

# Engaging citizens at the heart of power — three challenges

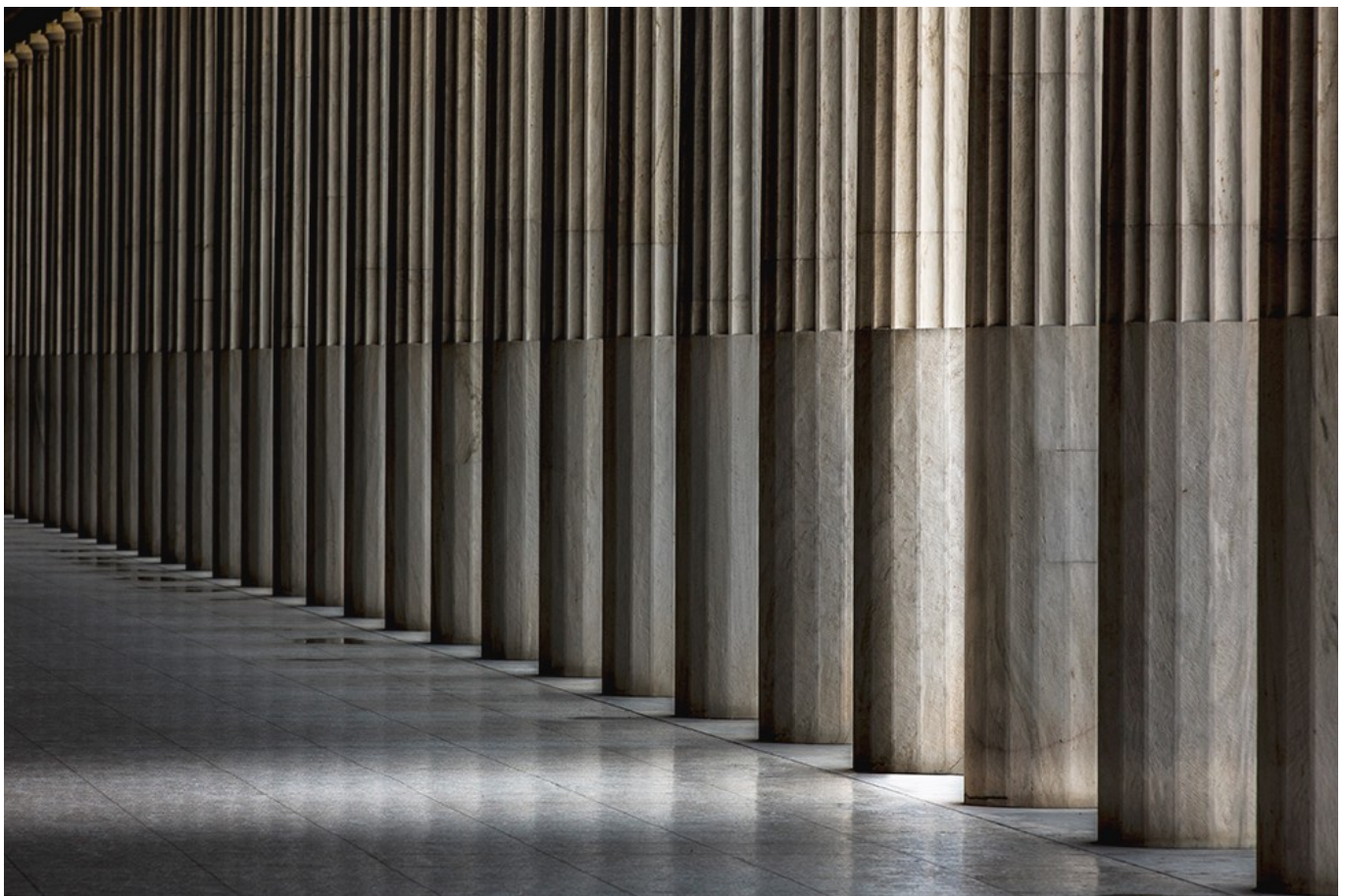
RSA

RSA [Follow](#)

Aug 19, 2016 · 7 min read

By [Reema Patel](#), Programme Manager for the [RSA Citizens' Economic Council](#)

Follow Reema and the RSA Citizens' Economic Council on Twitter [@ReemaPatelRSA](#)  
[@citizenseconomy](#)



*'We must not become engaged at the margins, but at the heart of power,'* declared Stéphane Hessel, a French diplomat and resistance hero.

Hessel was the writer of a pamphlet which is now widely credited with inspiring the Occupy Wall Street movement. That movement has since been criticised extensively for failing to live up to Hessel's declaration and for failing to genuinely engage citizens at the heart of power.

Perhaps it's unfair to be so critical. We live in uncertain and fast moving political times. In the era of soundbite media and a 24/7 news and social media cycle, it is clear that advancing more informed and deliberative citizen participation is a monumental task.

It helps, then, to be clear about the scale of the challenge ahead.

There are three distinct but related challenges that those who seek to engage citizens at the heart of power must deal with. These three challenges can also be understood as competing claims for legitimacy — each wholly inadequate if we want to see a more meaningful democracy and better policy.

## **The challenge of technocracy**

---

*'People in this country have had enough of experts' — Michael Gove*

---

Technocrats claim public policy sits solely within the domain of the experts: only with all the facts and full knowledge of the policy landscape is there real legitimacy when making decisions. And legitimacy is conferred by the process — simply making decisions well. They propose closing the door, announcing a decision, and simply awaiting any public backlash that might confront them.

Leaving aside the point that citizens can be experts in their own principles, values and ethics, there are at least three other questionable assumptions underpinning this attitude:

- The first assumption is that **expertise is all we need to make good public policy decisions**. But public policy also presents us with choices — where values and trade-offs also come into play.

- The second assumption is that **expertise automatically confers legitimacy**. But legitimacy is also concerned with issues of trust — the question of whether institutions and organisations are acting (and seen to be acting) in the best interests of all.
- The third assumption is that **expertise confers comprehensive knowledge**. But many expert-laden domains — science, technology and economics, for instance, also present us with uncertainties and risks about the future about which there is greater subjectivity than most experts themselves would like to accept or acknowledge.

As well as resting on questionable intellectual ground, technocracy also creates another challenge — populism.

## The challenge of populism

---

*‘Freedom and power bring responsibility.’ — Jawaharlal Nehru*

---

Populists take a different stance altogether — but a stance that is almost parasitic upon technocracy.

They argue that decisions are taken behind closed doors by the ‘elite’ and that power needs to be reclaimed by the people. **As our expert decision-makers retreat further and further behind a closed door, more and more space is created for the populist to advance at the door with a battering ram.**

It is essential to recognise that the rise of populism is dependent upon a growing and widespread perception that those who wield power (‘technocrats’) are not to be trusted, do not have the best interests of the public at heart, do not listen and do not care.

But whilst populists call for a new brand of politics that is in the interests of the public — they are rarely themselves interested in engaging citizens at the heart of power, or in creating the systems that would create space for a variety of voices in policy and politics. That would, after all, deprive them of the oxygen required for their own political survival.

What emerges, then, is a form of populist ‘democracy’ that is shallow — not deep. It is a form of democracy that calls for more power to people but without a sense of purpose

associated with that power, and without any genuine interest in creating the conditions in which people can be equipped to act responsibly with it.

Neither are populist democrats particularly interested in or equipped to navigate the problems that rough and ready majoritarianism sometimes creates — what do we do when the majority in a society (by populist appeal) are happy to infringe the rights of a minority, for example? What would have been the reaction if those who voted in Ireland's historic referendum voted against the introduction of same-sex marriage, for example?

To seriously make a case for engaging citizens at the heart of power, we must embrace Nehru's statement that 'freedom and power bring responsibility'. But what does this look like in practice?

Does it mean equipping them with better information and being more transparent with data? Does it mean asking citizens to agree to differ in views and perspectives? Does it mean promoting mutual respect and some kind of unwritten code of conduct towards each other? It probably means all these things and more.

One of the strongest arguments for deliberative models of democracy is the way in which they create the space for citizens to become better informed, more critical and more discursive in the way they engage with complex issues that we all have a shared interest in. When done well, deliberative democracy also promotes a process through which citizens become accountable to each other, and accountable to the decision-makers they engage with.

Citizens are given both power *and* responsibility — responsibility for the outcome of the process, but also responsibility for the way in which they treat other people throughout the process.

## **The challenge of electoral fundamentalism**

---

*'We have all become electoral fundamentalists. We look down on those who have been elected, but worship elections themselves.'* — David Van Reybrouck

---

Populism and technocracy are often cited as problems for our democratic system. But Van Reybrouck, in his recently published book 'Against Elections: The Case for

Democracy, argues that democracy faces an additional challenge — the existence of ‘electoral fundamentalism’.

There are two arguments Van Reybrouck seems to make which need to be distinguished and which unfortunately get conflated in the book.

The first, implied by the title of the book, is that elections are not necessary for democracy and are an almost oligarchic construct. I wholly disagree. The only way we can get rid of a government is through an election. However blunt an instrument they may be, elections are essential for constraining what could otherwise be excessive and disproportionate power wielded by governments for perpetuity. Van Reybrouck does, however, make the valid point that representative democracy has tended towards creating something which resembles ‘elected aristocracy’; the professionalisation of politics in the UK is a clear example of how this has developed.

Van Reybrouck’s second argument is crucial to strengthening democracy: **elections in and of themselves are insufficient for a democratic system to be truly democratic.**

Yet even now, in countries across the world, democracy is measured by the single yardstick of the ability to run free and fair elections. Important as that may be, the health of a democratic system must be judged on much more than this. For example —

- Whether people feel able to influence decisions about their lives — locally or nationally.
- Whether there is quality of debate and dialogue across our civil society.
- Whether the media is independent and balanced, without being beholden to state or corporate interests.
- Whether governments of the day listen, engage and respond to our media and our civil society.
- Whether decision-makers are properly accountable and transparent to our media and our civil society.
- Whether imbalances of power between interests are suitably addressed so that voices at the margins can have a say.

- Whether wealth can buy influence over politicians and policy.

How would you score the UK on these criteria? How about the USA?

Once we chip away at electoral fundamentalism, we realise that democracy demands far more of us than simply elections and representative democracy.

And once we accept that, we strengthen the case for the introduction of other methods that engage citizens in conversation with decision-makers and elected representatives — processes such as citizens' juries and citizen assemblies.

One such process is the RSA's Citizens' Economic Council — the first of its kind in the world. And there is no reason why these models need not complement representative democratic processes— Van Reybrouck is clearly an advocate for a citizens' deliberative and legislative assembly selected through random sampling techniques ('sortition'). This model is a potential replacement for the House of Lords as part of a blended representative-participatory democracy model — a kind of 'House of Citizens'.

We need to reject a red-herring question, 'is our society democratic?'. This implies electoral fundamentalism, but democracy is not binary.

Instead we should ask, 'how could we make our society more democratic?' Then we start to see 'democracy' less as a feature that some societies possess and others don't — and more as a journey upon which we are all embarking upon.

To make real progress on this journey will require greater ambition from those who claim to be democrats — not just our from political leaders but, perhaps more importantly, from ourselves.

• • •

*Read the Citizens' Economic Council prospectus — Economics for Everyone (via Medium)*

Find out more about the RSA Citizens' Economic Council