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ARTICLE

Political Experiments

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Abstract

We are witnessing experiments with political forms of life not seen for nearly a hundred years. Political forms of life are not limited to preferences for particular policies. They entail competing visions for political form itself—an arrangement of power as democracy, socialism, communism, anarchism, fascism, or some combination thereof—and a way of life that goes with it. My analysis centres on my own political experiment: a classroom-based citizens' assembly that I see as a microcosm of this wider phenomenon. This experiment reveals a shared desire among participants to exercise authorship over political arrangements, even as they divide between democratic enthusiasts and sceptics. It is this very authorship that liberal democracy has denied people, even when governments have instituted their own citizens' assemblies. These citizens' assemblies seek to expand participation on policy creation while ultimately constraining people to answer predefined questions, leaving the liberal-democratic structure of political decision making intact. I propose that contemporary movements, including authoritarian and other anti-democratic tendencies, can be understood partly as responses to liberal democracy's reluctance to cede authority over political form. The result is a proliferation of "political experiments" through which individuals and groups attempt to reclaim that authorship.

Keywords: authoritarianism; citizens' assemblies; democracy; education; political theory

What fascinates me about literature written in the 1920s and 1930s is the way it conveys a time when people lived among multiple political forms of life. I do not mean that people merely entertained different ideologies or sets of values in the relatively polite way that members of opposing political parties would today, differences that result in distinct policy preferences. I do not think taking different positions on legalising same-sex marriage or abortion rights are strictly equivalent to different political forms of life. A political form of life entails a vision for political form itself—an arrangement of power as democracy, socialism, communism, anarchism, fascism, or some combination thereof—and a way of life that goes with it. Questions about political forms of life are therefore more encompassing and consequential for the whole society than debates over specific rights because rights take their meaning from a particular political form—modern liberal democracy or republicanism.[1]

[1] I desist here from addressing the complex question of what these political forms are in precise terms, let alone the question of how they are related. Hereafter, I refer to "liberal democracy" as the condition in which people are

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Political forms of life are more fundamental and far reaching than most things we see as "politics as usual." As a result, the stakes are higher. Returning to the 1920s and 30s, you can see those heightened stakes reflected in the way that political attitudes were expressed. People did not simply debate these visions in universities, pubs, and cafés. Those competing visions carried people to street marches, picket lines, and battlefields. One thinks of those like George Orwell who travelled from Britain to fight in the Spanish Civil War, or the anonymous actors who torched the headquarters of unions or radical newspapers or carried out political assassinations.

Until recently, I would read about that time and feel that I was gaining some historic distance from our own political condition. Now, however, I read about it and believe that it is closer to a historical analogue to the present, and one that I can study with a view to gaining insight into our situation. That's because of the proliferation today of political experiments that are non-democratic, anti-democratic, and even anti-democratic-yet-formally-liberal-democratic. I call these "political experiments" because I see them as the efforts of disaffected and dissident-affected people to try out political forms of life that liberal democracy has tried to leave behind in its triumphal march to progress and historical completion.[2] But what kind of disaffection and dissident affection do I speak of? Or, to ask the same question differently, what caused these political experiments?

Plenty of answers have been advanced. As people keep telling me, "Political scientists must be having a field day with all that's going on in the world at the moment!" My purpose here is not to go through others' explanations. I rather want to consider our current moment through my own form of political experimentation—in the classroom. In doing so, I draw another conclusion from what we see, a conclusion that in many ways is complementary to others' findings.

To understand my classroom political experiment, I'll give you some context. I teach in a Great Books program that is modelled on those initiated in the 20th century at the University of Chicago, St John's College, and Columbia University. I teach a capstone subject on the philosophy of democracy and at the end of the semester I conduct a citizens' assembly with the students (in keeping with the U.S. liberal arts model, we have small classes so there are usually 30 students in my subject). The aim of the assembly is to build in some democratic *practice* in a course that involves reading and discussing a lot of democratic *theory*.

Organising a citizens' assembly is one thing, but making it democratic is another. One way I have done so is by selecting participants randomly through a lottery. Each student nominates two people who would be available to attend the assembly at the appointed time, a challenge that contains a lesson: People need to be liberated from work to be politically active. Once we have our nominees, we put their names in a box and then draw 20 of them at random to receive a formal invitation to join the students in this assembly. This selection

conducting the political experiments I am considering, though I acknowledge that, as an imprecise term, it has certain drawbacks. The term is good enough for the purposes of this article, though I do not suppose it applies to the cases of the Arab Spring that I mention.

[2] This meaning of "experiment" obviously differs from a scientific experiment in which a strict and predetermined procedure is undertaken to test whether something, which has also been predetermined, works or is true. In this case, it's equally possible for both the procedure and the hoped-for outcome to be relatively indeterminate, as people try out different political forms of life that may not even be characterisable in any straightforward typology of political forms.

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procedure mimics the democracy of ancient Athens. What makes it democratic is that it assumes every member of the community is adequate for political participation of any and, potentially, all kinds. No expertise, political experience, charisma, or any other quality defines political worth, only membership of a community. Of course, who counts as a member of the community and who gets to decide this matter are the controversial bits. For the Athenians, male adults born of two citizen parents that had been scrutinised in the initiation rites of their local community were eligible to participate in assemblies and hold political office. For my assembly, I do not put *any* conditions on who can be chosen. One year, a student's little brother was selected—he was only 11 years old!

During the assembly, the participants respond to a question: "Should we have more, or less, democracy?" Towards the end, I have students take to a side of the room to indicate their answer: more, less, or undecided. I then task them with proposing concrete changes they would bring about to reflect their position.

The results from this classroom experiment are always interesting, and each time (four so far) they are slightly different. But there are two broad reactions. Some participants love it. They embrace the assembly's openness and the feeling of being with others to debate core political questions in a notionally democratic fashion. In fact, some people love this aspect so much that they even critique the assembly for not going far enough. At one point in last year's assembly, a student raised her hand in the middle of the discussion to say, "I'm not satisfied with the way that this assembly is being run. It is not democratic enough! There are too many people in here who have not spoken and are therefore not participating." In response to that, someone lodged a protest on Slido—an online mechanism for people to write comments and ask questions anonymously and quietly. They wrote, "Just because we are silent doesn't mean we're not participating." We then passed motions to give the floor to those who had not spoken *and wished to speak* (three in total). Those are the ones that mostly love the citizens' assembly.

But there are also participants who have little time or patience for it. Some of them think that opening up the political space is a waste of time because we arrive at no decisive answers and achieve no outcomes. Both apparent flaws are usually attributed to a lack of expertise and authority among the assembled.

You could say that participants basically divide into democratic enthusiasts and democratic sceptics. But whichever category the participants fit into, one thing is common to all of them: They all have views about the political form *and want the power to author that arrangement.* They all, therefore, approximate if not directly exemplify political forms of life. But is not this power to author political form something that the current political system never gives them? Not even my own political experiment went that far, and the participants were clearly dissatisfied, if not totally exasperated, as a result.

On the back of this, I want to return to the question of political experiments in our societies. Could it be that we are witnessing expressions of this desire for the power to author political form in populations that have been denied it?

Consider a series of events over the last 15 years that cast our times in a very different political light. This was a period of unprecedented political experimentation in ways that appear to jar with more recent versions. It was in this time that citizens' assemblies started to be employed by governments to help create policies. Take the following as an indicative list:

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2012: In Finland, the constitution was amended to allow a citizens' initiative to be submitted to parliament provided it had 50,000 signatures.[3]

2017: In South Korea, a citizens' assembly on energy policy made recommendations that were preferred over the executive's choice of policy.[4]

2018: Ireland held a popular referendum, but it was to determine whether to adopt the recommendations of a special assembly of 99 citizens to decriminalise abortion.[5]

2019: In Belgium, the Parliament of the German-speaking community voted to establish a permanent Citizens' Council where randomly selected citizens would help the elected parliamentarians to formulate legislation.[6]

2019: France attempted to tackle the matter of reducing climate emissions with a two-month long Great National Debate with 1.5 million people followed by a Citizens' Convention (*Conventions Citoyennes*) on Climate Change with 150 citizens who for several months worked on recommendations for mitigating climate change in a socially fair way.[7]

And in case you think that the U.S. is a total outlier, in 2024 Deschutes County in central Oregon convened a citizens' assembly of randomly selected people that broadly reflected the diversity of the larger community. The issue under consideration was youth homelessness.[8]

I could go on, but you get the picture. And while these appear like valuable democratic experiments, it's important that we understand what these assemblies involved. In each case, the assembled citizens were set a particular question: Should it be legal for same-sex couples to get married? Should abortion be illegal? How do we reduce greenhouse gas emissions by a certain amount and do it fairly? And in many of these cases, participants were presented with high-quality information pertinent to the question (and sometimes experts to help lay people understand it). But let us be clear on what they did not do: In no case were the assembled people given power to determine the way that the assembly was conducted *or* to deliberate over, let alone act, on matters of political form. Even in these cases of opening up the space of politics to non-experts and unelected individuals, they are quite strictly limited to a very particular set of topics and activities.[9]

This is important to underscore because, like my classroom citizens' assembly, these efforts opened up politics a little but did not go all the way to empowering people to author the political form.[10] Both embrace just a little openness with respect to the means of reaching a

[3] Council of Europe 2020, 51–52.
[4] Participedia 2021.
[5] Involve 2018.
[6] G1000 2019.
[7] Gouvernement français 2019; Participedia 2025.
[8] Romeo 2024.
[9] Contrast this with the recent case of the Australian referendum over an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. There the citizenry was asked to provide a "yes or no" answer about an issue of political form: "A Proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Do you approve this proposed alteration?" (Australian Electoral Commission 2024). The 2017 National Constitutional Convention that instigated the referendum was a more sophisticated and meaningful process amongst Indigenous Australians that was about authoring political form even if the power to realise their decisions was constrained. It culminated in the "Uluru Statement from the Heart" (First Nations National Constitutional Convention 2017).
[10] This is not just a restriction in the cases of these citizens' assemblies. It's also a restriction in the theoretical literature on citizens' assemblies, even by those who are advocates for them. See Brennan and Landemore 2021; Landemore 2020.

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goal, but they also cordon off the goals themselves and the power to determine the process by which to get there.[11]

Putting all this together, several questions come to mind: Could we understand the current turn to authoritarianism and other forms of politics as connected to the limited democratic experiments of the previous decade? For instance, if the people who initiated and ran these assemblies did so because they sensed that politics as usual wasn't adequate to solve present challenges, then it's plausible that ordinary citizens also sensed the same limitations. And what if tweaking the means by which the political status quo created its policies, as in these assemblies, was not enough? What if, like the participants in my assembly, people are now expressing frustration at liberal democracy's unwillingness to share the power to author political form? Are the political experiments we are witnessing efforts to take that power anyway, in whatever way they can?

There is one analysis of the present that suggests as much: "Liberal authoritarianism." It names the process by which authoritarian politics have been achieved in certain countries from *within* the existing political form. That is, recent political tensions have been played out *within* liberal-democratic institutions, rather than through a complete overthrow of them. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court has been stacked with conservatives for the sake of political gain. But in doing so, the character of these institutions seems to have been changed, as when the Supreme Court justices erode certain legal norms such as dedication to precedent (*stare decisis*). Here we see the way politics that is about political form and their forms of life taking over the institutions of liberal democracy to turn it into something else.[12]

To recap, there are really two claims I'm advancing here. First, contemporary political conditions evince a proliferating phenomenon that has yet to be recognised for what it is: People are questioning political form and taking up the power to author political form in the ways that they can. This is manifested in contemporary U.S. politics but in other, less authoritarian, ways too: in my classroom, in other citizens' assemblies over the last 15 years, and in movements like Occupy Wall Street in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and in the Arab Spring.[13] The second is an explanatory claim: Some of these efforts are a response to the failure of liberal democracy to share that power beyond the professional political class. Citizens' assemblies are symptomatic of the way that liberal democracy is struggling to overcome its limitations and yet holds the power to author political form at arm's length from ordinary citizens.[14]

[11] Expressing a desire to author political form does not necessitate a purely formless starting point for doing so. In the case of my classroom assembly, the participants' desire to author political form was no doubt influenced by the way I framed the event, where I invited the students to consider the meaning and value of democracy and then decide whether we should have more or less of it. But democratic theorists such as Jacques Rancière have conceptualised politics and indeed democracy as resistance to power, where politics is formless at least insofar as it is defined by resistance and maybe also insofar as it entails a rethinking of power. On this, see Poe 2022, Chapter 5. Others have considered certain democratic forms as unique. Wolin 1994 has argued that ancient Athenian institutions and practices as lacking "institutionalisation," which does not make them formless but does make the character of form quite different.

[12] As I write this article, I read that President Trump attended the Supreme Court's oral arguments about birthright citizenship—the first time a sitting president has attended this part of the judicial process in U.S. history. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/01/trump-supreme-court-birthright-citizenship-arguments.

[13] On Occupy Wall Street, see Graeber 2014. On the complex political valences of the Arab Spring and especially the suicidal act that sparked it, see Bargu 2016 and Poe 2022, especially Chapter 5.

[14] One partial exception to this reluctance to share a more encompassing political power: In the run up to the French elections of 2022, La France Insoumise (under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon) proposed to have citizens appoint a Constituent Assembly for the creation of a Sixth French Republic by voting for a representative or for someone who would be chosen by a drawing of lots (Delannoi 2025, xii) though as Delannoi pointed out, there was no proposal to have this repeated or made regular.

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But this line of analysis needs to confront one further question: Where does this desire to author political form come from? In this short and modest contribution, I cannot address this important and deep question, but I will suggest that giving expression to it may just be the most democratic (yet anti-liberal) form of politics. As a result, I've decided to run my classroom assembly differently. Next time, I plan to let the participants work out how they want the assembly itself to run. What will happen is anyone's guess.

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