

## Democratic Innovations from around the globe

A key part of NUS Project 100 is about making our democracy more inclusive and representative. The first phase of this process involved identifying a set of principles that would underpin a better democracy. Having passed these principles at National Conference in April, phase two is about thinking through what they might look like in practice. A group of officers and staff from NUS and Students' unions have been working together to start this work. In order to inform and inspire their thinking, the group requested an overview of other democratic innovations. What follows is a list of examples of democratic decision making from outside the student movement and how they could be applied at NUS. Clearly it would be neither practical nor desirable for NUS to adopt all these ideas – indeed many of them are contradictory. However, they represent a genuine appetite to think beyond the processes we currently use and explore new means of building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century democracy for NUS.

**Name:** Cumulative Voting

**Summary:** Citizens are given a number of votes that they would be able to distribute across candidates or options (on a multi-choice ballot). They can then give their votes to a single candidate (or option) or spread them around a number of candidates.

**Potential benefit and application:** It makes the voting process more sophisticated and sensitive to the different values and priorities that people hold.

**Name:** Compulsory Voting

**Summary:** There are around 30 countries in the world where some sort of compulsory voting takes place. For example, in Bolivia voting is not simply a right but a duty or responsibility that citizens must fulfill, failure to do so can result in denied public sector employment and services.

**Potential benefit and application:** If participating in democratic decision making was part of the responsibility of being a member of NUS it would be likely to increase participation and in turn the legitimacy of the decisions, make those participating in decision making more representative of the whole membership and raise the political awareness of more people (through their involvement in democracy)

**Name:** Standing citizen's panels

**Summary:** a large (around 1000) and statistically representative sample of citizens, often weighted for gender, age, ethnicity and occupation. Authorities in Wolverhampton and Lewisham survey a panel on a regular basis as a sounding board to test policy proposals. The UK government ran a 5000 strong People's Panel for 4 years from 1998.

**Potential benefit and application:** A segment of NUS extra cardholders could be established to operate as a Standing citizen's panel. Involving a relatively large number of students on a fairly regular basis that could be broken down to focus on the views of particular groups e.g. black students. Such panels are clearly insufficient as they grant no power to students to make decisions, however they may be useful in providing a broader context for the policy formation process.

**Name:** Petition

**Summary:** petitions allow citizens to raise issues directly to parliament, an executive or local authority. In the past, the Scottish Parliament has used an effective petition system, coordinated by the Public Petitions Committee to enable individuals outside the networks of power to raise issues in parliament.

**Potential benefit and application:** this could enable students including but far beyond sabbatical officers to engage directly with NUS. It may help alert NUS to new issues faced by students and draw people in to debate the issue.

**Name:** Citizens' juries/ Deliberative opinion polls

**Summary:** citizens' juries bring together a demographically representative (e.g. gender, ethnicity etc) random selection of between 12 to 24 citizens to debate a particular issue. Over three to four days citizens hear evidence, cross-examine experts and debate questions. At the end the citizens produce recommendations in a report. Citizen's juries were first used in the UK in the mid-1990s when a series of citizen's juries were promoted by the institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), the King's Fund Policy Institute and the Local Government Management Board (LGMB). Deliberative opinion polling (DOP) differ from citizens' juries as they use a random sample of 250-500 citizens who are polled at the beginning of the event and then again at the end. Unlike traditional opinion polls DOPs reflect citizens considered judgements rather than 'top of their head' views.

**Potential benefit and application:** Evidence from the UK, US and Germany suggests that citizen take their role seriously and are willing to debate often complex and controversial issues. Citizen's juries are high in terms of inclusiveness as the selection method ensures that a demographically representative group of citizen's is involved. The obvious weakness is that only a small number of citizen's can participate. DOPs on the other hand involve more significant numbers of citizens. At NUS citizens' juries could be combined with delegations of sabbatical officers to bring officers and students to debate issues and produce recommendations e.g. a conference could be made up of two thirds officers one third students.

**Name:** Consensus conferences

**Summary:** The Danish Board of Technology has used consensus conferences since the 1980s to consult the public on new controversial scientific and technological developments that raise significant ethical concerns e.g. Genetically modified food. Citizens are selected on the basis of socio-demographic criteria from a pool of applicants who've responded to an advert inviting them to participate – so the process is more self-selecting. There are a series of pre-conference meetings where citizens learn about the issues and frame the questions for the conference.

**Potential benefit and application:** The pre-conference meetings allow the citizens to enter the conference with a much greater knowledge of the issues at hand and clearer about their own perspectives. As NUS has gone through a large consultative process to identify goals to achieve over the next 6 years e.g. combatting mental distress, votes for 16 year olds and closing the attainment gap, there may be an opportunity to more closely align the annual policy cycle with the long-term goals in the strategic framework.

**Name:** America Speaks 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings

**Summary:** One day events involving 500 to 5000 citizens debating local, regional or national issues e.g. "Listening to the City: Rebuilding Lower Manhattan" that took place after September 11<sup>th</sup> attracted 5000 citizens. Although these events are open to all, the organisers will usually engage in targeted outreach to attract under represented sectors of the population. The meetings attempt to combine small-scale face-to-face deliberations with large-scale collective decision-making. To this end they employ:

- Small group discussion of 10 to 12 diverse citizens with an independent facilitator
- Networked computers to collate ideas and votes from each table
- Electronic keypads for citizens to vote and provide demographic data
- Theming comments from tables to present back to the room
- Large video screens to present data, themes, and information
- Briefings from experts and stakeholders to inform the discussion

**Potential benefit and application:** NUS arguably needs a more 21<sup>st</sup> Century democracy, having designed the policy process for a very different membership. The scale of the meetings means that they often generate substantial interest from the media and authorities. The organisers have successfully ensured a reasonable level of participation from traditionally under-represented groups. Furthermore the sheer number of participants mean that even where there are discrepancies in the proportions of participants from certain backgrounds, voting can be broken down to reflect different characteristics and potentially weighted accordingly. NUS could hold the details of those who are willing to participate in such events.

**Name:** British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (BCCAER) *Case Study*

**Summary:** The BCCAER was set up to review the BC electoral system and recommend an alternative. The assembly was made up of 160 randomly selected citizens one man and one

woman from each electoral district plus two Aboriginal members. Each member was paid \$150 per day to attend. The assembly spent a series of weekend learning about different electoral systems, then took evidence from 50 public hearings attended by 3000 citizens and finally spent time debating different systems before voting on options. A referendum was then held to approve or reject their recommendation of using an STV electoral system.

**Potential benefit and application:** this process benefits from using an inclusive, demographically representative group of citizens to debate an important issue in an on-going process rather than a single one-off event. By giving them the power to frame a referendum question it also enables a high level of popular control as every citizen then has the opportunity to vote on their proposal. At NUS groups of officers and or students could debate important issues and develop either a single recommendation or a number of options that could be put back out to the wider membership to vote on using either a referendum or preferendum

**Name:** National Issues Forums

**Summary:** Every year the National Issues Forums (initiated by the Kettering Foundation in the US) identifies major issues of concern and develops 'issue books'. These issue books identify three or four options or approaches to the issue (not polar opposites). A moderator then facilitates discussions around these options. Participants are asked to agree to a set of guidelines: acceptance, listening with respect, curiosity, diversity, sincerity and brevity.

**Potential benefit and application:** It could be that NUS policy staff create 'issue books' ahead of deliberative events such as zones in order to frame and inform the debate. The guidelines could be adopted to guide discussion.

**Name:** Deliberation Day

**Summary:** Ackerman and Fishkin have proposed a new national holiday two weeks before major national elections for US citizens to gather in neighbourhood meetings to discuss the upcoming election. Before the meetings a balanced briefing document would be made widely available that summarised the basic positions of the candidates on selected issues. Each neighbourhood meeting would involve around 300 people who would be organised into groups of 15 people. The citizens would watch first watch a live television debate on main campaign issues. Then in small group roundtable discussions agree three questions to ask local party representatives. These questions are grouped, themed and answered before the small groups come back together to share their reactions to the responses.

**Potential benefit and application:** Clearly, this would give a lot more people the space and time to understand the issues at stake and identify who to vote for. The process could also be used to understand and debate policy proposals as well as elections. Simultaneous Deliberation Days could be held regionally for student officers and students to watch live stream debates between candidates for officer roles and/or debate national policy proposals before questioning local campaign supporters and voting. The votes could then be aggregated to give a national result. Providing a more regional opportunity to participate in elections and/or policy decisions would be likely to increase both the number and diversity of participants and provide more time for discussion and considered judgements.

**Name:** Multi-choice ballots

**Summary:** Benjamin Barber suggests using multi-choice ballots, replacing a simple yes/no option with a range of options:

- Yes in principle – strongly for the proposal
- Yes in principle – but not a first priority
- No in principle – strongly against the proposal
- No with respect to this formulation – but not against the proposal in principle, suggest reformulation and resubmission
- No for the time being – although not necessarily oppose in principle, suggest postponement

**Potential benefit and application:** Barber suggests varied choices elicit more thoughtful responses even though yes/no responses would be aggregated to give the result. Within NUS this would give us significantly more information on the voters views that would help shape the implementation of the policy

**Name:** Preferendum/ Consensus (De Borda) Voting

**Summary:** Rather than presenting a single proposal for citizens to vote for or against, a preferendum presents a number of different options for voters to number in order of preference. Unlike STV the De Borda Institute in Northern Ireland use a points system for voting which seeks to identify the most preferred result. If for example there are five options on the ballot paper voters would be asked to give 5 pts to their most preferred options, 4 pts to their second favourite and so on. In the count all the points are added up and whichever has the highest wins.

**Potential benefit and application:** De Borda voting means that the most divisive option which has a significant number of 5s and 1s could have an average score of 3 and be beaten by a compromise option that attracted very few 5s but lots of 4s. It was developed in Northern Ireland to deal with particularly contentious social issues. The voting method is arguably also more inclusive as minority groups cannot be overruled by a given option having more than 50% of first preferences in the first round of an STV vote.

**Name:** Recall

**Summary:** Recall enabled citizens to remove a public official from office. By filing a petition with the required number of signatures, citizens can force a vote on an official's term in office. Recall usually requires about 25% of citizens who voted in the last election. For example Gray Davies was removed as the Governor of California before the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

**Potential benefit and application:** The main argument for recall is that it provides for continuous accountability. NUS set up a space on NUS Connect to set up a petition, which, if signed by enough people, triggered a vote of no confidence in an officer.

**Name:** Electronic voting

**Summary:** A report by Howland, *Logged Off? How ICT Can Connect Young People and Politics* suggests that, "as a generation, young people are far more accustomed to using information technologies to perform basic functions and voting is no exception". For example the youth parliament in the Scottish Highlands where a higher percentage of students used their votes in schools using electronic online voting than those compared to those using paper ballots.

**Potential benefit and application:** There are multiple opportunities to apply electronic voting. From remote referendum or preferendum to the use of voting apps at events and conferences.

**Name:** Virtual Surgeries

**Summary:** Rather than meeting in person, MPs make themselves available online for a given time period to enable constituents to discuss or raise their problems or concerns online.

**Potential benefit and application:** NUS officers could have regular online surgeries to make themselves available and more accountable to officers and students.

**Name:** International Workers of the World (IWW) *Case Study*

**Summary:** The IWW uses multiple levels of democracy. Local branches are controlled directly by local members. Once a year these branches elect and vote on a direction for delegates to send to a general convention. At the convention the delegates debate key issues and construct referendums. These referendum questions are then mailed back out to local branches for members to vote. This annual ballot is also used to elect various union roles.

**Potential benefit and application:** It is easy to consider how this method could be applied to NUS. Rather than the final decision being made at national conference, it could be used to debate and construct a final referendum proposal for members to vote on. Students' unions could simply be awarded one vote each or votes could be weighted depending on the number of students at their institution. Another option (adapted from Participatory Budgeting in Brazil) is that sabbatical officers vote is weighted in relation to the mandate they received in their election; so the higher the turn out the more power they get. This could however be both highly controversial and administratively burdensome.