

Are “Professional” Politicians the Problem?

Democracy v. Demarchy

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Do we really *need* politicians?

Can't we [cut out the useless middlemen and do it ourselves?](#)

Professional politicians just [pimp their services out](#) to the [highest bidder](#).

And American democracy – once a glorious thing – has devolved into an oligarchy, according to [two leading IMF officials, the former Vice President of the Dallas Federal Reserve](#), the [the head of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City](#), Moody's [chief economist](#) and [many others](#).

This is not how it was supposed to be. Thomas Jefferson [envisioned](#) “citizen farmers” who served in political office for a few years, and then went back to their normal jobs.

Reader Eric H. has a very interesting take on the whole question of politics and democracy:

“I was curious about Athenian democracy, and when I was poking around I was very surprised to find out that traditionally, a state in which the people voted for their public officials was known as an oligarchy. This was because that even if not at first, then eventually the government would devolve to a small, homogenous group that had enough political power to disregard the will of the people. Today we define oligarchy as simply “the rule of the few,” but that’s only the symptom; the Greeks understood that the disease was the delegation of political power through elections. Sounds radical, I know.

Today we call it representative democracy, but that’s just a euphemism (perhaps the most pervasive euphemism in history). It’s hard to understand how giving up the power to make the decisions that affect one’s life could be considered to be any kind of democracy. Even though the definitions have been changed, there is ample evidence to show that the ancients were correct, much of which has been chronicled on your site. And it’s an explanation that makes a lot of sense; rather than a secret conspiracy for world domination, maybe our problems are down to a deluded public repeatedly making the same mistakes.

I think a discussion about whether we should elect our public officials and lawmakers is important because:

- 1) It’s mind boggling to consider how many people (hundreds of millions? billions?) have been hoodwinked into thinking that because they might occasionally have some (extremely limited) political influence, they have some kind of political power
- 2) It’s heartbreaking when the first order of business of a people who wrest political power

at a terrific cost is to give it away in the hope that this time they will choose the right oligarchs

3) It would make it possible to understand “the end of history” as the emergence of oligarchy as the dominant form of government in the world (great if you’re an oligarch, not so great for the rest of us)

4) It might mitigate the suffering caused by seeing the same often cretinous or senile career politicians year after year

5) The creeping feeling that by bothering less and less with the pretense of democracy, our ruling class feels almost secure enough to drop it altogether and take off the gloves.

The Athenians cured the disease of oligarchy by randomly choosing their public officials and submitting legislation to popular vote. There were other checks and balances, but those were the main features. I think that until we adopt some combination of those two processes, our political situation is unlikely to improve, even if the ills of oligarchy take a long time to manifest themselves. Quite a few people have actually given a lot of thought to how we might adopt aspects of the Athenian system; a web search on sortition and demarchy will yield a lot material.

We really need to challenge our most basic assumptions if we want things to change.”

Wikipedia [explains](#):

Demarchy (or lottocracy) is a form of government in which the state is governed by randomly selected decision makers who have been selected by sortition (lot) from a broadly inclusive pool of eligible citizens. These groups, sometimes termed “policy juries”, “citizens’ juries”, or “consensus conferences”, deliberately make decisions about public policies in much the same way that juries decide criminal cases.

Demarchy, in theory, could overcome some of the functional problems of conventional representative democracy, which is widely subject to manipulation by special interests and a division between professional policymakers (politicians and lobbyists) vs. a largely passive, uninvolved and often uninformed electorate. According to Australian philosopher John Burnheim, who coined the term demarchy, random selection of policymakers would make it easier for everyday citizens to meaningfully participate, and harder for special interests to corrupt the process.

More generally, random selection of decision makers from a larger group is known as sortition (from the Latin base for lottery). The Athenian democracy made much use of sortition, with nearly all government offices filled by lottery (of full citizens) rather than by election. Candidates were almost always male, Greek, educated citizens holding a minimum of wealth and status.

In the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario, a group of citizens was randomly selected to create a Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform to investigate and recommend changes to the provinces’ electoral systems. A similar system happened with the Dutch Burgerforum Kiesstelsel. The Old Order Amish use a combination of election and sortition to select church leaders; men receiving two or three nominations to fill a vacancy (the number varies by district) are then asked to select a psalm book containing a slip of paper, one of those slips being marked to indicate who will take on the burden

of the position.

An attractive feature of demarchy is that if political leaders were replaced on a regular basis with randomly selected citizens, it would reduce institutionalised corruption, party apathy and complacency as well as a history of party led entitlement, lack of choice and variety in political ideas in platforms. It could be argued that replacing politicians in this way would solve such problems.

As people would be randomly selected to act as representatives it would be less likely that the person involved would be part of a “party political machine”.

The theory says that a randomly selected person as a representative would not have to compromise their own beliefs in order to make political alliances and gain support, nor fear political reprisals in implementing tough or controversial legislation. However, as theory goes, there is no inherent guarantee, nor anything a priori in demarchy which guarantees this.

There is no proven link that long term political representation equals a larger amount of monetary loss through political corruption nor could it be proven that random citizens in office would end or limit corruption nor that corruption would increase.

Research by the World Bank and others has shown that a form of citizens’ assembly called Participatory budgeting reduced corruption in several cities.

Politicians are often forced to make decisions which compromise their own beliefs and what they may think is best through the pressures of future elections, fitting into their party apparatus, pleasing those who funded their campaigns and vote sharing and voting compromise. The time lost in the voting process, image forming and maintenance and focusing on approval would be better suited to forming good law and policy. Demarchy would eliminate some of these pressures, however these pressures are likely to exist in any political office and there is no guarantee that a randomly selected citizen would adhere to his/her belief system or that he/she would have the political history, knowledge or courage to do so.

Demarchy, because it is based upon random selection, does not make a person’s career dependent upon popularity, and, because a demarchy is likely to remove the direct influence of political parties, there is no “party line” that the individual must adhere to. This is not to say that political alliances could not be formed after a person’s selection—but that the structure of demarchy is less suited to decision-making based upon politics.

One benefit of demarchy is that it is more suited to non-party politics. So some claim it is better able to build consensus or compromise.

No modern nation has attempted to use demarchy as a primary system for political decision making, so it is difficult to assess problems of transition or shortcomings of the system.

Wikipedia also [notes](#):

Almost all Greek writers who mention democracy (including Aristotle, Plato and Herodotus) both emphasise the role of selection by lot or state outright that being allotted is more democratic than elections. For example Plato says:

“Democracy arises after the poor are victorious over their adversaries, some of whom they kill and others of whom they exile, then they share out equally with the rest of the population political offices and burdens; and in this regime public offices are usually allocated by lot.”

We see the same idea in the 18th century after the re-emergence of democracy in the writings of Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu:

“The suffrage by lot is natural to democracy, as that by choice is to aristocracy”

[But] according to Xenophon (Memorabilia Book I, 2.9), this classical argument was offered by Socrates [against demarchy]:

[Socrates] taught his companions to despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot, when none would choose a pilot or builder or flautist by lot, nor any other craftsman for work in which mistakes are far less disastrous than mistakes in statecraft.

Interesting stuff ... what do you think?

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