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## 7 Beyond citizens' assemblies: Expanding the repertoire of democratic reform

**Abstract:** There is broad support for democratizing the policy process by better connecting mass publics and governing elites. In policy terms, these efforts have become closely associated with deliberative mini-publics, especially CAs (CA). The wisdom accumulated on these novel practices is impressive, but also highlights important limitations. Drawing on recent developments in deliberative theory and our own empirical work on other democratic practices, we suggest expanding the repertoire of democratic reform beyond the current focus of “designing” one-off novel deliberative forums to thinking more systemically about ways to “mend” the fabric of democracy. Democratic mending involves strengthening and sustaining democratic connections between people and the processes and institutions that govern them. We argue that mending is a vital component both of better integrating forums like CAs into their political and administrative context, and, more radically, for expanding the repertoire of practices for democratic reform in contemporary governance.

**Keywords:** democratic mending, design thinking, deliberative systems, deliberative mini-publics, CAs, representative government, public sphere, public policy, innovative governance, pragmatic experimentalism

### 7.1 Introduction

The rapid rise of the citizens' assembly (CA) into everyday policymaking parlance in many parts of the world is, in broad terms, a welcome development for those interested in deepening democracy in governance. CAs are celebrated for breaking policy deadlocks even on the most contentious policy issues and for offering an open and direct democratic experience to ordinary citizens (see Landemore 2020; OECD 2020). They are proposed as solutions to democracy's many pressing problems such as rebuilding national unity and repairing the trust deficit between citizens and politicians (Brown 2019). According to their advocates, CAs can even solve the “echo chamber” problem of democracy “by making people talk to others who don't share their opinions” (Benedictus 2019).

While most CA efforts are founded in good intentions on the part of key advocates and champions, they are not without their drawbacks and risks. The existing literature emphasizes these risks eloquently (see, for example, Lee 2015; Fuji-Johnson 2015; van Dijk and Lefevere 2022). What is less problematized is that CAs are mostly rooted in

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what we call “big-D Design” thinking in democratic governance – an abstract and technocratic exercise in developing and implementing institutional interventions to democratize the policy process. Big-D design thinking is the opposite of “small-d” design thinking – or, as we ultimately prefer to call it, “mending” – which problematizes reaching for “off-the-shelf” solutions like CAs, at least without adopting and adapting them significantly for local conditions and contexts. When underpinned by big-D design thinking, CAs can easily become vulnerable to *realpolitik* and can struggle to realize much impact in practice because the political context is hostile or unfamiliar (see e.g., Flinders et al. 2016).

In this chapter, we consider alternatives to the big-D Design approach to democratic reform as manifested in deliberative mini-publics such as CAs. Our contribution expands the focus from “designing” to “mending” democracy where the broader goal centres on strengthening connections among the citizens themselves and between the citizens and governing elites. Democratic mending refers to “the intentional, creative, everyday practices that seek to repair and renew connections in the fabric of democratic life” (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020: 2). It draws our attention to often overlooked agents and agency in creating and sustaining these democratic connections. While the primary purpose of the mending approach is to expand the existing repertoires of democratic reform beyond designed forums, it also has important implications for how we think about CAs and their underlying design logic (big-D vs small-d). Taking a mending approach, we can show why and how CAs need careful integration into existing institutions and policymaking practices if they are to realize the benefits their advocates in academia and practice hope they will. More fundamentally still, taking a mending approach allows us to appreciate a wide repertoire of democratic repair alternatives beyond “off-the-shelf” interventions such as CAs.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section sets out in greater detail the limitations of “the forum” in the context both of what we know empirically about contemporary governance trends and what leading theorists argue normatively about ideal democratic practices. The next section outlines our idea of “democratic mending”. We show here both how an emphasis on mending can inform contemporary research and practice on CAs, and also how it can encourage scholars and practitioners of democratic reform to look beyond these sorts of forums and recognize/make use of a wider repertoire of repair. The conclusion then draws together key lessons for further research and experimentation, advocating in particular a grounded, pragmatic emphasis on policy learning through trial and error rather than seeking to replicate the rigid “social laboratory” approach associated with a big-D Design approach.

## 7.2 Citizens’ assemblies and their limits

The public policy and public administration literatures (and cognate fields such as health, environmental, and innovation governance) now abound with systematic efforts to define and map out democratic innovation (see e.g., Abelson et al. 2003; Kno-

bloch, Gastil and Reitman 2015; Smith 2009). The practice of democratic innovation has become an important field of consulting and expertise, as specialists hone a toolkit of techniques, and the skills to execute them, across sectors and settings (see Hendriks and Carson 2008; Cooper and Smith 2012; Lee 2015; Escobar 2018). The touchstone, in both research and practice, has been on participatory forums – the CA perhaps chief among them—that seek to institutionalize many of the ideals of deliberative democracy.

On the one hand this focus on “the forum” is entirely understandable, especially given emphasis in policy theory and practice on using public engagement processes to democratize governance (see Fung 2006; Nabatchi et al. 2012). Below we briefly run through what makes “the forum” so appealing for democratic reform in the policy process to illustrate how successful it has been on some dimensions, and also to foreshadow its limits and alternatives.

- (a) *Forum as a shortcut to democracy/democratic representation*: This point is well articulated by Christina Lafont (2019), in her recent book, *Democracy without Shortcuts*. What Lafont rightly criticizes is that the forum is often seen as a shortcut to democratic practice. It is seen as a remedy to many systemic problems, most notably to the broken system of democratic representation in modern governance. In a context of deepening disaffection with representative democracy and a growing chasm between elites and everyday citizens, the forum appeals as an ideal augmentation which can reinject inclusivity into the making of key policy decisions. Archon Fung (2006), for example, argues that elected institutions provide only a minimally representative process, and that acute pathologies afflict contemporary governance as a consequence, providing evidence that “institutional remedies” (imagined as the forum) can address the democratic shortcomings of contemporary governance. These forums can be both designed as part of existing institutions (Neblo, Esterling and Lazer 2018), or outside of them.
- (b) *Forum as a remedy to distorted public sphere and uninformed public opinion*: The forum promises to cut through the “noise” of an increasingly distorted public sphere. The perceived problem here is that the conduits of public opinion outside of electoral representation – the traditional media and increasingly social media especially – are seen to reinforce and generate a lot of heat and little light, such that we cannot be sure what policy preferences an informed and rational debate among citizens would lead to. There is sound evidence that the forum provides an alternative, controlled conduit which can enable better and more legitimate decision-making (see especially Fishkin 2009; Niemeyer 2011). The forum offers a platform for testing policy ideas and proposals. It provides policymakers with an answer as to whether a policy can be “sold” to the public (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 228). It offers politicians the possibility of finding out “what the public *would* think about an issue if it were to experience better conditions for thinking about it” (Fishkin 2009: 13).
- (c) *Forum as a solution to complex policy issues*: The forum also promises to generate and protect capacity for lay citizens to engage with the complexities, risks, and un-

certainties of contemporary policy issues. It seeks to address the perceived growing disconnect between democracy and bureaucracy, where non-majoritarian institutions and a raft of powerful private actors shape policymaking “on the ground” through Byzantine processes in the messy, “real world” of policymaking (see Flinders 2008). The forum appeals as a means to bridge this disconnect. It allows lay citizens and stakeholders to become better informed about the complexities of policymaking, and to use that knowledge to deliberate on otherwise hidden or opaque decisions about policies and services – with a considerable literature suggesting that citizens are capable of coming to grips with governing complexities in the right circumstances (see, for example, Abelson et al. 2003; Gronlund, Bächtiger and Setälä 2014). Another additional layer here is that our knowledge and understanding of many contemporary public policy issues is often incomplete and highly contested. Ideally the forum offers a ‘clearing house’ where citizens can learn about and question the unknowns, risks, and uncertainties of knowledge, and develop ‘common sense’ judgements. In some policy areas, such as climate change, the forum has found particular appeal because citizens are encouraged to look beyond the short-term and consider the interests of future generations (Devaney et al 2020; Smith 2021).

There is also a practical utility to the forum. In countries like Ireland and the UK, the CA has become a salient tool for tricky political problems (Farrell and Suiter 2019). For example, comparisons of the botched handling of Brexit in the UK with the widely acclaimed Irish abortion referendum in Ireland are thought to provide clear evidence of the potential of CAs (Brown 2019). It is easy to imagine, and plan, a forum as an intervention in the policy process – indeed it is an ideal input in the policy stages or cycle heuristic which continues to predominate. It is a convenient “social laboratory” to study and assess the effects of deliberation in empirical research. It is an off-the-shelf solution for the challenges of governing complex issues in practice. It is, in other words, a tried and tested product of “big-D Design”.

But, as this might suggest, the forum model also has important limitations. According to some scholars of democracy, it is deeply problematic to equate democratic reform of the policy process with “the forum” (see e.g. Hammond 2019; Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020; Lafont 2015; 2019; Pateman 2012). These concerns can be traced back to the compelling logics underpinning the appeal in the first place.

- a) *The legitimacy and accountability of designed forums*: Current practices of designed forums such as CAs operate according to certain principles (such as random selection) that seem to violate or bypass established canons of existing representative democracy (Parkinson 2003, 2006). They provide little scope for the sort of scrutiny or accountability typical to established democratic institutions. And, certainly, there are prominent examples of forums or planned forums which have generated considerable antipathy in the broader public sphere – none more so than the proposed CA on climate change in Australia that was written off and ridiculed across the political spectrum (Boswell, Niemeyer and Hendriks 2013).

- b) *Top-down nature of designed forums*: There is also concern about the potential for top-down democratic innovations like CAs to crowd out or marginalize organic, bottom-up participation in civil society (see e.g. Mansbridge et al. 2012). Others worry that deliberative forums are too discrete and isolated, and thus have limited engagement or capacity to address democratic disfunctions in conventional institutions (Pateman 2012). There is also a growing critique that the refined and routinized practices of professional forum-making can function as a tool by which governing elites seek to tame difficult issues, shutting out or quietening the “noise” from the public sphere (see Lee 2015; Fuji-Johnson 2015).
- c) *Unclear/uncertain role of designed forums*: The forum does not necessarily produce immediate policy clarity or certainty – mostly it forms part of, and becomes absorbed within, the complex, recursive, sporadic practices of policy work (e.g. see Wells, Howarth and Brand-Correa 2021). In other words, the forum can be lost in and swamped by the vast array of other discussions and sources of policy input surrounding any given issue (see Hendriks 2011), and can struggle to produce tangible reforms (see Michels 2011). Certainly, for instance, the messy and incomplete integration of the recent spate of climate assemblies in Europe speaks to a complexity that forum-designers seldom bear in mind (see Torney 2021; Wells, Howarth and Brand-Correa 2021). The particular concern is that forums might end up offering little more than the veneer of democratic inclusion within a context of continuing elite domination (Fuji-Johnson 2015).

These concerns about “the forum” share affinities with more recent scholarship on democratic and policy design – a small-d approach to “design thinking”. This more nuanced approach to design recognizes the importance of context in shaping and constraining interventions (see in political theory Saward 2021; in policy studies Lewis, McGann and Blomkamp 2020). Small-d design thinking emphasizes the need for locally meaningful, contextual solutions to policy problems. In what follows, we elaborate our mending approach which has important affinities with this kind of small-d design thinking, and which opens up the possibilities for democratic reform beyond designed forums.

### **7.3 From “designing” to “mending” democracy: “Stitching in” citizens’ assemblies**

The approach we advance in this chapter shares some affinities with this shift towards small-d design thinking in democratic governance, although as our point of departure we draw on “systemic” thinking in democratic democracy. Here deliberative democrats have expanded their view of public deliberation beyond something that occurs in a singular ideal forum, towards thinking of it as something that occurs across a more complex system made up of many communicative activities and spaces, ranging from high-

ly structured assemblies (such as legislatures), to loose informal social gatherings and public interactions (Hendriks 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Elstub, Ercan and Mendonça 2016).

While the existing literature tends to draw on idea of deliberative systems as a way of thinking big and scaling up the democratic effects of deliberative mini-publics, in our view, a deliberative systems approach also offers a way of reconceptualizing democratic reform beyond the forum. Inherent in the idea of a legitimate deliberative system is the notion of connectivity. Connections not only help link different actors, practices, and institutions across a deliberative system, but they are crucial for ensuring undistorted communication between citizens and decision-makers (including elected representatives, and those making and implementing public policy). Despite the centrality of connectivity in deliberative systems thinking, it is curiously under-developed concept in theories of deliberative democracy.

We can flesh out the idea of connectivity by turning to democratic practice. Our empirical work on contemporary democratic practices show that connectivity is enacted in democratic systems in multiple ways as diverse actors, activities, settings, and practices relate to and influence one another (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020). In studying these diverse connective practices we uncovered the important – yet largely hidden – small-scale efforts of citizens, elected officials, civil society activists, and public administrators to connect citizens with each other as well as with the governing elites. These are not high-profile democratic wonders but everyday actors doing incremental connective work often in and around conventional or unassuming institutions, such as local cafés and libraries, election campaigns, and administrative committees.

We label this intentional, creative, and everyday work to repair and renew connections in the fabric of democratic life as *mending democracy* (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020: 2). Practices of democratic mending entail the gradual, small-scale, incremental, mundane work of people working inside the system, rather than imposing something on the system. They occur in and around political and policymaking institutions that already exist, and involve reimagining and remaking this institutional architecture as more deliberative and democratic. They emerge through mostly bottom-up efforts of citizens, activists, and civil society groups, as well as professionals, public managers and officials. Often these practices are not products of conscious big-D design or high-minded initiatives to enhance deliberative democracy. More commonly they emerge out of collective problem-solving efforts, whether to address a policy issue or to resolve a political or administrative challenge (such as a broken electoral relationship, a divisive public sphere, an opaque and confusing institutional make-up) (see Hendriks and Dzur 2022). Finally, practices of democratic mending are not usually off-the-shelf or codified. They are instead contingent on the complex constellation of factors that have fostered and channelled their emergence.

The idea of democratic mending we propose in this chapter has important implications for the way we think about and design interventions like CAs. At first blush, our emphasis on democratic mending might imply that we are critical of designed forums. But we still believe forums can be valuable – indeed, a key principle is that actors



should “mend and make do” with the resources at their disposal, and the opportunities that come along. The proliferation of assemblies in the recent “deliberative wave” (OECD 2020) is one such opportunity to grasp. CAs have developed a mainstream cache that opens up exciting possibilities for meaningful democratic repair.

A mending approach emphasizes the importance of integrating forums into the existing political system and policy process and shifts our attention to the actors involved in doing the integration work. To extend the metaphor, a CA represents a “patch” that might help repair the connection between citizens and democratic policymaking. But patches do not work on their own. They need to be carefully “stitched in”. That work has important parallels with the work of democratic mending; it is time-intensive, relational, and context-specific.

“Stitching in” requires more than linking CAs to formal decision-making processes, which seems to be the priority of most of the existing efforts. It also requires ensuring that CAs are not isolated spaces of deliberation and instead well integrated into the wider public sphere (Curato and Böker 2016). Only when they are part of the broader public sphere can they contribute to not only to “decision-making” but also “deliberation-making” (Niemeyer 2014).

We can look to a nascent literature on the integration of forums like CAs for promising signs on how such “stitching in” might occur. To date, much of focus has been on establishing elite champions for the cause. One approach is to engage elite actors directly. Notably, for instance, politicians were intimately involved in the deliberations of the Irish Citizens’ Assembly, which made them much more receptive to the ideas emanating from the forum (Farrell, Suiter and Harris 2019). But that success was not just a question of big-D Design – it took ongoing relational work on the part of committed activists (Enright, McNeilly and De Londras 2020) and other civil society actors to build and sustain that sort of elite buy-in, as reflected by relative failures to emulate the Irish model elsewhere (see Flinders et al. 2016). Another approach entails “institutional coupling”, whereby empowered institutions (often legislative committees) sponsor and support a designed forum (Hendriks 2016). Early experiments in this regard have proven somewhat successful, although again they stress the importance of everyday, relational work to sustain the link. The recent experience of the Climate Assembly UK on this front is instructive – the CAUK lost much of its impetus following significant turnover across the Parliamentary select committees that had co-sponsored the process. The new committee chairs were much less enthusiastic to endorse and follow through on an innovation they had played no part in establishing (Elstub et al. 2021).

But “stitching in” could also mean connecting CAs (whether instigated by state or non-state actors) to wider public discourse – to embed and sustain better links with the media, community initiatives, and the broader public. We see signs of this sort of wider “stitching in” in recent climate assemblies in France and Germany, for instance (Boswell, Dean and Smith 2022). Indeed, the newly formed Knowledge Network On Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) in Europe offers a promising model for exploring these modes of integrative innovation. This is an active network of practitioners, advocates, and experts developed to share experiences from the recent wave of national climate assem-

blies in Europe, learn from successes and failures from mini-public intervention in practice, and develop strategies for better enhancing profile and impact for the long term.

## 7.4 Beyond citizens' assemblies: A much wider repertoire of democratic repair

While CAs can, with a mending orientation, go some way to helping democratize policy work, it is important to retain perspective. In the task of democratizing the policy process, they remain minor and niche in the grand scheme of things. They command a lot of media attention, and attract considerable academic attention and analysis because of their novelty. They are increasingly recognized in policy practitioner circles, too – but the bulk of this audience would still consider them relatively peripheral to the everyday work of governing (e.g., Sasse, Allan and Rutter 2021).

There is instead a lot more activity already happening in the more mundane spaces of policy work that can and does have much greater impact on the real lived experience of democratic governance. In our own empirical work on democratic mending we identified the careful, creative, intensive work done by actors on the ground to make democracy work better for them (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020). For example, we observed a group of alienated voters reclaim the electoral process from the inside out, and in the process reimagine representative democracy outside of the traditional strictures of party politics. We observed a collection of concerned citizens working creatively to change the terms of a polarized environmental debate and seeking to mend a fractured public sphere in Australia. We observed civil society activists and officials seize on newly re-made institutional arrangements to pry open the complex and opaque health system in the UK, ensuring greater public inclusion and scrutiny over policymaking and implementation. In the space available we cannot do justice to these rich cases – all are recorded in more detail in our book-length treatment (see Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell 2020) – but they speak to the importance of placing equal analytical attention on the ordinary, mundane, low-profile spaces of democratic governance as has been granted to novel deliberative forums.

Pleasingly, our observations and insights also gel with insights beginning to emerge elsewhere in the field. Escobar's (2022) recent account of Scottish participatory engagement practitioners on the "frontlines" of public encounters describes them as being engaged in the careful, skilful, and resourceful work of democratic mending; in the face of bureaucratic obstacles and political dynamics, they adapt and reimagine established tools and practices of participatory engagement to keep the show on the road. Wood's (2022) study of the European Medicine's Authority showcases democratic mending in public hearings, demonstrating how seemingly mundane and dry committee work can link affected publics to this technocratic supranational body. Beyond work that expressly adapts and builds on our ideas, we see affinities elsewhere, too. For instance,



something very close to democratic mending appears in the creative and forceful work of Scottish health activists who resist tightly scripted, top-down engagement activities while at the same time forging opportunities for more expansive “fugitive co-production” to ensure greater inclusion and accountability on healthcare priorities (Stewart 2021). Likewise, we see something like democratic mending emerging in various trust-restoring and community-building efforts, for example, locally-led housing and economic development initiatives in England (Healey 2015), or parents engaged in after school programmes in Chicago (Barnes 2020).

In other words, there are hopeful stories emerging for everyday practices of mending that can democratize the policy process from the ground up. We need to know much more about what different practices of democratic mending are out there, how they emerge in practice, if (and how) they interrelate, and how well (or badly) they can be sustained against a wider background of disconnection in the representative relationship, in the public sphere, and in the policy process. CAs – as occasional but potentially useful integrated “patches” – can only ever be a small part of a much broader systemic approach to democratic repair work.

## 7.5 Conclusion

CAs are “just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to creating a more deliberative democracy” (Dryzek 2015: 753). Much more is needed for advancing both deliberation and democratic reform in contemporary societies. In this chapter, we have provided a glimpse of what a mending approach to democratic reform entails, but much more experimentation is needed. We use the term experimentation with particular purpose – in the pragmatist tradition, with the soft sense of encouraging trial-and-error through experience, rather than the hard sense of imagining complex contemporary policy settings as controlled environments into which it is possible to input innovative democratic “treatments”. None of the examples we draw on above, either of our own work or of others, lend themselves to neat replication across context. The work of “stitching in” CAs and other deliberative forums will by necessity be contingent on local context. The practices within the broader repertoire of mending beyond the forum are not off-the-shelf products or services. There may be ways to seed or promote similar practices elsewhere, but such efforts will always take on their own local hue. And, in any case, there may be more value in promoting and protecting local practices which emerge organically.

We conclude, then, that the pursuit of democratic repair needs to move away from a “social laboratory” mode and towards an approach associated with “reflexive governance” (see Hendriks and Grin 2007) and “policy learning” (see Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). That will entail looking for, seeding, and supporting organic opportunities to “stitch in” forums or, more often, draw on a much wider range of democratic mending practices. In other words, pursuing democratic reform now requires a form of experimentation based on experiential knowledge, historical understanding, a nuanced ap-

preciation of local practice, and a thoughtful, flexible and piecemeal approach to learning by doing.

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