

Pope, Maurice: *The Keys to Democracy. Sortition as a New Model for Citizen Power*. Exeter: Imprint Academic 2023. ISBN: 9781788360975; 230 S.

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For over a century, the liberal democracies of the West have been governed by legislative and executive bodies composed along the results of elections by universal suffrage. When the 19th century with its restricted suffrage is included, this type of government has been in place for over two centuries. For most citizens of democracies today, political citizenship means voting, as a matter of course. Yet, among these same citizens, discontent with this system is increasingly becoming manifest. Nominally living in a democracy, citizens sense that actual power is not in their hands, but in the hands of the political parties channelling the elections. Some political parties are hardly more than the power vehicle of their elite leadership. After voting for their representatives, citizens are not involved anymore with what their government is going to be and to do. No wonder that many citizens feel alienated from the very democracy that is supposed to be the embodiment of their sovereignty.

Among the policies currently advocated to reinforce liberal democracy, one stands out for its essentially democratic program: replacing or enhancing representative government by bodies composed of allotted citizens. In principle, such a system would guarantee the deliberation necessary for effective legislation, including protection of minority views, and provide a true representation of the citizen body without the interference of political parties. Interest in this policy has been rapidly growing across the western world, supported by academic research, political projects, an international movement, and a body of publications increasing almost by the day.

The Keys to Democracy. Sortition as a New Model for Citizen Power was written twenty years before this interest in sortition took off. Maurice Pope (1926–2019) was a classicist, an expert in the ancient Cretan script called Linear A and author of a captivating study of

ancient scripts „The Story of Decipherment“ (1975). After holding a professorship in the university of Cape Town for two decades, he left South Africa in 1969 in protest against apartheid, and next settled in Oxford. As a classicist, he was familiar with the direct democracy of classical Athens, with its wide application of drawing lots. What being on an allotted board meant in practice, he encountered when in the UK he served on a jury. The experience gave him deep faith in the good sense of the average citizen and in the capacity of lay people for constructive and effective deliberation. With this wisdom in mind, he realized that the modern elective, representative system was a far cry from what democracy could and was meant to be. His continuous thought on the matter resulted in a book typescript that was first forgotten by one publisher, next refused by another: in the 1980s and 1990s, no one was interested in sortition. Recovered by Pope’s family after his death, the book is now published by Imprint Academic, in its series on Sortition and Public Policy.

The message of the book is developed over twelve chapters. Chapter 1 and 2 („Defining Democracy“; „Elected Representation“) provide the argument for the necessity of a change in present-day liberal democracy. On a brief discussion of what democracy as the people’s sovereignty was meant to be, Pope points out why government by elected representation does not live up to that purpose. The elective system and its discontents that he considers here is by and large that of the UK and USA, where two dominant political parties and constituencies with a first-past-the-post outcome exacerbate the oligarchic tendency of the system. But the principal shortcomings also feature in democracies with proportional representation, where citizens’ attitude towards politics is likewise characterized by deficient knowledge, apathy, and alienation.

Ch. 3 and 4 („Broadening Participation“; „The Discovery of Opinion Polls“) present the movements towards more active democracy from the 1960s on. The gradual emancipation of subaltern groups in western societies brought concomitant claims to more influence on policy making by citizens more broadly.

Opinion polls are increasingly used to sound out what the citizenry is doing, thinking, and wanting. Pope examines whether systematic use of such polls, and its stronger variety, the referendum, could be a means of giving the citizens more direct influence on government. He rightly concludes that it cannot work as a democratic device, because such large-scale polling cannot accommodate the effects of a real exchange of arguments and viewpoints.

Chapter 5 to 8 examine the possibilities for allotted bodies as the main institutions of democratic governance. Chapter 5 („The Legitimacy of Juries“) traces the change in the nature of the jury, from the late-medieval group of qualified persons selected for their knowledge of the case, to a group of disinterested citizens randomly selected to represent the people’s sense of justice. Chapter 6 („The Lost Legacy of Venice“) and 7 („How Athens Excelled“) present two historical city-states famous for applying political sortition: early-modern Venice and classical Athens. In chapter 8 („In Defense of Randomness“) Pope discusses the appreciation of randomness by some philosophers and scientists to provide it with legitimacy in politics.

In the final four chapters, Pope develops his vision of why all citizens, precisely because they are lay persons in politics, should be actively involved in policy making (chapter 9 „Why all Citizens deserve their Turn“) and what the size and function of future allotted citizen assemblies should be (chapter 10 „Assembly Required“). In chapter 11 („A Democratic Utopia“) he pictures a fantasy state run by allotted bodies and how they would operate, returning in chapter 12 („Power from the People“) to more practical considerations of how in the existing situation the necessary political change towards inclusive, active citizenship using sortition could be brought about.

The quality of the argument is in my view quite uneven. Some of the political analyses and in particular the historical sections suffer from oversimplification, generalisation, and special pleading. For instance: „The political ideals and most of the political practices of Western civilisation go back through Venice and ancient Rome to classical Greece.“ (p. 115). No, they don’t, this is simply not

true, nor is Pope’s account of how sortition got „lost“ in the course of history. On p. 123, Pope contends: „It would be possible [...] to define history itself as the story of how experts have been proved wrong. For otherwise [...] it would not be history at all, but current practice. [...] examples in] the history of science. Being history, it is possible to tell which side was wrong.“ This view of history is simply bizarre. If Pope resorted to such sweeping statements to help easy reading, I don’t think they are the proper means to that end.

But, making up for such drawbacks, Pope offers excellent observations on deliberation as a crucial ingredient of democracy and on the potential of sortition to prevent oligarchisation (the „law of Michels“), meritocracy and other problematic forms of hierarchy. Sortition enables implementing the equality of citizens and bringing their engagement in policy making about. Importantly, Pope points out that sortition, whenever it is employed, must be rigorous and compulsory to be effective, and allotted bodies must be selected from the whole population (p. 167; complemented by the outstanding comment by Potter in the appendix). He underlines that allotted panels of citizens must have moral authority and real responsibility (to which should be added a transparent system of accountability). Written with an open, engaging style, *The Keys to Democracy* is set to win a wider audience for its important and pressing message.

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