

For Repubblica

From John Lloyd

George Papandreou has seen the future: and it is 2400 years old. The leader of the centre-left Pasok party and former Greek Foreign Minister walked about a modern conference centre in the Athens suburb of Marousi last weekend, and believed he was seeing a renaissance of democracy: the system his city of Athens had discovered, by accident, some 500 years before the birth of Christ.

What he was witnessing, in the rooms of the centre full of people earnestly discussing politics, was a new way of making decisions. It's the invention of an American political scientist named James Fishkin, a professor at the University of Stanford in California. Some 20 years ago, Fishkin had been studying why people were withdrawing from politics – no longer joining political parties, voting in fewer numbers, expressing growing distrust of politicians. Gradually, as he thought about it, he came to the conclusion that they acted this way because they didn't think they had a voice.

The world was growing more complex, more difficult to understand. At the same time, people were becoming more individualist: they were getting richer, they were taking more decisions for themselves, the great forces which had once organised them – as religion, politics, patriotic feelings – were much weaker. And they had more leisure: they watched more television, went on more holidays, had a more pleasant life. For all these reasons, politics seemed less important: it seemed, even unpleasant.

Fishkin studied the history of ancient Athens. There, he found that the Athenians had, between the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ, developed a system in which the citizens of Athens – so long as they were men, free and not from abroad – took part in deciding the affairs of the country, through a complex system of assemblies, all chosen at random. These assemblies debated over weeks and months; they decided on everything from small fines to declaring wars; and they took in, at one time or another, nearly all the free men of the city. They could make very bad decisions: they voted to put the philosopher Socrates to death, and to invade Sicily – a decision which, ultimately, so weakened the city that it was overthrown. The intellectuals of the day – as the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the historian Thucydides – were scornful of it: Plato much preferred a government of philosophers, like him. But no question that it was democratic: people were engaged.

And so he developed a system he called “discursive democracy”. It was a merger of the Athenian system and modern social science. To decide on an issue, a group of people would be brought together to discuss it – having been given expert briefings on the subject. And the opportunity to question experts and politicians, and to discuss the issues with each other. They would typically several hundreds, split into discussion groups: but they would represent much larger numbers – hundreds of thousands, or millions. They would be selected to be a small mirror of the wider society – by age,

sex and class. Instead of many people voting about things they knew little about, a few people would vote with a lot of knowledge.

Fishkin attracted a lot of interest. His system was used to make TV programmes in the US and Britain; it was used to debate the Euro in Denmark, the monarchy in Australia and the spending of a city budget in China. But always, the voting was either as a demonstration, or to act as advice to those in power. It didn't decide anything.

George Papandreou made the difference. The son and grandson of Greek premiers, raised while his father was in exile in the US and Canada, he got to hear of Fishkin's system, and invited him to apply it to his party, Pasok. Pasok, like other parties, placed a great deal of importance in having their people elected as mayors of the Greek cities: in each case, there were many candidates for the Pasok nomination – who were selected, as everywhere, by decisions of the party. Papandreou proposed that the candidate for the mayoral post in Marousi should be chosen by a sample of the citizens of the town – citizens who would not be Pasok members, indeed, who could be voters for or even members of other parties. And the vote would be binding: whoever they chose would be the Pasok candidate.

And so it was, on a fine weekend in June, about 150 citizens of Marousi spent many hours in the Hellenic Conference Centre, arguing about what were the most important issues facing their town; about how to put them to the candidates; and, finally, which of the six candidates was the most convincing. For much of the time they were divided into groups of 12-15, under the chairmanship of a Pasok member who had been trained, not to lead them, but to bring out what they wanted to ask. I went round these groups as they debated – and I was impressed by how neutral the chairmen were, and by how lively the discussion was.

When, on Sunday afternoon, the six candidates – four men and two women – faced the hall full of people, it was a dramatic moment. They knew they were facing people who had thought about the issues. The questions which came – on the environment, on the big debt which the city had run up, on the dirt in the streets – were sharp and detailed, demanding good answers to be convincing. And because they were so precise, it became clear very soon which of the candidates were themselves knowledgeable on the issues, and which were not. The chairman was a well known TV presenter, who kept to strict rules: the questions had to be short, and couldn't be speeches. The candidates had only one minute each to answer: if they went on longer, they were cut off. "This is not customary for us Greeks," said Papandreou. "We like to talk, especially in politics". But the rules were obeyed.

Finally, early on Sunday evening, they got a result. Panos Alexandris, a lawyer who had indeed seemed the most confident of the candidates, won on the second round of voting, with nearly two thirds of the vote: he will stand as the Pasok candidate in the mayoral elections of Marousi in October. And though they had done their duty, the citizens didn't seem to want to go home: they stayed around till late at night, talking in small groups.

Papandreou was elated: "this could be a system for the future, it could stop the rot in our democracy", he said. The Pasok leader is also president of the Socialist International, the grouping which brings together the centre-left parties around the

world. He will, he said, recommend to them that they also try out the system: applying the lessons of ancient Greece to the problems of the contemporary world.

Democracy celebrated its triumph after the collapse of the Soviet Union, now 15 years ago. It seemed then that it was the dawn of a new era. It was: but ironically, after it won it showed signs of ill health. Deliberative democracy is one answer to the malaise: though its great defect is that it leaves most citizens out in the cold, its great strength is that it shows that decisions affecting all our lives can be absorbing, important, even passionate. We need more experiments like that in Athens: democracy does not need to fail.

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