# PS-07 Who shows up: the participation problem

The foundational paradox of self-governance is that while the theoretical right to participate may be distributed equally, the propensity, material resources, and cognitive bandwidth to do so are strictly stratified. In the anticipated context of "the Fall"—characterized by the permanent loss of industrial supply chains and the retreat of the coercive state—governance will inevitably devolve to the scale of immediate human relationships: households, hamlets, and watersheds. At these scales, when governance requires physical presence and continuous deliberation, time becomes the primary currency of political power. The logistical question of "who shows up" ultimately dictates the ideological and material output of any self-governing body.

This foundation document evaluates the empirical realities of participation inequality, time costs, meeting fatigue, and the vulnerabilities of participatory institutions to elite capture by individuals exhibiting dark-triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy). By examining historical and contemporary models of direct and deliberative democracy, we can identify which principles of participation endure, which collapse under the weight of human apathy, and how future governance structures might be insulated against the inevitable decay into oligarchy. Crucially, this analysis actively avoids the naturalistic fallacy and the romance of the primitive: historical longevity does not equate to moral goodness, and the small scale of a community does not guarantee fairness.

## The Baseline of Inequality: Resources and Political Voice

To understand who participates in self-governance, one must first establish the baseline of political inequality in modern representative systems. This baseline was definitively quantified by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady in their 1995 work, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*[1]. Through exhaustive survey data, the authors demonstrated that political participation is fundamentally stratified by socio-economic status, specifically education, income, and occupational prestige[3].

While majorities theoretically endorse equal influence—in 1990, 95 percent of surveyed Americans agreed that every citizen should have an equal chance to influence government policy[1]—the reality of participation is fiercely skewed. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady proved that resources (time, money, and civic skills) dictate political voice. The time cost of participation operates as a regressive tax on the working and lower classes. At the extreme end of the participatory spectrum, financial contributors heavily skew the agenda. In 2000, 95 percent of substantial donors (over $1,000) to presidential campaigns had household incomes over $100,000, compared to only 12 percent of the general population[1]. Furthermore, 85 percent of these significant donors possessed at least a bachelor's degree, contrasting sharply with the 26 percent of the general public holding such credentials at the time[1].

When financial contributions are removed from the equation—as they must be in a post-collapse scenario where fiat currency loses relevance—the primary currency becomes

time. Negotiating collective action requires hours of endless debate, a luxury rarely afforded to those laboring for basic subsistence. Consequently, those with surplus time (the wealthy, the elderly, or those subsidized by others) inherently monopolize the discourse.

Evaluating the modern electoral status quo across the scale ledger reveals its mechanical limitations. At the rungs of the household (4 to 10 people) and hamlet (30 to 50), formal representative voting is largely unnecessary and alienating. It becomes operational at the village level (150 to 500) and scales infinitely upward to the nation (50 to 500 million), where it functions as the dominant paradigm. However, it fails to provide actual self-governance, instead offering periodic veto power over pre-selected elites. Subjecting this system to a capture test shows high vulnerability to Machiavellian factions who weaponize wealth to monopolize communication channels and filter candidates. Historically, this is evidenced by the capture of late 20th-century American policy by corporate lobbying factions[4]. Resistance features exist primarily in constitutional rights to free assembly and periodic elections, though these merely cycle elites rather than dismantling them.

Epistemologically, a profound disconnect exists within this model. Participants and proponents of modern electoral systems state that the arrangement guarantees equality through the principle of "one person, one vote." The empirical record, however, shows that "voice" is heavily mediated by socio-economic status, rendering the system functionally plutocratic. Modern scholarship infers that formal political equality in a representative system merely masks deep structural inequalities, converting economic power directly into political leverage while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

# Face-to-Face Assembly: The Myth and Reality of the Town Meeting

The New England town meeting is frequently romanticized as the pinnacle of authentic, face-to-face self-governance. Political scientist Frank M. Bryan spent 28 years (1970–1998) collecting data on this phenomenon, observing 1,435 meetings across 210 Vermont towns, and logging 230,000 individual acts of participation by 60,000 citizens, culminating in his 2004 book *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works*[5].

Bryan’s data dismantles the romance of universal participation. Over the 28-year study period, the average attendance was only 20.5 percent of a town's registered voters[5]. Town size was the dominant variable, explaining nearly 60 percent of the variance in attendance; smaller towns routinely produced healthier democratic metrics[5].

| Vermont Town | Democratic Index Score | Voter Turnout / Speaking Metrics |
|---|---|---|
| **Belvidere** | 88.46 | 17% of voters attended; 72% of attendees spoke (125 acts by 39 people). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Mendon** | 72.02 | 5% of voters attended; over 66% of attendees spoke at least once. |
| **Huntington** | 50.12 | Mid-range participation; moderate speaking engagement. |
| **Hinesburg** | 22.26 | Low participation relative to population size. |
| **Proctor** | 21.19 | Bottom-tier participation; highly passive attendance. |

Data synthesized from Bryan's town meeting observations and 2018 follow-up studies[6].

As populations grew and society became more complex, participation plummeted. By 2016, the larger town of Stowe saw attendance drop to between 3 and 4 percent (132 to 159 people out of 3,793 voters)[8]. The primary cause of non-attendance was the uncompensated time cost. A survey in Stowe found that 56 percent of non-attendees could not take time off work, while 30 percent explicitly stated they "do not like listening to other people go on and on"[8]. To circumvent this meeting fatigue, towns increasingly adopted the Australian ballot (secret paper voting) for budgets and officers. While this increased total voter turnout, Bryan noted that the Australian ballot is "worse than deadly, because it doesn’t kill town meeting quickly"—it slowly strips the assembly of its deliberative power, replacing real democratic engagement with sterile, individualized box-checking[8].

Evaluating the open assembly across the scale ledger defines its strict carrying capacity. At the rung of the household (4 to 10), parliamentary procedure is absurd. In a hamlet or band (30 to 50), it is highly effective, nearing absolute participation. At the village level (150 to 500), it remains highly operational and effective, as seen in Belvidere[6]. Moving to the parish or district (1,500 to 5,000), efficiency declines rapidly, with attendance dropping to the 10-20% range. By the time it reaches a town or watershed (15,000 to 50,000), the model fails completely; face-to-face meetings collapse into low-single-digit attendance, forcing a transition to representative governance or secret ballots. At the region, nation, or planet (0.5 million to 8 billion), it has never been tried, as it is physically and chronologically impossible.

Subjecting the town meeting to a capture test reveals acute vulnerabilities to the weaponization of time. A Machiavellian faction or narcissistic individual captures the assembly through endurance and filibuster. By intentionally dragging out meetings ("going on and on"), they trigger exhaustion in the working population, who leave early to attend to jobs or childcare[8]. The faction then calls for a binding vote when the room is empty of opposition. Historical precedent is

evident in Stowe, where 30% of citizens refused to attend precisely because of long-winded speakers monopolizing the floor[8]. To resist this, assemblies rely on strict meeting moderation, time limits on speakers, and intense community surveillance. Small group sizes limit the anonymity required for manipulation, as a known bad actor is heavily penalized socially outside the meeting hall.

Epistemologically, participants claimed they valued the town meeting as a cornerstone of their civic identity and a true legislature of, by, and for citizens[10]. The record shows a contradictory reality: persistent, long-term declines in attendance, widespread reliance on the Australian ballot to avoid meetings entirely, and a strong negative correlation between town size and participation rates[5]. Modern scholarship infers that the natural carrying capacity of a face-to-face deliberative democracy is remarkably low (under 1,000 people). Beyond this threshold, transaction costs exceed the perceived benefits of participation, and representative models inevitably emerge to subsidize the cognitive and temporal costs of governance.

# Unitary versus Adversary Democracy: The Limits of Friendship

In *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1980), Jane Mansbridge dissected the micro-mechanics of participation in face-to-face organizations, comparing a small Vermont town ("Selby") with an urban crisis center ("Helpline") that employed 41 staff members[11]. Founded on New Left and Counterculture principles of participatory democracy, Helpline attempted to operate via strict consensus, rejecting majoritarian voting as inherently coercive (adversary democracy) in favor of mutual agreement based on shared interests (unitary democracy)[11].

Mansbridge’s ethnography revealed that consensus models exact a brutal psychological and temporal toll. Because every decision required unanimity among the 41 employees, meetings stretched for hours[11]. The pressure to conform to the group's "friendship" dynamic paradoxically created intense, hidden hierarchies. Those who possessed higher verbal fluency, emotional stamina, or a willingness to engage in interpersonal conflict dominated the ostensibly "equal" space. Mansbridge documented that the insistence on unitary democracy actually suppressed minority voices, as individuals feared the social ostracization that came with blocking a consensus. Meeting fatigue became the ultimate filter: only those willing to endure marathon sessions maintained their grip on power.

Conversely, the town of Selby utilized adversary democracy—protecting friendships not through forced consensus, but by acknowledging conflicting interests and using majoritarian voting and secret ballots to settle disputes cleanly and quickly, thereby limiting the time cost of participation. Short meetings and formal procedures allowed citizens to disagree without destroying their social fabric.

Evaluating the unitary consensus model across the scale ledger shows it to be the most fragile form of governance. At the household level (4 to 10), it is operational and highly effective, acting as the natural sphere for consensus-based decisions due to deep mutual interest and shared fate. At the hamlet or band scale (30 to 50), it becomes highly stressed and borderline dysfunctional, as evidenced by Helpline's 41 staff members experiencing extreme meeting fatigue and the calcification of hidden status hierarchies[11]. At the village level (150 to 500), it

fails completely. Consensus becomes mathematically paralyzing; a single veto halts all collective action, leading to organizational death or informal oligarchy. From the parish to the planet (1,500 to 8 billion), it has never been tried and remains fundamentally impossible due to the inevitability of conflicting interests among strangers.

Running a capture test on unitary democracy reveals it is the system most vulnerable to psychopathic and narcissistic hijack. Because unanimity is required, a single dark-triad actor can hold the entire collective hostage, forcing the group to capitulate to their demands simply to end the agonizing meeting. At Helpline, staff members who were more aggressive or willing to inflict social discomfort easily wore down more agreeable members, rendering the "equal" consensus a dictatorship of the most stubborn[14]. The arrangement possesses almost no resistance features. Unitary democracy assumes mutual respect and shared interests; when a bad actor introduces zero-sum tactics, the structure lacks the self-defense mechanisms (like a majoritarian override or formal expulsion) to eject the disruption.

Epistemologically, the Helpline staff claimed their consensus model dismantled hierarchical oppression and achieved total egalitarianism through mutual friendship and shared ideals[11]. The record shows that meetings suffered from massive attrition and chronic burnout, with decisions frequently railroaded by a vocal, high-stamina minority while the exhausted majority remained silent. Modern scholarship infers that unitary democracy is only appropriate in small groups with genuinely common interests. Once interests diverge—which they inevitably do in any group larger than an extended family—attempting to force consensus becomes coercive, making adversary democracy (majoritarian voting and formal constitutional protections) a much fairer and faster mechanism.

# Empowered Participatory Governance: Power and Scale

Addressing the failures of both unscalable consensus and apathetic voting, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright proposed the concept of Empowered Participatory Governance (sometimes called Empowered Deliberative Democracy or EDD) in their 2003 work, *Deepening Democracy*[16]. They argued that participation rates can be sustained at scale if the governance bodies are granted genuine, consequential power (empowered), operate via structured deliberation rather than mere voting, and are actively nested within a supportive state apparatus.

Fung extensively studied the Chicago Local School Councils (LSCs), initiated in 1988 across 540 public schools. Each council comprised 11 members (6 parents, 2 community members, 2 teachers, the principal) elected every two years, wielding the hard power to hire and fire principals and approve school budgets[18]. Crucially, Fung found that this model disrupted the standard socio-economic bias observed by Verba. Because the stakes were immediately consequential—the safety and education of children—residents in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods participated in beat meetings and LSC elections at rates equal to or greater than those in wealthy neighborhoods[19].

A multiple OLS regression analysis of Chicago's community policing beat meetings (which operated on similar EDD principles, attracting 5,000 to 6,000 residents monthly) revealed that

the personal crime rate of a neighborhood was a much stronger predictor of attendance than median household income[19]. However, participation was highly sensitive to systemic support. When private foundation funding for outreach and mobilization dropped from $750,000 in 1989 to $215,000 in 1993, candidate numbers and voter turnout correspondingly declined, proving that participation requires continuous infrastructural subsidy[20].

Similarly, in 1996, the state government of Kerala, India, launched the "People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning." Seeking to bypass entrenched bureaucracies, the Left Democratic Front government devolved 35 to 40 percent of the state developmental budget to 1,214 local panchayats and municipalities[22]. Coordinated by figures like Thomas Isaac and analyzed by Patrick Heller, the campaign mobilized 1.8 million citizens to attend neighborhood planning Gram Sabhas (assemblies) in its initial years[23]. The scale was massive, supported by 100,000 trained volunteers who guided the deliberation phases[16]. However, while raw numbers were high, disparities persisted in the deliberative phases. Development seminars averaged 231 delegates, but marginalized groups were underrepresented (Scheduled Castes/Tribes comprised 10.5%, and women only 22.1%)[25].

In Porto Alegre, Brazil, sociologist Gianpaolo Baiocchi and others documented the Participatory Budgeting (PB) model, which thrived from 1989 to 2004 under the Leftist Workers' Party (PT) led by figures like Tarso Genro and later championed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva[26]. Citizens debated public works in neighborhood assemblies, electing delegates to a 44-member Council of Participatory Budgeting (COP) representing 16 city regions[26]. The material results were staggering: household access to water rose from 80% to 98%, and 900km of sewage systems were built by 1996[28].

Evaluating Empowered Participatory Governance across the scale ledger reveals its unique elasticity. At the household level (4 to 10), it is not applicable. At the hamlet or band scale (30 to 50), it is highly operational, reflecting the exact size of an individual Chicago police beat meeting[19]. At the village level (150 to 500), it remains operational, matching the size of the Kerala development seminars (avg. 231 delegates)[25]. At the parish or district scale (1,500 to 5,000), it functions well as the electoral base for a Chicago public school[19]. From the town up to the region (15,000 to 5 million), it is operational *only* when meticulously nested. Kerala successfully aggregated local Gram Sabhas into block and district plans, coordinating 1.8 million people across a state of over 30 million, but this was only achieved through intense vertical integration by a functioning state apparatus[24]. From the nation to the planet (50 million to 8 billion), it remains untried, as the logistical burden of nesting becomes computationally and politically prohibitive without catastrophic information loss.

Subjecting EDD to a capture test identifies its vulnerability at the bureaucratic choke points between the grassroots and the center. A Machiavellian faction captures this system by administratively starving it from above. When the PT lost the 2004 election in Porto Alegre, succeeding administrations legally maintained PB but structurally hollowed it out, ignoring its mandates and stripping its funding[27]. This demonstrates that "empowered" local councils are highly vulnerable to capture by higher-level executive authorities who possess the ultimate purse strings. To resist capture, EDD requires radical transparency, strict rotation of delegates,

and continuous capacity-building (like Kerala's 100,000 volunteers)[16]. Furthermore, granting hard power at the base—such as the LSCs' ability to fire a principal—keeps citizens engaged and deters apathy-based capture.

Epistemologically, participants in Kerala and Porto Alegre viewed themselves as breaking historic oligarchies and achieving true, bottom-up democratic planning[24]. The record shows that while this generated massive initial mobilization and tangible infrastructure improvements, the structures gradually ossified. Chicago LSCs saw dropping electoral turnout over a decade; Kerala struggled with the underrepresentation of women in technical appraisal committees; and Porto Alegre's PB was dismantled by subsequent mayors[20]. Modern scholarship infers that decentralized participation cannot survive in a vacuum; bottom-up democracy paradoxically requires a strong, centralized state willing to enforce the rules, train volunteers, and fund the processes.

# Governing the Commons: Time, Scale, and Sanctions

In *Governing the Commons* (1990), Elinor Ostrom dismantled the binary choice between centralized state control (Leviathan) and total privatization by documenting long-enduring, self-organized common-pool resources (CPRs)[29]. Analyzing cases spanning high mountain meadows in Törbel, Switzerland, to Zanjera irrigation communities in the Philippines, Ostrom quantified the scales at which self-governance routinely succeeds: between 50 and 15,000 individuals relying heavily on a resource[29].

Ostrom proved that rational actors can overcome the "tragedy of the commons," but doing so requires immense investments in institutional design. She identified eight core design principles that have held across deep time and cultures:

| **Ostrom's Design Principles for Common-Pool Resources** | **Mechanism for Sustaining Participation** |
|---|---|
| **1. Clearly defined boundaries** | Defines exactly who has the right to participate and withdraw resources. |
| **2. Congruence with local conditions** | Rules restrict time/place/technology in a way that matches the specific local ecology. |
| **3. Collective-choice arrangements** | Most individuals affected by rules can participate in modifying them. |
| **4. Monitoring** | Monitors are actively accountable to the users, or are the users themselves. |
| **5. Graduated sanctions** | Rule violators receive warnings, then escalating fines, preventing instant |

| | |
|---|---|
| | alienation. |
| **6. Conflict-resolution mechanisms** | Rapid, low-cost local arenas to resolve disputes between users. |
| **7. Recognition of rights to organize** | Higher-level authorities do not challenge the local institution's right to exist. |
| **8. Nested enterprises** | For large CPRs, governance is organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises. |

Adapted from Ostrom's analysis of enduring institutions[29].

The implicit variable in all her successful cases is time. Establishing, monitoring, and enforcing these rules carries high transaction costs. Communities that survived for centuries did so because they developed low-cost, mutual monitoring systems where the act of harvesting the resource inherently involved monitoring one's neighbor, thus eliminating the need for a separate, time-consuming bureaucracy.

Evaluating CPR governance across the scale ledger aligns closely with Ostrom's empirical findings. At the household level (4 to 10), it operates seamlessly through informal norms. At the hamlet to parish scales (30 to 5,000), it reaches its maximum efficacy, as social cohesion and physical proximity lower the costs of monitoring. At the town or watershed level (15,000 to 50,000), it struggles but remains operational if strictly adhering to the principle of "nested enterprises" (e.g., overlapping water districts in California)[29]. Beyond the region to the planet (0.5 million to 8 billion), it fails; at this scale, the resource users are entirely alienated from one another, rendering mutual monitoring impossible and requiring a coercive state apparatus to prevent free-riding.

Running a capture test on Ostrom's CPRs shows they are vulnerable to aggressive privatization by Machiavellian actors who utilize external legal frameworks to invalidate local collective-choice arrangements. Historical precedent is found in the enclosure of the English commons or the litigation games in California groundwater basins[29]. The primary resistance feature is Ostrom's 7th principle: minimal recognition of rights to organize. If the local arrangement is legally recognized by the broader state, it can defend itself against privatization. If not, it falls to external capture. Internally, dark-triad behavior is suppressed through graduated sanctions (Principle 5); an arrogant rule-breaker is first warned, then fined, and finally exiled, severing their access to the life-sustaining resource[29].

Epistemologically, participants in these systems rarely spoke of "democracy" or "ideology"; they spoke of tradition, survival, and fairness. The record shows these systems successfully managed fragile ecologies for hundreds of years without collapsing into the tragedy of the commons[29]. Modern scholarship, led by Ostrom, infers that human beings are capable of profound, long-term collective action, but only if the institutional rules strictly match the local

ecological and social conditions, proving that "one-size-fits-all" governance is inherently destined to fail[31].

# Compensating Time: The Athenian Innovation

The most enduring historical model for solving the time-cost of participation comes from classical Athens. Mogens Herman Hansen's definitive demographic and institutional studies (*The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*) outline how Athens sustained mass participation[32]. The Athenian *Ekklesia* (Assembly) was an open meeting held roughly 40 times a year on the Pnyx, a hillside that initially accommodated 6,000 citizens and was later expanded to hold up to 13,400 to 15,000[32]. The total eligible population was 30,000 to 60,000 adult males[32].

To overcome the socio-economic bias—ensuring that poor farmers and rowers could participate alongside wealthy aristocrats—the Athenians invented political pay (*ecclesiasticon*). Introduced in the 390s BC by the statesman Agyrrhius at one obol, it was quickly raised to two, then three obols (roughly a day's low-wage labor), and by the 330s BC reached six to nine obols for regular meetings[32]. This state subsidy was strictly required to achieve the quorum of 6,000 citizens necessary for high-stakes decisions like ostracism or granting citizenship[36].

Even with pay, active participation was heavily stratified. Hansen estimates that only 2 to 5 percent of the citizen population ever proposed a motion or amendment; the vast majority merely listened, judged, and voted[32]. The time cost was so severe that attendance occasionally had to be physically enforced; public slaves would sweep the agora with a red-painted rope, herding citizens toward the Pnyx and fining anyone marked with red[35].

Evaluating the Athenian model across the scale ledger reveals a system perfectly calibrated for its specific environment. From the household to the village (4 to 500), the model is unnecessary, as the *Ekklesia* was designed specifically for the aggregation of the *polis*. At the parish to town scale (1,500 to 50,000), it is highly operational. It supported up to 15,000 physical attendees through sophisticated crowd control and acoustic engineering[35]. From the region to the planet (0.5 million to 8 billion), it fails entirely. Physical acoustics, the logistics of mass voting, and the impossibility of geographic travel in a pre-industrial world cap the model at roughly 50,000 citizens.

Subjecting the Athenian Assembly to a capture test reveals its primary weakness: the demagogue. Narcissistic, Machiavellian orators (e.g., Cleon, Alcibiades) utilized exceptional rhetorical skills and emotional manipulation to drive the Assembly into frenzies, overriding rational deliberation. Historical precedent is found in the Sicilian Expedition (415 BC), where Alcibiades' manipulation of the crowd led to a catastrophic military defeat. However, Athens possessed highly sophisticated legal mechanisms to resist capture. *Ostracism* allowed the Assembly to preemptively exile any citizen deemed too powerful or ambitious for ten years (requiring the 6,000 quorum)[32]. The *graphe paranomon* allowed any citizen to prosecute a speaker for making an illegal or contradictory proposal, rendering the speaker personally liable and legally checking the power of charismatic elites[38].

Epistemologically, Athenians viewed their democracy as the absolute equality of all citizens before the law (*isonomia*) and in speech (*isegoria*), operating as a seamless, unified collective[33].

The historical record shows that the system was rigid, highly coercive regarding attendance (the red rope), brutally exclusive (excluding women, slaves, and metics, who formed the vast majority of the population), and functionally dependent on imperial tribute to fund the *ecclesiasticon*. Modern scholarship infers that the Assembly was actually a complex mixture of mass and elite. The 6,000 ordinary citizens served as a macro-jury, passively judging the proposals of a small, hyper-elite oligarchy of *rhetores* (speakers)[39].

# Sortition and the Deliberative Wave: Curing or Hiding the Bias?

Modern democratic innovation has increasingly turned to sortition (random selection by lot) to cure the participation biases highlighted by Verba and Bryan. Promoted heavily by the OECD, the "deliberative wave" has seen the rise of Citizens' Assemblies and mini-publics to tackle wicked problems like climate change[40]. In 2023, the OECD tracked 733 representative deliberative processes globally[41].

These assemblies use a two-stage "civic lottery"[42]. First, thousands of invitations are sent out. Second, from the pool of affirmative respondents, a stratified sample is drawn to perfectly mirror the census demographics (age, gender, geography, education)[42]. The most prominent modern example is the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC) (2019-2020), authorized by Emmanuel Macron, where 150 citizens drafted 149 climate measures over nine months with a budget of €5.4 million[43].

| Climate Assembly Comparison | UK Climate Assembly (CAUK) | French Convention Citoyenne (CCC) |
|---|---|---|
| **Participants** | 108 citizens | 150 citizens |
| **Budget** | £520,000 | €5.4 million |
| **Duration** | 4 months | 9 months |
| **Output** | >50 recommendations (556 pages) | 149 measures (460 pages) |
| **Public Awareness** | Low (no national polling data available) | High (70% of French citizens aware) |

Data comparing sortition models[43].

However, sortition suffers from a severe, hidden participation bias: the response rate. Does lot cure the bias or hide it? The data suggests it hides it. The average response rate to initial

sortition invitations globally is barely 15 to 30 percent[44]. In Germany's *Bürgerrat Klima*, the response rate was 25 percent (1,800 affirmative responses)[47]. In targeted experiments using door-to-door canvassing to boost assembly registration, rates plummeted even further, ranging from 0.25% to a maximum of 3.02%, effectively hovering below 5 percent[40].

When researchers canvass those who decline these invitations, the answers are definitive: 67.8 percent cite time commitment, unavailability, and opportunity costs as their primary reason for refusing[40]. Consequently, while the final 150 people are demographically representative regarding race, age, and income, they are *psychologically* unrepresentative. They are drawn exclusively from the sub-15 percent of the population that is highly agreeable, highly interested in politics, and possesses the surplus time and cognitive bandwidth to dedicate to weeks of deliberation. By statistically forcing a demographic quota onto a self-selected pool of civic enthusiasts, sortition obfuscates the participation bias rather than curing it.

Evaluating sortition across the scale ledger shows it is essentially a scaling technology. At the household to village scale (4 to 500), it is unnecessary and counterproductive; random sampling at this scale destroys the natural community cohesion required for survival. From the parish to the continent (1,500 to 500 million), it is highly operational. It works exceptionally well as an advisory body (e.g., Ireland's assemblies, France's CCC) because it artificially recreates a "village" out of a nation[43]. At the planetary scale (8 billion), it is theoretically operational via digital platforms, though mathematically difficult to achieve global attitudinal representation.

Subjecting sortition to a capture test reveals its Achilles' heel: the unelected steering committee. A Machiavellian organizing faction captures the assembly through framing. Because the citizens are randomly selected amateurs, they are entirely dependent on the "independent" experts and facilitators for their baseline information. By controlling the reading materials, selecting the expert witnesses, and steering the facilitation, a biased organizing committee can virtually guarantee a specific policy outcome. Historical precedent was seen in the French CCC, where participating citizens actively challenged the voting methodology imposed by the organizers, noting it had not been discussed with them, which raised severe questions about the integrity of the process[43]. To resist this, best practices dictate ensuring the steering committee is cross-partisan, allowing assembly members the hard power to subpoena their own experts, and giving the assembly control over its own agenda[42].

Epistemologically, organizers and participants claim these assemblies reflect the true, uncorrupted "will of the people," free from electoral short-termism and lobbying[48]. The record shows that assemblies routinely produce highly progressive, sweeping policy recommendations that are subsequently ignored or heavily watered down by the actual executive legislature (e.g., Macron ignoring key CCC proposals, leading 73% of the public to correctly believe the executive would not implement them)[43]. Modern scholarship infers that sortition creates "idealized" citizens rather than representative ones. The deliberation process itself educates and alters the participants so profoundly that, by the end of the process, their views no longer reflect the uninformed mass public they were chosen to represent.

# The Strongest Case Against: The Iron Law of Oligarchy

The most robust critique of participatory self-governance remains Robert Michels' 1911 thesis, *Political Parties*, in which he formulated the "Iron Law of Oligarchy"[49]. Michels, a socialist studying the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), concluded that true democracy is procedurally impossible. His maxim—"Who says organization, says oligarchy"—posits that any complex organization requires a division of labor. This division inevitably creates a class of professional leaders[49].

Over time, these leaders consolidate power, hoard technical knowledge, and control the mechanisms of communication. The mass base, constrained by the time and cognitive costs of daily survival—what Michels termed participation fatigue—willingly delegates its authority to this elite[51]. Power chemically and psychologically alters the leadership, inducing contempt for the masses, reckless overconfidence, and a conflation of the leader's own survival with the organization's survival[52]. Michels' theory suggests that regardless of whether a post-collapse society begins with a Vermont town meeting, an Athenian Ekklesia, or a strict consensus model, the sheer fatigue of participation will inevitably result in the masses yielding control to a dedicated, and likely dark-triad, oligarchy.

Evaluating the oligarchical model across the scale ledger shows it is the universal default. It operates efficiently from the village (150) to the planet (8 billion). It fails only at the household or band level (4 to 50), where physical proximity and absolute interdependence prevent a dedicated elite from separating themselves from the labor of survival.

Subjecting this to a capture test is tautological: the system *is* capture. The mechanism is the slow accrual of administrative power. Historical precedent is universal, ranging from the capture of the Russian soviets by the Bolsheviks (1917) to the modern capture of corporate governance by C-suite executives[53]. Resistance features are scarce, though Fung and Wright argue that carefully designed, empowered institutions with strict rotation and radical transparency can temporarily stave off oligarchy[16]. Yet, the empirical decay of Porto Alegre's PB and Chicago's LSCs over time largely vindicates Michels: participation takes energy, entropy is the natural state of organizations, and oligarchy is the path of least resistance.

Epistemologically, leaders of these organizations universally claim to act as the "vanguard" or faithful representatives of the people[55]. The record shows that they act primarily to preserve their own status and institutional power[56]. Modern scholarship infers that while oligarchy is indeed an iron law, its severity can be modulated through institutional friction, term limits, and the decentralization of critical resources.

# Summary of Robust Findings

1. The primary constraint on equal participation is time; the working class will always be underrepresented in time-intensive governance without direct material subsidy.
2. Face-to-face deliberative democracy maxes out at a carrying capacity of approximately 500 to 1,000 individuals before requiring representative abstraction.
3. Consensus models (unitary democracy) in groups larger than a household are highly vulnerable to capture by dark-triad personalities via filibuster and emotional coercion.
4. Paying citizens for their time (the Athenian *obol*) is the only historically proven method for maintaining mass participation among the poor.

5. "Empowered" participatory mechanisms (Chicago LSCs, Kerala) generate high engagement only when citizens are granted hard, consequential power over local resources.
6. Sortition (civic lotteries) solves demographic representation but masks psychological and temporal selection biases due to 70–95% refusal rates.
7. Bottom-up participatory institutions paradoxically require strong top-down state support (funding, facilitation, legal enforcement) to survive long-term.
8. Unstructured open meetings will inevitably be dominated by a vocal minority of 2 to 5 percent.
9. Organizations inherently default toward oligarchy (Michels' Iron Law) due to the exhaustion of the masses and the technical advantages of leadership.
10. Secret majoritarian voting (Australian ballot) destroys the deliberative community but is usually adopted to relieve the crushing time burden of open assembly.

# Contested or Open Questions

- Does the deliberative process of a Citizens' Assembly fundamentally alter the participants so much that they cease to accurately represent the population they were drawn from?
- Can asynchronous decision-making mitigate the physical time-cost of participation, or does it simply introduce new vectors for literacy and status bias?
- Is it possible to design an anti-oligarchic "reset" mechanism (akin to Athenian ostracism or biblical jubilee) that functions without a central monopoly on violence?
- How heavily does the specific culture of a community (e.g., New England civic duty vs. post-collapse survivalism) override structural governance designs?

# Sources to Read in Full


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# Implementability after the Fall

**Minimum Viable Version (Household - 4 to 10 people):** A strict consensus model (Unitary Democracy).

- *Requirements:* A shared mealtime acting as a meeting place; deep mutual interest and

interdependency for basic physical survival.
- *First Failure to Expect:* An interpersonal dispute or romantic fracture shatters the shared interest, turning consensus into an emotional hostage situation where one aggrieved member vetoes all action.

**Minimum Viable Version (Village - 300 people):** A face-to-face town meeting with majoritarian voting (Adversary Democracy) and strictly limited speaking times.

- *Requirements:* A central meeting hall, a shared calendar to guarantee synchrony, a universally recognized moderator, and an oral tradition or basic ledger for recording precedents.
- *First Failure to Expect:* Meeting fatigue sets in during the harvest season. A Machiavellian faction waits until the meeting hall empties out at midnight to call a vote and pass self-serving allocations of the village surplus.

**Minimum Viable Version (District - 3,000 people):** A sortition-based representative council, combined with mandatory material civic pay (the *obol*).

- *Requirements:* Literacy, a complete and continuously updated physical census (the lot pool), a secure method for randomized drawing, and a surplus resource (food, fuel, tools) to pay the 50 to 100 randomly selected representatives for their time away from agricultural labor.
- *First Failure to Expect:* The literate clerics or record-keepers who administer the lottery and facilitate the meetings begin subtly restricting the flow of information, capturing the agenda, and establishing an entrenched technocratic oligarchy.

# Principles

1. The rate of participation in self-governance is inversely proportional to the time and cognitive costs required to participate.
2. Face-to-face assemblies without strict time limits or majoritarian overrides are highly vulnerable to capture by high-stamina, dark-triad actors.
3. Without material compensation, participation naturally restricts itself to a socio-economic elite possessing surplus time.
4. Empowered local councils only sustain engagement when they possess the hard, consequential power to alter their immediate material conditions.
5. Sortition achieves demographic representation but masks psychological and temporal selection biases due to high refusal rates among the laboring class.
6. The division of labor required for complex organization inherently breeds oligarchic leadership.
7. Small group sizes utilize intense social surveillance to resist Machiavellian capture, a defense mechanism that evaporates as populations scale beyond immediate personal recognition.
8. Bottom-up participatory institutions decay quickly without the scaffolding of a central authority to enforce rules, train participants, and subsidize organizational costs.

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