



# Avoiding System Failure

How Process Design  
Can Help Fix Politics  
Chiara Rosselli

# AVOIDING SYSTEM FAILURE: HOW PROCESS DESIGN CAN HELP FIX POLITICS

*This paper is written from the perspective of a practitioner and dedicated to all the policy people out there “who are usually too busy practicing to write books, articles, papers, speeches, equations, theories and get honored by (...) Honorable Members of Academies” (N.Taleb). It is dedicated to the non-academics, those who, instead of trying to predict the future, try to understand the present and its day-to-day workings.*

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# I. FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

Current political and societal trends highlight a striking dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo. The many different and thoroughly researched explanations about why citizens are fed up with “the system” range from sociological to economic ones. However, none sufficiently addresses the all-pervasive nature of these “anti-systemic” sentiments. These span policy areas, ideologies, political parties, and borders—and their very pervasiveness seems to point to a deeper unifying root cause.

This paper maintains that our political system is failing not because of any single policy malfunction, political class, or political philosophy, but because the processes that regulate it are no longer fit for purpose. The infrastructure of political decision making is unable to keep up with the needs of its constituents in today’s rapidly evolving society—edging us toward a complex<sup>1</sup> and sophisticated<sup>2</sup> system failure.

A complex and sophisticated system failure can occur when a system composed of subsystems (economic, political, societal, technological, etc.) undergoes what seems to be a set of seemingly separate, complex challenges. The system appears to function, and no single challenge or challenged subsystem poses an existential threat, yet their compound effect is the erosion of its central infrastructure—driving toward system failure caused by the inadequacy of the democratic infrastructure.

If we accept that current widespread political dissatisfaction is indeed the result of systemic failure, rather than a specific policy challenge, then addressing the weaknesses that contrib-

ute to the existential dysfunctionalities of our political system requires we look at the ‘how’ of politics rather than the ‘what.’ How decision making and political processes function can be studied through the lens of process design. The discipline of looking at how a process is designed offers a chance to change the way the frailties of the political system are understood by avoiding the temptation to focus on the outcomes of individual policies and thus miss the bigger picture, and it helps to understand and ultimately strengthen political decision making today. It promotes more adaptive and effective policymaking by improving how decisions are made rather than focusing on any single policy decision or political actor.

Observing the current political landscape from a systemic angle raises the question of how a system can fail in the first place. From a design perspective, the political system has been weakened by its inability to adapt to a new political reality, resulting in a gross mismatch between policymaking tools and approaches and the changing demands and realities created by today’s political and societal challenges. These challenges include the increasing unpredictability of the outcomes generated by policy interventions in complex contexts, the increasing variety and diversity of stakeholders that are active parts of the political system, and the transformative and crosscutting challenges represented by the technological and communication revolution and the impact these have had on the political tissue of societies. The overlap of these macro challenges, their unprecedented scale, and their nature has rendered political infrastructure outdated.

Borrowing from process design and the related disciplines from which it draws its insights—such as behavioral science, psychology, neuroscience, or the study of trust as well as that of heuristics and cognitive bias—it is possible to identify four key process flaws that contribute to the weakening of today’s political system. They are:

- Jumping to conclusions without proper diagnosis of a policy problem,
- Assuming the rationality of policymakers and citizens,
- Failing to think outside the box, leading to severe policy blind spots, and
- Stifling adaptive and innovative policymaking due to hyper-rigidity.

The thesis of this paper is that good process design can assist in mitigating these weaknesses through three positive levers:

- Building a deeper understanding of the policy challenge for improved and innovative policy solutions;
- Supporting greater ownership of policy solutions for stronger political consensus, more effective implementation, and a broader mandate for experimentation; and
- Increasing transparency and trust building to improve confidence in institutions and create the preconditions for more flexible, less risk-averse policymaking.

Through these levers, political processes and spaces can be designed that encourage:

- More explorative policymaking that is instrumental in the face of complex and unprecedented challenges;
- More inclusive deliberation to engage a greater diversity of stakeholders; and
- More active listening and constructive exchanges between stakeholders that hold different political positions, which is essential to striking political compromises and creative problem-solving.<sup>3</sup>

Together these improvements can strengthen the overall ability of the political system to remain adaptive and fit for purpose in a fast-changing society defined by “wicked problems,” that is, problems with many interdependent factors making them seem impossible to solve. Because the factors are often incomplete, in flux, and difficult to define, solving wicked problems requires a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved.”<sup>4</sup>

While process design is not a silver bullet, it can—particularly in the context of rigid protocols common in policymaking—help ensure that political infrastructure is upgraded to make the best use of the processes and resources in place in order to bolster effective and efficient decision making.



## II. MORE THAN JUST A SERIES OF RED FLAGS: It's time to recognize political dissatisfaction as an early indicator of system failure

- Widespread dissatisfaction with “the system” is pointing to a sophisticated and complex system failure, where seemingly separate challenges acting in concert are threatening the very resilience of our democratic infrastructure.
- Accepting that political trust is plummeting, that citizens do not believe that the system in its current state is able to deliver, and that they do not “trust the process” means we should look for answers and solutions through a “systemic” lens.

Whether we pin the current state of democracy on elected autocrats (a classic democratic backsliding narrative),<sup>5</sup> the failure of capitalism,<sup>6</sup> or a deep social crisis driven by record levels of social isolation<sup>7</sup> and loneliness<sup>8</sup>—there are a number of red flags concerning the state of societies and the erosion of democratic functioning.

For more than a decade, political analysts have tried to make sense of some disheartening trends, including record levels of political polarization, as exemplified by the current political situation in the United States where polarization is at its highest in decades;<sup>9</sup> the erosion of social cohesion;<sup>10</sup> increasing distrust in governments;<sup>11</sup> and public disillusionment in the democratic system.<sup>12</sup>

### PIT STOP: Citizen perceptions of the state of the system

According to a 2017 study, an absolute majority of the population in Greece, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and Italy say that their government never or rarely works in their interest.<sup>13</sup>

Many voters distrust the integrity of the economic and political system. For example, half of Europeans believe that the only way to succeed in business in their country is through political connections.<sup>14</sup>

Citizens, on average, perceive the world to be poorer, less healthy, and more dangerous than it actually is.<sup>15</sup>

“Dissatisfaction with how “the system” functions—whether expressed in the polls or on the streets—indicates the first signs of a broader system failure.”

These trends have given rise to unexpected political behavior, such as the emergence of new challengers—dubbed anti-systemic parties—to the political and economic status quo. At their worst, they have resulted in new forms of overt and covert violence, from the weaponization of the media and external actor interference in democratic processes to outright civil disobedience.

In one way or another, widespread dissatisfaction with how “the system” functions—whether expressed in the polls or on the streets—indicates the first signs of a broader system failure.

In this context, system failure should be understood as both complex and sophisticated. Complex in that it refers to a system composed of a number of interdependent subsystems (economic, political, societal, technological, etc.) undergoing a set of seemingly separate, complex challenges.<sup>16</sup> The interdependence of these challenges threatens the very resilience of the system and its components. Sophisticated, as on the surface the system appears to function,<sup>17</sup> and no single challenge or challenged subsystem poses an existential threat, yet their compound effect is the erosion of its central infrastructure—causing it to fail.

### BUT WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT “THE SYSTEM”?

One could argue that there is no such thing as “the system,” which has several different interpretations. It may refer to social, economic, or political systems; international, European, or national systems; or local governance, which can also be considered a system in its own

right. Yet all these systems are intimately interlinked, which explains why voters perceive but one system in which citizens are allowed, indeed tasked, to express their judgment—by casting a single vote. Every four to five years, one single vote expresses a citizen’s level of satisfaction with the societal, economic, and political status quo—whatever that may be.

### PIT STOP: Defining “the system”

It is telling to consult Merriam-Webster’s definition of the word system and find among its entries the following statement:

“an organized society or social situation regarded as stultifying or oppressive—usually used with *the*”<sup>18</sup>

Why does it matter? Why does a theoretical debate on where one system ends and the other begins have any implications in the real world?

It matters because a misdiagnosed problem will be mistreated, with potentially disastrous results. So, what would change if we were to look at political events today through a systemic lens? Rather than focusing on individual elements of the problem, we would recognize these as symptoms of a broader systemic challenge and look for more comprehensive solutions. Instead of repairing broken windows, we’d turn our gaze to the foundation of the house. If we accept the systemic premise, then we have a duty to understand what it means for an entire system to fail and how it could have happened.

III. THE ELUSIVE HUNT FOR A ROOT CAUSE:  
Does the multiplicity of competing explanations  
point to one underlying cause?

- Competing theories shed light on individual elements of the crisis while pointing in the direction of a unifying cause.
- The crosscutting theory, whereby a crisis of trust is to blame for current discontent, offers a particularly compelling narrative. The pervasive and systemic implications of rising distrust offer useful insights into the source and nature of our systemic weaknesses and how to begin solving them.

For a failure to be systemic, there needs to be either a common cause that affects the system as a whole or a set of interdependent drivers with the same systemwide impact. A systemic failure cannot be an isolated failure which, rather than pervading the system, can be circumscribed and addressed in a targeted manner.

One reason to suspect that today’s political and societal problems are symptoms of a systemic failure is the existence of competing explanations for the current state of discontent. On the one hand, these interpretations provide valuable insights into particular aspects of societal problems witnessed today. On the other, the competing validity of these explanations may well hint at the existence of a broader underlying and unifying problem.

DEEP DIVE: EXPLORING COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS OF WHO OR WHAT IS TO  
BLAME FOR SYSTEMIC DYSFUNCTION

What follows is a select overview of evidence and theories regarding what may be the principal driver(s) of today's political discontent, or political discontent in general. Highly reputed scholars—experts and practitioners across economics, psychology, sociology, and history—each offer their own interpretation.

Untenable Economic Tensions Theory

The untenable tensions theory is largely economic in nature. As summarized by economist Thomas Piketty, the unprecedented trajectory of social inequality is making issues of redistribution politically unavoidable and the current system untenable.<sup>19</sup>

The Consequences of the Digital and Communication Revolution

Recent sociology research supports Piketty’s interpretation and elaborates further. It finds that inequality, together with the increased visibility of the lives of others due to the digital and communication revolution, is giving rise to emotional distress in society,<sup>20</sup> including a shift in voting patterns and a growing sense of unfairness.

Accountability, Transparency... and Mistrust

On a similar, yet perhaps more positive note, Ivan Krastev links societal progress in terms of transparency and connectedness to the underlying root cause of dissatisfaction. In a nutshell, “What went wrong is also what went right,” claims Krastev in his “In Mistrust We Trust.” The progress societies and democracies have made in terms of

accountability, transparency, and engagement with citizens in order to increase trust in government may have bred the contrary—a system built on the management of mistrust through increased openness and transparency, which creates ever higher demands for accountability. The political system simply cannot keep up.<sup>21</sup>

Globalized Clash of Civilizations and Moral Tribes

Psychology scholars argue that the violent confrontation of diverging philosophies in a globalized society is giving rise to deep rifts within communities. Joshua Greene describes these as “moral tribes,” which prevent the emergence of political compromise based on highly ideological positions.<sup>22</sup> This interpretation is supported by Jonathan Haidt, who highlights the emotional rather than the rational choice of political preferences—“People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds.”<sup>23</sup> Once this logic is activated, you have a world divided into irreconcilable tribes.

Voids of Authority and the Return of Tradition

Some scholars would describe the current political landscape as a clear crisis of political authority. They explain that when political authority is questioned, citizens may turn to pre-political authority instead: “The common quest for gaining meaning by forging pre-political solidarity can often express itself in affirming traditional family and community life and religion and solidarity.”<sup>24</sup>

**Social Isolation Breeds Mistrust, Aggressiveness, and Fear of the Other**  
More than 9% of adults in Japan, 22% in the United States, and 23% in the United Kingdom always or often feel lonely, or else feel left out or isolated,<sup>25</sup> due in part to smartphones and social media. The political moment we are in is one that often refers to the ones that are “left behind.” Hence it is no surprise that economists such as Noreena Hertz<sup>26</sup> have looked into the causal connection between social isolation and political behavior, supported in their thinking by Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*. As loneliness increases, feelings of abandonment and the sense that the world is untrustworthy breed feelings of marginalization, producing a potentially aggressive backlash against groups with which one does not identify.<sup>27</sup>

The Loss of Control in a World with Too Many Variables

One notable theory by Ulrich Beck discusses the loss of perceived control in a world with too many variables. The scale of modernization leads to a society in transition, unleashing unintended side effects, growing societal uncertainties, increasing the perception of risk, and triggering feelings of loss of control.<sup>28</sup> Other political theorists echo this understanding, underscoring, as Habermas does, that this tension is most evident at the transnational level.<sup>29</sup> This leaves citizens and politicians worried about who is actually deciding what, and whether they have any influence over their own futures, hence making the delicate and ephemeral realm of international cooperation a prime victim.

### Illusion of the Liberal Consensus

The crisis of political authority may be due to the complex set of policy and political challenges that political leaders of the last decades have been ill-equipped to answer. Or, as suggested by Frank Furedi, it could be from the imposition of a set of values over a non-consenting majority. The liberal elites, Furedi observes, are guilty of having waged a “cultural war” against the average citizen on the basis of assumed shared values.<sup>30</sup> What we are observing today is a continuation of the cultural war the elites themselves started.

### A Crisis of Trust

An essential component of social cohesion, societies have depended on trust for hundreds of years—“the fact that millions of people are able to believe the same things about reality is a remarkable achievement, but one that is more fragile than is often recognized.”<sup>31</sup> As observed by political and sociological theorist William Davies, whilst recognizing the “current crisis has too many causes to enumerate...and it is impossible to apportion blame for a collective collapse of trust... what is emerging now is what the social theorist Michel Foucault would have called a new ‘regime of truth’—a different way of organizing knowledge and trust in society”<sup>32</sup>—what some today would call a post-truth society. Davies argues that today the very nature of trust is changing in ways that are irreversible and can no longer sustain or justify a structure where politics and policymaking are the exclusive realm of elites and intellectuals.

**“ The erosion of trust could be a catalyst for other tensions, with the potential to inflame dormant or minor cleavages and turn them into full-blown conflicts.”**

One theory that stands out among the compelling interpretations of today’s systematic dysfunction is the theory regarding the crisis of trust. It offers a particularly interesting and convincing lens through which to view the weaknesses of our current system because of the crosscutting nature and pervasive consequences of a society that no longer knows how to trust. In contrast to other theories which highlight particularly troublesome components or trends within the system, the erosion of trust could be a catalyst for other tensions, with the potential to inflame dormant or minor cleavages and turn them into full-blown conflicts. When we understand trust as a belief in the reliability, truthfulness, and capability of someone or something, other theories of political system dysfunction can also be understood in connection to the erosion of trust, for example:

- Excess inequality;
- Less trust in the ability of the economic system to deliver;
- Untenable demands for transparency;
- Decline in trust in all that we do not have full access to and control over;
- Crumbling of traditional sources of authority;
- Loss of a figure in which to place our trust.

### WHAT ARE DISINTEGRATING TRUST LEVELS TELLING US?

The essential role of trust in keeping societies and political systems viable simply cannot be overstated.

It is often brushed aside as a direct consequence of the incompetence or corruption of a political class. Yet this is a gross oversimplification of far more subtle phenomena.

First, the current crisis of trust does not exclusively concern the realm of politics. Research has shown that social trust and political trust correlate one for one,<sup>33</sup> which means the trust we place in our neighbors increases and

decreases in line with the trust we place in institutions or politicians. This hints at the fact, ignored by many political analysts, that the current crisis of trust may have less to do with corrupt or incompetent politicians or a particular policy, and more to do with the more comprehensive and complex drivers of social trust. Keele claims social capital, or trust, is the greatest driver of the decline in trust in institutions.<sup>34</sup>

Even when other indicators of good governance seem to be improving, they are not necessarily reflective of trust toward political institutions. The crisis of trust seems pervasive, almost omnipresent, spanning countries and blind to political ideology.

The decline of trust when analyzing today’s society may be the underlying root cause for today’s ailments. Even though it cannot explain all the current misgivings, its pervasiveness is a nudge toward a systemic rather than particularistic lens. Its multifaceted nature encourages us to look beyond the scapegoating of a political class or policy to seek more comprehensive answers.

An elusive yet cross-cutting indicator, trust—or the lack thereof—is society’s way of signaling that something is profoundly wrong.



IV. OVERLOOKING THE HOW:  
How overeager policy expertise obscures the systemic weaknesses of our political processes, and why it matters

- In their search for answers, policy thinkers and analysts tend to look for problems and solutions in the realm of their own expertise, yet fail to see the forest for the trees.
- Addressing a systemic challenge through particularistic policy fixes distracts our attention from the actual problem and could easily do more damage than good.
- Beyond individual policies, the issue with politics today is that the processes regulating decision making—the *how* of political decision making—is emerging as no longer fit for purpose.

There is a reason why we do not dig deeper for answers. Society relies on highly specialized expertise and values experts who claim to have the answers to a problem instead of asking uncomfortable questions.

In their search for answers, policy thinkers and analysts tend to do what they do best: to look for both problems and solutions in the realm of their own expertise. In their individual fields, each expert contributes to providing enriching insights into a particular component of a vast and complicated puzzle, and yet... fails to see the forest for the trees. “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”<sup>35</sup> This expression points precisely to the cognitive biases that lead to over-reliance on familiar tools or paradigms, even when they are not suited for the job.

“ As a society of highly specialized experts, we are simply not wired to see the system as a whole. Rather, we scrutinize its parts.”

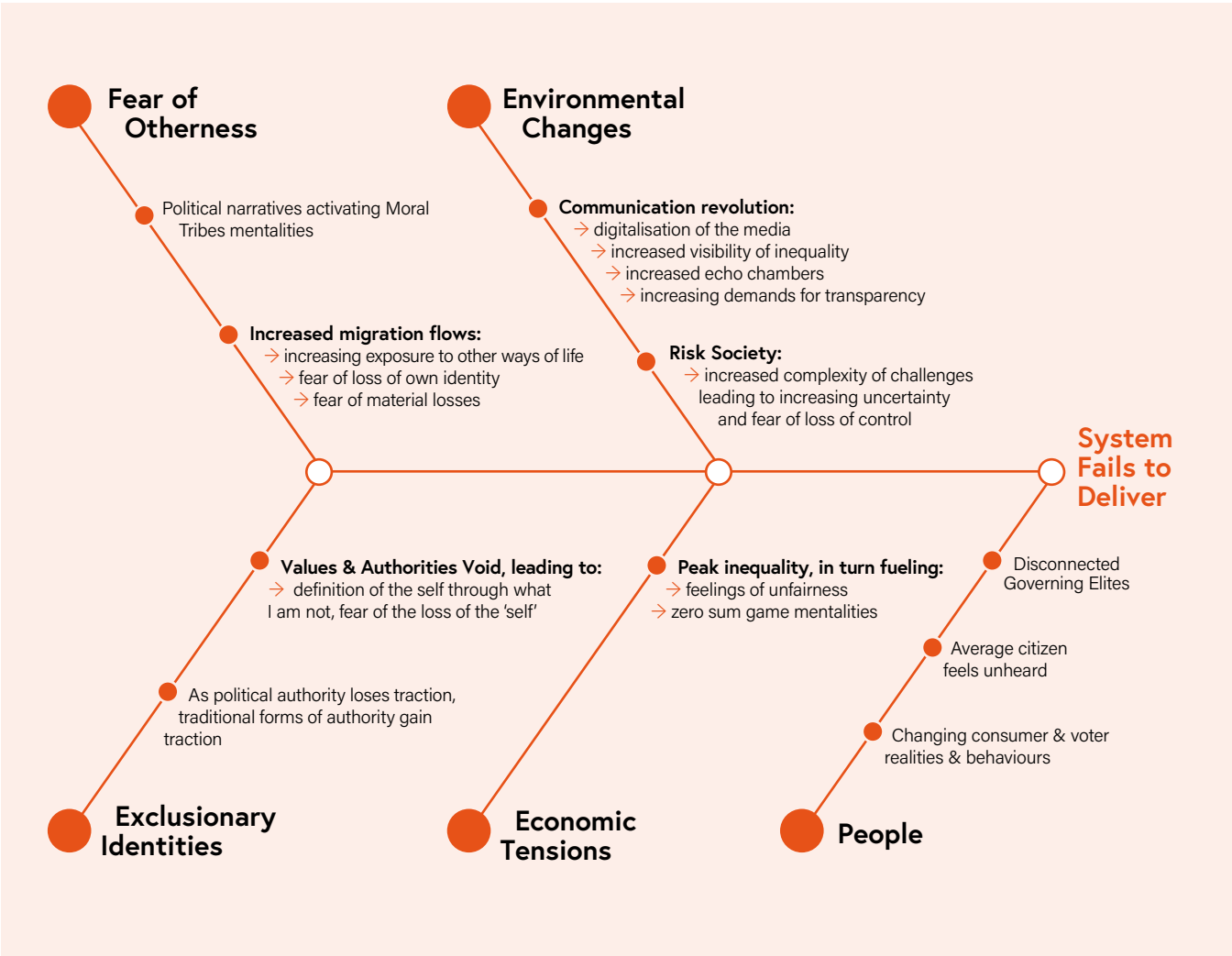
As a society of highly specialized experts, we are simply not wired to see the system as a whole. Rather, we scrutinize its parts. The tendency of political analysis to over-rely on the critical scrutiny of individual policies and the political voices championing them has created a dangerous blind spot for our democratic system. As exemplified by the panoply of expertly-researched interpretations for the current state of dissatisfaction with the status quo, the field overanalyzes and overestimates the importance of individual output and input failures. Failures of individual policies or individual political classes are taken seriously, both what is fed into the system and what comes out of it is carefully scrutinized, but we do not stop to question comprehensively the fundamental design of the system and what happens in the middle—the ‘*how*’ of politics and political processes.

DEEP DIVE: AN EXERCISE ON HOW TO SEE THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES, A.K.A. DRAWING AN ISHIKAWA FISH DIAGRAM

The Ishikawa diagram is a management tool that identifies cause and effect relationships within an underlying problem and how multiple causes can lead to the same outcome. Most importantly, it helps prioritize causes, so that underlying root causes can be addressed first.

This method helps to identify underlying trends, if not common causes, and highlight the existence of patterns.

In the graph below, we can see some trends emerge along the themes of fear & uncertainty resulting in distrust and a sense of loss of control. Highlighting such trends can help produce solutions that broadly address these trends. For example, reform of the organization of political life to take into account feelings of uncertainty and distrust, on a large scale could have a broader system impact compared to specific policy fixes that address one particular cause, which will have limited to no impact on the system as a whole.



In the context of political decision making, recognizing that current political challenges may be systemic rather than caused by specific or isolated factors means we must explore how political stakeholders interact and the processes that regulate their interactions. Analyzing the decision making processes that stakeholders are embedded into means looking at the ‘how’ of political process as a whole.

Beyond individual policies, the issue with today’s politics is that the processes that regulate decision making—the *how* of political decision making—is emerging as no longer fit for purpose. The way political life is organized is outdated and ill-suited to current societal reality. In an ever more complex and diverse political environment and a fast-paced information society, the infrastructures of democracy are simply not up to date and lack the necessary mechanisms to respond and adapt to the needs and moods of today’s society. Other sectors, notably the private sector, have understood the need to adapt their business models to a changed consumer reality. They have begun to adopt adaptability as a competitive advantage over market positioning.<sup>36</sup> Similar paradigm shifts have not occurred in the public and political sectors, which still understand their voters as though they were operating in a world largely unchanged over the last 30 years.

**THE PLAGUE OF WELL-INTENTIONED NEGLIGENCE**

If the problem with today’s politics is systemic rather than policy-specific, addressing it through particularistic policy fixes distracts attention and diverts resources away from the actual problem, which could lead to further backlash and do more harm than good. This plague is called well-intentioned negligence.

Even if policy interventions could alleviate the symptoms of a sophisticated and complex democratic system failure and play an important role in ensuring social cohesion during

tense times, they will still fail to address the underlying causes of dissatisfaction.

Worse still, they may contribute to killing a patient that is already in critical condition. Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues strongly against what he calls “naive interventionism” due to the often conveniently discarded phenomenon of iatrogenics, or “harmful unintended side effects.”<sup>37</sup> This notion, initially used in medicine, translates very well to social sciences and politics in that the risk of iatrogenics is greater, the greater the uncertainty of the context we operate in. Social sciences are, notably, far from a precise science.

Moreover, there are grounds on which to question the ethics of such forms of naive interventionism. Anand Giridharadas<sup>38</sup> offers a sharp critique of why promoting policies that address the superficial symptoms of grave structural imbalances is actually producing worse results than by not intervening at all. He argues that dampening ever-so-slightly the acuteness of a given problem, say poverty, contributes to pacifying a system that is flawed by design. This leads to inaction and complacency when in fact, substantive change is needed to address those imbalances. As one example, inequality will continue to produce negative externalities until it is addressed. To simplify the concept, it would be like covering an infected wound with a band-aid and hope it will heal.

It is therefore of primary importance that we properly diagnose the dysfunctionalities of our system, particularly if we are edging toward system failure.

*Early* identification of system failure is essential for timely intervention. If today’s crisis is a systemic one with many manifestations and catalysts fueling discontent, it is vitally important to dig deeper to identify and address its common root causes. This is the first step to solving a problem that requires us to intervene in the general infrastructure or organization of the system as a whole.

**V. HOW SYSTEMS FAIL:  
Four tell-tale process flaws undermining our political system**

- The current policymaking system is no longer appropriate for the challenges of today’s society, as predicting the outcomes of policy interventions becomes increasingly complex and unleashes unintended consequences.
- Four process flaws that contribute to the system’s weakness are: jumping to conclusions without proper diagnosis of a policy problem, assuming the rationality of policymakers and citizens, failing to think outside the box, and stifling adaptive and innovative policymaking due to hyper-rigidity.

Today, there is widespread agreement that many traditional policymaking models are ill-fitting to modern, hyper-connected societies. Angela Wilkinson puts this down to the rigidities of the current institutional setup. “Today, the world is radically more interlinked, fast-moving and information-rich. But our governments aren’t.”<sup>39</sup>

We are operating in increasingly complex systems. This recognition is more than just a platitude used by analysts to mask the fact that it is increasingly difficult to make any sensible predictions in the world of politics (recall the fallibility of polls in predicting events of enormous political relevance, such as the Trump election or the Brexit vote). The recognition of complexity is essential to understanding reality and its risks, and requires policymaking infrastructures to evolve.

There are many ways in which the organization of the structures and processes that regulate political life can fail to address this complexity. Does it provide for the appropriate stakeholder interaction, thereby avoiding risky blind spots in the understanding of policy challenges? Does it facilitate the co-creation and widespread ownership of solutions? Does it allow for the appropriate diagnosis of a problem before jumping to the solution? Does it allow for out-of-the-box thinking? Does it provide policymakers with the necessary tools to experiment and fail safely? Does it inspire trust in citizens?

**DEEP DIVE: SYSTEM FAILURE IN POLICYMAKING**

Jake Chapman refers to system failure in the context of policymaking as:

“The result of an outdated model of public policy making, based on the reduction of complex problems into separate, rationally manageable components, which is no longer appropriate to the challenges faced by governments and the changes to the wider environment in which they operate.”<sup>40</sup>

Chapman enumerates a list of elements that contribute to system failure:

- Growing complexity due to an increasing number of actors;
- Changes in technology and the resulting impact on communications and interactions;
- The blurring of boundaries between domestic and international policy.



The compound effect of the above elements of complexity, he argues, lead to:

Outcome prediction of any policy intervention becoming infinitely more complex, unleashing unintended consequences, stifling the confidence of leadership, [and] ultimately leading to long-term failure to deliver on electoral promises.<sup>41</sup>

From a process design perspective, the political system today suffers from four key process flaws.

### 1) Jumping to conclusions without proper diagnosis of a policy problem

The complexity and uncertainty that define today's policy problems make the issue of policy framing—the way we understand and describe problems—all the more important. In a political reality in which there are no straightforward answers, policymaking needs to be explorative. Problem solving without pausing to reflect on how a problem is framed is likely to produce solutions based on a distorted, top-down analysis of the problem.

### 2) Assuming the rationality of policymakers and citizens

Failure to embrace explorative policymaking is due in part to the failure to recognize the subjectivity and emotional elements of policymaking. Our current policymaking system is almost entirely built on the rationality fallacy. Cognitive scientists and political psychologists have extensively researched behavioral theory and the notion of bounded rationality. We have in-depth descriptions of the human mind's limits on the gathering and processing of information. These discoveries suggest that the stubborn pursuit of purely “evidence-based policymaking” may be a misleading ideal.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, understanding the way that our mind perceives and processes political questions should inform how policies and political strategies are designed.<sup>43</sup>

### 3) Failing to think outside the box, leading to severe policy blind spots

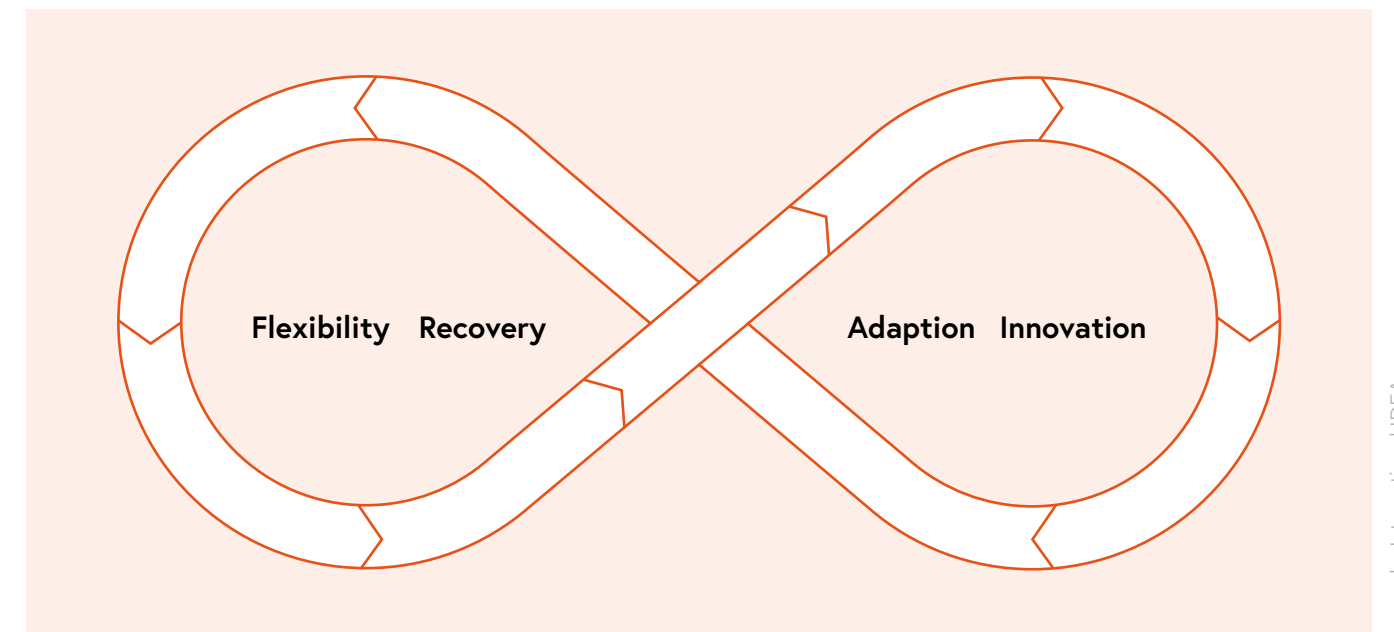
Nik Gowing and Chris Langdon argue that the rate of change of societies is overtaking humanity's capacity to keep up.<sup>44</sup> The problem is partly rooted in the limits of the human mind: our inability to process the scale of unpredictability. Yet there is one aggravating factor that we do have some control over—the conformist leadership structures, which tend to obscure and neglect unpalatable scenarios from receiving the necessary attention from leaders. In a nutshell, “leaders are struggling” today more than ever, across both sectors and borders. The unprecedented level of anxiety and uncertainty facing leaders contributes to increasingly risk-averse leadership and the inability to think or act beyond business as usual.

### 4) Stifling adaptive and innovative policymaking due to hyper-rigidity

Trying to solve new problems with old tools, that is to say, the dire lack of innovation in the field of politics, is undermining the adaptiveness and resilience of the political system. Where resilience is understood, as suggested by International IDEA,<sup>45</sup> as the ability to cope with crisis by being flexible, recovering from a shock, adapting, and innovating—it is clear that current political systems are severely lacking when it comes to their ability to innovate and adapt.

#### PIT STOP: Defining democratic resilience

**International IDEA describes democratic resilience as the property of a social system to cope, survive and recover from complex challenges and crises. The characteristics of a resilient social system include flexibility, recovery, adaptation and innovation.<sup>46</sup>**



**“Whilst other sectors have evolved to adapt to a new context, there is an overwhelming lack of R&D investment in the political sector and therefore a lack of innovation in the way politics are conducted—a stagnation that is threatening the resilience of the democratic system.”**

The difficulty in maintaining processes that are fit for purpose and up to speed with the times is not unique to politics. During the last couple of years, “virtually every industry has been experiencing rapid, massive, and, at times, devastating change. Just look at what Airbnb has done to the hospitality industry.”<sup>47</sup> But whilst other sectors have evolved to adapt to a new context, there is an overwhelming lack of R&D investment in the political sector and therefore a lack of innovation in the way politics are conducted—a stagnation that is threatening the resilience of the democratic system.

The political sector must recognize the need for innovation and invest appropriately in re-imagining its core functions. Indeed, some scholars would argue that the state is being hollowed out, with more and more services being provided by third parties and de facto reducing the capacity of governments to influence their societies directly. Where we do not see a shrinking state, we may instead observe a stagnating state with fewer resources devoted to social affairs and more spent on incentivizing and investing in the productivity of the economic system.<sup>48</sup> De facto, little thought and few resources seem dedicated to innovating how the government and state function, the processes that govern how policymakers interact with society, and the way in which decision making is managed.

## VI. WHY PROCESS MATTERS:

### The untapped potential of upgrading political processes

- A well-designed policy process can dramatically improve policy outcomes and address distrust in political institutions through effective stakeholder engagement.
- Effective stakeholder engagement delivers greater ownership and stronger political consensus, a deeper understanding of policy challenges, more effective policy solutions, and increased transparency and trust-building.
- During times of high polarization, advocating for a redesign of political process could be a policy challenge around which different political forces could rally.

Philosopher John Dewey describes democracy as a framework for coping with the inevitable problems of modern society. This framework is not a blueprint for society but a methodology through which to respond to both opportunities and dangers. It follows that keeping this framework or methodology updated is, as political scientist John Ikenberry advocates, essential to the resilience of our political system. The survival of democracy requires resilient systems and institutions, which, when confronted with change, even drastic change, will adapt rather than collapse.<sup>49</sup>

**“Good process design can help navigate complexity and manage political risk, dramatically impacting the achievement of good policy outcomes.”**

To be capable of adapting to change, democratic and political systems require adaptive processes. It is well known that a key indicator of good governance is good process. Yet, this fact is often overlooked.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the Institute for Government criticizes attempts to improve policymaking that are based on the idea that “success lies in finding the ‘correct’ solution and then making sure it is implemented perfectly.”<sup>51</sup> Rather, it underscores that how a policy is put into practice is just as significant as what the policy is.

Effective policymaking is a complex process, a balancing act that requires evaluating different policy options by drawing both on evidence and the views of stakeholders who will naturally evaluate these options against their own values, perceptions, and interests.<sup>52</sup> It is thus a highly complex context in which politicians are frequently called upon to take contentious decisions in politically flammable environments.

Good process design can help navigate complexity and manage political risk, dramatically impacting the achievement of good policy outcomes. It can accelerate the process of finding workable solutions while mitigat-

ing the risk of expensive policy mistakes.<sup>53</sup> It does so by designing processes that explicitly recognize and try to work around well-known policy thinking and policymaking pitfalls. A good process can spark innovative conversations in the stalest of policy environments. It can mitigate the risk of groupthink (which is an especially relevant risk when the decision making elite is homogeneous). It can help guide policy conversations in a way that considers the emotional elements of decision making. It can create the conditions for more diagnostic and experimental policymaking or create a holding environment to encourage the emergence of uncomfortable truths and blind spots.

In a nutshell, good process helps address the systemic weaknesses of our political system. It can help navigate politically risky situations and provide politicians with the tools to better understand complex challenges. For particularly contentious policies or reforms, it creates the engagement and exchange mechanisms necessary to build consensus. If applied correctly, good process has the potential to revolutionize policymaking.

Consider the potential impact of better political processes on the crisis of trust our political system is experiencing. Recognizing that the current political setup does not inspire trust, process design can help us rethink the design of political institutions by keeping trust-building in mind as an explicit objective. If, for example, we understand the three main ingredients needed to build trust are authenticity, competence, and empathy,<sup>54</sup> good process design can create policymaking processes that are specifically tailored to highlight, strength-

en, and reflect these values. It can provide opportunities for policymakers to develop and exercise empathy through stakeholder engagement, arm themselves with a more refined and diverse set of insights, and bolster their competence and ability to address complex problems. A policymaking process that is designed around transparent decision making can provide policymakers with the opportunity to prove their authenticity and communicate their intentions to voters. Ultimately, improvements in the design of dialogue, deliberation, and decision-making processes, when acting in concert, can credibly help tackle the most urgent political challenges: citizens’ distrust of the system.

#### DEFINING POLITICAL PROCESS DESIGN

Looking at political process design means looking at the design of the policymaking process and its auxiliary processes—from identifying and assessing a policy challenge, to stakeholder engagement and the creation of political consensus, to formulating a policy solution and proceeding with implementation. Political process design looks at policymaking infrastructure not as isolated, static parts, but as interconnected elements within the same dynamic process.

Applying process design to politics requires being intentional and strategic when organizing political life. It means paying attention to how each part of the process is designed to achieve its intended outcome and understanding the interaction with other elements of the broader political decision-making process.

This approach calls for applying process design principles to the realm of policymaking. Principles such as clarity of purpose, the alignment of objectives and instruments, and the coherent integration of a given process into other ongoing processes all attempt to assess the same thing: is the process fit for purpose? If not, what does it need in order to be?

**DEEP DIVE: HOW DESIGN MEETS POLICY AND THE BASIC DEFINITIONS & PRINCIPLES FOR APPLYING PROCESS DESIGN TO POLICY CHALLENGES**

**What is policy design?**

In 1996 Herbert Simon, Nobel Prize winner in Economic Sciences, defined the realm of design by stating that “Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.”<sup>55</sup>

Guy Peters associated the work of design to that of policy by proposing that “Public policy can be considered a design science. It involves identifying relevant problems, selecting instruments to address the problem, developing institutions for managing the intervention, and creating means of assessing the design.”<sup>56</sup> He went on to elaborate how policy design has become “an increasingly challenging task, given the emergence of numerous ‘wicked’ and complex problems.”<sup>57</sup>

The Institute for Government strengthens the argument for linking design and policy by stressing how “Policy design is a fundamental yet underdeveloped part of the policy process. Design matters. Many ideas which look good on paper are not feasible to implement—and it is often too late to change course when the legislation is on the statute book and political capital has been expended. Those failures can come from multiple causes, but one recurrent theme is the failure to understand the likely behaviours of those whose

actions the policy is designed to affect.”<sup>58</sup> Basic design principles that should also be applied to the field of policy include:<sup>59</sup>

- ✓ Design against an understanding of the purpose, demand, and current capabilities of the organization or system to deliver.
- ✓ Design ‘outside in’ (customer focused), ‘not inside out’ (internally focused)—better still design in co-creation with users.
- ✓ Always design within the context of the broader system, not in isolation.
- ✓ Prototype the design to test hypotheses and the impact of policies against their real-world application.
- ✓ Design and deliver policies collaboratively, leveraging maximum benefit from internal and external stakeholders throughout the process.

**What does political process design look like at different levels of governance?<sup>60</sup>**

The rise and scale of design cuts across four levels of government:

- ➔ At the local government level, design work focuses on interactions with citizens and draws on methodologies in service design. Examples include cities and municipalities which deploy designers to generate user insights and help local officials redesign services and offerings.
- ➔ At the regional level, design has been used to stimulate new thinking and approaches to economic and regional development, for instance by strengthening the creative sector.
- ➔ State level design spans from service design to comprehensive national digital design programs to design methods embedded directly in the policy making processes.
- ➔ At the international level, institutions from the EU to the UN have embraced design as a way to address complex policy issues and (for instance in the case of the UNDP) empower local efforts at the country level by creating and distributing innovation resources.

**“One of the key value-adds of good process design is its ability to ensure the effective engagement of different stakeholders in the political decision-making process.”**

This approach advocates for evaluating the effectiveness of deliberation and decision-making processes and the adaptation of the components of these processes from the macro level (how decision making is conceptualized and organized) down to the micro level (how stakeholder exchanges are designed and implemented). A panoply of tools allows for the application of process design at any intervention level, with the ability to scale interventions up or down according to need. Indeed, the application of process design to politics can span the design of citizen services and interfaces to the design of entire policymaking processes.

One of the key value-adds of good process design is its ability to ensure the effective engagement of different stakeholders in the political decision-making process. In doing so, it holds the potential to deliver:

- 1) Greater ownership of policy solutions for stronger political consensus, more effective implementation, and a broader mandate for experimentation

Stakeholder buy-in, a key policymaking challenge particularly when it comes to contentious policies, is important for successful policy implementation. With greater ownership, stakeholders are more likely to grant policymakers a mandate for experimentation, a necessary approach to tackle ‘wicked policy challenges’ that lack clear-cut solutions. A broader set of stakeholders taking ownership of a policy makes the policy more resistant to personalization, which ties the success of a policy to the popularity of a specific politician, often with negative outcomes.

- 2) Deeper understanding of the policy challenge for improved and innovative policy solutions

Effective stakeholder engagement allows for better policy formulation and implementation as it builds on the unique inputs of affected stakeholders. Inclusive political dialogue can ensure that policies address the right issues and find solutions that can be realistically implemented. The inclusion of diverse perspectives helps avoid groupthink and creates opportunities for the development of policymakers’ empathy and emotional intelligence, in turn bolstering their ability and competence to deal with contentious and emotional policy questions.

- 3) Increasing transparency and active trust-building to improve confidence in institutions and create the conditions for more flexible, less risk-averse policymaking

Processes that bring together the insiders of the political system (the decision makers) with the outsiders (affected stakeholders), can help undermine the toxic us-vs-them rhetoric which recent research reveals to be a critical factor for the distrust that citizens feel to-



ward traditional mainstream political elites.<sup>61</sup> Greater transparency in the decision-making process allows policymakers to communicate their intentions to voters and prove the authenticity of their motives, which makes them less likely to be questioned than if the decision making was happening behind closed doors. The creation of trust between policymakers and stakeholders creates the psychological safety needed for policymakers to propose daring solutions and maintain the flexibility to exercise their mandate, thereby promoting the conditions for leadership to emerge.<sup>62</sup>

#### ADVOCATING FOR PROCESS DESIGN IN A POLARIZED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In times of political polarization, such as the current one, there is a risk of political immobility as fragmented positions on highly flammable topics dominate the political landscape.

In this context, staunch rivalries between political parties emerge around broader political questions from the economy to the climate to civic rights. A degree of polarization is desirable in a thriving democracy due to its positive impact on political participation. However, excessive polarization can make governance difficult, limiting the capacity for reform and inhibiting the system's ability to innovate and address issues of major public concern requiring broad majorities.<sup>63</sup> This often ends up blocking the large-scale systemic interventions needed in times of crisis.

Yet, reforming the political process so that it can be more adaptive, effective, and resilient is a policy issue that could potentially appeal to a cross-partisan audience and have a broad systemic impact, making it an investment with low risk and a high potential yield.

The latest example of how it is possible to rally a divided electorate around reforming the decision-making process is a 2020 constitutional referendum in Italy, where despite cacophonous confusion as to which party was supporting which position and why, the proposal to cut the total number of parliamentary seats passed with a historically high in favor vote, with 70% of voters agreeing.<sup>64</sup> Citizens definitely have an appetite for some form of change in the current political infrastructure.

## VII. SYSTEM FIXES: changing policymakers and policymaking

- As we move the policymaking infrastructure into the modern age, the role of policymakers itself should evolve from top-down decision makers to “system stewards”—a figure that is closer to a coach or a manager of teams.
- Wicked problems call for more deliberation and dialogue. Fit-for-purpose policymaking in the future should embrace active listening and more explorative, experimental, and inclusive policymaking.

When it comes to the way we think of policymaking and the role of policymakers, a paradigm shift may well be needed. The Institute for Government has a compelling and apt sense of how policymaking ought to change to adapt to the wicked problems of today's society. It advocates “system stewardship”<sup>65</sup> as an alternative modus operandi for government, one based on the basic premise that unilateral top-down policymaking will “rarely be suitable when it comes to complex problems.”<sup>66</sup> In this light, the Institute advocates for “setting high-level resilient goals and letting the system find the best solution through adaptation and experimentation.”<sup>67</sup> At the very core of this change is the idea that the process of policymaking needs to be more flexible, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of stakeholders. Hence, stakeholder engagement and experimentation become crucial tools for the 21st-century policymaker.

**“We do not hold all the answers when it comes to complex political challenges, and politicians may need to embrace new approaches to political decision making away from the executive, top-down, decision-making model.”**

In other words, policymakers must “embrace their role as system stewards...thinking about how to manage an overall system, rather than how to launch another stand-alone initiative.”<sup>68</sup> Managing the system also means actively involving multiple players in the system, rather than formulating policies in a vacuum and then involving affected stakeholders in the implementation, when it is too late to have any real impact on the policy design. Ultimately, this approach is one that requires policymakers to recognize that they do not hold all the answers when it comes to complex political challenges, and they must adopt a more humble approach to their work. Politicians may need to embrace new approaches to political decision making away from the executive, top-down, decision-making model and toward a model that sees politicians as coaches or team leaders who are responsible for channeling the insights of a broad set of actors and stakeholders.

Particularly in the context of high polarization, new methods of political decision making and the research that informs them highlight the important role that upgrading our political toolbox could have on widespread societal challenges such as extremism and generalized distrust. For example, Open Dialogue—intended as a tool for informed and participative decision making—can be a powerful instrument for resolving value conflicts and rebuilding trust. Don Lenihan indeed makes a case for Open Dialogue as a solution to the deteriorating state of political communication: “in a democracy, public debate and consultation are supposed to inform citizens and give them a meaningful voice on issues - however today debate is often highly scripted, fiercely partisan and largely unproductive.”<sup>69</sup> Hence, he argues for changing or upgrading the way we go about public debates or consultations. Giving communities a meaningful role in decision making and a space where their views are genuinely respected can be an important exercise for rebuilding trust and cultivating compromise. Open Dialogue is a place to start sowing the seeds of a different way of engaging with the political other.

Working with elected politicians across Europe, the Open European Dialogue (OED) has observed policymakers grappling with shifting paradigms and distilled lessons on how policymaking can become more fit for purpose.

As the political problem becomes more wicked or complex, dialogue and deliberation, supported by tailored process design and facilitation tools, become crucial to political problem solving. For more than six years, the OED has been experimenting with how to deliver innovative and constructive formats for political dialogue to policymakers across Europe. OED has been recognised as a global best practice for cross-border collaboration and innovation by the OECD<sup>70</sup> as well as other public policy scholars.<sup>71</sup>

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### **PIT STOP: What is a "Wicked Problem"?<sup>72</sup>**

**Wicked problems are problems with many interdependent factors making them seem impossible to solve. Because the factors are often incomplete, in flux, and difficult to define, solving wicked problems requires a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved. Complex issues such as healthcare and education are examples of wicked problems. There is always more than one explanation for a wicked problem because the explanations vary greatly depending on the individual perspective. Hence, there is no definitive formula for a wicked problem.**

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The OED platform regularly serves a network of nearly 200 elected politicians with tailored policy and political dialogue spaces that are designed following three key principles. These represent recommendations for the design and promotion of better dialogue and trust-building processes for fit-for-purpose policymaking. Political process design principles can be applied from the macro level—the reconceptualization and organization of the decision-making process as a whole and the way institutions function—down to the micro level—designing and organizing the various components of the policymaking process, such as the successful execution of parliamentary hearings, and stakeholder meetings. Acting in concert, these improvements can strengthen the ability of our political system to remain adaptable and fit-for-purpose in a fast-changing society defined by ‘wicked problems’ and increasingly diverse, politically active stakeholders.

The Open European Dialogue’s three key principles for better political dialogue and fit-for-purpose policymaking are<sup>73</sup>:

- 1) **More explorative policymaking: Spending more time on the diagnostic and analysis of a problem—asking why and how—rather than trying to find a solution**

Collective decision making on complex policy issues would benefit from a stronger focus on the analysis and diagnosis of political and societal problems before jumping to conclusions.

Exploring policy problems by taking into consideration different perspectives improves the quality and diversity of available information, as well as the way information is processed by decision makers. It creates a clearer picture of a problem and leads policy actors to explore root causes and not just the symptoms of a problem.

Yet established experts, among which we count policymakers, are “rewarded for knowing the answer rather than asking better questions.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, policymaking processes tend to neglect new and alternative approaches in favor of quick fixes in the form of familiar solutions based on oftentimes false assumptions and pre-defined beliefs.<sup>75</sup>

Explorative policymaking is intrinsically rooted in an understanding that policymakers accept that they do not possess the solution to a problem, and therefore agree to adopt a more open-ended experimental policymaking approach—a controlled trial-and-error methodology that embraces testing solutions and evaluating policy results in an iterative process designed to refine policy solutions.

- 2) **Broaden the scope of voices in policymaking: actively seek engagement with diverse and niche views, paying attention not only to political ideology, but also levels of governance**

To foster the achievement and acceptance of political compromise, it is important to understand the underlying motivations behind divergent political preferences. Only through exposure and engagement with different ways of thinking can policymakers make sense of others’ preferences and understand how these are influenced by both values and the lived experience of different sets of stakeholders. Hence, more policymakers and policymaking processes need to engage in exchanges outside their own political echo chambers.

The alternative leads to the problematic phenomenon known as groupthink—which tends to exclude opposing perceptions to the ones of the group as invalid or irrelevant—and prevents the emergence of political compromise.<sup>76</sup> Discussions that take place in cohesive ingroups striving for unanimity and consensus-based decisions, are known to lack critical review and independent input and can lead to developing dangerous blind spots. Valuable insights that an out-group could provide are lost and alternative or new approaches are sidelined before even being considered.<sup>77</sup> This approach should be applied broadly across the political spectrum and at all levels of governance, in order to create a rich exchange across as many different stakeholders as possible.

- 3) **More active listening in democratic decision making: the conditions for constructive exchange need to be designed into a process, as they will not manifest otherwise**

Simply having a representative of a certain view in the room does not mean that he or she is actually being heard. Political debates rarely feature much listening. Rather, they are characterized by actors with different or opposing views competing over speaking time and the superiority of their opinions.<sup>78</sup>

The concept of active listening means paying attention to what is being said, verbally and nonverbally, for the sake of understanding

and not just to articulate a counter-response or comeback.

Talking against and not with each other results in debates that lack constructiveness and fail to challenge any pre-existing views. Engaging in such debates merely reinforces pre-defined opinions and does not allow for mutual understanding and learning.<sup>79</sup> Parliamentary plenaries, to quote one example, will yield a very different dialogue environment than open agenda informal exchanges. The conditions for constructive exchange need to be crafted, as they will not manifest otherwise.

When spaces are explicitly designed to allow for active listening, actors holding competing views can have meaningful exchanges and fruitful outcomes. It is crucial to define who is the convener of a conversation in order to surface any assumptions about the neutrality of the exchange. Whenever possible, stakeholder engagement should be convened by an independent, neutral facilitator, so as to encourage outliers or fringe opinions to surface in safety.

# VIII. POLITICAL PROCESS DESIGN IN ACTION: Practical ideas, guiding principles and tips, tools & approaches to begin embracing process design thinking in politics

- Political process design can play an important role both on the macro level (design of decision making processes or institutions) and on the micro level (design of consultations, dialogues, meetings)—the trick is choosing the right tool for the right purpose.
- Applying process design to politics is not an all-or-nothing game and does not require a complete systemic overhaul. Even small tweaks can make a difference.

This final chapter is a collection of starting points from which to begin embracing process design thinking in politics. Introducing elements of process design into political processes, whether for convenings or organizing decision making processes, can seem like a daunting task. Yet, this approach does not necessarily require revolutionizing existing political infrastructure. While its impact could potentially prove to be systemic, if applied coherently and consistently, this approach does not require a complete overhaul of the current system. Even small tweaks can make a huge difference. Embracing the process design approach and slowly integrating and streamlining it across sectors and silos can have a ripple effect that starts with a series of small changes before gradually disseminating best practices to different areas of politics.

The chapter will offer three entry points into the realm of political process design:

- The Political Process Designer Starter Pack: Practical ideas for integrating process design & adaptive policymaking tweaks into your policy thinking & policymaking starting today;
- Activating the Power of Dialogue: Practical tips and guiding principles for designing better political dialogue processes from the experience of Open European Dialogue; and
- The Approaches & Toolkits Marketplace: Choosing the right tool for your design needs.



## THE POLITICAL PROCESS DESIGNER STARTER PACK: Practical ideas for integrating process design & adaptive policymaking tweaks into your policy thinking & policymaking starting today

- ✓ **Apply this process design rule of thumb to any process: Align the three Ps—purpose, people, and process.** What is the purpose of this exercise? Who do I have or need in the room in order to achieve it? What process and tools can best guide us toward our shared purpose? Using this simple heuristic can help ensure that meetings and decision making processes are coherent in their design, that the process allows the pursuit of the stated purpose, and that it includes the necessary people to achieve said aim.
- ✓ **Consider reviewing the protocol of internal meetings, dialogues, workshops or multi-stakeholder processes** with an eye to effective process design. Is the fora fit-for-purpose and, if not, how can it be amended?
- ✓ **Establish a working group or an appointee with an explicit mandate and, ideally, a budget to research and pursue innovative policymaking methods.** There are a vast number of methods and actors that could improve the effectiveness and impact of your policymaking efforts. Researching and identifying the right one will take some effort.
- ✓ **Create a budget for consultations and stakeholder engagement to seriously pursue more inclusive and adaptive policymaking.** Stakeholder engagement requires time and money; it can never come as an after-thought. Make it a priority with measurable targets and key performance indicators to help monitor progress.
- ✓ **Never underestimate the importance of informal processes.** Reinforce informal exchanges on the sidelines of formal decision making processes. These can help strength-

en existing structures or gather information on how to increase impact. They can also be a powerful tool to surface red flags or blindspots.

- ✓ **Reach out to civil society or think tanks with expertise in process design** and experimental or innovative policymaking<sup>80</sup> for consultations or collaborations. If possible, hire a process design consultant to help you avoid process pitfalls.

Dig deeper with the Open European Dialogue's Participatory Processes: A Guide to Improve Political Conversations

## ACTIVATING THE POWER OF DIALOGUE: Practical tips and guiding principles for designing better political dialogue processes from the experience of Open European Dialogue

- **A good dialogue considers the emotional element of decision-making. Recognize that providing politicians with evidence might not lead to evidence-based policies.** Content should be provided as a conversation starter and always complemented with information from different sources and varied perspectives.
- **Apply human-centric and experiential learning approaches rooted in behavioral science to challenge preconceptions and assumptions.** These can positively influence the way information is interpreted, remembered, or judged, creating a more constructive space for political discussion. Designing effective exchange opportunities is a key instrument for activating human-centric learning. Participants should be presented with easily digestible information and there should be space given to relate their own personal experience to the challenge at hand so that participants can engage more intimately with the material being discussed. Good process design can help achieve less polarizing exchanges—e.g., by substituting plenary discussion shouting matches with small group conversations, which have been proven to foster more collaborative narratives.
- **Recurring engagement with stakeholders in open-ended consultations, rather than one-off exchanges, allows for the surfacing of potential solutions that may not appear obvious.** Policy thinkers and policymakers alike should work to broaden their understanding of a given policy challenge, with repeated engagement throughout the policymaking process with a variety of relevant and affected stakeholders. Pitting one solution against another is ineffective in the long run as it generates more polarization rather

than encouraging political compromises, which guided and reiterative stakeholder engagement may instead help to reveal.

- **In the diagnostic phase of exploring a policy problem, it is important to foster the discipline of gathering and processing new information and steering away from immediately jumping to prescriptive solutions and panel-style, pro-contra debates.** One way to do so is to engage policymakers in formats that allow for experiential learning of a given problem—through field trips, fact-finding missions and informal exchanges—with the explicit mandate of gathering information rather than finding a solution. Ideally, moderators of such exchanges should be impartial and external to the decision making process. They should act as the keepers of the “spirit of enquiry” and ensure there is a genuine respect for the views of all participants.
- **Recruitment and engagement of politically diverse stakeholders are necessary to achieve a diverse and inclusive exchange.** Diagnostic exercises are strengthened by the involvement of actors with different views. Don't assume that if you open up the door for a “diverse” point of view, that this point of view will engage and participate in your exchange. It is important to explicitly seek out and recruit diverse political voices by reaching out directly, developing a rapport, and building trust with the stakeholders you hope to engage.
- **Tailored process design and facilitated dialogue can establish a culture of active listening between policymakers and stakeholders holding different views.** Small table discussions and clear ground rules about the objectives and the binding or non-binding nature of a political exchange are a first step. Another trick is to construct a shared conversation space with the aim of asking participants for shared observations that arise from conversa-

tions rather than solutions. This exchange should be facilitated in a way that explicitly allows for active participation of smaller parties rather than being monopolized by the usual suspects. Participatory dialogue tools can be revolutionary in this sense. Experienced facilitators can curb the speaking time of any one participant and ensure ground rules are respected in the exchange. Open agenda tools, such as open space technology,<sup>81</sup> can make it easier to capture the real and shared issues important to a specific group rather than limiting a conversation from the outset due to misguided top-down assumptions and priorities.

→ **Reframing exercises can be used to challenge pre-existing perspectives on a given topic.** Taking a known policy issue and reframing it into a different guiding question is an instrument one can use to lure policymakers away from the comfort of standard replies or solutions and force all participants, including the experts and the newbies, to engage on the question with fresh eyes. Role-playing simulations can serve a similar function, by forcing a group to engage with a topic from the perspective of another stakeholder group. The success of this type of experimentation rests on the perceived neutrality of the convening body, which is key to establishing a neutral problem framing. Trust in the convener is an important aspect to take into consideration in this case, as the convener needs to be granted an explicit mandate to place stakeholders in a situation of potential discomfort.

→ **Create a baseline of accepted knowledge ahead of a dialogue.** Provide digestible and non-partisan data in an easy-to-consume format, such as briefing notes or an introductory video. In the preliminary stages of the process, discuss the information provided with the stakeholder group to ensure there is buy-in of the basic data around which the discussion can then evolve.

→ **Genuine dialogue does not naturally flourish within the bounds of protocols or excessive formality. Complementing formal decision making and exchange fora with informal spaces for conversation is key.** These should be given equal importance as they can help dig deeper into stakeholders' points of view. Informal spaces are an opportunity for policymakers to let their political guard down<sup>82</sup> and engage in open and honest conversations. For policymakers, letting their political guard down is the first step to an open conversation. Politics is a people-to-people business hence it is crucial to create opportunities and conditions for policymakers to engage on a human level as individuals. Having dedicated spaces for off-the-record exchanges is important for building trust. Furthermore, one should create opportunities to converse on things that all participants share regardless of their political color, for example, their challenges as policymakers, the changing role of policymaking, or their daily exposure to hate speech and public pressure. This allows people to shed their role as representatives and reconnect as individuals before getting to work on a policy issue on which they are likely divided.

Dig deeper with the Open European Dialogue's Participatory Processes: A Guide to Improve Political Conversations

## THE APPROACHES & TOOLKITS MARKET-PLACE: Choosing the right tool for your design needs

New tools and approaches embrace the need to rethink and redesign political processes in order to achieve more adaptive, inclusive, and fit-for-purpose policymaking. Each contributes to enriching and refining the skillsets of policymakers and policy thinkers, and each embraces the basic logic and principles of good process design to maximize impact by upgrading political infrastructure to better reflect the needs of society.

That said, it is important to navigate the landscape of design tools & approaches to find the right fix for each challenge. The Observatory for Public Sector Innovation produced a toolkit navigator<sup>83</sup> precisely for this purpose—this compendium of toolkits for public sector innovation and transformation covers a wide range of applications of design approaches from organizational design to the design of foresight exercises.

The number of approaches and tools is staggering. Some, such as citizen participation tools, have taken the political arena by storm while others are just beginning to emerge. What follows is a selection of approaches and toolkits worth perusing before deciding on the design fix best suited for your policy challenge.

### → **Innovative Citizen Participation Tools.**

The literature is rapidly evolving when it comes to best practices in terms of citizen participation in politics and policy. Merely desiring greater engagement of citizens is insufficient to actually achieving said engagement. In fact, many such experiments backfire for lack of a professional approach to the issue (often this is unintentional, often still it is very much intentional). Decades of experiments at different scales of governance highlight how to pursue such an objective in an effective manner, it always begins with the identification of the

desired type of engagement and its purpose and function: citizen opinion gathering, policy evaluation, informed citizen recommendations, or permanent deliberation. An unclear purpose will yield a messy process.

Find out more at OECD Report: Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions

→ **Experimental Policymaking.** This approach applies design thinking to develop new policy frameworks to carry out experiments in government. This allows for “strategic experiments” or policy trials—such as the basic income experiment in Finland—and fosters the creation of a grassroots experimental culture in the public sector. Experimental policymaking creates more license to experiment and can yield rapid results in testing out new solutions to complex problems.

Find out more at OECD Report: Using Systems Approaches in Policy Design - Introducing Experimental Culture as a High-Level Political Goal

→ **Redesigning Political Dialogue Fora.** The art of dialogue design and facilitation offers insights into how existing institutional and civil society-led political exchanges can be more effective. By embracing the principles of human-centric process design, from the creation of genuine dialogue opportunities within institutions to the conceptualization of effective task forces, this approach aims to redesign dialogue and deliberation fora around its users' needs and re-humanizing existing political spaces. The Open European Dialogue and its partners are pioneering this type of work.

Find out more at OED Declaration: Creating Better Political Conversations; and More Than Just a Ticking Clock: The Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly

→ **Open Government Reforms.** These initiatives center around the incorporation of transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation in the policymaking process. Toolkits for designing open government initiatives cover a broad spectrum of government needs—from digital engagement guides to help governments deliver services and engage stakeholders to techniques for greater co-creation of policy solutions and user-led policy, and the effective use of open data in policy decisions.

Find out more at [OECD Toolkit Depository: Design an Open Government Strategy or Initiative](#)

→ **Agile Methodologies for Multidisciplinary Collaboration.** Agile methods focus on closing the gap between growing expectations from citizens and the lagging speed at which governments produce and service solutions. It applies an approach originally intended for software development to activate multidisciplinary teams in the design and testing of solutions. At its heart, it embraces a new model of decision making based on flexible and diffused leadership and cross-functional teams—breaking down the traditional silos and hierarchies of large organizations or, in this case, institutions.

Find out more at the [Boston Consulting Group: Conquering the Challenges of Agile at Scale in Government; Agile as the Next Government Revolution; and Getting to Agile at Scale in the Public Sector](#)

→ **Policy Design Sprints for Creative Problem Solving.** The premise of the design sprint is that in a condensed amount of time—usually five days—a focused and expertly guided process can assist in the identification and prototyping of a product or solution. The design sprint is comprised of five phases: problem mapping, sketching of potential

solutions, deciding phase, prototyping, and testing. It is a smarter, more effective, and efficient tool to work creatively and collaboratively on any problem, large or small.

Find out more at [Sprint Stories: How We Ran a Design Sprint in Government; The Open European Dialogue's Policy Design Sprint Report; and Digital Telepathy's Design Sprints Playbook](#)

→ **Anticipatory Governance.** This approach strengthens the ability of governments to handle the increasing speed and growing complexity of major policy challenges.<sup>84</sup> A series of practices encourages “exploring, envisioning, and planning for change and uncertainty,”<sup>85</sup> for example through the use of Strategic Foresight methodologies, with the aim of “governing in the present to adapt to or shape uncertain futures.”<sup>86</sup> The approach aims to expand the toolbox for governing bodies in order to foster more resilient decision making and governance capabilities.

Find out more at [UNESCO Open Learning: Anticipatory Innovation Governance - Observatory of Public Sector Innovation](#)

## IX. CONCLUDING REMARKS

When addressing frustrations with political, economic and social institutions, it would be a mistake to keep searching for individual policy solutions.

If today's crisis is a systemic one with many manifestations and catalysts fueling discontent, each with its own validity, it is necessary to dig deeper to identify and address its common root causes. A silver bullet solution to a systemic challenge is rarely found. That said, acting on individual elements of the system while ignoring the underlying systemic drivers, would be irresponsible, intellectually dishonest, and in the long run, dangerous.

While there are many possible explanations for the crisis, two key features should lead to investigating political processes and their supporting democratic infrastructure as probable root causes.

On the one hand, political trust is plummeting. Citizens do not believe that the system in its current state is able to deliver, and they do not “trust the process”. Second, there is an observable innovation gap between fast-paced societal changes and the rigid, stale, and largely immutable nature of democratic infrastructure. These combined factors should, at the very least, raise some questions about the way in which political life is organized and lead to a reexamination of the political processes that govern societies.

Good process design is proven to dramatically improve policy outcomes: the adaptive and inherently flexible nature of the discipline can help political processes keep up with a rapidly changing society. Furthermore, process

design has the potential to address the current perception that policymaking lacks authenticity, competence, and empathy—the three main ingredients that are needed to build trust.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, working to update the way we organize our society politically is a potentially bipartisan cause that could—if properly communicated—provide a much needed impetus toward change and constructive political renewal in times when polarization and fragmented decision-making power are blocking major advancements on other, more divisive, policy issues.

At the institutional level, many associate the upgrading of political process with the push for greater inclusion of citizens in decision-making, which has been strongly advocated over the last decades. Yet, the redesign of political processes means much more than that. It means embracing an approach that is strategic and human-centric when it comes to the “how” of politics—one based less on how people believe the world should work and more on working within the limits of their rational minds. It means taking into consideration the insights provided by cognitive and behavioral science to fashion fora and processes for political exchange and decision-making that are suitable for the way the human mind and society actually works.

These changes do not require major overhauls of political institutions; hence, the cost of implementation is relatively low and the potential benefits could be exponentially high, making it a policy action with a high Return on Investment.

Process design principles can be integrated into very different levels of decisionmaking.



In their most modest application, it would suffice to make certain changes to the way internal meetings are designed to witness a substantial change in attitudes of policymakers.

One example of a small tweak with important consequences is provided by one member of the Open European Dialogue parliamentary network who chairs the European Affairs Committee in one EU national parliament. She reports that a very small change in the way she runs committee meetings, inspired by her experience at the Open European Dialogue, almost immediately had a positive effect on the manner and tone in which government and opposition politicians addressed one another. She says:

“I tasked opposition members to act as rapporteurs, which led to noticeable change from discussions based on personality to more content-based discussions. People refrained from attacking each other as frequently as they used to. It also helped to decrease attacks on the chair and the governing party, and it did indeed lead to more constructive engagement, and I felt that it improved the atmosphere and discussion climate in the committee.”<sup>88</sup> Another notable example, unfortunately providing for a European worst practice, is that of COSAC—Europe’s biannual conference for member states’ national parliamentarians to come together and discuss European affairs. COSAC is supposed to be the forum for deliberation and dialogue between national parliaments in Europe, yet the format allows for very little dialogue. The agenda, set almost a year in advance, is the product of consultations among an extremely small subset of actors in a very top-down manner, which leaves little room for deviation from the stipulated topics of conversation. Given the long timeframe between the setting of the agenda and the conference, there is little opportunity for dialogue around important topics that emerge between the two. The two-day conference is articulated in hundreds of subsequent two-minute statements, allowing no space for

questions or discussions between the participants. Dialogue, if any, happens during the breaks, which is often the most interesting part of the conference. As a forum designed to promote dialogue across countries, COSAC’s design and structure do not meaningfully advance its own aim.

Better process design would immensely improve the outcomes of this illustrious forum with noble ambitions. The case of COSAC is but one case in an infinite number of policymaking processes and fora that, simply put, lack the tools to achieve their self-proclaimed aims. The policymaking world is rich in examples of well-intentioned processes that simply lack the design rigor to achieve their own goals, from the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly,<sup>89</sup> to Macron’s consultations on Europe, to the Conference on the Future of Europe, to expensive gatherings hosted by philanthropic foundations with the objective of creating a network—without structuring any networking time.

Integrating process design into policymaking does not mean adapting constitutions or revolutionizing representative democracy. Much to the contrary, and as illustrated by the above examples, most process designers would argue that even very small tweaks within existing structures can have an enormous impact.

While process design is not a silver bullet, it can—particularly in the context of rigid protocols common in policymaking—help ensure that political infrastructure is upgraded to make the best use of the processes and resources in place to bolster effective and efficient decision making.

Finally, there is a reason beyond the return-on-investment argument for looking more carefully at how anything—from town halls to online ministerial websites, citizen consultations, or experimental policies—is designed. There are values enshrined in the way decisions are made. While it is true that

redesigning political institutions is not as polarizing or partisan as other topics, there is nevertheless a vision of what a good society looks, one reflected in the way political life is organized. Hence, if process design can help create a political system that is more adaptive, inclusive, constructive, competent, transparent, and empathetic, then we have the responsibility to make sure institutions reflect these values. If nothing else, process design can be an olive branch in times of heightened polarization, an opening toward finding a common ground, if not on specific policies, at least on how society and democracy should function.

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# JOINING FORCES IN THE OPEN EUROPEAN DIALOGUE

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The Open European Dialogue is a politically neutral platform that aims to improve European politics by supporting policymakers in better understanding challenges and perspectives from across Europe.

It connects European politicians across parties and countries, providing space for dialogue and cross-border collaboration.

In 2021 it was selected as an OECD global best practice for public-sector innovation.