

Task democracy: politics for the common good

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Abstract

This paper argues that urgent sustainability transitions, towards an economy for the common good, require an upgrade of the liberal democratic political system. It presents an upgrade design and first findings from experiments.

Transitions are needed to prevent dangerous climate change, resource depletion, biodiversity degradation, extreme inequality and large-scale injustice. Liberal democracies, however, have not responded timely and effectively. Briefly analysing the competitive nature of liberal democracy leads to the intermediate conclusion that ideological competition is a 'fair-weather system', fundamentally unable to turn the tide.

To explore options for democracies to innovate out of gridlocks, the history of political decision making during slow existential crises may provide clues. An example is found in the governance system of the Dutch water authorities, dating back to the 13th century. This system originally built on task division rather than competition, and is a proven effective and robust 'storm system'.

To explore its possible value in the present, a democratic institute is designed that may be added to a liberal democratic parliament as a 'transition chamber'. Its purpose would be to coordinate voluntary transition efforts from all of society and to create shared transition leadership for sustainability transitions.

Observations from field experiments are reported and some questions from political philosophy are discussed. More research is needed, which may be considered urgent.

1. Introduction

This paper argues that liberal democracy needs an upgrade to handle sustainable development challenges timely and effectively. It explores the fundamental inability of the liberal method of ideological competition to produce shared transition leadership. It continues with a novel institutionalist upgrade design, and some first findings from simulations and field tests.

Humanity is in uncharted territory. Half a century after the first loud warnings (Meadows et al., 1972), the limits to growth on our planet are exceeded large-scale, creating environmental, social and eventually economic crises. These crises are 'wicked problems': over-constrained systemic gridlocks with no easy way out, and even 'hard to define since there is nothing like the undisputable public good' (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Such crises may amplify each other, may be irreversible when trigger points are passed, and may become existential to civilisation and even mankind (Homer-Dixon et al., 2021).

Since 1987, the UN calls for sustainable development. The 17 SDG's, set in 2015, require massive change and huge investments, on a much larger scale than ever. Many industries and shareholders, however, remain focused on short term profits. Governments therefore need to intervene, but act

too little and too late. CO₂-emissions still rise. We're in the sixth mass extinction and we're running out of many resources.

The structurally insufficient crisis response leads to the two main questions of this paper: are liberal democracies able to handle slow-but-existential crises in the first place? And if not, is there an alternative democratic system that may do better?

Section 2 focuses on liberal democracy and its limitations. Section 3 explores the governance model of the Dutch water authorities, that helped managing a slow-but-existential crisis. Section 4 presents the design of a democratic institution for sustainability transition management, inspired by this 'storm system'. In section 5, observations from field experiments are reported and some questions from political philosophy are discussed, leading to conclusions in section 6.

2. Liberal democracy: a fair-weather system

In 2023 around 18% of countries worldwide were liberal democracies, meaning they hold elections, respect individual and minority rights and constrain their governments (Herre et al., 2024). This section focuses on the parliaments of these countries and their continental unions, on all levels from international to local. How do they handle the 'polycrisis'?

Since the 19th century, political parties in parliaments and councils proclaim visions on the common good, and strive for power to realise these visions. Meanwhile, they need to compete for votes, which makes asking for sacrifices without short term returns, like reducing meat consumption and holiday flights, an electoral risk. This dilemma results in various degrees of avoidance. Take the climate crisis. Typically, and exaggerated for contrast, populists deny the problem, socialists want to solve inequality first, nationalists point elsewhere, neo-liberalists trust science and markets to solve the problem and centre parties tune to insufficient average efforts. None, except some niche parties, explain the true magnitude of the crisis and its real life-style consequences.

As this avoidance is collective, it creates a normal, and thus a blind spot that masks the urgency of the polycrisis. It reduces sustainability to an issue like all others, to be addressed within budget once trust in politics is restored. This suggests a straight causal line from ideological competition, to normalised avoidance, to systemic inertia.

One might argue that the inertia has other causes, such as populism, 'wokeism' or neoliberalism, and that ideological competition as such is not to blame. A common analysis in this category is that neoliberal overpraise of markets and entrepreneurship results in privatising profits, socialising costs and eventually 'plundering of public goods and services' (e.g. Thomas, 2023). However, while sentiments and interests may explain the cause of problems of society, they do not explain why the political system cannot rise above this and find adequate solutions, which is its core task.

The systemic inertia seems to be overlooked even in scholarly debate about sustainable reform of the economy. Concepts like Doughnut Economics (Raworth, 2017), degrowth (e.g. Hickel, 2021), and many other green theories and models (Kronsell & Hildingsson, 2022), call politics and governments to action. However, researching why exactly previous calls did not result in sufficient transitions, is mostly beyond the scope.

Can liberal democracy improve itself? Francis Fukuyama proposes to step back from both neoliberalism and identity politics and to return to core liberal principles (Fukuyama, 2022). While

this ideological reconciliation would reduce polarisation, it would still not alter the competitive nature of the system. It is hard to see how it would end the collective avoidance of drastic measures.

In sum, ideological competition is the dominant, if not single, method of liberal democracies to organise plurality. While effective in here-and-now issues, in elsewhere-and-later challenges it normalises collective avoidance of necessary measures, and results in political transition inertia. As this inertia is systemic, the competition method is fundamentally unfit for existential sustainability transitions. It is a fair-weather system, useful for liberalism but only as long as we can afford being divided.

3. A medieval storm system

In The Netherlands, 21 regional water authorities prevent floodings, keep inland water levels on target and operate sewage treatment plants. Their general boards consist of three groups: inhabitants, farmers and nature reserve managers (Vollaard & Binnema, 2023). Each group has a fixed number of seats. The inhabitant representatives are chosen through elections. The other representatives are appointed by the elected boards of their respective organisations.

This hybrid model of group elections for quality seats has its roots the 13th century, and the population growth, economic growth and urbanisation of that time. Intensified land use resulted in a slow crisis of large-scale subsidence, worsened by devastating North Sea storm floods (Tielhof, 2021). Left unattended, this crisis would eventually turn existential, as accounts of land loss indicate.

A societal transition was needed, from artificial hills and unrestricted peat extraction, to regulation and water management by embankments, polders, locks and pumping stations. The investments and operational costs of these projects had to be carried by land owners, villages and emerging cities. They should either pay taxes or provide labour, for construction and maintenance.

Coordinating all this and settling the inevitable conflicts required an authority. At first, these authorities were bottom-up initiatives, representing all land owners and organising skill-based task division between societal groups. This bottom-up task division has survived wars and revolutions, and, so far, even political debates.

Even today, societal task division is a widely used complement of liberal democracy. In The Netherlands, issues requiring societal task division, such as labour market regulation, energy transition and pension reforms, are negotiated in corporatist advisory councils and in 'societal agreements' that involve government and 'societal partners' like industry, workers and NGO's.

A major difference between these agreements and liberal democratic parliaments, is the relation between represented groups. While ideological groups in parliaments may want to do without some of their competitors, societal partners need each other badly, especially in crises. They have no interest whatsoever in a competition model that could result in dominance of one group over the other, or removal of any group.

In conclusion, the original governance model of Dutch water management authorities is based on sectoral task division rather than ideological competition. The model is hybrid, combining a top-level collegial board with democratic representation of task groups. This model has been successful in containing a slow-but-existential crisis, and can still be recognised in water authorities, advisory councils and societal agreements.

4. The task democracy model

Innovating out of democracy crises is currently being explored in multiple approaches, such as redesigning the social contract (Huntjens & Kemp, 2022) and establishing citizen councils (Reybrouck, 2016). This section adds a ‘democratic institutionalist’ approach (Herzog, 2023) and presents the outline of a new negotiation platform, to be implemented as for instance an additional parliamentary ‘transition chamber’ or a ‘product council’ for circular economy. The purpose of this platform is to create conditions for shared transition leadership and to initiate a flow of society wide campaigns that result in irreversible transitions. The platform design and intended applications are described, and a definition is proposed.

The platform is designed in three steps: a structure model, a process model and a development path.

The structure model in Table 1 is based on sectoral task division. It is designed to be generic for all sustainability transitions and scalable from villages and city districts to international sustainable development collaboration. It defines five societal sectors and their generic transition tasks. These tasks may be seen as distinct, indispensable and untransferable. The resulting mutual dependency elevates their need to collaborate above their interest to compete. The number of sectors is kept small, to keep the model generic and easier to implement. The government task group is a linking pin with the existing liberal democratic parliament. A consequence of this design is overlapping of task groups: scientists, public administrators, entrepreneurs and non-profit executives all are citizens as well.

Task group	Representation	Generic transition tasks
Science	Networks of academic disciplines or knowledge fields	Measure capitals and trends, explain history, predict future, identify development pathways, fundamental and applied research
Citizens	Grouped on a non-ideological dimension, e.g. area or age	Adjust lifestyle, support each other, raise children with sustainability values, vote
Government	Public administrators of government institutes	Encourage sustainability, tax or forbid unsustainability, ensure level playing fields, be launching customer
Businesses	Associations of self-employed, SME, multinationals, industry branches, business parks	Invest and innovate for sustainability impact, initiate supply chain action
Non-profits	Networks of health care, education, housing, sports, culture, NGO’s, life view	Inspire people, qualify students, build and connect communities, inclusion

Table 1: Structure model

For continuity, a cyclic process model is chosen. This model is presented in Table 2. Its deliverable is a flow of society wide joint transition campaigns.

Step	Content
Agenda	Democratic prioritising of sustainability issues to set a joint transition agenda. This may be done by (1) asking each task group what they want on the agenda; (2) plenary deliberation; (3) sorting the issues into an agenda by voting.
Campaign	Co-creating sustainability campaigns to address top issues on the transition agenda. These campaigns consist of voluntary, mutually adjusted and synchronised contributions from five task groups. After co-creating a draft campaign plan, the task group representatives may ask their constituency for amendments and approval, on behalf of all of society, until a final plan can be kicked off.
Evaluation	Scientific measuring of ecological, social, economic capitals, and campaign impacts. This may be carried out by the science task group.

Table 2: Process model

In each step, negotiation and decision making is needed, to set an agenda, to coordinate campaign efforts, or to decide how trends are measured. This decision making may result in joint requests or even peer pressure to task groups and their institutes. A transition chamber or product council, however, is not an authority in itself and cannot overrule internal decision making of its participants.

As the platform represents all of society in a given territory, consensus decision making is unpractical, if not impossible. Following normal practice of parliamentary procedures, the platform therefore decides by majority vote. In the voting procedure, task groups have equal voting weight, which may be, given their mutual dependence and therefore their de facto veto power, the least questionable alternative. In a round table diagram (Figure 1), equality is expressed by equal positions.

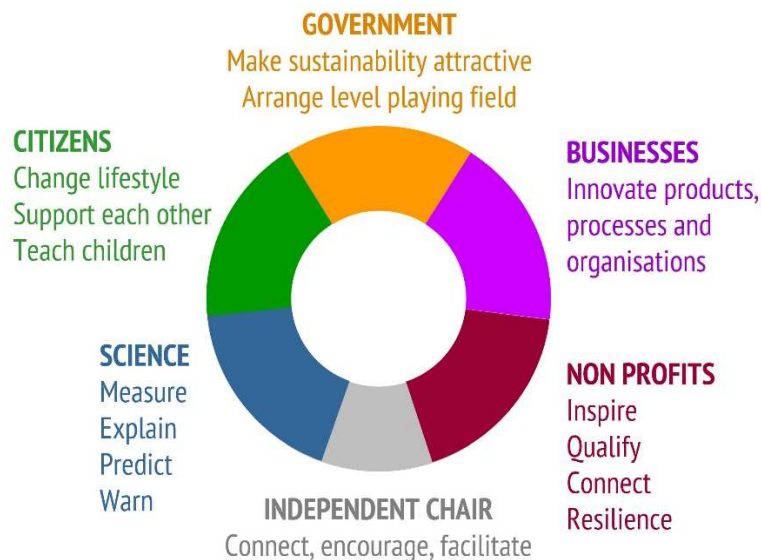


Figure 1: Round table diagram

A development path is considered essential to enable experimenting and implementation in current conditions. The path starts at the ‘first mover’ and ends in a consolidated new institute. Table 3 presents a summary.

Step	Deliverable
Initiative	A single initiator from one task group and a brief idea for next steps
Survey	A list of possible task group representatives
Opinion leaders	An agreement in a small group with opinion leaders, one per task group
Task groups	Meetings within each task group to collect issues and find more initiators
Simulation	Plenary test meetings, manifesto design
Institute	Establishing a formal transition chamber

Table 3: Development pathway

In recent years, the Noorden Duurzaam association developed a set of open access implementation tools for use in this pathway. The set includes an online voting system, a campaign canvas, a product council startup method (Faber et al., 2023) and more. Furthermore, a number of templates are written, such as a product council manifesto (Faber et al., 2022), and documents for district level applications like a plan for task division in district level energy transitions and a district council foundation document (in preparation). This last document outlines the councils' purpose, structure and process, representation and membership, meeting protocol and equal voting rights for task groups, presidency, independent chair profile, open access meetings and public archive.

This design of a transition chamber is intended to be scale-independent and suitable for state, province and municipality levels. Within municipalities, the concept may also be applied in village councils and city district councils, to achieve a more task-oriented and action focused representation. International assemblies like the EU parliament and the UN General Assembly may explore similar implementations to strengthen global collaboration for sustainability transitions. For circular economy, the task democracy concept may be implemented as multi-level 'product councils'.

In summary, task democracy is a task- and action-oriented model for coordinating voluntary sectoral transition efforts. It is based on a blueprint and development path for a negotiation platform where science, citizens, public administration, businesses and non-profits are task groups with equal positions. The model intends to create conditions for shared transition leadership and a flow of society wide sustainability transition campaigns. It is designed for application in liberal democracies, on any territorial scale of public administration or circular economy supply chains, creating networks of transition centres.

5. Discussion

Any proposal to upgrade the liberal democratic governance system of states, provinces or municipalities will be controversial. This section highlights some of the many questions raised by the method of task democracy.

To start with, are there empirical observations? While the title 'task democracy' came up in 2021, sectoral task division projects at Noorden Duurzaam go back further. In a local cross-sectoral circular economy meeting, an entrepreneur said "I won't start on my own [with the suggested measures], but as a group, we would not object being forced collectively." – which set the tone and resulted in a successful covenant (Vereniging Noorden Duurzaam, 2013). In this case, the importance of level playing fields can be seen, as well as the strong motivational effect of actor group unanimity (see for instance Hauser et al., 2014) and the synergy effect of involving all actor groups. Since 2016, a series of local public transport initiatives was initiated, using a task group model. In 2019, the task group

model stabilised in its current form. In a simulation of a transition chamber with a group of 20 transition professionals, participants observed peer pressure by four task groups to a relatively passive fifth group (Bootsma, 2020). In 2023, a legal entity for sustainable development of a 60 hectares farm area was established, based on task democratic articles of association. In 2024, the municipal council and an alderman of Groningen responded positively to the suggestion of a task democratic round table model for circular economy (Gemeenteraad Groningen, 2024). In a related project, five task groups designed a joint local transition campaign and reported that the process created energy and synergy (Figure 2). In general, the observations, although small in scale and numbers, confirm that the model correlates with positive results. On the other hand, politicians and public administrators often hesitate and prefer experiments with more traditional transition approaches.



Figure 2: Campaign design workshop

For political philosophers, the task democracy model raises many questions. For instance, is task democracy liberal? The model deviates from the one-man-one-vote principle, as it aims for equality and political emancipation of task groups, rather than individuals. It even allows for multiple representation (for instance, entrepreneurs and scientists are citizens as well). On the other hand, it prevents task group dominance through a 'one-task-group-one-vote' rule, regardless of potentially huge differences in constituency sizes. Furthermore, it does not establish authority over existing liberal democratic institutes. Liberalism in general may be seen as governing over diversity, rather than politics based on individualism (Fukuyama, 2022). In this sense, task democracy may be considered instrumental to liberalism, as it intends to provide liberal democracies with a new method to respond to slow-but-existential crises.

One could object that task democracy is utopian theory, since it adheres to sustainable development ideals and aims for full participation. Task democracy, however, assumes diversity, negotiation and co-creation of transitions, rather than compliance to a given transition procedure. It intends to rationalise and accelerate crisis response. It improves rather than replaces the current political system. With this openness, realism and transition approach (Valentini, 2012), it is non-ideal rather than ideal theory. In contrast, applying the competition method of liberal democracy to sustainability transitions may be considered utopian, for two reasons. First, it puts individual rights above societal interests which requires an unlimited world with unlimited resources. This causes slow-but-existential crises. Second, it causes transition inertia, making adequate response to these crises impossible.

While experimenting with a task democratic platform may be justified by urgencies and outcome expectations, one still could question its legitimacy, as citizens may be subjected to changed laws and regulations. In that case, however, the laws and regulations always stem from of decision making by a legitimate public administration. They may be negotiated in a task democratic transition chamber or product council, but this chamber or council has no authority of itself. A legitimacy objection is therefore ungrounded.

Task democracy is a new and largely untested model on how to upgrade liberal democracy for timely and effective sustainability transition handling. This paper is the third scholarly writing on topic, and the first presenting an overview. It cannot discuss all questions, but it can name some topics that are being researched or need research: representation and proportionality within task groups; the relation between task democracy and corporatism; lessons from complexity theory; implications for transition theory; implications for state law and public administration; experiment design; tool development; usage in consultancy services; facilitating a community of practice.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the system inertia in liberal democracies, occurring while managing sustainability transitions. A root cause of this inertia is found in the competitive method of liberal democracy, which forces political parties in a race to the bottom, compromising their vision. Their collective avoidance creates a blind spot in public debate, which in turn amplifies avoidance and prevents shared transition leadership. As this problem is systemic, rather than resulting from ideologies, a systemic solution is needed.

For inspiration, the medieval governance model of the Dutch water authorities is reviewed. This model combines a top-level collegial board with democratic representation of task groups. It proved effective in a slow-but-existential crisis.

Can a modernised version of this model help to accelerate sustainable development? A design for a new democratic institution is presented: a negotiation platform, to be implemented as a transition chamber or product council. It facilitates voluntary collaboration and task division between five societal sectors, including public administration as a linking pin to current governance. The purpose of this approach is to create conditions for shared transition leadership.

The task democracy model is new and largely untested. However, simulations and small-scale implementations indicate the model is welcomed by all five task groups and creates collaborative group dynamics.

In answering some political philosophy questions it is argued that task democracy may be considered instrumental to liberalism, that task democracy is non-ideal rather than ideal theory, and that a transition chamber or product council itself has no authority and thus avoids legitimacy issues.

In sum, task democracy is in a different category than many current attempts to fix liberal democracy, like referenda and citizen councils. This category of task division based models urgently needs more research, collaboration and experiment.

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