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(Washington Post illustration/Photo by Getty Images)

The U.S. House of Representatives is not representative at all.

Of its 435 members, 71 percent are men, 72 percent are White, one-third are lawyers, and more than half are millionaires.

Compare that with a nation in which women outnumber men, Whites constitute less than 60 percent of the population, a scant 1 in 128 American workers has a legal background, and 4 in 10 people lack the money to cover a \$400 emergency expense.

A House of Representatives with the demographics of a House of Lords isn’t the only reason for legislative dysfunction and public disdain. But it doesn’t help. And legions of Why Not? readers believe they have a solution.

“Why not transform the House of Representatives by including members who are chosen by lottery . . . and drafted to serve for a defined period of time?” wonders a reader in Vero Beach, Florida.

On Election Day, we affirm with our actions an unspoken principle of governance: The fairest and most democratic way to determine who wields public power is by asking citizens to cast ballots.

But what if there’s an alternative — not autocracy or monarchy but a more radical form of democratic representation and popular sovereignty?

“Why not make serving in Congress like jury duty?” asks a reader in Salt Lake City. “If you meet the criteria, you could be selected to serve for a term, which would give a broader cross-section of people representing regular Americans.”

A petition for sortition

The idea isn't new. It's called sortition. And it was standard practice in the birthplace of democracy, ancient Athens, where public officials were chosen by lot. The city-states of Florence and Venice also used the leaders-by-lottery method during the Italian Renaissance. But the idea waned for the next several centuries — only to mount a modest comeback recently in the academic press, among the think-tank set, and in the pages and pixels of political publications.

The particulars of what some call a “lottocracy” vary, but here's what the basic elements might look like.

Each person in a congressional district who has reached the constitutionally required age of 25 would be a prospective member of Congress. Every two years, a handful of these eligible people, selected at random, would receive a summons, similar to jury service. Those with challenging personal situations — say, recovering from a serious illness, caring for a newborn or performing some essential job — could be excused. But as with juries or military reserves, the system presumes that everyone has a duty to serve.

Of course, the burden of being drafted into a two-year job is far more onerous than sitting through a three-day trial. So, the government could pay these citizen legislators much more than the \$30 per day that D.C. Superior Court pays jurors — perhaps even the current congressional salary of \$174,000 per year. They'd also get free housing (congressional dorms, anyone?) and a staff. Then, for two years, they'd represent their district.

It's a bit nutty — complicated and replete with unintended consequences. But first, let's examine its virtues.

At the top of the list is a mind-rattling but surprisingly convincing argument: Assigning legislators randomly is more equitable and democratic than choosing them through elections. Think about it. Only a tiny sliver of citizens have the time, money, connections and wherewithal to wage a congressional campaign. For most people, even those with the talent and desire to serve in Congress, the demands of a race are too daunting even to consider. Requiring people to toss their hat in the ring practically ensures that hat-tossers are elites. In that sense, elections are aristocratic. They merely replicate existing power structures. Elections don't establish true democracy, the argument goes; they undermine it. Roll over, James Madison.

The Why Not? Project

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Share your bold, unexpected idea for improving our country, our organizations or our lives. We read every submission and will select the most intriguing ideas to explore in future columns.

Sortition, meanwhile, is democratic. It opens public office to everyone, to anyone. Unlike those aristocratic elections, a lottery draws from a vastly wider, more representative group of citizens.

Partly as a result, a sortition might scrub money out of politics. With no elections and therefore no campaigns, prospective members of Congress wouldn't have to cultivate donors, dial for dollars or work the fundraising circuit. The implicit quid pro quo of campaign contributions would disappear — ensuring that the chosen few, who already more closely resemble their constituents, can represent those constituents and ignore the special interests and lobbyists.

Add in experimental evidence that groups with randomly selected leaders make better decisions than those with leaders selected in more traditional ways, and sortition seems like a sensible reform.

Good intentions gone awry

Except, like all well-intentioned reforms, this one risks uncorking a spray of new problems. Take expertise. In general, the lottery-chosen citizen legislators won't have much of it. Yet they'll be tackling complex issues such as climate change, terrorism and artificial intelligence — and appropriating a \$6 trillion budget that reaches every corner of American life.

Where will these bewildered amateurs — dog walkers, retired crossing guards, newspaper columnists — turn to for policy briefings and legislative savvy?

Enter those supposedly banished special interests, who are suddenly the most experienced and knowledgeable inhabitants of the newly remade ecosystem. Want to understand energy policy, new Congressman? The fossil fuel industry will happily supply you a briefing and maybe a steak dinner. Health-care reform, Madame Congresswoman? Come with our association to Cabo to hear why medical malpractice lawsuits keep America healthy. In an effort to drain the swamp, sortition risks turning lobbyists into apex predators who'll feast on these baby alligators.

Congressional staff could be a countervailing force. But unlike many current members of Congress, newbie legislators won't have worked their way up from the political minor leagues — city councils, county commissions, state legislatures — mastering issues and policymaking itself along the way. They'll likely need more staff and more professional staff — something akin to the elite British civil service or the U.S. Foreign Service. That's not terrible, perhaps, but it's not exactly democratic. Eliminating elected elites would empower unelected elites. A lottocracy could become a wonkocracy.

Then there's popular will. With elections, voters have a say. With sortition, they sacrifice their say for the promise that a randomly selected person will be more like them. But what if voters *prefer* to be represented by a plutocrat rather than a plumber?

Citizens, assemble!

In the end, I'm not sold that randomization should replace election for choosing the House of Representatives. But I can't dismiss sortition, either. It would make a worthy experiment for a city or county legislature. Its appeal, as a flurry of *Why Not?* readers has demonstrated, is undeniable. The idea provokes a system that needs provocation. It challenges premises that have gone unchallenged. And it bears the truest hallmark of a good idea: It leads to a better idea.

In 2016, the Irish Parliament established the first Ireland Citizens' Assembly, 99 randomly selected citizens, chaired by a Supreme Court judge, who met over several weekends to discuss one of the most controversial issues in the country: abortion. They heard from medical, legal and ethical experts, debated options, and by nearly a two-thirds majority recommended repealing the country's abortion ban. This citizen body, 99 strangers thrown together, helped resolve a long-standing political stalemate in the country and clear the way for a 2018 national referendum that legalized abortion. Since then, Irish Citizens' Assemblies have convened to consider drug policy, gender equality and other topics.

The United States could do something similar — inspired by sortition but not bound by it. In about 14 months, we will begin celebrating our 250th anniversary as a country. Let's honor it by honoring democracy itself and giving citizens a greater say in governing. Imagine: 250 randomly selected Americans who'd meet monthly during our semiquincentennial to discuss and debate the top issues facing the country. Call it the American Citizens' Assembly. This temporary band of citizen servants — informed by facts, removed from vitriol, charged with a historic mission — might find a common agenda that our polarized politics can't seem to locate.

The American Citizens Assembly wouldn't replace either house of Congress. It would supplement them, maybe elevate them. It would revere our past by revolutionizing our future. Is it a random idea whose time has come?

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a debate on the idea of sortition, or selecting legislators by lottery. Many commenters criticize the concept, arguing it overlooks expertise and capability, and could lead to ineffective governance. Some suggest enhancements like literacy tests or partial... [Show more](#)

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