Reimagining Democracy
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Conclusion
Looking to the Future

People have started to expect more from democracy than just the opportunity to vote for a party every few years. Participation is growing: not just in signing petitions (see the six million who signed a Brexit petition, for example) but also in social movements, NGOs, and other sorties. These trends suggest that there is public appetite to be more involved and to narrow the representation gap. Rising public cynicism and declining public trust suggests that such involvement is critical.

The point is that citizen assemblies and other deliberative institutions can strengthen representative democracy. Restoring public trust requires several factors. First, citizens must feel that their voice matters; the answer to this is creating deliberative mini-publics in which the government is invested. The process itself builds trust in the political process
and helps narrow the political legitimacy gap. And of course it produces that same evidence which can then be used within the debate and for debunking and fact-checking by media in later reporting. Second, citizens need to regain trust in each other. The answer is a transparent process staffed by experts so that we can stop reaching for cynical, factually untrue cliché³ about the ineptitude of ordinary citizens. Third, democracy should continue to grow and evolve. One answer is in testing out ways to make deliberative mini-publics a permanent part of the political structure, such as is being tested in places like East Belgium and Madrid. A democracy that is experimenting and evolving is—we suggest—one that is less likely to be prone to severe crisis.

We would like to encourage policymakers and governments to think hard about ways to truly listen to citizen voices—to design participatory processes that are representative, inclusive, deliberative, free from manipulation, informed, and influential. Otherwise, politicians and policymakers are left to rely on the work of special interest groups and opinion polls to generalize the public’s views. These methods are, however, almost by definition “top of the head” representations. For complicated issues that require complex background information and open minds rather than rigid views, pollsters and lobbies tell us too little. Deliberation provides a far richer account of citizen preferences, viewpoints, and visions for their future.
Our vision is of democracies that incorporate everyday people into major public decisions, especially those that present democratic structures struggle to address. We have seen how a meaningful democracy is not just possible, but eminently practical and achievable.