

# Preface to the Special Issue\*

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Politics & Society  
2018, Vol. 46(3) 299–301  
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DOI: 10.1177/0032329218789882  
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## Abstract

This special issue explores the theoretical and practical prospects for creating legislative bodies via sortition. This preface summarizes the purpose of the issue and each of the articles therein.

## Keywords

Athens, bicameralism, democracy, elections, legislatures, political equality

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\*This special issue of *Politics & Society* titled “Legislature by Lot: Transformative Designs for Deliberative Governance” features a preface, an introductory anchor essay and postscript, and six articles that were presented as part of a workshop held at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, September 2017, organized by John Gastil and Erik Olin Wright.

The articles in this special issue of *Politics & Society* are drawn from a September 2017 conference in the “Real Utopias Project” series around the idea of creating a legislative assembly in which legislators were chosen by lot. The conference was anchored by a specific proposal from John Gastil and Erik Olin Wright for a bicameral legislature in which the members of one chamber were elected and in the other chamber chosen by random selection. This special issue begins with that article, which reviews the democratic flaws intrinsic in electoral representation, lays out a set of principles that should guide the construction of a sortition chamber, and argues for the virtue of a bicameral system that combines sortition and elections. Participants in the September conference wrote engagements with this proposal, and a selection of those appear in this special issue.

Yves Sintomer begins with “From Deliberative to Radical Democracy? Sortition and Politics in the Twenty-First Century.” He presents a broad historical overview of the role of sortition in democratic theory.

James Fishkin draws on extensive experience using deliberative minipublics, as well as some lessons from ancient Athens, to explore what could be the optimal use of sortition in a legislative system. In “Random Assemblies for Lawmaking? Prospects and Limits,” he argues against a long-term, full-function sortition legislature in favor of a more targeted use of sortition assemblies.

Pierre-Étienne Vandamme and his coauthors present an empirical exploration of attitudes toward sortition in Belgium, including a sample of political officials. In “Intercameral Relations in a Bicameral Elected and Sortition Legislature,” they provide a context for discussing the possible public support for sortition proposals.

In “Should Democracy Work through Elections or Sortition?,” Tom Malleson lays out a general scorecard for evaluating the democratic quality of different legislative systems, and he then makes a point-by-point comparison of electoral and sortition assemblies.

David Owen and Graham Smith advance this argument further in “Sortition, Rotation, and Mandate: Conditions for Political Equality and Deliberative Reasoning.” They are sympathetic to the goals of sortition but skeptical about the viability of a full-function sortition legislature. They lay out a series of critiques and then propose an alternative way of using sortition in which the agenda-setting function is generated through nonsortition processes and a different kind of sortition assembly scrutinizes proposed legislation.

Finally, in “Why Hybrid Bicameralism Is Not Right for Sortition,” Terrill Bouricius argues strongly against retaining an electoral chamber and against the feasibility of a full-function sortition legislature. His favored alternative uses a series of more special-purpose sortition lawmaking bodies.

Together, the authors of these essays explore the real potential for sortition to satisfy fundamental democratic principles. Although more than one author strikes a note of caution, the time may soon arrive when theories of sortition gain an infusion of empirical evidence. Before long, small and large bodies may begin to experiment more vigorously with this ancient method of democracy.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors received funding to support the conference out of which this special issue grew, as well as to provide research assistance by undergraduate and graduate students. Those funds came from the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences at Pennsylvania State University, and *Politics & Society*.

### **Author Biographies**

**John Gastil** (jgastil@psu.edu) is a professor in the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences at Pennsylvania State University, where he is a senior scholar at the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. Gastil's research focuses on the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, particularly as it relates to how people behave as voters or members of small decision-making groups. Recent books he has authored or coedited include *The Jury and Democracy* (2010), *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement* (2012), and a second edition of *Democracy in Small Groups* (2014).

**Erik Olin Wright** (eowright@wisc.edu) is Vilas Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin. His academic work has been centrally concerned with reconstructing the Marxist tradition in ways that attempt to make it more relevant to contemporary concerns and more cogent as a scientific framework of analysis. From 2011 to 2012 he served as president of the American Sociological Association. His most recent books include *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), *American Society: How It Really Works* (2011 and 2015, with Joel Rogers), *Understanding Class* (2015), and *Alternatives to Capitalism* (2016, with Robin Hahnel).