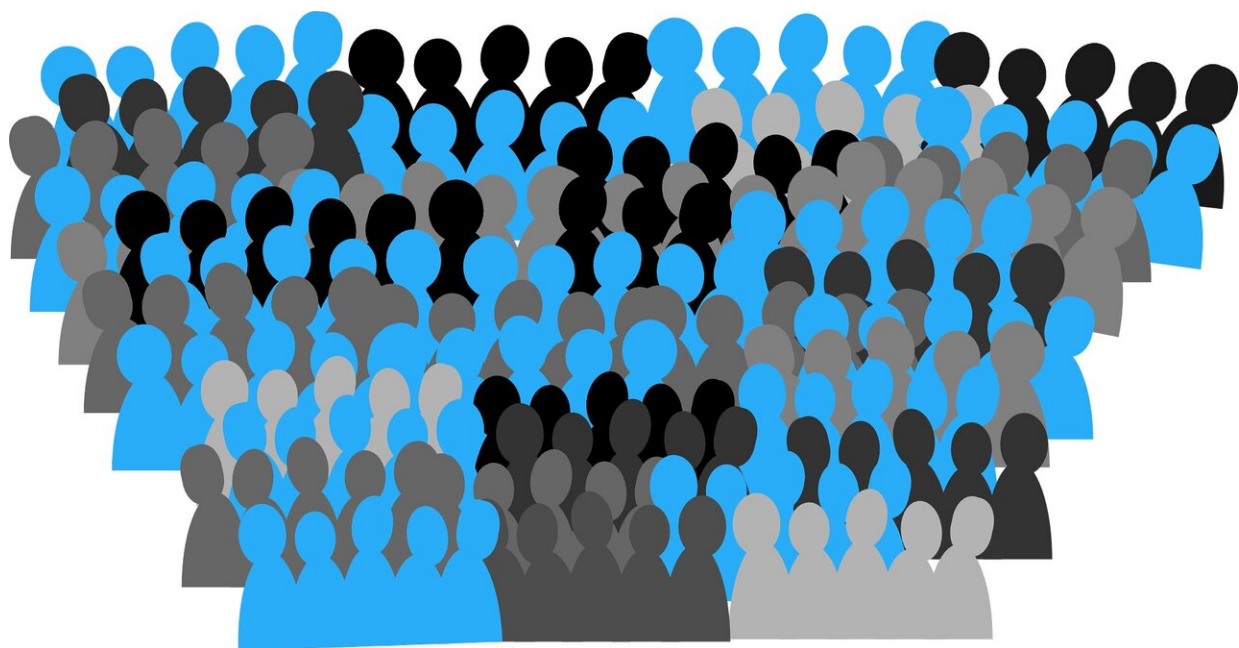


# Democracy fatigue: An intelligent system that combines direct and representative politics can help counter it

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Democracy is in crisis. Many people are losing confidence in political parties and parliaments and their ability to solve pressing social problems in the long term.

Recent studies by the University of Stuttgart indicate that addressing

doubts about the democratic system does not necessarily require resorting to the election of an autocratic head of state. Rather, more direct [political participation](#) could revitalize and legitimize [democracy](#)—provided that innovative participatory formats are intelligently linked to the work of representative institutions.

"Many people consider representative politics to be tiring and dysfunctional in the face of existential crises," says Prof. André Bächtiger, Head of the Department of Political Theory and Empirical Democracy Research at the University of Stuttgart's Institute for Social Sciences.

"Some voters are therefore relying on a strong head of state to bring order to a world that has gone off the rails." Bächtiger and his team are researching democratic alternatives that could counteract the misery.

In a recent study [published](#) in the *American Political Science Review*, he, along with Saskia Goldberg from KU Leuven in Belgium and Marina Lindell from Åbo Akademi University in Finland, explored the concept of "Lottocracy" and its potential for implementation.

## **Political participation by lottery: A practice from ancient Athens**

Similar to ancient Athenian democracy, a "lottery democracy" uses [random selection](#) to determine who may participate directly in [political decisions](#), by serving on a citizens' council for example. "They operate competently, free from party or lobby influences, and ideally represent the interests of the entire citizenry," explains Bächtiger. According to the expert, such "mini-publics" work surprisingly well in practice.

Participating citizens not only engage in discussions at an impressively

high level but also often achieve consensus on contentious issues. Political scientists, sociologists and philosophers discuss what powers such councils should actually have in political practice.

Should citizens take their fate into their own hands? Should they be allowed to make binding decisions or even completely replace dysfunctional parliaments? Or is it illegitimate for a small group of randomly selected citizens to make decisions on behalf of others without direct accountability or effective representation?

## **Lottocracies: How do members of the public view them?**

Bächtiger, Goldberg and Lindell wanted to know how members of the public, as the addressees of such reform efforts, view lottocratic citizens' councils. The study revealed that while respondents generally found this form of direct democracy intriguing, they were more hesitant when it came to granting it decision-making powers.

The researchers observed this pattern in very different country contexts—in the politically highly polarized U.S.; in Ireland, where people already have a lot of experience with citizens' councils; and in Finland, where there is a high level of political and social trust. However, only 15% to 25% of respondents had even heard of citizens' councils before and only around 4% had ever been involved in one.

The study also shows that citizens who already have experience with direct democracy formats in particular are more open to mini-publics with decision-making power. However, uncertainty remains when it comes to the question of whether citizens' councils should have "decision-making power or merely an advisory role."

## **Future democracies: Complex models of citizen participation**

"This raises new questions for the design of future democracies," says Bächtiger. In a current research project by the Bertelsmann Foundation, he and his team asked participants in the citizens' council "Forum against Fakes" to share their views on what they believe an ideal democratic system should look like.

Here, too, the participants would like citizens' councils to play a more important role in decision-making. However, they would like them to be linked to the existing representative institutions. "They want to use the best of both worlds," says Bächtiger.

Representative institutions promote the articulation of problems and politicize people. Lottocratic institutions, in turn, improve the quality of political discourse, create trust and encourage people to be impartial and consider the interests of society as a whole.

## **Multi-chamber systems: Smarter decisions and more satisfaction**

There are already approaches that combine decision-making mini-publics with existing democratic institutions at the municipal level, such as in East Belgium and Paris. There, lottocratic chambers are linked to the representative system.

"The future of democracy therefore does not lie in replacing existing representative systems, but in intelligently combining representative and lottocratic institutions," concludes Bächtiger. "This might not only lead to more informed decisions but also significantly boost the public's satisfaction with democracy."

**More information:** Saskia Goldberg et al, Empowered Minipublics for Democratic Renewal? Evidence from Three Conjoint Experiments in the United States, Ireland, and Finland, *American Political Science Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055424001163](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001163)

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