go the notion that participation disintermediates democracy—it doesn’t, and it can’t.

This still leaves spaces for participatory democracy in its classic sense, but these would be exclusively those in which participants are immediately governing only themselves as in membership-run organizations like housing co-ops, workplace democracy, and certain online forums (Forestal 2022, 115–16). Lottocracy thus brings out a key dimension of participatory democracy as commanding new conceptual priority: coincidence between those subject to an

organization or polity's authority and those *actively* engaged in its governance, not merely afforded the opportunity to do so, and where engagement encompasses *any* type of participation—including informal processes of will and opinion formation enabled by paying attention to politics.

We might say, then, that a participatory democracy is one wherein, regardless of size, there is practically perfect coincidence between the general membership of a polity or organization and those who are engaged, even just attentively, in its governing. By contrast, a representative democracy is a polity or organization where, regardless of size, those groups are substantially disjoint, such that there is a considerable population of those subject to its authority who are usually inattentive and disengaged from its politics and yet the subset of active participators govern on their behalf and not exclusively for themselves (cf. Landemore 2020, 74ff).

Coincidence between those governed and those attentively engaged distinguishes participatory from representative democracy separately from considerations of scale. One could have a representative democracy as small as a housing co-op if it's predominantly governed by a board of elected members or a small group of highly engaged volunteers, and a participatory one of unlimited scale if virtually every member attended dutifully to politics and has robust means to engage actively and authoritatively (Elliott 2023, 100–106). This liberates participatory democracy from the brute fact of size while clarifying the structure of representation and its nearly infinite applicability, even to small groups.

This understanding of participatory and representative democracy also widens the modal focus of the former from face-to-face discussion to encompass the entire scope of participatory modes, including informal processes of will and opinion formation mediated by the allocation of

attention to politics. Such wide scope is justified by the lottocratic possibility of a democracy where most pay no attention to politics, lacking the practical stimulus of the franchise and the social attention coordination created by momentous election campaigns. Focusing on citizens' political attention (or lack thereof) suggests versions of democracy responsive to emerging features of today's attentional environment, like information abundance paired with attentional scarcity (Elliott 2023, 203–12), and offers promising avenues for future research.

Participation's Great Folly: Land Use Planning

There is one contemporary incarnation of participation that must, unfortunately, be bailed into participatory democracy's remit: modern land use planning in the United States. Although local politics has often been identified as a promising venue for participatory democracy—particularly in the large and growing literature on municipal participatory innovations like participatory budgeting (discussed further below)—local land use is seldom associated with it. Yet local land use is a clear instance of participation backfiring and generating a predictable set of serious problems associated with the housing crisis. I argue this case is sufficiently stark and important that it ought to not just temper one's enthusiasm for one class of common participatory institutions but rather update one's prior beliefs that they are desirable at all as a means of institutionalizing democracy.

In the 1960s and 70s, there was a wide-ranging reevaluation of the role of government and its relationship to the people it governed. We have already heard part of this story. Here I propose to dig down into what it meant for local government in the United States and control over the land. There are few types of control more profound and political than that over who gets

to use the land and how. I want to highlight how this authority was transformed in ways that reflect the participatory ideal and yet were profoundly pathological.

The midcentury United States was characterized by an imperative to *build*: roads, dams, highways, and housing, both public and private. This was the golden age of Robert Moses and the “growth machine,” during which public authorities worked hand in glove with developers to build out urban and suburban spaces (Caro 1974; Molotch 1976). These projects were governed by the same rules as the rest of the New Deal political economy, which meant, in the telling of a new generation of liberal critics, that growth was to be pursued at all costs—to human communities, health, and the environment—by way of a cozy partnership between government and big business (Sabin 2021). There followed an extensive reaction against this model and an agenda of institutional reform to force proper consideration of these costs.

In local government, this reform agenda meant formal and informal transformations to the rules governing control of the land to make it more participatory. Zoning and other land use planning became more broadly open to the input of local communities via public meetings and comment processes (Einstein 2019, 28–32; Anbinder 2024). Here, we saw a flowering of participatory democracy in a form nearly perfectly embodying the ideal, all across the country (Sahn 2025, 689). These processes were 1) open to any member of the community who desired to be heard, 2) involved giving specific reasons, 3) were intensely pragmatic and oriented to specific projects, 4) occurred at the local level, and perhaps most importantly, 5) were nearly always empowered because comments either formally or informally created obligations on developers and altered material outcomes (Einstein 2019, 17–18, 25–28; Anbinder 2024; Sahn 2025).

Participation in local land use therefore features virtually all the elements of ideal participatory democracy during its heroic era, lacking only the characteristic that they weren't always self-initiated to the participants' agenda. If participatory democracy was indeed inaugurated for land use, who did it empower and to what effect?

Although a comprehensive analysis of all localities over the relevant period is impossible, the available empirical evidence demonstrates that participatory land use empowers groups that are demographically unrepresentative of their communities. They are more likely to be white, male, and older than the rest of the community and are, in particular, more likely to be homeowners than the average resident (Einstein 2019; Yoder 2020; Sahn 2025). Those who are empowered by this set of participatory institutions are thus those who are already advantaged in a variety of ways in American society. These advantaged groups have, moreover, deployed this power to deepen their advantages by delaying and blocking the building of housing that might change the balance of public goods and 'character' of their neighborhoods (Schleicher 2013; Einstein 2019; Marble and Nall 2021).

This reinforcement of social advantage makes local meetings governing land use a paradigmatic example of what I call the paradox of empowerment (Elliott 2023, 72–80). Because participation is costly and often requires specialized resources—think of how in-person meetings require not just money but also free time during workdays or evenings and civic skills like self-confidence and social respect to speak up (Sanders 1997)—it is often beyond the reach of disadvantaged people who are busy with the ordinary demands and responsibilities of life.

The paradox occurs when especially costly forms of participation are inaugurated or become empowered yet, because of their costliness, are disproportionately used by the already advantaged members of a community to reinforce their advantages (cf. Neblo et al. 2018, 65).

The paradox implies that more opportunities to participate are often not only unhelpful but can positively harm democracy by reinforcing the power of already powerful groups. Participation can thus be bad for democracy, at least when it occurs this way.

In this case, the paradox of empowerment has resulted in a housing shortage so acute it is widely called a crisis. It is difficult to overstate its significance. The consequences for human flourishing—and even the future of democracy itself—have arguably been catastrophic. Regional unaffordability has contributed to “opportunity hoarding,” whereby high-quality public goods like schools, parks, and libraries, and opportunities for good jobs, are geographically concentrated where housing is cost-prohibitive, which degrades the quality of life and overall life prospects for those locked out. Opportunity hoarding thus compounds social inequality along nearly every dimension (Einstein 2019, 8–9). Homelessness, too, has exploded in America due to the housing shortage (McKay and Cowles 2025; Colburn and Aldern 2022).

The cost in foregone human development and economic growth is immense. One projection put the amount of economic activity sacrificed by the housing shortage in New York City alone at \$1 trillion over ten years (Obeid 2025). Another study found housing constraints reduced the historical rate of economic growth in the US by 36 percent (Hsieh and Moretti 2019). These purely economic figures are suggestive of the sheer scale of the crisis’s overall human cost. Consider the innumerable lost opportunities for connection, creation, inspiration, love, and innovation in every field of human experience which occur most readily in dense human communities (Glaeser 2011). These are not the wages of education and individual and social development promised by participation.

This foreshortening of horizons has not only closed off opportunities for better lives, but seems, likely as a result, to have discredited the political system itself and invited the erosion of

democracy. Evidence from Europe shows that support for populism and the radical right is concentrated in places with stagnant housing markets and where residents faced constraints, above all housing costs, which prevent them from relocating to places with more opportunities (Adler and Ansell 2020; Patana 2022; Ansell et al. 2022). Among Americans, a plurality see material security and opportunity not as things provided instrumentally *by* democracy, but constitutive of democracy itself (Davis et al. 2022). The housing crisis may thus signify a betrayal of what many Americans think democracy is all about, generating systemic frustration and a willingness to empower outsiders and even outright enemies of the established (democratic) order.⁸

I am making the intentionally provocative claim that participation is to blame for these problems, at least in considerable part. Although we might fairly be concerned about the undue influence of developers on the rules governing use of the land, the transfer of authority to “local community members” through the specific institutions of public land use meetings was a predictable disaster. We must not allow the invocation of ‘participation’ to blind us to the perverse tendencies occasioned by ‘local control’ as it has been institutionalized to date in this highly consequential policy area. Moreover, although we might tweak the design of local land use planning processes, that the existing processes mirror so closely the widely endorsed design ideals of participation in being open, local, reason-based, authoritative, etc. suggests the problem lies in the ideal, not its operationalization. If things can go this badly wrong from such small

⁸ This suggestion regarding democratic erosion is not a rehash of the ‘economic anxiety’ argument, which posits that support for anti-democratic populism is driven by economic deprivation. Rather I am suggesting that the housing crisis has demoralized and weakened the credibility of political forces supportive of “democracy,” demobilizing them, and opened discursive opportunities for demagogic populist appeals. The real political base of rightwing populism lies among cultural reactionaries who are not themselves necessarily experiencing economic insecurity and are politically activated by these appeals (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2019, Ch. 5; Margalit 2019).

deviations from what participatory democracy would identify as an attractive process, we should fundamentally reconsider its attraction.

I propose that participation in its classic form should be, by default, viewed with skepticism, perhaps even hostility. There is no reason to see any institutional arrangement as authentically democratic that reliably operates to empower the already empowered this way (Elliott 2023; Bagg 2023, 66–73). We should therefore invert our priors to consider participatory institutions that look *anything* like these ostensibly ‘open,’ ‘community-based’ arrangements as presumptively undesirable, unless their susceptibility to the paradox of empowerment is neutralized structurally, and thoroughly.

Conclusion: Reshaping Participatory Research

As mentioned at the outset, Warren suggests the complexity of modern societies opens up many political spaces that might be democratized. Yet this sits uneasily with the profoundly limited attention citizens have, and the often small share they want to devote to democratic politics (Elliott 2023). Because the spotlight of our attention is always narrow, and our ability to comprehend the world’s complexity is severely limited and strongly mediated, we might miss the advances of democracy in the spaces beyond our interest (Elliott 2020; 2024). Thus, Warren’s vision of democratized social complexity answers what participatory democracy can mean today only by raising a further question of political epistemology (Friedman 2019): how can we square the finitude of citizen attention with the vast complexity of democratic societies? How can citizens rally to democracy’s defense without *knowing* where in its vast honeycomb of social spaces they should muster?

This concern about attention and complexity in democracy, as well as those explored throughout this review, suggest additions and changes to ongoing participatory research. The first concerns online ‘participation,’ mainly through viewing and posting to online forums or social media platforms. If attention is more essential to democracy today than in the past, then these spaces where people spend an inordinate amount of their time and attention are essential to understand and monitor. They are arguably where most democratic will and public opinion formation, as well as meaning-making (cf. Woodly 2015, 143), now occur. We should therefore ask sharp questions about platform design and ownership as well as about the norms of online conduct (e.g. Forestal 2022; Muldoon 2022; Forestal 2024; Fischli and Muldoon 2024).

However, we must also watch for insubstantial “political hobbyism” in these spaces, which consists in citizens dissipating their finite political attention on online content (Hersh 2020). Political hobbyism is a form of self-indulgent consumption that perniciously and erroneously causes consumers of political content think they’re ‘doing politics’ while it displaces authentic political work in the “meatspace” of their actual neighborhoods. It thus transmutes genuine political concern into impotence, preserving a largely unperturbed political world.

Another key research area concerns citizens taking part in the administrative side of government (Fung and Wright 2003b; Fung 2006; 2015; Zacka 2017; Dzur 2019, Ch. 5; Heath 2020). This research investigates how governments, particularly administrative agencies and local governments, involve non-officeholders in the execution of policy rather than in legislation. The public salience issue is acute here since these processes are often entirely invisible or opaque. More work should problematize administration’s simultaneous importance and relative public invisibility while examining its substantive democratization (e.g. Thompson 2024; Cordelli 2020; Zacka 2022, 28–29).

Researchers and reformers must always ask of participatory institutions: who sets the agenda? Participatory budgeting, one of the most successful recent participatory innovations, suffers acutely here since it is usually given a portion of a municipality's capital budget to use on projects determined popularly (Shah 2007; Peabody 2024). This is quite a restricted to-do list, arguably denoting a domesticated version of participation. And although it might expand democracy in a complex society into local government spaces, one should nonetheless hold one's applause until it is shown to durably evade the paradox of empowerment. So far, it has not (e.g. Baiocchi and Ganuza Fernández 2017, 130–31). Future work on participatory budgeting and other local participatory initiatives should prioritize this concern.

One function of participation I have said little about is that of expanding democratic horizons. What is there to be said about future research highlighting it? This function is one of the most easily abused; any half-baked participatory experiment that fails in short order may be excused by it. Yet such failures are not without cost, and not only in the wasted effort and resources of reformers (always in short supply anyway). It also risks inciting despair. One must be responsible in eliciting and handling others' hope, and this is what we must see more of in future participatory research and advocacy. Though hope dies hard, it is also hard to revive when it does—and little is possible without it.

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