

## *Rethinking Democracy – Why Local Government is the Best Place to Start*

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When we ask people ‘what is democracy?’ the most common answer we hear is simply “voting”. It’s a fair enough answer, as today that’s the only experience that we have on offer.

Taking a step back, it’s worth thinking about why we have a preference for democracy. First, it’s because people want to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Second, it’s because there’s quite a lot of us and we all need to get along despite having a wide range of different views and priorities. Combined, it’s because it’s important for us to trust and be connected to decisions that affect the whole community.

So, we’d answer the ‘what is democracy?’ question by saying that a democratic decision is when we act on the informed general will of the people.

You can probably see that voting is just one way to arrive at that. And perhaps not the best way, as voting is a task we generally don’t think deeply about: this is why negative advertising, spin, soundbites and social media have proven so corrosive. Public opinion is what we think when we haven’t had time to think; public judgment is asking the same question when you have had a chance to consider a range of viewpoints, sources and weighed different trade-offs. Voting is a public opinion exercise, not a public judgment exercise. Democratic innovation looks at how we can find complementary structures to better find a balance and do democracy better so democracy is voting *and more*. We think about what democracy beyond elections can be.

Some readers may be thinking that people aren’t capable – after all, look at the comments on any news website or government ‘have your say’ page. We would suggest that the *structure* you offer people shapes the quality of what comes back. If I asked you and some friends to complete a 3-question survey allowing for 300-character responses on the topic of healthy eating a reviewer would probably form the view that you didn’t know much about it and your views lacked nuance. How could you, you only had a few words you could offer? If we take the same group of people and give them 40-50 hours across several months with access to a diverse range of expertise and an ability to get their questions answered, we think you would see that people know – and had the capacity to learn – considerably more. Structures that create the opportunity for people to think encourage people to think.

How might this apply to local government tasks like changing the zoning and approving new buildings, or approving the annual budget?

Picture 30-50 people from the community being selected in a Democratic Lottery. It’s a rough match to the Census by age, geography, and split evenly by gender. It would look like who you see walking down the street: blue collar, white collar and no-collar jobs, different backgrounds and life experiences. In short, everyday people who aren’t trying to have a political career. If those people spent that ~40 hours we described and came back with an answer that represented what that group could agree to, then would you trust it? If those people were asked “does this proposed development make where we live better to live in?” and said ‘yes’ – would you have more confidence that development approvals were free from outside influences? We think many people would.

We think a starting point is to try it in one location and see the results. Trialling things to see the public response needs to be something we embrace. Not everything is going to work, and that’s OK. We’re going to trial a deliberative process for local government in NZ, so what follows is what you might want to look for.

There are five key principles common to every deliberative democracy approach.

First, we use a Democratic Lottery to bring together a generally representative group of people. It's fair, it's very hard to cheat, and it can't be skewed by money. People receive an invitation asking them to give some of their time and it makes clear what will happen to their recommendations. Most of us wouldn't dream of running for office but asking you – just one time – to give five or six days to contribute to a public decision is something we have found a lot of people welcome.

Second, we expose them to a wide array of sources of information. We ask the government to give them a primer to read so they have a reference point. Then we ask those with an active interest in the topic to share how they would answer the question posed to the jury, including any supporting evidence they would rely on. Importantly – especially in an era with growing levels of mistrust of experts – we ask the citizens to nominate the questions they need answered and the people they trust to provide that in order that they feel able to offer an informed view.

Third, if you look at the first two items – a very mixed group of people considering a wide array of sources – you'll see they need considerable time. From our experience operating ~30 demonstration projects for a range of governments, we find 5-6 meeting days spread across 3-4 months works well for the majority of topics.

Fourth is influence. If we want people to give this amount of time and to work together, then it's reasonable they know in advance what will happen to their recommendations. Many people who comment or make a submission to the government feel it goes into a black hole and made no impact on a decision. If I tell you that the final report is immediately public, that you'll get a detailed response to every recommendation within 45 days and will get a 90min session to discuss that response with the decision-makers, then more people will think it's worth their time. Setting a public standard for the nature and timeliness of response matters.

Fifth is asking an open question with a free response. We don't do polling: how many of us have received a survey and felt frustration that none of the selected answers can convey our view? We pose an open question that captures the hardest part of the problem without pre-supposing an answer. And a citizens' jury simply allows the group to write a response they can stand behind as their own work. For those wondering how this is possible, we ask people to write the headline recommendations first (generally on their fourth day together) – and have the group prioritise, refine, and shortlist them. Then we ask people to show their reasoning and explain why they have reached that position. After that is agreed, their task is to show the evidence they heard through the process which underpins that. Writing in a shared GoogleDoc and in frequently rotating groups (so one person doesn't get proprietorial over their special recommendation) is a great way for citizens to offer an informed view unfiltered by organisers, consultants or government staff.

The intention of the current inquiry into the Future of Local Government is simply to find ways to do things better. If we can do democracy better – having all of us feel more connected to public decisions and feeling trust in the way those decisions are made – then local government will be left stronger than we found it. What follows are three potential models to implement this so that you can picture them and think about whether you'd like to see this put in place where you live.

The first model would see the council budget reviewed by a Citizens' Jury once every 2-3 years. If there's a public perception that money may not be spent well – or may be spent to help someone's political prospects – then knowing that 40 people from your area looked at the budget in detail, questioned it, provided recommendations, and got a detailed response probably adds to your confidence in how the public budget is used.

Going a step further, a second model could see a group of 24 citizens asked to review the results of traditional community engagement for *acceptability* (are we prepared to accept that we need to pay for what is proposed?) and *balance* (have we heard from a mix of the community or only special interests?). Where councillors may feel trapped by public opinion and organised campaigns this offers a release valve by having a representative group of citizens able to offer an informed view to councillors. It might involve ten meetings per year as a complement to the elected councils much more frequent meetings.

As a third model – and slightly more ambitious one – one might like to see a local government deregulate the election process. There are many ways to do democracy which range from different types of voting structures to those which are based on Democratic Lottery – and of course combinations of both. As long as a basic set of democratic principles are adhered to, should the Electoral Commission be prepared to allow different democratic models in different council areas? A little bit of competitive innovation could be just what democracy needs. A citizens’ jury that answers the question on how people want to be democratically represented in their local area could be the best way to build better local democratic process.

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