

How might we take meaningful steps to Upgrade Democracy?

INSTRUCTIONS

INFORMATION

1

The current system and its challenges

The UK's current first-past-the-post system is a long-established form of Representative Democracy. Everyone eligible votes for their chosen representative every 4-5 years. Then politicians act on our behalf.

The UK has an elected chamber, the House of Commons, and an unelected chamber, the House of Lords. The Commons has ultimate authority, with the Lords scrutinising proposed legislation to provide checks and balances. An independent judiciary can also hold government to account.

Certain powers have been passed from Westminster to national parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but the UK Parliament still has ultimate authority.

Current system	Complementary ideas	Innovative ideas
1 Info + challenges	3 Citizens' Assemblies	5 Grassroots Democ. (Rojava)
2 Longer term view	4 Participatory Budgeting	6 Liquid Democracy

(Some of) the challenges

- Many feel that the system works in favour of those with power and influence.
- Many are concerned about the excessive influence of mainstream and social media.
- There are increasing levels of polarisation in political and in public debate.
- Traditional people power (like petitions, letters and protest) sometimes works (eg Same Sex Marriage legalisation - 2013), but more often doesn't (eg Stop the War Coalition - 2003).
- Trust in politicians is at an all-time low.
- Proportional representation could improve things, but will it address the systemic issues?

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- Just how much is an upgrade to democracy needed in your view?

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The current system - long-term view

How do we get Government to take the long view for future generations and the environment?

When governments are elected for 4 or 5 years, the temptation is to make decisions for the short term. How do we promote long-term thinking?

Here are four ideas:

- 1. A Commissioner for Future Generations, like in Wales**, where Derek Walker screens all policy proposals for their impact on the unborn. As a result, the Welsh Government scrapped a motorway extension around Newport and froze all road building.

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2. **More Referendums:** Long-term policy could be made this way. In August 2023 the people of Ecuador made history by voting 6 to 4 to shut down oil drilling in Yasuni National Park.
3. **House of the Future:** once a year, everyone is paid a people's allowance for the day so that they can gather, discuss and steer decisions about the future.
4. **Legal Rights for Nature:** Rivers in New Zealand and India have been given legal rights, just as companies have legal rights. Protection of the environment has been written into the constitution in Bhutan and Costa Rica.

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- Which of the four ideas might make a significant difference to you, or none of them?

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Complementary People Power - Citizens' Assemblies

More recently, attempts have been made to influence Government policy through the use of **citizens' assemblies**, such as the People's Plan for Nature. Typically about 100 randomly selected and diverse citizens meet over several weekends. They learn from wide-ranging experts and then work together to suggest inclusive, well-informed and supported policies. Citizens' assemblies get ordinary people from all walks of life to take part and find common ground, free from outside interference.

Despite requiring substantial time and money and sometimes being ignored, citizens' assemblies can unlock political deadlock like in Ireland when they resulted in new laws on abortion and same sex marriage.

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Integrating assemblies into the system of government

1. In Vorarlberg, in Austria, a citizens' council can be called for by the Government or by petition. Results are presented at citizens' cafés. They are now part of the constitution and the culture.
2. In 2019, a permanent citizens' council, but with changing membership, was set up in Eastern Belgium, to sit alongside the Parliament.
3. When a referendum is held in the state of Oregon, USA, a citizens' jury talks through the issue over 5 days. Conclusions are distributed and printed alongside the ballot paper.

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- What, if anything, can be done to get citizens' assembly recommendations taken seriously by current power holders?

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Complementary People Power - Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB)

In PB, community members, using assemblies, decide spending priorities for a public budget. It began in Porto Alegre, a city in Brazil in 1989.

Edimar, a local activist, says, “PB means that community members realise that if they want a particular thing they need to get involved, politics or not. So poor people, who didn’t have much knowledge, begin to understand how things work and get more involved in the movement, first to win something for themselves but also to help others. So they learn a sense of solidarity.”

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Some results:

When PB began, bus routes mainly funnelled the workforce in and out of the city centre. Now there is a network of routes that serves the needs and wishes of the poorest neighbourhoods. In the first 13 years of PB, the number of municipally- run secondary schools rose from 22 to 90.

Another example:

The Garvagh Forest Big Dish Out in Northern Ireland involved children as young as 7. They voted on which projects to fund to enhance the forest for all, including the birds and plants.

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- Would PB be a stepping stone to better decision-making and more participation?

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Innovative People Power - Grassroots Democracy

Rojava, in North and East Syria, is a place where everyone can join in making decisions. During the Syrian Civil War, Rojava set up local groups, from neighbourhood councils to regional bodies, focusing on agreement and representing the community.

Rojava supports equal rights by having both men and women as leaders, thus making sure women are involved in politics. This area, with people of different ethnicities and religions, encourages teamwork among Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and others.

Syrian women's lives have changed a lot. Some women formed groups called Women's Protection Units (YPJ) to fight against ISIS and promote gender equality. Their courage and leadership have changed how society views women, showing the power of local democracy and gender equality.

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Some democracy experts believe the only way to upgrade democracy is from the grassroots.

The UK could adopt the Rojava model, setting up local assemblies for community decision making. That would begin to give a voice to everyone in each community. This could grow into a democracy where key decisions would be based on the needs of all.

Jeremy Corbyn, the independent MP for Islington North, is starting a monthly People's Forum so that (1) residents can hold him to account and (2) the community has a space in which to organise.

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- What would be tangible steps towards more grassroots democracy in the UK?

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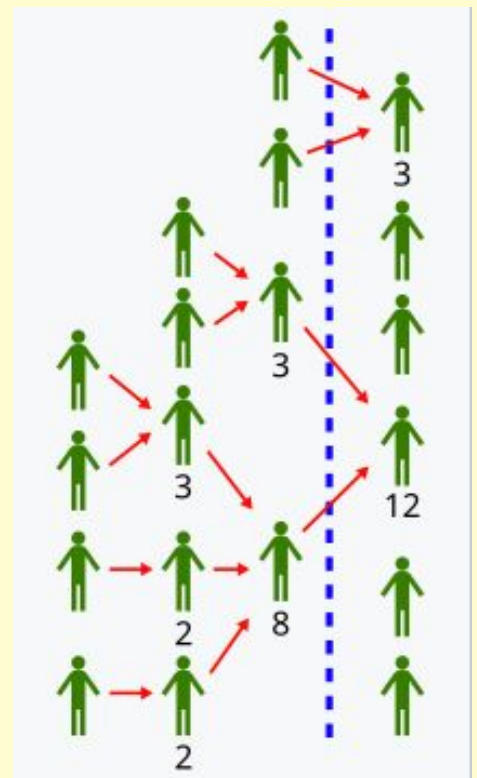
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Innovative People Power - Liquid Democracy

Liquid Democracy mixes representative and direct democracy. At any time, an issue can be debated by everyone. Except that, on each issue, you have a choice. You can decide to be active yourself, take part and vote. Or (via a website), you can delegate your vote to a representative. That means that you are asking them to participate in the full deliberative process and decide on that basis.

Delegates can themselves delegate their votes onwards.

If at any time, you dislike what your delegate does, you can choose a new one.



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In Germany, The Pirate Party uses liquid democracy to make binding decisions. At one stage, a man called Martin Haase had 167 votes delegated to him. No-one else had that many votes, so he had great influence on the Party's policies, more than those in original positions of leadership.

There are various criticisms of liquid democracy. One is that people may give their vote to celebrities rather than to people who are knowledgeable on the issue and who deliberate well.

For reflection:

- Anything surprising, important or unclear?
- How might this work in practice - can you imagine it at all?

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