THE ARGUMENT IN TWO PAGES

Democracy Without a Political Class

The Architecture of a Citizen Legislature

D. Protopopescu | September 2026 | rethinking-representation.org

When people lose confidence in politicians, the diagnosis is often that democracy is in trouble. But this treats one way of organising democracy as if it were democracy itself. Democracy concerns who ultimately controls public decisions, and on what terms of political equality. Elections are one way to choose representatives; political parties are one way to organise competition; making politics a career is one way to reach and retain authority. These choices can be examined separately.

> *Do not optimise the occupants. Change the selection function.*

Consider Parliament as the output of a process. To become a legislator, a citizen may have to decide to stand, be recruited or selected by a party, find time and resources to campaign, perform publicly, win an election, and then navigate party hierarchies. Each step rewards some capacities and excludes some people. Campaigning and coalition-building can be useful skills. Yet the cumulative process was never designed to produce a body that resembles the public or is especially suited to considered legislative judgment.

This is an institutional argument, not a judgment about the character or intelligence of elected politicians. Many are capable and conscientious. The question is whether success in a competition to acquire political power is the right criterion for choosing the people who will deliberate and legislate on everyone else's behalf.

> *The system is a selection machine, and it is not selecting for representation.*

Selection is only half of the problem. Once elected, legislators who hope to stay in office must also think about re-election, party approval, promotion, fundraising and public image. Those demands can help coordinate and hold them accountable, but they can also pull attention away from a decision's merits. Better ethics rules may reduce some harms; they do not remove the career structure that produces these incentives.

The alternative is to select citizens by civic lottery for legislative service, much as jurors are selected for a jury. Imagine a chamber composed wholly or partly of people drawn from the eligible population. They would serve one fixed, non-renewable term, receive a full salary and practical support, hear competing evidence, deliberate and vote. They could not campaign for a seat or seek another term. After service they would return to their previous lives.

> *Desire for power would cease to be the admission ticket to power.*

Selection would need to be transparent and designed so ordinary people can actually serve. If participation were confined to volunteers, the willing and well-resourced would again be overrepresented. Employment protection, replacement income for the self-employed, and childcare, eldercare and disability support are therefore part of

the constitutional design. Staggered terms could preserve experience while preventing legislative office from becoming a career.

Who would know enough to decide?

No legislator can personally master taxation, public health, energy, defence, agriculture and every other subject of law. Elected members already rely on research staff, civil servants, hearings and outside specialists. The relevant question is how to arrange the flow of knowledge so that legislators can interrogate it and make decisions without surrendering authority to those who supply it.

> *Expertise and decision authority are separable institutional functions.*

A citizen legislature would need professional, independent support: legal drafters, research staff, budget analysis and the ability to commission further evidence. On disputed questions, members should hear experts argue against each other, as witnesses do in a trial, examine their assumptions and interests, and question them directly. Experts would inform decisions; citizens would retain responsibility for making them.

Where would power go?

Some power would shift towards whoever controls information and the agenda, which is why the design divides legislative work between separate bodies. Removing career politicians would not remove the possibility of capture: temporary legislators might depend too heavily on permanent staff, an executive controlling information, lobbyists, or whoever decides what reaches the agenda. People chosen by lot can also make bad decisions, form factions or neglect minority interests. Random selection changes the risks; it does not solve politics by itself.

Setting the agenda, supplying evidence, drafting laws, deciding, reviewing decisions and overseeing staff are different tasks. They need not all be controlled by the same people or institution. Separate citizen bodies could, for example, put issues on the agenda and review bills; independent staff could provide competing evidence; the legislative chamber could deliberate and decide. Public reasons, independent audits and disclosure rules would provide accountability during and after service. The precise division of responsibilities is a question for constitutional design and testing, not a settled blueprint.

What would count as a serious test?

The proposal does not require replacing an elected Parliament overnight. A selected second chamber, legislative committees with defined powers, or citizen panels able to amend or delay bills could test parts of the design. The crucial step is to study bodies with actual authority as well as advisory assemblies. We could then compare recruitment, learning, legislative quality, lobbying, legitimacy and accountability under different mechanisms.

The claim is deliberately narrower than "ordinary people know better." A representative legislature does not have to be selected through a career competition for political power. If we want the governed to be present among those who govern, and to make judgment less dependent on campaigning and career advancement, civic selection deserves to be designed and tested as a constitutional alternative.

We have mistaken one implementation of democracy for democracy itself.

If representative institutions were being designed from first principles today, would competition for political power be the only way we would consider selecting the people who exercise it?

The full paper, with the evidence, related work and references, will be linked at rethinking-representation.org