

# Politics Minus Politicians

Wed, 7/28 3:47PM 46:54

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, question, system, democracy, assembly, citizens, problem, randomly selected, country, tocqueville, elections, jury, ordinary citizens, france, democratic, conversation, french, congress, parliament, optimism

## SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Jeff Goldberg, support message, Hélène Landemore, audience member

S

### support message 00:00

Support for this podcast comes from Mount Sinai. Just ranked the number four smart hospital in the world by Newsweek's World's Best Smart Hospitals 2021. recognized for their use of artificial intelligence, augmented reality and robotics, Mount Sinai is finding a way to push medicine forward to create safer and better outcomes for their patients. More information at mountsinai.org.

T

### Tricia Johnson 00:29

It's Aspen Ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. Yale political science professor Hélène Landemore has a radical idea: Allow regular people, not politicians to govern. She's written about the concept in her book open democracy. The idea stems in part from the American judicial system. Landemore says the notion of being judged by your peers, not an aristocratic superior is at the heart of the democratic ideal.

H

### Hélène Landemore 00:59

We should respect the common sense of ordinary citizens. If they are capable of making momentous decisions like that, you know, in judicial matters, why not on on political matters.

T

Tricia Johnson 01:10

Today, she describes a new model of democracy, one that puts governance back in the hands of the people. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Aspen Ideas Festival. Contemporary representative democracies around the globe are in bad shape says political theorist Hélène Landemore. People don't feel like their governments represent them, modern parliament's are gated and guarded, and it seems as if only certain people with the right suit, accent, wealth, and connections are welcome. What's at the heart of the problem?: elections, says Landemore. In a conversation with Jeffrey Goldberg, she describes a new paradigm of democracy where a randomly selected assembly of citizens could define laws and policies. Goldberg is editor in chief of The Atlantic. They spoke on June 29. Here's Goldberg.

J

Jeff Goldberg 02:08

So why don't you start by telling us what the problem is that you're trying to fix.

H

Hélène Landemore 02:14

So the problem I'm trying to solve is the crisis of representation we find ourselves in and democracy is in bad shape all around the world, people don't feel that the government stands for them, act for them, represent them in any meaningful sense. And so my question is, why is that? And what can we do about it, and one of the diagnostic which probably will come as a surprise to you perhaps, is that elections are to blame for a much of the problem, because the way we select our representatives ends up putting in power a group of highly unrepresentative people from very homogeneous socio economic classes that, you know, not only may not always work for, for the vast majority of people, but may actually not even see the problem because they have cognitive blind spots. They are able to visualize, understand, conceptualize, identify the problems that ordinary people experience, and therefore, they can bring the right solutions to them. So, the solution is then to rethink democracy and the way we select our representatives.

J

Jeff Goldberg 03:21

You talk about, and stipulating that I'm not a defender of Congress as a high functioning, highly intelligent body right now, but you talk about the people who come to it, let's talk about just the American context. You talk about the people who come to Congress who we vote for to be our representatives, as wholly unlike us. But it is true, it is whiter than average, there are more lawyers than average, and so on. But but these are not aliens,

these are people from their communities. Is it something that happens in Washington where they change? Or is the whole system broken? Right from the selection process?

H

Hélène Landemore 03:58

I've come to think the process is broken from the beginning, that elections are based on a distinction principle. And I'm not the one who said it first. It's from Aristotle to Montesquieu, so more contemporary theories, they all say that elections are in fact an oligarchic selection principle. So yes, they're like us in some ways, I mean, more like us than actually ordinary citizens, I guess. But they also, you know, are overly educated, urban, you know, wealthy, white male. After a point the sort of this creates also phenomenon of groupthink as well, where they get disconnected from the real problems of, you know, vast majorities of people. And that's, that's a problem. Not saying that this is a bad system, especially compared to more authoritarian regimes, but it has a lot of flaws. And I think we are now in the midst of realizing what those are.

J

Jeff Goldberg 04:53

I don't want to overly simplify or have you overly simplify some complicated ideas that you write about, but talk about the insight that you derive from looking at the jury system in America.

H

Hélène Landemore 05:08

The jury system is an old democratic institution where you get a chance to exercise your judgment about, you know, something very important, which is making a verdict about the life or the prospects of another person. It's also right that Americans fought for, and that they got to be inscribed in the Bill of Rights. That I think was at the heart of the Democratic idea, the right to be judged by your peers, not by an aristocratic, superior or a notable. So I think it's quite essential to the democratic ethos. And Tocqueville who visited America in 1835. That's one of the first things he noticed how important the jury was to American institutions and to American civil life, that it educated people created a sense of community, a responsibility, you know, and it fed the system and reinforced the democracy.

J

Jeff Goldberg 06:06

So what is the insight that you took from that, that you are applying to a broader question?

H

Hélène Landemore 06:13

Well, one insight is that we have a right to say about certain collective decision making, you know, decision decisions. And the other is that we should respect the common sense of ordinary citizens, if they are capable of making momentous decisions like that, you know, in judicial matters, why not on political matters, it's not just the American jury, you can go back to the ancient Greek practice of staffing political office by lot. In fact, they didn't know elections, elections were an oligarchic mechanism in their eyes, they only used it to stuff. Office offices, like administrative positions, or to generals. But when it came to lawmakers, they were chosen by a lot.

J

Jeff Goldberg 06:58

So that's what you want. Talk about the ideal system. And by the way, this is I want to get to this, but your ideal system would totally freak out James Madison, absolutely. And anybody who had any hand in writing the Federalist Papers, but but but describe describe the system that you would like to see, and where Congress fits into this, but talk about the system.

H

Hélène Landemore 07:20

Okay, so I'll give you the more outlandish vision, I think it can be sort of, you know, presented in more hybrid versions, but the purest version of it would be a parliament made up of about 500 randomly selected citizens, who will be rotated every two or three years, and whose goal would be to set the agenda for the larger polity and to potentially make laws or delegate the lawmaking function to another randomly selected assembly. Right. And all of that would be connected to the larger fabric through moments of mass referenda and the possibility for every citizen in the country to, you know, start a process called an initiative whereby you should gather enough signatures around an issue, you can put it to the agenda of the Legislative Assembly, or even put it straight to a referendum.

J

Jeff Goldberg 08:13

Right. And like I said, one of the reasons this is an idea, at least in political theory, circles in New Haven is taking hold. Is that is that our Congress, our system right now looks so dysfunctional, but how do you count for the fact that in this age of disinformation and age, when social media is doing so much lightening fast distortion of people's understanding of reality? How can you have more faith in 500 randomly selected citizens to come gather and I assume not Washington, that would probably be

the point and and decide the overall agenda of the United States? We know very well now that some large percentage of American people believe that there are secret pedophile tunnels under the capital of the United States. So so let's assume that only 20% of the people chosen randomly by lottery believe that how is that better than Congress?

H

Hélène Landemore 09:14

Right, no, very good point.

J

Jeff Goldberg 09:17

There are no pedophile tunnels under the Capitol, by the way, I just want to stipulate.

H

Hélène Landemore 09:22

So I based my trust in ordinary citizens first on on, you know, empirical evidence, we have a lot of evidence about the way juries function and function. Well. We have evidence from ancient Greece that a non electoral democracy functioned relatively well, for a certain period of time.

J

Jeff Goldberg 09:41

They didn't have Twitter in Greece.

H

Hélène Landemore 09:42

That is true, but in some ways, they had to overcome more, you know, difficulties to communicate to I mean, you're on balance, I'm not sure. And I also rely on theoretical evidence, more than perhaps the founders had at their disposal actually to understand the logic of collectivity. liberation in what I call collective wisdom. And that theoretical, you know, set of arguments says that in order to have a smart assembly, you're better off with a diverse group of ordinary people, or at least, you know, not not necessarily extremely smart people, then with a group of PhDs basically. And that's very counterintuitive, because it means that you need to maximize the diversity of your group, rather than, you know, the number of diplomas that each member has. And so if you put all that together, it starts to look like a good case for a lot of credit system over an electric system, which is a lot more homogeneous and a lot more biased. Right, right. So now you're asking the question about information, disinformation, filter bubbles and all that? Well, that's, that's definitely a problem. It's a problem for an elected system and a lot of aquatic system. I just think that in a diverse body, you're more likely to be bias than in a

highly polarized or to homogeneous body. So the solution is more deliberation. So that you kind of filter out the bad arguments, the bad information and get closer to the truth. That said, even in my system, you need to have reliable information and reliable media and, and, and good sources of information. But that's why I also think that the causal arrow goes the other way as well. It's not just that you need as a precondition good media to have good political decision making, you first need a real democracy to then you know, control engineering, the right informational environments.

J

Jeff Goldberg 11:34

What role do experts play in this? And I asked, I asked for a very specific reason, because you remind me only in one way of William F. Buckley, which is that he famously said that he'd rather be ruled by the first 50 people in the Cambridge phonebook, then by the faculty of Harvard University. But what you're arguing against interest here is a tenured member of the Yale faculty. But what are the role of experts play in this future democratic ideal state?

H

Hélène Landemore 12:05

So I have to say, I'm on the senate of my university, and I can confirm that Buckley is right.

J

Jeff Goldberg 12:14

Noting that she has tenure.

H

Hélène Landemore 12:16

Yes, so I can only say that now. So and experts are essential to any regime, I'm not a populist in the sense of like, we should, you know, cut off the heads of every normal person. No, of course not. You need a bureaucracy, you need an expert to be, as you always say, on top and not on top, meaning at the service and disposal of citizens, not in a position of controlling and telling them what to do. And it's perfectly doable. You know, in the experience, the experiments of citizens assembly that I talked about in the book, including the French recent case of a citizens convention for climate, you had 150, randomly selected citizens and about as many experts present to help them educate themselves about climate change, about ways to curb greenhouse gas emissions. And over the course of nine months, they educated themselves with the help of those experts about all the solution that exists. And they came up with 149 proposals of great quality. In fact, they were quite legislative proposals. So I think this can be done and you don't have

to sacrifice knowledge and expertise.

J

Jeff Goldberg 13:26

I just want to push a little bit more on your optimism, right. I mean, stipulating that we all live in a world that James Madison created, right, and his mentor, George Washington, more than Jefferson's world, Madison was a pessimist about human nature. Jefferson was more of an optimist. I'm, and Madison believed, among other things, that that it would be tragic situation. Well, factions would be tragic, obviously, factions, that 18th century term for political parties in some way, that that would be tragic, and that it would be tragic if the President of the United States was in direct communication with the American people. He actually was worried that the rise of daily newspapers was going to create too frenetic pace of information and distortion for the American people to handle. Right. So so so he designed a system that we live in today. It's worked fairly well. Where does your optimism come from, about human nature and the ability of large groups of very disparate kind of Americans coming together and making rational decisions about the common interest?

H

Hélène Landemore 14:42

Okay, so there's a question about Madison pessimism. I mean, in some on some level he is based on his experience with with, you know, human nature and his knowledge of history, but the truth is that he didn't have that much empirical evidence. For the system he designed, it was a lot of theory, a lot of history, but very little social scientific evidence at the time. So we are in a better position today, I think, in some respects to come up with a better system. And then it's true. You have you call it my optimism. I think it's also a fundamental democratic trust in my fellow citizens, which I don't think medicine is all he had. And so when we trust in a jury, when we trust in the principle of one person, one vote, is it a form of optimism or is just a recognition of a fundamental principle of equality? I think it's different to cast it as optimism as opposed to a democratic principle because if you say optimism, then you sound naive, you sound like, you know, you're taking a risk, and what about, you know, minority oppression and all the things and so let's counter majoritarian wills and will and, and, and, you know, increase the anti democratic aspects of our system, because because liberalism, because we need to be really careful. And but is it really realism? Or is it demo phobia? I think, meaning fear of the people and I think Madison had had a form of GMO phobia, he feared the masses.

J

Jeff Goldberg 16:16

But he was pretty frank about that.

H

Hélène Landemore 16:17

Oh, yeah. 63, Article 63, he says, in the in the Federalist Papers, you know, it's a good thing that the American system is designed to basically, you know, prevent any form of mass participation.

J

Jeff Goldberg 16:34

I want you to step back a little bit more and go a little deeper in the diagnosis or, or the history of how we got how we got to a place that is so bad, that you think that this radical, my word is outlandish, not not yours. But outlandish idea is more plausible, or more effective than the system that we have. What are the what are the triggering events for you, in the course of you could expand this to France, if you want as well, but but in the last 2030 4050 years of American history, that have led to a representative democracy that you believe is neither representative nor democratic.

H

Hélène Landemore 17:18

I think interestingly, I would trace it to my my, my arrival in the US 2001, the fall of the Twin Towers, I felt like this was a huge crisis for democracy already. So a sense that, you know, why do they hate us? Why is the system not loved anymore? Or something like that, then 2008 financial crisis? Why is this not working? And also the way our, you know, elected elites, so solve the problem, I mean, it you can debate what was feasible or not at the time, but it's not clearly worked out in favor of, you know, everyone, then 2016, the populist backlash against years of neoliberalism, in the UK, with Brexit in in the US, with Trump, perhaps a little less than France at the time. And now 2021, an enormous pandemic, a global pandemic, which very few regions have been able to actually, you know, prepare for. And so I think we're at the moment where our self doubt is enormous. And we're finally willing to fess up face up to the fact that our system is flawed, fundamentally flawed. And, yes, these ideas are outlandish. I knew that. And but I think they are less so than even 10 years ago, 10 years ago, wouldn't have been talking about this at all.

J

Jeff Goldberg 18:34

You mentioned your arrival in America 20 years ago, you have a very, very interesting story of being raised in a country with a very centralized, powerful federal system. Talk a little bit about about what the French state, I'm boiling this down to make it simpler, but what the French state wanted from you, and how your your arrival in America and the work you're doing now is kind of a rejection of what the French state wanted for you.

H

Hélène Landemore 19:08

And so I guess, I mean, sure product of this French republican system where, you know, you get a free education and you're, you know, my parents were teachers. And so I sort of was plucked from, you know, a pool of good students to be in this elite school called the economic superior.

J

Jeff Goldberg 19:32

And you're not Paris.

H

Hélène Landemore 19:34

No, I'm from Normandy, like Tocqueville. And I felt like I was drinking the Kool Aid a bit for a while I was reading Plato and I was, you know, in agreement? Yes, she does a first rule. I was a philosopher, so why not, you know, and, and through that in the schools, they tell you, you're the leader of the nation, you're going to be in positions of power, and so you have a responsibility and that's You know, it's flattering.

J

Jeff Goldberg 20:01

And unlike in America, they don't feel bad about saying that, frankly, right? Oh, ideal deduction, bad, bad thing either. Oh, really? Oh, no, no, there's at Harvard, there's like a little bit of guilt around the fact that they're the ruling elite.

H

Hélène Landemore 20:15

Really, I also went to Harvard, I didn't notice that it's a little bit more at Harvard. So anyway. But But it's true, they tell you, you have a responsibility, but you also, you know, inculcated with a sense of like, privilege and that you were expected to be in positions of power. And then I came to America and, and all of that crumbled. For me, I, I remember arriving in Boston and taking the taxi. And this conversation with the taxi driver was in 2001. So prior to the economic crisis, and even just prior to the Twin Towers, and, and this guy was just really proud and talking to me completely unimpressed by my credentials, and it was just really normal conversation, you know, on a completely level playing field, that's how it felt to me, we had an experience in France, because the, the relationship between different, you know, groups are a lot more fraught. It's probably even more true in Great Britain, for example, but the kind of accents you have the kind of position you hold, whether you're a cleaning lady or a professor, or it just materializes in the interactions. And I felt like in the US, it wasn't like that at all, that you could be a billionaire

or cleaning lady and engaging in a conversation on an on an equal level. And I think that's what's so fascinating about this country, and would give me hope, in a way and that's also what was so inspiring to Tucker Ville, it's this fundamental equality of conditions that he that game was the foundation of the country, I mean, the, you know, the sort of like, moment of equality at the beginning, I mean, not for everyone, and certainly the, you know, as you consider the natives than the black population, of course, not everyone was equal, but there was a moment of social equality at the beginning and, and it still transpires in everyday interaction to this day, I think, despite massive economic inequalities, despite, you know, power imbalances...

J

Jeff Goldberg 22:16

Right. Talk about this a little bit. We're gonna go to questions in a couple of minutes, by the way, both for the live audience and for people who are watching on the web. But we'll talk a little bit more, let's stay on the Tocqueville theme. Since if you play your cards, right, you're the next Tocqueville. 200 years ago, he noticed certain small d democratic qualities of the way Americans interact with each other. You've been alluding to this a little bit. Do you think that that these qualities that I think you're resting a lot of hope in the perpetuation of these qualities? Do you think that these are not under almost kind of existential pressure right now?

H

Hélène Landemore 23:07

I think they are.

J

Jeff Goldberg 23:09

What are the sources of that pressure?

H

Hélène Landemore 23:11

I think when you reach to a higher level of economic inequality, then people stop interacting, it's that simple. You know, when you never see your cleaning lady, when you only fly private jets, when you just don't understand the problems of ordinary people, then it becomes harder to maintain the social equality, I think that's what's under threat. And and also, if the bottom falls out, and you have people who live in dire poverty, and I've always, you know, psychiatric problems, and I mean, you you can either relate on an on an, you know, an equal with with them, and they can relate to us. So I think there needs to be I think there needs to be a compression again, ovals, those messy economic inequalities.

J

Jeff Goldberg 23:59

Two more questions. One is very specific about your core idea, one of your core ideas, and the other is comparative. The question about the core idea is, it's, it sounds great in principle, and it is, it is kind of exciting cognitive leap to realize that we already do this in the jury system, we gather random citizens to judge very important matters, life and death matters. And it kind of works. So it's feasible to imagine nonprofessional Cincinnati, Cincinnatus kind of non professional politicians, people people deputize to temporarily make decisions on behalf of their fellow citizens, but how do you get an embedded system to agree to that? I mean, you can't go to Congress and say, hey, what we'd like you to do, because you people are corrupt and myopic. We would like you to cede power back to the people and then they say but We do represent the people and then the people say no, actually you don't. How do you get from here to there? Where this is where this is even a feasible thing to design?

H

Hélène Landemore 25:09

So the question from here to there is this is the hardest one. And so this is why you're a political theorist. Yes. I do have theories so much easier, right? But So first of all, notice, I'm not saying they're corrupt, I'm really focused on the epistemic dimensions and knowledge related question, the fact that they have blind spots. And so if you look at the problem that way, and you don't start, you know, hurling insults at them, I think we can come to agree that it's true. It's more fun to hurl insults. I know. But it doesn't solve the problem. And I think a lot of people that are currently elected, agree, actually, they think Well, yes, we can't connect anymore. We relate sometimes with less than 10% of the population. I mean, what kind of legitimacy we have, who do we claim to represent, so they won't help. And so this model I'm proposing, you could also use in a hybrid way, as a way to augment electoral institutions, to give them more wisdom, to help them become more representative again. And so in France, again, it's a good example of something that has been tried and it's not been completely successful, but they these French distance convention for climate was meant to help the government make climate change, you know, policies in a way that would be legitimate and backed up by the population. In Ireland, the same thing happened with a citizen's assembly on the discrimination, decriminalization of abortion, parliament was behind that assembly because they needed help transform the country...

J

Jeff Goldberg 26:41

You've spoken about the guns issue in America as an issue that can be unlocked? By gathering random selection of a large number of randomly selected citizens talk about how it would work in this specific example of a question that everybody knows is a

problem. But no one can sort of figure out.

H

Hélène Landemore 27:01

I have to say it's a mystery to me that gun regulations cannot be passed in this country. And they are Metroid is behind the idea that somehow Congress can do it, because the lobbies are just too powerful. That's another problem that has to do with the role of money in politics in electoral systems, that actually leads to corruption. In that case, if you had a jury, large jury, like 300, randomly selected Americans deliberating for several months, on the weekends paid about what to do, I think they've come up with solution that be completely reasonable, acceptable by the larger population, and that Congress is committed to implementing with very little tweaks, you know, and the idea would be that the NRA would be allowed to speak and be heard, but it couldn't buy votes and couldn't sort of influence and interfered with, I think it's currently...

J

Jeff Goldberg 27:57

And the very nature of a lottery system means that after you finish your service, you just go home to your regular job. And there's no reason the NRA would, would have any influence over you or any other lobbying organization.

H

Hélène Landemore 28:08

If you're here as a citizen, you don't owe anything to anyone, you know, you don't have to fall in line. It's just you, and you're conscious in some ways.

J

Jeff Goldberg 28:19

Before we go to one last question before we take questions. Talk about the Iceland example. Because these ideas have been applied to talk about the French example on climate change. Talk about Iceland a little bit.

H

Hélène Landemore 28:31

So Iceland is very tiny country, 320,000 people, but it's been incredibly inspirational for me, because in 2008, when their financial and economic system collapsed, you know, they burned seven times of GDP, they decided that it was time to change things radically. And so in 2010, they conducted a very participatory constitutional process, whereby they said, you know, we want a new constitution, we want a new social contract. And we will start with the National Forum of 950 randomly selected Icelanders who are going to tell us

what values and principles they want to see included in the foundational text of this country. And so those 950 deliberated for a day, and they said things like, well, we want to protect the environment, we want to, you know, be more social and, you know, general society, etc. We had all kinds of ideas. And then a group of 25, elected ordinary citizens because politicians had been deemed too corrupt to participate in elections. were in charge of drafting the text. And they thought, well, we can't do that on their own. It's only 25 of us. So we're going to put on drafts online for everyone to see, we're going to take into account the feedback of the crowd and the larger public. So we did that there was an iterative process. After four months, they came up with a very good proposal. And that proposal was put to a referendum in the fall 2012 and two thirds of the voting population approved it. That looks to me like quite an ideal way of writing your social contract. Didn't work in the end because Parliament refused to vote and turn this text into law. But still, if you look at the design and the intentions, and we worked out, I think this is very inspirational.

J

Jeff Goldberg 30:14

There's a question over here.

A

audience member 30:17

I'm going to try to think of a very productive way to ask this question. I'm going to return to a question that you asked Jeffrey, about, what is the risk of doing this given that a large percentage of the country believes? Let's call them extreme things? And I guess my question is, you frame that as a reason not to do it, as opposed to a symptom of the current system, where there's actually a very strong incentive for elites to keep people believing extreme things, because those are some of the most reliable voters you can get. So you know, and also to foster, you know, persistent racism or other things that produce reliable if distasteful voters. So I guess, why am I wrong in saying that's a reason actually, to change it instead of to keep it?

J

Jeff Goldberg 31:11

No, no, no. I think No, no, it's for you.

H

Hélène Landemore 31:14

I think I agree with the gentleman. I think, indeed, the fact that the system is not working is even it's a reason to try something new. I think there's a risk in not trying something new at this moment.

J

Jeff Goldberg 31:26

What is that? What is the exact risk? Do you think that we're just on? Do you think that we're on a reversible slide?

H

Hélène Landemore 31:35

Yes, at this point, I mean, January 6, did not open up your eyes. I mean, there's no exceptionalism to...

J

Jeff Goldberg 31:41

I was actually there, it really opened my eyes.

H

Hélène Landemore 31:43

I mean, how much farther down that sort of really want to go? the legitimacy of institutions that is at an all time low? And, and I mean, look at the risks. I mean, France has taken it, Ireland has taken it, Iceland has taken it. Soon enough, Australia will take it now there are cities all over the world who are trying and taking risks. Paris wants to create Persians assemblies at random. So I think there are enough experiments around the world to know that this is not the, you know, guaranteed collapse. I mean, this is actually in fact, I'll tell you that the from the opposite side of this conversation, I get attacked for being too, you know, conciliatory, you're, in a way, these assemblies are a way for the powers that be to buy social peace. They do what's called participatory washing, you create an assembly of randomly selected citizens, you let them deliberate for nine months, meanwhile, mass protests diminish. And at the end, you do nothing, right. So it's not revolutionary at all. It's common sense. It's very practicable. It's not that costly. Elections cost a fortune, with very little, you know, benefits in terms of public education. Because it's a lot of spin and a lot of propaganda. When you do a citizen's assembly, the costliest has probably been the French one, because we do everything the grant way. So it cost 5 million euros, something like that. I mean, it's it's not much, and democracy has a price, and we should be willing to pay for it.

J

Jeff Goldberg 33:13

Let me just before we go over there, just want to add a question that we got over the web from Jenny, who writes, I appreciate the need for good sources of information, how could we ensure a shared sense of what is fact? we've struggled with that now? And I and I, and I, and I would say that, that, that don't hear a ton from you about the distorting effects of

filter bubbles and echo chambers and, and and alternative facts sets, or however you want to frame it. So how it seems like a prerequisite for a gathering of 500 randomly selected Americans to come into a room or whatever it is, with a shared reality, some sense of shared reality, how do you how do you build that as a prerequisite?

H

Hélène Landemore 33:56

So actually, it's not a prerequisite when you during this 500 citizens together, you principles, nothing, you take them as they are with other biases, and their, you know, lack of information. And you tell them this is a process of learning, and we're going to learn together. And somehow in the experiments, I've observed that these people come in with actually a certain amount of humility, and willingness to learn. And because they are chosen not as a representative of the Republican Party, or the democratic party or any group, and they're not sure who they're talking to, because it's all at random. So you only know you can't tell who thinks what, they're not tempted into this logic of tribalism, where you signal that you agree on things and then if you avoid certain topics, because you want to display your loyalty to a party. So this this partisan mindset that we're so used to electoral systems, because that's how it functions, it's non existent, at the beginning, at least in in those assemblies tends to form again, you know, through the process around Other issues and but at least for, you know, a certain amount of time, and you can you can you can incentivize it and structure it, you get people who are willing to learn and, and D bias himself. And so I was talking about the French example. And we had a climate climate change denier in the group, you know, and somehow he listened to the scientists, and after a while, he was like, Well, I'm still not a very pro environmental policy person. But I think we need to do something, you know, so you get a form of consensus that doesn't require you to align on every dimensions, but it makes people converge on factual truth.

J

Jeff Goldberg 35:38

There was that question over there.

A

audience member 35:40

Yes, if we, if we take a look at the system that we have now, I think we all look at this and say, This is broken, they can't get anything done. And we look at the Senate and the House. And we watch these discussions. The average person just gets said, this is this is, this just doesn't work. And now the question would be, theoretically, we can read, we can read republicans say, we'll play those get great ideas. These are terrific in an academic atmosphere. But how practically, when the control really is in the house, in the Senate,

they control their own destiny? How do we, how do we make this change?

H

Hélène Landemore 36:24

Again, the question from here to there, so I can only tell you what happened in other countries. It's a mix of finding an advocate at the top, and having social movements at the bottom to put pressure on the decision makers from both sides. So in France, this was made possible by President macrons willingness to try a citizens convention. But his willingness to try something like that was brought about by the social movements known as the yellow vests, if it were not for the yellow vests, you know, breaking stuff and protesting vehemently for months. I don't think the President would have tried that. In Ireland. It came from the parliament, I think, and people were talking to activists and academics, academics printed a huge role in Ireland in pushing for this citizen's assembly on abortion and other things. And parliament was struggling because party members were not willing to take a public position on abortion. It was to it was a failed reel of Irish politics, very Catholic country. And so, so they thought, well, let's basically give the hot potato to a group of citizens. And then we can say, oh, we're doing what you guys want. And and, and that's what happened. In the US. I am not sure. I think there's not enough of a social movement in favor of this kind of reforms. It's not out there yet. Maybe it will change. Maybe there will be a conversation around these things. I think change is more likely to come from first at the state level. And so I'm hoping that there will be some experiments down, you know, it's not like you haven't experimented with randomly selected bodies yet. I mean, Jim Fishkin at Stanford has been conducting so called deliberative polls for years, Ned Crosby invented the concept of a jury, you know, consensus jury in the US. And it's been also done for years. So there's a lot of empirical evidence, we just don't talk about them that much in the media, and I don't think elected politicians are so interested yet, but I think they will have to become interested.

A

audience member 38:37

When you started this discussion that reminded me of the Swiss experiment. And we've talked about Ireland, and Switzerland, and Iceland. All of these are small societies. And in our world, in the United States, we are very complex society. And right now we find ourselves without a central organizing position. And so my question to you is, how do you propose to handle such a large group or a large society to establish a representative democracy?

H

Hélène Landemore 39:21

So that's a really, really key question, the diversity argument. And it's true that if you look

at the more successful example of what I was talking about Iceland, Ireland, Switzerland, is a different sort of case because it's a semi direct federal democracy, but it's also quite successful, but it's small and Homewood and somewhat homogeneous, meaning white, and Christian. But friends actually, is a sort of landmark in the, in these cases, because it's a large country. It's 67 million people, and it's a very diverse country. At this point. We are a multicultural nation. You know, we have a large Arab Muslim population. Are we so and you know, all kinds of populations were present on the on the climate change assembly. So it was on an issue that perhaps didn't raise certain questions or on immigration and things like that climate change was more perhaps consensual. But I am quite convinced that you could have a successful assembly on Moodle almost any question. I don't think diversity is an issue, if anything, diversity is an argument, for theory to have such assemblies, because what is the alternative? Staying in our polarized environments and not talking to each other? No, we need to have conversation hard conversations face to face, online if need be. Across device. So there's no alternative, I think.

A

audience member 40:48

Do you think there is a possibility that the election day itself and the voting process is a problem? between the strange day of the week that elections are held these presidential elections are held the lack of low turnout in certain communities, the failure of electronic systems to work the archaic, punching a hole in a paper, it seems to me in the kind of the constant demand for re vote recall? That seems like there was a problem. Could you please comment on that?

H

Hélène Landemore 41:17

Yes, I think there's a problem in in the things you describe. But even if we fixed them, I think the larger problem would still be there. So you know, that sort of fixes your calling for, to me, they're, they're important. They're crucial in some ways, but they're also marginal. It's the same with money in politics, you can try to get money out of politics. But first of all, we're not succeeding. And there might be, you know, an intrinsic reason why. And again, even if you take money out of politics, you're still stuck with this problem of lack of representation. You're not going to be able to democratize elected assembly, elected assemblies as much as is needed to truly get a picture of what the country is and wants and needs. That's. So that's basically the you know, the, the view I have of the problem.

J

Jeff Goldberg 42:10

There was a question that just sort of disappeared from my screen. But it basically said, the question goes, What does success actually look like? And I want to if you actually got

to this more representative situation? And let me add one question on top of it. What does the President do? What does the executive branch do in a situation in which the course and direction of a country is decided by a rotating cast of, quote unquote, common citizens?

H

Hélène Landemore 42:44

Right, so first of all, success for me would be that at a minimum, when you ask people, are you satisfied with your representatives? At least 50%? say, Yes, in this country, the answer has never been higher than 30%. mean, how, how acceptable is that? In Switzerland, you know, people are happy with our system, they're happy with the democracy. So I think that's a good threshold of legitimacy is a majority happy with what they get. And your second question was...

J

Jeff Goldberg 43:18

What does the president in this in this vision do when the referenda are deciding the course of American politics or American policymaking?

H

Hélène Landemore 43:31

So that's a really difficult question. I, my sense is that the executive should execute and not legislate, but somehow in the US, and in a lot of those presidential democracies, we've entrusted the president with legislative roles and goals and functions. And I don't think that's good, because it brings us closer to a monarchy than to a democracy so my sense would be should be that is that the president should execute and have a much less of a role. You should be no parliamentary systems actually.

J

Jeff Goldberg 44:00

My final question for you you've been here for 20 years are you more French or more American now?

H

Hélène Landemore 44:09

I'm applying for my American citizenship as we speak. So I have halfway I just am very Americanized at this point when I come home, I'm still French, but I am both.

J

Jeff Goldberg 44:28

What does that mean? When you go home to France? You feel Americanized. With the people around you, how are they reacting to your Americanization? What are they? What are they seeing? They're annoyed?

H

Hélène Landemore 44:42

I get that all the time? No, no, it's these are very real issues. I just organize a conference on citizen legislators and my co organizers. We're friends and we have very difficult conversations around inclusion and who to invite and what diversity looks like and And it's difficult. You know, in France, you can't track race. It's illegal. And it's not. It's not all bad. I think the idea of being colorblind actually, in the ideal is should be a good thing. It's just that I don't believe it works anymore so that I've changed on a lot of issues. Right?

J

Jeff Goldberg 45:20

Well, we wish you the best and you're Tocqueville in Germany. And thank you for doing this. And thank you everyone, for coming. Thank you.

T

Tricia Johnson 45:34

Hélène Landemore is a professor of political science at Yale University, where she teaches political theory. Her book, "Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the 21st Century" was released last fall. Jeffrey Goldberg is editor in chief of The Atlantic. Previously he was a national correspondent. He also served as a Middle East and Washington correspondent for The New Yorker. Their conversation was held at the Aspen Ideas Festival on June 29. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's show was produced by the Aspen Ideas Festival team, Kitty Boone, Killeen Brettmann, Katie Cassetta, Christen Cromer, Libby Franklin, Ava Hartmann, Marci Krivonen and Jonathan Melgaard, Azalea, Millan and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Trisha Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

S

support message 46:32

Support for this podcast comes from Mount Sinai, finding a way to push medicine forward so that more people live healthier, fuller lives, with eight hospitals, a leading medical school nearly 300 research labs and over 400 outpatient practices. There is no challenge to great. More information at [mountsinai.org](https://mountsinai.org)

