Enthusiasm for reforming our democracies has been gaining momentum. From the pages of FP to the colorful criticisms of comedian Russell Brand, it is evident that a long-overdue public conversation on this topic is finally getting started.

There is no lack of proposals. For example, in their recent FP piece, John Boik and colleagues focus on decentralized, emergent, tech-driven solutions such as participatory budgeting, local currency systems, and open government. They are confident that such innovations have a good chance of “spreading virally” and bringing about major change. Internet-based solutions, in particular, have captured our collective imagination. From Pia Mancini’s blockbuster TED presentation to NewScientist’s recent coverage of “digital democracy,” we’re eager to believe that smartphone apps and novel online platforms hold the key to reinventing our way of governance. This seems only natural: after all, the same technologies have already radically reconfigured large swaths of our daily lives.

To put it bluntly, I believe that focusing on innovations of this sort is a dangerous distraction. Sure, empowering citizens at the local level and through trendy new technologies — and the greater public involvement in
policy-making this promises — are positive developments. But we must remember that the bulk of political power still lies in the hands of the professional politicians that govern our nations. Being able to affect how things are run in our neighborhood is great, but how much of a victory is that if we have so little control over our national governments? Similarly, technology that lets us “crowd-source” writing legislation is fine, but how much good will this do us if the political class continues to have the final say on what actually becomes law? Instead of letting ourselves become distracted by the glitter of the local and the technological, we should focus on reclaiming some real political power at the top levels of government. The question is: how might we do so?

As described in my book, Rebooting Democracy: A Citizen’s Guide to Reinventing Politics, a number of extraordinarily encouraging experiments along these lines have taken place in British Columbia, Oregon, and elsewhere over the last decade. What they all have in common is citizen deliberation: the use of large panels of randomly selected citizens to carefully reflect and decide on complex policy matters, a practice which dates back to ancient Greece. Expanding on this experience could usher in a fundamental change to the nature of government.

The idea of involving ordinary citizens in real-world policy-making will come as a shock to many, but skepticism invariably dissipates as people come to understand how citizen deliberation works in practice. A panel of randomly-selected participants carries out in-depth study and analysis of the issue at hand, including consultations with policy-makers, interest groups, scientific experts and others. They deliberate, at length and with the assistance of skilled facilitators, about the available policy choices and their possible impact. The process has nothing in common with the rowdy scenes and uninformed shouting matches that characterized, for example, the town hall meetings on healthcare reform in the United States.
A commonly voiced concern is whether ordinary citizens have what it takes — are they smart enough to address complex policy issues? Here, too, doubts prove unfounded. Stanford Professor James Fishkin, one of the world’s foremost experts on citizen deliberation, writes that “the public is very smart if you give them a chance. If people think their voice actually matters, they’ll do the hard work, really study, ... ask the experts smart questions and then make tough decisions. When they hear the experts disagreeing, they’re forced to think for themselves. About 70% change their minds in the process.” He assures that “citizens can become better informed and master the most complex issues of state government if they are given the chance.”

The promise of citizen deliberation is that it could free policy-making from the well-known biases that plague professional politicians. Ordinary citizens, chosen at random, can act in what they perceive to be the true public interest, free from the pressures of facing re-election. The role of money in politics and the dangers of hyper-partisanship are increasingly obvious in today’s politics, but letting ordinary citizens make policy avoids these pitfalls — they must neither cater to the interests of those who funded their campaign nor hew to the party line. They don’t have to worry about how necessary-but-unpopular measures will adversely impact their popularity. Perhaps just as importantly, they will be truly representative of the general population, in the sense that such a citizen panel, by virtue of being drawn at random, will tend to mirror the entire citizenry in terms of gender, age, occupation, socio-economic background and political attitudes — very much unlike the privileged political class that currently rules us.

But perhaps the most exciting aspect is that none of this is idle, academic speculation. Recent experiences show how well citizen deliberation works in practice. In 2004, a randomly-chosen panel of 160 citizens was tasked by the government of the Canadian province of British Columbia with reforming the province’s electoral system. After drawing on the input of a wide variety of
experts, consulting the public, and deliberating at length, the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform ended up suggesting a type of electoral system that, in the words of Professor David Farrell, a renowned expert on electoral systems, “politicians, given a choice, would probably least like to see introduced but which voters, given a choice, should choose.” The assembly’s proposal was later approved by 58 percent of the popular vote in a referendum, yet regrettably failed to meet the strict requirements imposed by the provincial government for its results to be considered binding and, for that reason, has yet to be implemented.

Similarly encouraging results are reported from the U.S. state of Oregon. Since 2010, citizen deliberation has been used to assist Oregon voters in state-wide ballot initiatives. In a process known as the “Citizen Initiative Review,” a panel of about 25 randomly chosen Oregonians is tasked with carefully researching and deliberating on the ballot measure up for a vote. At the end of this process, an accessible and highly informative set of “key findings”, as well as an indication of how many panelists ultimately supported and opposed the proposed measure, are presented as a “citizens’ statement” in the pamphlet that voters receive in the mail before a ballot. Research confirms that this citizens’ statement not only makes voters better-informed, but also has a substantial influence on the voting behavior of those who read it.

As these examples make evident, gradually incorporating citizen deliberation into our political institutions holds huge promise. By having a representative microcosm of the general population directly engage in thoughtful, informed policy-making, we have a mechanism that powerfully sidesteps the biases of the traditional political class while also avoiding the unreflective and uninformed behavior that plagues nearly all forms of direct democracy — including the increasingly popular digital ones.

Crucially, and by virtue of the random sampling at the heart of the process,
citizen deliberation is also immune to another big problem that afflicts most proposals for more grassroots styles of democracy: self-selection. Whenever participation — whether on- or offline — is open to the public at large, those who take the time and effort to make themselves heard will invariably tend to be those who feel most strongly about the topic at hand. (This often means that they also espouse the most extreme views.) Citizen deliberation, on the other hand, ensures that the public voice that emerges from the process is indicative of what the whole population would think about that topic, if only it had the time and resources to carefully deliberate.

So, how might citizen deliberation be used to bring about major changes to our political systems? The most promising proposal, which repeatedly appears in the work of academics and democratic reformers alike, is to create a “citizens’ chamber” in our parliaments. Think for a moment about the tremendous potential demonstrated by the experiments in both British Columbia and Oregon over the last decade: if ad hoc citizen panels work so well, why not try to tap into this source of reasoned, public-spirited decision-making on a more permanent basis? This citizens’ chamber could supervise the work of the elected political class, ensuring that professional politicians did not betray the trust of those they represent. When a sufficiently large majority of the citizens’ chamber deemed that to be the case, it would have the power either to veto the decisions made by elected officials or at least submit them to a popular vote. This is the true potential of citizen deliberation as a way to radically transform our way of doing politics.

Given our political system’s current crisis of legitimacy, we have before us a unique opportunity to truly democratize our way of doing politics. The technology we should be excited about is one that actually dates back 2,500 years. Digital democracy, as well as the other modern developments discussed earlier, promise to give the public a better chance of making itself heard by the political class. Yet, as was already evident to the ancient
Athenians, only citizen deliberation can ensure that the public will speak in a way that is, not only empowered, but at the same time representative, reasoned and well-informed.

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