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Democracy in 2030: a future close to present

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Think Piece

My vision of democracy in 2030 takes as its starting point the different levels of innovation demonstrated by today's parliaments. Such differences will certainly endure into 2030. In the future, there will be a combination of very modern parliaments, those that continue in their old-fashioned ways, and several others that follow a middle path. Here, I will focus on the first type: the ideal, upgraded, twenty-first century parliament.

Imagining the democracy of 2030 is not such a challenging task. The year 2030 is not a very distant future, particularly in the context of centuries-old institutions such as parliaments, where change does not happen quickly. Violent revolutions aside, modernization in public institutions usually takes place incrementally as a result of small-scale, innovative experiments and opportunities in specific contexts. Such incremental changes have been seen since the nineties, as governments and parliaments have become more transparent by publishing their activities on the Internet.

Indications of what democracy will look like in 2030 already abound, for instance through some recent open parliament innovations. The relationship between citizens and parliaments is changing. The parliaments of 2030 will be (much) more transparent, participatory and intelligent.

In terms of transparency, citizens will be empowered by an in-depth understanding of their parliaments, as lawmakers' actions will be publicly tracked and mapped in great detail. That transparency will be made possible by (1) open parliaments that publish legislative data in a variety of formats; and (2) civil society organizations that complement this data by cross-referencing it with other public databases.

With their improved understanding of parliament, citizens will also have several opportunities to participate in lawmaking. They will be able to use either institutional tools that parliaments provide or mechanisms offered by civil society organizations and social media platforms. Citizens will therefore be empowered to advocate for the issues in which they have an interest within much larger-scale digital arenas than those available today.

The parliaments of the future will also be more intelligent. They will create "thermometers" of citizens' feelings about policies, and use more accurate methods and technologies to measure the potential impacts of their decisions. In short, the virtual public arena will be an intrinsic part of the physical arena of future parliaments. Online and offline space will be inseparable.

Understandable parliament

One of the steps towards increasing transparency is the sharing of legislative open data by parliaments. It is already beginning in certain

places, but will be consolidated in most countries by 2030. Establishing publicly available datasets about every detail of the law-making process and parliamentary behaviour will allow civil society organizations, academia and companies to use that data freely, cross-reference it with other public data and link it to other sources of knowledge at multiple levels.

In addition to the institutional portals that parliaments maintain, citizens will have access to accurate legislative information provided by several non-institutional platforms. It will be presented from a variety of perspectives in accessible, user-friendly, visually attractive and fun graphic forms. Understanding and tracking legislative issues will be much easier than it is today: it will be a commodity.¹ Smart parliaments will accept that they no longer have a monopoly over legislative information and will function as hubs in this multi-stakeholder process. If they do not, other organizations and networks will perform this function in their place, and parliaments will lose their importance as information providers.

Such a process will also help put an end to manipulative parliamentary techniques. Those include the excessive use of rhetoric to obscure facts and actions, which is still very common today. The gap between what parliamentarians say and what they actually do will be more visible and more easily detected. Consequently, evaluations of parliamentary behaviour will be based on effective monitoring of actions rather than on charismatic but empty speeches.

Citizen-lawmaker

Progress towards increased citizen participation in law-making around the world has been uneven and patchy at best. Some parliaments have developed institutional participatory portals to engage their citizens in the law-making process. Others have focused on stimulating their parliamentarians to discuss public policies through social media channels or the interactive portals of civil society.² Both approaches lead to more open attitudes among parliamentarians as they receive citizens' suggestions – regardless of the channel – and incorporate elements of them into the drafting process. In 2030, this open, participatory law-making process will be the rule, and not the exception as it is today.

In 2030, parliaments rich in ICT resources will be capable of building, maintaining and evolving their own institutional portals. However, many parliaments will use social media platforms and participatory portals run by civil society as the main channels for connecting citizens and parliamentarians. Consequently, parliaments, civil society organizations and companies will develop technologies and techniques for aggregating and filtering policy discussions across those diverse channels. The most

¹ Several parliaments provide open data on their websites. The Chilean National Congress and the State of New York's Senate House are two examples of parliaments providing among the most substantial information.

² For example, in Brazil there are (a) institutional participatory portals, such as the Senate's *e-Cidadania* portal and the Chamber's *e-Democracia* platform; (b) civil society portals, such as *VotenaWeb*; and (c) millions of Brazilians discussing policies on Facebook and Twitter.

effective mechanism will likely be one that finds a way to synchronize the various forms and virtual arenas of participation in law-making. This will give parliamentarians access to summarized and comprehensible maps of how the overall population – or a great part of it – feels about specific policies.

Citizens will be certified and registered when they log in to participatory portals, and parliaments will be allowed access to certain information from citizens' profiles. In this way, parliamentarians will also have access to accurate data on citizens' opinions on past policy issues. For example, parliaments will know whether female citizens from the north of the country think similarly to those in the south; or what teachers think about a new education policy compared to the views of the parents of elementary school children.

Social advocacy

In 2030, civil society will be more engaged, not only in discussing policies, but also in lobbying in the virtual world. Most legislative deliberations will begin online, with parliamentarians participating in the process. There is in fact a chance that the parliaments of the future will become mere validators or executors of decisions taken on the Internet.

Thematic groups and networks in civil society will be very influential. They will have the significant power of mobilizing and leading millions of citizens towards certain points of view. In such a context, the physical space of parliaments will become less relevant than it is today. Powerful interest groups that employ traditional lobbying methods to advocate their causes will adapt to that system. However, such groups, which currently take advantage of their special, non-transparent access to lawmakers, will slowly lose their power of influence. That is because virtual lobbying presents a more transparent alternative to their traditional, face-to-face, closed-door, meeting-based lobbying.

New civil society leaders will emerge as they take advantage of Internet shortcuts to gain influence. As a result, some causes of minority groups may be adopted and carried forward by well-known, credible, influential leaders. That may give those causes increasing relevance in the legislative agenda. In 2030, political power will be in the hands of those who are credible in online spaces, regardless of whether they are politicians or citizens.

At the same time, certain groups will also use virtual lobbying strategies to block causes that they do not want on the legislative agenda. They will continue to use the strategy – which is common today – of creating confusion and misunderstanding in virtual spaces. However, 2030 will see improved systems for validating and filtering messages. Data journalists and academics will work to discredit and consequently reduce the impact of inaccurate and false messages on the Internet. Credibility will be critical in 2030.

Legislative intelligence

The technology and methodological instruments available in 2030 will make it possible to predict the social, economic, political and environmental impact of policies as they are deliberated in parliament. Several countries and regions have already adopted such methods, including Portugal, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union. In 2030, these methods will be more elaborate and accurate, and they will incorporate a new tool: crowdsourcing.

In this sense, future technologies would allow data use to project the impact of, for example, a new city transit rule. In addition, smart parliaments would make use of collective intelligence systems to gather experience-based opinions across the spectrum of professionals, specialists and citizens potentially affected by the new rule.³ In this example, city traffic officers, engineers, environmentalists and citizens would be invited to give feedback to parliament on the potential negative and positive effects of the proposed policy.

Consequently, parliaments will have accurate projections at their disposal for each possible alternative of a draft policy. This information will be highly relevant to the related political deliberation. However, there is a significant risk that this intelligence could be used to support causes that are not in the public interest. If not made public, such intelligence has the potential to reinforce the information divide that has privileged certain elite groups for centuries.

On the other hand, parliaments can develop this kind of intelligence by nurturing a collaborative relationship with citizens. In this way, parliaments can increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of their policy decisions, while also generating natural publicity that will facilitate the subsequent law enforcement process. For parliaments functioning under a presidential system, this kind of intelligence will be critical to maintaining their power in relation to the executive branch and will continue to be essential for checks and balances.

Another essential element in this process is an improved connection between the information systems of parliaments and justice systems. Bad laws have hazardous effects on society, such as legal uncertainty for citizens, excessive trials in court, and many other negative material and psychological impacts.

In 2030, smart parliaments will reduce the mistakes caused by bad laws. With improved links to the justice system, parliaments will be able to quickly correct bugs in problematic laws as soon as manifestations of those bugs reach the courts. In 2030, parliaments will be under greater pressure to change bad laws quickly, and so avoid the long-term difficulties they can create.

³ Martyn Dorey and Stephen Ozanne describe such an experiment, conducted in Saint Peter Port, which simulated the potential effects of a new transit norm before being approved and enacted. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nT7EuN5GX4>

Finally, in 2030, many parliaments will not follow the processes described here, or will implement only some of these innovations. Such parliaments may gradually lose importance in their democratic systems. Some may become disposable bureaucratic bodies. In such cases, all public decisions will be made and legitimated in other arenas, not necessarily within state agencies. But exploring this “dark side” of democracy in 2030 is a matter for another article.

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