

# Bulls-Eye: Why Democracy by Lottery is Right for DSA

In [his analysis of the procedural shortcomings at the Democratic Socialists of America's national convention](#),

Andrew Sernatinger calls for the organization to imagine “a theory of democracy beyond voting.”

Democracy is a “moving target,” he notes, and while he doesn't stipulate where the arrow should land, he pleads for a process that allows for multiple levels of engagement. What Sernatinger seeks, the ancient Athenians provided two and a half millennia ago: Democracy by lottery. In their system, any eligible citizen could serve in government via civic lotteries that chose them. While the power to pass legislation resided in the Assembly (open to all) a Council of 500, selected by lot, developed the proposals. Lotteries also chose magistrates and even judges. Only a few positions, like generals, relied on voting. Why? Because the Greeks understood a truth we've bitterly come to learn—wealthy elites control elections and the politicians they produce. This domination isn't a perversion of the system, but inherent to it. “The appointment of magistrates by lot is democratical,” Aristotle observes in *Politics*, “and the election is oligarchical.”



The Athenians harbored a realistic view of human nature. On the one hand, they knew that when placed in adverse circumstances, people succumb to corruption. On the other, they believed that ordinary citizens—no matter experience, status, or education—can make sound judgments when set up for success. Contemporary democratic innovation vindicates their view. Through a process of stratified selection, modern civic lotteries create a Citizens' Assembly, a representative cross-

section of the populace. After consulting experts, its members work together to identify the pros, cons and trade-offs of policy options. They then render high-quality public judgments backed by considered, easily understood reasons. In this way, democracy by lottery achieves greater diversity, effectiveness, and credibility. It gives every citizen an equal chance of governing; allows them to develop an informed understanding of complex issues; and promotes long-term thinking and solutions that garner public trust.

Today, governments in Ireland, Belgium, Britain, and more are all experimenting with civic lotteries. Leftist political parties in other countries have adopted similar processes for their internal operations. In Spain, Podemos has used lotteries to pick 17.5% of the members of its standing committee in several provinces. The radical political movement La France Insoumise did the same to select the twelve-hundred delegates to its 2017 national convention. And Mexican President Obrador's MORENA party uses a combination of elections and lotteries to field its candidates for the national legislature.

If DSA wants to improve future conventions—and transform our oligarchic political system—we must follow the lead of our comrades abroad and embrace democracy by lottery. Moving to an allotted system to generate delegates, committees, and leadership could happen swiftly, with sweeping results. We could then call for the implementation of the same structures in the State, doing so with integrity and boldness. To that end, we should work to elect politicians who agree to call Citizens' Assemblies once in office. In fact, we should make a pro-democracy by lottery position a requirement for candidates seeking our endorsement. Unions and cooperative businesses should adopt the method, too, along with universities, schools, and religious bodies. The more people become exposed to real democracy in all areas of life, the more it will whet their appetite for it in politics.

What might such a system look like for DSA? In [a 2013 article for the \*Journal of Public Deliberation\*](#), Terrill Bouricius offers a game-changing idea: multi-body democracy by lottery. He breaks up the journey of a law into stages, assigning each stage to a separate Citizens' Assembly. In the first stage, an Agenda Council acts as a "meta-legislative" body. This Council's work would serve as the pre-convention, so to speak, and all DSA members would be eligible to serve (with the option to opt-out). Using a stratified civic lottery, the selected members (about 1,000) would constitute a statically representative sample of DSA. Using techniques pioneered by the Dutch organization G1000, they would identify issues needing attention and put them on the docket, under the guidance of facilitators. But they would not draft policy or vote on resolutions. To maintain accountability, openness, and universal access, all DSA members could watch the proceedings and submit petitions; petitions crossing a threshold of signatures could automatically make it onto the agenda. The Council could also solicit feedback during their sessions using crowdsourcing technologies.

Several weeks later, the agenda items would move to a second stage for deliberation and draft resolutions. Here, fresh DSA members selected by lot would sit on Review Panels, smaller assemblies (thirty-five to fifty) focusing on each policy area designated by the Agenda Council—healthcare, education, transportation, etc. Again, all DSA members would be eligible to serve, (except those picked for the Agenda Council) and, again, members could opt out if they chose. The Review Panels would consult policy experts, engage in research, and conduct substantive deliberations. Facilitators could design the process to promote seeking common ground, while avoiding group-think, polarization, and domination by vocal individuals. The deliberations would emphasize critical thought, open-mindedness, and a civil dialogue of ideas.

To ensure broad participation, all local DSA chapters would

have the opportunity to pitch policies to the Review Panels. Each would create an Interest Panel for the respective agenda areas in the weeks leading up to this stage. Chapter members could join as many Interest Panels as they wanted; together, they would research and develop proposals. The Review Panels would then conduct hearings, either online or in-person, with each Interest Panel from each local. Combined with their own research, the Review Panels would coordinate and collate the various proposals into comprehensive resolutions, debating and refining them in the process. After a final vote, the Panels would issue both a majority and minority reports, making the former give an account of its decisions, and the latter a formal opportunity for dissent.

They would not make the final decisions, however. That responsibility would fall to Policy Juries. These bodies would again be constituted through civic lotteries, with new DSA members populating them (barring those who served in the previous stages). Numbering several hundred people each, these Juries would meet online or in person and serve anywhere from a few days to a week or more. An individual Jury would convene for every policy platform and conduct a trial of the proposed resolutions. Proponents from the Review Panels would defend the policy's merits, while opponents would argue its defects. Upon conclusion, and without debate among themselves, the Jury would vote via secret ballot. This would avoid factionalism and interference with a member's conscientious choice. To promote unity, resolutions receiving sixty percent of the vote or higher would pass; those receiving forty percent or less would die. Anything in between would kick back to the Review Panels for reconsideration. The result would reflect what DSA as a whole would decide if all its members had the information and time to reflect. But even if the Jury decided purely on the grounds of self-interest, "at worst we arrive at the ideal outcome envisioned by adversarial liberal democracy," Bouricius explains, "which is finding the majority preference among competing interests."

As for terms of service, veterans of the Agenda Council and Review Panels would have to wait at least one whole convention before being eligible for selection again. E.g., a member who sits on a Review Panel in 2021 would be automatically ineligible for the Review Panels or Agenda Council in 2023 (but could serve on a Policy Jury). This limit would both reduce corrupting tendencies associated with incumbency, and ensure broad participation by the membership. A Rules Council, also constituted via a civic lottery, would establish and update the procedures of the whole process, without knowing how changes would affect particular resolutions. To avoid abuse, it would not have the authority to increase its own power, and any rule changes would take effect only once it achieved complete turnover in membership. They would also hear complaints of biased or unfair behavior—e.g., charismatic but misleading presentations to a Policy Jury.

As for DSA's National Political Committee, its members would also be chosen by lot, and limited to a single term. Like now, the NPC would guide DSA, populate the various steering committees, and hire staff. Plato knew that philosophers make for the best rulers but will never seek power, out of fear of corruption. With that in mind, the NPC would conduct a thorough vetting process when selecting personnel, people at once highly qualified, yet who do not proactively seek the job. After selecting a batch of experienced candidates, the NPC would make the final selections by lot. A separate Oversight Council, also allotted, could act as a watchdog of the NPC and the various committees and commissions. This Council would evaluate the performance of leadership and staff, removing incompetent or abusive office holders. To avoid conflicts of interest, the Oversight Council would be repopulated with new members before seeking any replacement.

Along with the civic lotteries themselves, the key to the success of this system is the quality of the deliberations. Rather than engage in the adversarial, gamesmanship approach

engendered by Roberts' Rules of Order, Citizens' Assemblies investigate various perspectives by hearing from experts. They then explore ideas and establish common ground before finally reaching a decision. And instead of a zero-sum objective, the process seeks and strives for consensus. Facilitators help the group identify and counteract common biases, while also training them in the art of collaborative inquiry and joint questioning of specialists. The group learns how to call on their own experts, too. But the deliberations don't paper over substantive differences or aim for the lowest common denominator. Quite the opposite—facilitators help the members surface disagreements and engage conflicts. Resolution is desirable, but consensus is not a must. If after much effort the group remains divided, they can take a vote via secret ballot, employing one of the various tools available: the Condorcet method, multi-option voting, preferential voting, etc. The group then produces both a majority and a minority report.

A multi-body approach along these lines would mark a watershed in the history of DSA, of the American left itself. Bouricius's design isn't the only way to implement democracy by lottery, nor does it achieve immaculacy. None does. Our fallible human nature will find ways to weaken any process. The structure contains vulnerabilities, points where corrupt actors could throttle the system. Like any form of government, its success depends on the ethics of its participants. This concession makes the Rules and Oversight Councils such critical additions. These bodies provide the means of improving the system and fixing flaws. A self-learning, self-correcting intelligence animates the whole apparatus as a result. It's difficult to imagine a more effective conception. In considering it, DSA shouldn't ask, "Would this be perfect?" We should ask instead, "Would this be better?" And the answer, resoundingly, is yes.