



Methodological and Ideological Options

Sustainable and inclusive wellbeing governance: Reinventing democracy after the crisis

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of advances in sustainability science, global progress on climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and human wellbeing remains dangerously inadequate. While these failures are often attributed to insufficient political will or contested knowledge, we argue that a more fundamental constraint lies in how collective decisions are made. Contemporary governance systems are increasingly shaped by concentrated economic and political power, undermining their capacity to act in the collective interest and to pursue long-term sustainability goals. At the same time, there is growing evidence that citizens broadly support transformative policies aimed at sustainable and inclusive wellbeing. We argue that governance design itself has become a critical leverage point for sustainability transitions. For example, deliberative democracy offers an alternative by representing shared societal values and goals through randomly selected citizens' assemblies. Such assemblies operate independently of partisan and special-interest control and have demonstrated success at several scales. Advances in communication technology now make their broad application increasingly feasible. In parallel, new decision-making methods, such as sociocracy, emphasise consent over majority rule and provide tools to reduce polarization and foster inclusive agreements within deliberative processes. Viewed historically, today's governance challenges resemble recurrent crises and may offer a critical opening to adopt more sustainable and inclusive forms of governance, grounded in deliberation, consent, and collective wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, sustainability science has generated increasingly robust evidence on the scale and urgency of global challenges, from climate change and biodiversity loss to widening social inequalities and declining human wellbeing. Yet policy responses remain fragmented, delayed, or inadequate relative to the magnitude of

the risks involved. Emissions continue to rise, biodiversity targets are routinely missed, and economic systems remain poorly aligned with sustainable human and planetary wellbeing. This persistent implementation gap suggests that the barriers to sustainability transitions are no longer primarily due to the lack of knowledge within current institutional regimes. Instead, they increasingly require serious change in our collective decision-making and governance systems (Biermann

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et al., 2012).

In many countries today, governance institutions are geared toward satisfying the interests and desires of a small subset of the population, often powerful and wealthy elites (Fuentes-Nieva and Galasso, 2014; Ganuthula and Balaraman, 2025; Winters, 2026). This is obvious in autocratic political regimes, but even in many “democratic” countries, decisions are all too often dictated by special interest groups (including the fossil fuel, finance, construction, defense, tech, and pharmaceutical sectors, and wealthy individuals) and often fail to adequately reflect broader public preferences and long-term societal interests (Gilens and Page, 2014; Greider, 2010). The elites in power are obviously very reluctant to change this situation. They deny the severity of the problems that the inequitable distribution of wealth and power cause – just as addicts will deny the problems that their habit causes.

The preferences of the people are often very different from those of the ruling elites. For example, in a 2024 survey commissioned by Earth4All and the Global Commons Alliance¹ found that over 70% of people across eighteen G20 countries support higher carbon taxes, higher progressive taxation on income and higher tax rates for large businesses, to fund major changes to our economy and lifestyles. People want political and economic reform. Two in three people across G20 countries surveyed (68%) agree that the way the economy works should prioritise the sustainable and inclusive wellbeing of people and the rest of nature, rather than focusing solely on profit, increasing wealth, and GDP growth. There is a growing recognition and scientific understanding of what does contribute to sustainable and inclusive wellbeing and how to measure it, and a growing movement to shift the goal of the economy to this broader goal (Benczur et al., 2025; Costanza et al., 2025; Costanza et al., 2014).

However, it is clear that representative democracy is, in many cases these days, not representative of the wishes of the demos (the people) as reflected in the Earth4All survey, but rather of the ploutos (the wealthy and powerful). Many governance systems that call themselves democracies are, in reality, plutocracies or oligarchies, not democracies (Winters, 2026). The Trump regime in the US is the latest and most blatant example of this trend. It is heavily shaped to protect the interests of billionaire donors as well as the President himself, corporate lobbyists, and cabinet members drawn directly from the industries they were meant to regulate. It demonstrates quite openly how concentrated wealth can capture and distort democratic institutions.

These plutocratic systems do not facilitate true participation in governance, which leads to large swaths of the population feeling unheard and unhappy while the system remains very resistant to change. Participation in decision-making is a major contributor to both individual and societal wellbeing (Seligman, 2011) and the current system is failing badly in many if not most countries. In the past, labour unions and various social movements were effective at balancing corporate and elite power, but since the early 1970's in several countries their role has greatly diminished along with growing inequality and individualism (Putnam, 2020).

For example, (Gilens and Page, 2014) tested the hypothesis that economic elites control policy decision-making in the US using a unique data set that included measures of 1779 policy issues. They concluded that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence” (Gilens and Page, 2014). pg. 564).

In fact, the US has been downgraded to a “flawed democracy” in the 2020 Economist Intelligence Unit's “Democracy Index”, along with 51 other countries. According to this index the world now has 57 authoritarian regimes, 35 hybrid regimes, 52 flawed democracies, and only 23 full democracies (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). Given the current state of affairs, the US may soon be reclassified as hybrid or even

authoritarian.

For example, the US exhibits an unusually high level of corporate concentration compared to other democracies. Since the 1930s, the asset share held by the top 1% of U.S. corporations has surged from around 70% to nearly 90%, while the top 0.1% of firms now control 88% of corporate assets. Moreover, the top 1% of firms by sales account for 80% of total corporate revenue, up from 60% in 1969 (Kwon et al., 2023). By contrast, European economies today feature significantly lower market concentration, more modest profit margins, and fewer barriers to market entry—making them more competitive and democratic in comparison (Gutiérrez and Philippon, 2018).

But even in relatively well-functioning full democracies like Scandinavia, special interests and anti-democratic actors often have undue influence over governance. The plutocrats and autocrats have a clear shared vision of the world they want and are implementing it, but this vision is increasingly in conflict with that of the general population and with the sustainable and inclusive wellbeing of humanity and the rest of nature. The proposed solutions often involve fixing the voting system to make it fairer and more representative, getting money out of politics, and reducing the influence of lobbyists. These are certainly essential steps and are the signs of a full democracy as opposed to flawed democracies like the US.

At the same time, democratic governance necessarily operates under conditions of pluralism, uncertainty, and disagreement. Deliberative democratic scholars argue that there is rarely a single unified public will, but rather evolving areas of overlap, contestation, compromise, and negotiated collective priorities. There is also the risk of ‘blind deference’ and incomplete representation (Lafont, 2019). The goal of deliberative processes is therefore not to eliminate disagreement, but to create institutional conditions that enable more informed, inclusive, and constructive engagement toward the goal of making better decisions that support the common good.

So the fundamental problems relate to how collective decisions are made and how to make better truly participatory collective decisions that reflect the broader goals of sustainable and inclusive wellbeing for the entire population and the rest of nature. We synthesise evidence from existing deliberative experiments, governance theory, and sustainability scholarship to explore how deliberative and consent-based decision-making could enhance the capacity of societies to pursue sustainable and inclusive wellbeing. We examine the strengths and limitations of these approaches, consider their potential for scaling, and situate them within broader theories of systemic change. We argue that the current governance crises, while deeply destabilising, also creates windows of opportunity for institutional renewal. Developing and testing governance models that better align collective decision-making with long-term sustainability goals is therefore an urgent task.

2. Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is based on the idea that democratic legitimacy can be strengthened through inclusive and reasoned public deliberation that is institutionally designed to reduce distortions associated with unequal economic and political power (Dryzek, 2002, 2012; Van Reybrouck, 2018). Deliberative democracy can be either direct, where all of the qualified stakeholders in a decision deliberate together, as was the case in Ancient Athenian forums – (albeit only for free men) or New England town meetings, or representative. In the representative case, how the representatives are selected is key. The process should be free from the distortions of political power and influence that are now so prevalent in flawed existing democracies as discussed above. One method for doing this is known as ‘sortition’ where the representatives are selected at random from the stakeholder or candidate population, rather than by election via voting. This has the advantage of preventing the buying of influence over candidates' positions since there is no possibility to influence the selection process. In Athenian democracy, sortition was a primary way of selecting representatives for policy

¹ <https://earth4all.life/global-survey-2024/>

decision making. Its use was regarded as an essential feature of democracy. Today, sortition is used to select prospective jurors, deliberative citizen advisory group participants, and deliberative polling participants.

Current applications of deliberative democracy take several forms. For example, James Fishkin and colleagues at the Stanford University Deliberative Democracy Lab² pioneered 'deliberative polling', which combines representative sampling by sortition with structured deliberation to assess informed public judgment. The growing use of 'citizen assemblies' is another example of deliberative democracy. For example, Belgium, Ireland, and France have all hosted successful citizen assemblies. The world's first permanent Citizens Council was established in Belgium's Ostbelgien region in 2019. The Irish assemblies³ led to successful referendums to legalize same sex marriage and abortion. The French Citizens Convention for Climate was a citizens' assembly held in 2019 and 2020 which discussed reducing France's carbon emissions by 40% from its 1990 levels (Giraudet et al., 2021) albeit not without some backlash about the short term effects of some of the recommendations.

There are also initiatives at the global scale. For example, The Global Citizen's Assembly for People and Planet, is a governance experiment launched in 2024 by the Iswe Foundation. The Assembly has four components: (1) a core assembly of globally representative citizens chosen by lottery; (2) community assemblies open to anyone; (3) a broader campaign to engage 10 million people globally by 2030; and (4) a coalition that will support the campaign and implement the Assembly's recommendations. Governance and evaluation of the Assembly will be guided by the Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN).⁴ A related initiative is the similarly named 'Global Citizens' Assembly'⁵ which aims to support and encourage citizen's assemblies globally.

This is not to say that deliberative democracy using sortition can replace all the functions of democracy in complex societies. Scholars of deliberative democracy have raised important concerns about replacing representative democracy entirely with sortition-based systems. For example, they argue that randomly selected assemblies may create accountability gaps if broader publics are asked to defer to small groups of selected citizens (Pow, 2023). Many contemporary theorists therefore advocate hybrid democratic systems that combine elected institutions with citizens' assemblies and participatory mechanisms (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Dryzek, 2002; Landemore, 2020).

But the scope for expanding the use of deliberative democracy and sortition seems vast, especially in light of the massive political corruption and cost of the current system of representation. For example, the United States spent an estimated \$18 billion on the extremely polarizing 2020 national and state elections and \$16 billion on the 2024 elections (Fig. 1). Imagine for a moment if this had been done using sortition. The President and Vice President would be selected at random from a large pool of **qualified** candidates. This pool could consist of all members of Congress and State governors, all of whom would have been selected by the same process. This would spell the end of political parties, lobbyists, political campaigns, and attempts to buy influence. It would be largely free from the distortions of unequal political power and would better represent true democratic representation. Of course, the current political parties are totally locked-in to the current system and would never agree to such a plan, even in the face of the obvious dysfunctionality of the current system to make political decisions that are for the common good.

But assume for the moment that deliberative groups are formed by some version of sortition or some other truly representative system. How do they then deliberate in a way that is productive and can lead to good

decisions? Civil discussion among equals is an essential feature of deliberative democracy. To make decisions, the usual recommendation is that the goal is consensus and failing that some form of majority voting. But some interesting work has been done on a method known as "sociocracy" that may be better than either of these and could further facilitate effective deliberation toward decisions that serve the common good.

3. Sociocracy

Sociocracy is governance by the *socius* or group or society. It has roots in the ideas of Auguste Comte and Lester F. Ward in the 19th century and Kees Boeke in the 1920s. It is also related to how decisions are made in Quaker business meetings. In its modern manifestation as a formal system of governance and decision making, its origins can be traced to Gerard Endenburg, a Dutch entrepreneur, who developed the Sociocratic Circle Organization Method (SCM). Since then, the method has been developed and used successfully by thousands of companies and communities to improve governance and decision-making. A number of websites provide practical guides⁶.

Sociocracy is based on 4 key ideas (Owen and Buck, 2020)

- **The principle of consent** governs decision-making, rather than consensus or majority rule. This is an important distinction. Majority rule disadvantages and disenfranchises the minority, while requiring absolute consensus can stall progress indefinitely. Consent, by contrast, requires that all participants can "live with" the decision. Participants ask themselves if the decision is "good enough for now and safe enough to try." If there are participants who cannot consent to a decision, then a discussion aimed at finding an acceptable adaptation to the original proposal that satisfies the objection is started. This often leads to an improved proposal that can accommodate the shared interests of the whole group. The process generates improved engagement by participants in the decision-making process and broader, more sustainable support for decisions. It also implies that decisions only need to be "safe enough to try" and that the results of the decision should be closely monitored and revisited if the intended results do not come to pass. Thus, the process is a form of "active adaptive management". Consent should not be understood as requiring unanimity of values or the disappearance of disagreement. Rather, it aims to enable workable and adaptive collective decisions and action under conditions of pluralism.
- **Overlapping networks of semi-autonomous "circles" as the fundamental structure**, rather than a strict hierarchy or flat organization. The circles are groups appropriately sized to deal with the domain of responsibility that has been allocated by the overall group. Consent, as described above, is used for decision-making in all circles as well as for selection of individuals for specific roles within the circle. Circles are overlapping with shared membership in each overlap.
- **Egalitarian selection of individuals for leadership and functional tasks**. Elections are also taken by consent. Members of a circle first nominate either themselves or other members of the circle for a role. They must present the rationale for why they or their choice would be the best person for the role. There is then a deliberative discussion about the nominations with the possibility to change nominations. At some point, the discussion leader will recommend the election of the person for whom there are the strongest arguments. If any circle members have reasoned objections, there is further discussion until consent is achieved. This may go very quickly or require several rounds. But the bottom line is that the process chooses the individual who the entire circle can at least "live with". This is quite different from the majority rule process, which often

² <https://deliberation.stanford.edu/>

³ <https://www.involve.org.uk/news-opinion/opinion/citizens-assembly-behind-irish-abortion-referendum>

⁴ <https://iswe.org/>

⁵ <https://globalassemblies.org/>

⁶ <https://patterns.sociocracy30.org/>

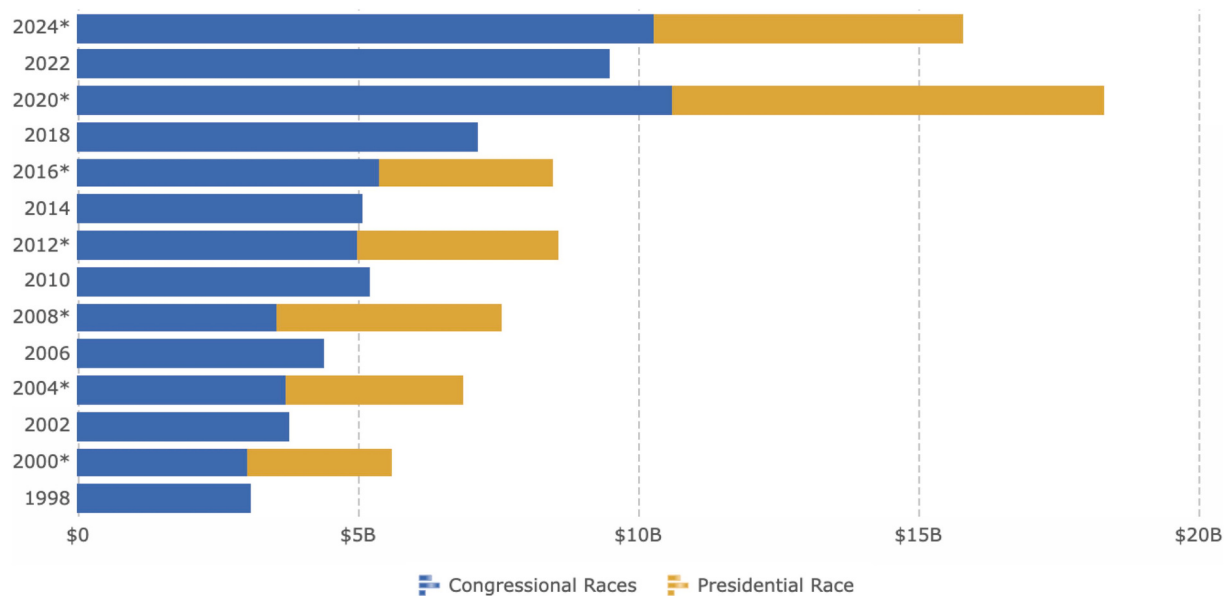


Fig. 1. Costs of state and federal elections in the United States by year (adjusted for inflation).

results in the election of individuals who are only acceptable to slightly more than half of the group.

- **Double Linking of circles to facilitate vertical and horizontal networking** and communication. Circles are overlapping and at least two individuals are included in each of the overlaps. At the highest level of the organization, there is a “top circle” that works within the policies of the circle structure rather than ruling over it. This is analogous to a board of directors for a company or a Parliament for a country. The members of the top circle can include external experts with expertise in law, government, finance, community, and the organization's mission. It would also include members from overlapping lower circles

More recently, Sociocracy 3.0 has elaborated on these ideas and developed seven foundational principles. They are reproduced here directly from the website.⁷

“The Principle of Effectiveness: Devote time only to what brings you closer toward achieving your organization's overall objectives, so that you can make the best use of your limited time, energy and resources.

The Principle of Consent: Raise, seek out and resolve objections to decisions and actions, so that you can reduce the potential for undesirable consequences and discover worthwhile ways to improve.

The Principle of Empiricism: Test all assumptions you rely on through experiments and continuous revision, so that you learn fast, make sense of things and navigate complexity as effectively as you can.

The Principle of Continuous Improvement: Regularly review the outcome of what you are doing, and then make incremental improvements to what you do and how you do it based on what you learn, so that you can adapt to changes when necessary, and maintain or improve effectiveness over time.

The Principle of Equivalence: Involve people in making and evolving decisions that affect them, so that you increase engagement and accountability, and make use of the distributed intelligence toward achieving and evolving your objectives.

The Principle of Transparency: Record all information that is valuable for the organization and make it accessible to everyone in the organization, unless there is a reason for confidentiality, so that

everyone has the information they need to understand how to do their work in a way that contributes most effectively to the whole.

The Principle of Accountability: Respond when something is needed, do what you agreed to do, and accept your share of responsibility for the course of the organization, so that what needs doing gets done, nothing is overlooked and everyone does what they can to contribute toward the effectiveness and integrity of the organization.”

Sociocratic principles and processes are a form of deliberative democracy that have been used successfully by many companies and small groups. The challenge is scaling it up to larger communities, states, nations, and the world. But there is no fundamental reason why this could not work. The main barriers are our lock-in to current systems of governance and the special interests who would lose influence and power in the new system. In addition, we need communication technologies that can overcome the time and distance limitations of large-scale deliberation.

4. Collective decision-making for sustainable and inclusive wellbeing

To summarize, the central problem in democratic governance is how to make better collective decisions toward shared goals. There are two interconnected aspects to this problem: (1) improving the process of collective decision-making as discussed above; and (2) developing consensus (or consent) on shared goals. One important thing to note here is that developing shared goals is an important (and often overlooked) first step in any collective decision-making process.

Consider the all-too-common situation where a group of people all have their own individual goals surrounding a decision that may be required of a group. Perhaps a community has to decide whether to widen a road. Some may want to widen the road because they are business owners, and they want to improve traffic flow to bring in more customers. Their goal is more and better business. Others may be residents whose goal is to keep the neighborhood quiet and safe for their children. These two groups will be diametrically opposed on the issue of whether to widen the road. In a normal majoritarian democracy this would come to a vote. The losers of the vote would be disappointed and would probably fight the decision. In current “flawed” democracies the parties with the most economic and political power would win, by manipulating the votes, the voters, the information flow, or the process. In an authoritarian system the decision has already been made, perhaps

⁷ <https://patterns.sociocracy30.org/principles.html> accessed 12/2021

with some corruption to push it along.

How would this be different if the goals discussion had come first? The business owners want more and better business while the residents want a safer, quieter community. Are there any shared goals here? At first, it might appear not, and rushing to deciding on the possibility of a bigger road cuts off discussion of shared goals and locks individuals into thinking only about how the wider road would affect their individual goals and how to better defend their 'position' in the debate. The 'set in stone' positions encourage the unproductive polarization we see so much these days.

Is there a better way? A deliberative, sociocratic process could be structured to first establish consent on the shared goals of the community. For example, there may be broad agreement that a safe community with thriving businesses was a fundamental shared goal. That might then open the door for a broader range of solutions to achieve this goal. Perhaps a road with better pedestrian access and crosswalks to improve safety and enhance customer access to businesses.

This is critical for sustainable and inclusive wellbeing. Indeed, sustainable wellbeing requires resetting our societal goals away from continuous growth in production and consumption toward a more balanced, regenerative, and sustainable approach. It also requires more collaboration and less competition. To do so, an ongoing deliberation process is indispensable in order to elaborate new collective objectives as a society.

These sorts of deliberative, participatory, goal-setting, and envisioning processes have been very successful at the community scale. Can they be scaled up to larger state, national, and global scales? It is increasingly urgent that we find a way to do this. The global discussions on such existential matters as climate change have failed for 30 years. For example, the requirement, inserted by oil-dependent economies at the inception of the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change, that decisions must be unanimous has enabled countries like Saudi Arabia and the United States to block effective climate action.⁸ Using a global citizen's assembly and sociocratic decision processes like those mentioned above would have led to a much better outcome.

5. The potential of new information technology

One of the central challenges identified in deliberative democracy research is how to scale inclusive and high-quality deliberation to larger populations while maintaining legitimacy, transparency, and meaningful participation (Shortall et al., 2021). Digital technologies and AI-assisted communication systems may help address some of these challenges, although they also introduce risks related to misinformation, manipulation, surveillance, and unequal access.

Currently available tools include systems that are best classed as 'participatory' rather than deliberative. They are headed in the right direction and show promise but will require significantly more work to make them fit for purpose. An incomplete list includes:

- *Polis* (<https://pol.is/home>) – Uses machine learning to map opinion clusters and highlight consensus points
- *Consul* (<https://developer.hashicorp.com/consul/docs/intro>) – Open-source platform for citizen proposals, debates, and participatory budgeting
- *Your Priorities* (<https://www.yrpri.org/domain/3>) – idea generation, deliberation & decision-making platform helping governments make decisions
- *WeGovNow* (<https://wegovnow.eu/>) – civic engagement platform that supports communication and collaboration between citizens, civil society and public administrations.

- *CitizenLab* – an online civic engagement platform where citizens co-create their city.

None of these tools are quite what is needed for a true deliberative democratic approach, and one must be aware of the anti-democratic uses that information technology has been and is being used for today. But they show that the potential is there to develop tools that would be fit for purpose. Scaling up deliberative democracy to state, national, and even global scale is only now becoming a real possibility and better online tools are needed to support this use.

6. Can this ever happen?

These changes in governance and collective decision-making are already happening at several scales, including the national and global scales mentioned above. It is worth elaborating here on the Belgian example mentioned earlier, which is one of the first that has been made permanent. Ostbelgien is the German-speaking Community of Belgium, where policymakers enacted an institutionalised model of deliberative democracy⁹. Established by decree in 2019, the Ostbelgien Model integrates a Permanent Citizens' Council and ad hoc Citizens' Assemblies into the regional legislative process. The Citizens' Council, comprising 24 randomly selected members serving 18-month terms, independently determines the topics for deliberation. It also designs the structure of each subsequent Citizens' Assembly, which convenes 25–50 randomly selected participants for intensive deliberation over three weekends. These assemblies generate evidence-informed recommendations, which the parliament is legally required to debate and respond to, providing a systematic follow-up mechanism that enhances political accountability. Moreover, the Citizens' Council monitors the implementation of these proposals over time. Although the final recommendations remain nonbinding within Belgium's constitutional framework, the Ostbelgien Model has nonetheless reshaped the democratic agenda by embedding citizen-driven deliberation as a permanently sanctioned institution.

Participatory sociocratic decision making has also made progress. Many progressive companies already effectively use sociocratic decision processes. In addition, employee-owned and democratically managed enterprises tend to outperform conventional businesses on productivity, innovation, and resilience (Blasi et al., 2013). And the New England town meeting is still an effective example of deliberative democracy at the small community scale (Prugh et al., 2000).

But what about the possibilities for broad application at the state, national, or even global scales? Governance changes at these scales have happened several times in the past and there are already some hopeful initiatives including the citizen's assemblies mentioned above and the Wellbeing Economy Governments initiative¹⁰. Historical examples include the founding of American democracy and the post WWII expansion of the welfare state in many countries. But is the time right for another radical shift in governance?

There are three lines of thinking that argue that it is:

- Neil Howe's work on the cycles of history with each cycle composed of four eras or 'turnings' of around 20 years (Howe, 2023). According to Howe we are now in the fourth or 'crises' turning that will culminate in the early 2030's to be followed by a new 'high' phase of reorganization and renewal and a return to an emphasis on community and equity.
- Buzz Holling's and other's work on the four phase 'adaptive cycle' in ecological and human systems at multiple scales (Gunderson et al., 2022; Holling, 1973; Holling, 2001). They argue that complex systems (like ecosystems, economies, or organizations) go through four recurring phases of growth (r), conservation (K), release (Ω), and

⁸ <https://www.clubofrome.org/blog-post/lovins-frick-copx-climate-crisis-rebuild-democracy/>

⁹ <https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1237>

¹⁰ <https://weall.org/wego>

reorganization (α). Our current society can be seen as in the release phase headed toward reorganization.

- Robert Putnam's work on cycles in American social capital (Putnam, 2020). Putnam assembles a huge amount of data about how equality and community rose in America during the first half of the 20th century to a peak in the 1960's and then declined to a trough equivalent to the 'gilded age' around now. He predicts a new progressive era 'upswing' to bring back equity and community.

Taken together, these three quite independent lines of scholarship all point in the same hopeful direction. We are currently in a crisis of increasingly autocratic governance, and the future looks bleak to many. But the resolution of the crisis can produce the renewal and reorganization necessary to build a new and better system. Howe has documented how this has happened over 6 historical cycles in the Anglo-American world. Holling and colleagues have documented how this has happened in both ecological and human systems at many interconnected spatial and temporal scales. Complex systems have a tendency to become 'brittle and lose resilience' and the current system is in that condition and primed for radical change.

Importantly, citizens' assemblies and sociocratic decision-making processes are unlikely to function effectively in isolation. They need to be embedded within broader democratic systems that include legislatures, courts, civil society organizations, scientific institutions, and mechanisms for public accountability and implementation. Questions of representation, legitimacy, transparency, and follow-through therefore remain central design challenges.

The need for a radical renewal of our democratic systems is needed as a result of the corruption of our current system. Many political systems around the world have become addicted to special interest influence and unable to make decisions that benefit the entire population. This creates openings for autocratic patrimonial leaders who can exploit the growing discontent. But the autocratic approach will only worsen the situation for the population and eventually a crisis will release demand for radical alternatives. Implementing the proposals we discussed involves such dramatic changes in the distribution of power that they may not be possible until such a crisis, like those anticipated by Howe, Holling, and Putnam, forces change. We are probably in the middle of that crisis. It is therefore critically important to have ideas for reform ready to implement after the crisis. For example, the German 'social market economy' plan was quite well developed and ready to be taken up in post WWII West-Germany. Current ideas about what a sustainable and inclusive wellbeing society would look like are plentiful and evolving (Costanza, 2022; Pickett, 2026; Raworth, 2017; Rockström et al., 2022; Stoknes et al., 2025), but their sustainable implementation will require deliberation in truly democratic processes like those discussed here.

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Robert Costanza: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Roberto De Vogli:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Sandrine Dixson-Declève:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Lorenzo Fioramonti:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Enrico Giovannini:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Ida Kubiszewski:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Hunter Lovins:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Jacqueline McGlade:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Lars Fogh Mortensen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Kate E. Pickett:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Kristín Vala Ragnarsdóttir:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Stewart Wallis:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Richard Wilkinson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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