



# SHARING SORTITION WITH SOME *SOUL*

How we can generate excitement about sortition  
with savvy and emotive communication

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The content of this essay represents the views of the authors and not those of any agency, organization, employer, or company with which the authors are or have been affiliated.

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**Cover Photo:** Randomly-selected participants in a debate run by [Missions Publiques](#) (France)

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# Introduction

All of us in the *Sortition Space*, from the organizations in [Democracy R&D](#) to the regular readers of [Equality by Lot](#), are passionate about sortition and hopeful that it can empower everyday people and deepen democracy. The last decade has seen exciting advances on this front: mini-publics are on the rise, as are related books and articles, and we are connecting and collaborating with each other more than ever. But although we have grown and moved in from the fringe, we are still quite small and sortition is still quite marginal. And this should surprise us, especially given how desperate our societies seem for anything that could right the sinking ship of traditional electoral politics.

Political crises ripple through our countries and trust in government tanks, yet almost 50 years after its resurrection few people have even *heard* of sortition. Demagogues rise a wave of democratic disenchantment, yet few people who have heard of it seriously *consider* sortition. And we promote our cause everywhere from dinner parties to democracy conferences, yet few of our listeners seem to *care* about sortition. Some are surprisingly skeptical (given such frustration with the status quo), while others seem to find our case convincing but not compelling. But sortition *is* important and inspiring, so where are we going wrong?

In this short essay, drawing on research on political communication,\* we suggest that the primary stumbling blocks are an affinity to language that doesn't always fit our audiences, and a lack of skill and comfort with persuasion—especially in the realm of emotion. We argue that the latter is likely due to our deep predisposition to try to communicate in ways that are rational and neutral. As illustrative examples, we juxtapose typical sortition speech with concrete ways to overcome these challenges. And we conclude with an invitation for others to join us in making our messaging about sortition more captivating and memorable.

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\* Throughout the development and writing of this essay we drew on the following works: Forsyth, Mark. *The Elements of Eloquence: How to turn the perfect English phrase*. Icon Books Ltd, 2013; Lakoff, George. *The ALL NEW Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014; Leith, Sam. *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*. Soft Skull Press, 2012; Luntz, Frank. *Words That Work: It's not what you say, it's what people hear*. Hachette UK, 2007; Westen, Drew. *The Political Brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation*. PublicAffairs, 2008.

# Adapting to the Audience

One important reason we sometimes struggle in our communication is that we don't always adapt it to fit different audiences. The precise, technical, and somewhat jargon-laden language we use as practitioners, researchers, and proponents can resonate in very intellectual spaces. It falls flat, however, with the general public and with many public officials and grantmakers. Tone-deaf language of this kind may make us sound sophisticated, but at the cost of creating confusion and making us (and sortition) appear out of touch and irrelevant.

This can generally be avoided with a better understanding of different audiences along with practice engaging them. Good questions and good listening can help us gain this understanding and tailor our appeals to *their* values, *their* priorities, and *their* language. One example of how to do this comes from Iain Walker of the *newDemocracy Foundation*, who wisely starts conversations with public officials not with a pitch, but with a question: "What's hard for you?"

We should, however, be aware that tailoring our appeals to different audiences will require us to occasionally part with some of our favorite words and phrases. For example, I (Adam) have been canvassing in different parts of the United States. Having spoken with nearly 300 complete strangers, I have found that the phrase "*everyday people from all walks of life*" is much more accessible and appealing than *microcosm, stratified sample, demographically representative, or "reflective of the broader population"*. I have also found that the word *jury* and comparisons to courtrooms resonate in some spaces, but not where there are negative associations with the court system, such as in many communities of color.

Likewise, when talking about the selection process, I previously preferred what I saw as the cleanest and clearest option: *random selection*. But having repeatedly heard the knee-jerk reaction "You're gonna put *RANDOMS* in there!?", I've realized that many non-sortitionists associate the words *random* with chaos and *random people* with the absolute worst that humanity has to offer. While canvassing, I've also found it difficult to explain new *concepts* like sortition, if at the same time I also have to explain new *words* like '*sortition*'. And presenting unfamiliar approaches to politics in unfamiliar terms can create unnecessary barriers to understanding and enhance people's natural apprehensions with radical change. Thus, I have found

many Americans (half of whom enjoy playing the lottery)\* quickly grasp and get behind MASS LBP's preferred term: *civic lottery*.

I (Adam) make no claim that these examples are scientifically robust or generalizable to other populations. And if your intuition tells you I'm wrong about one of your favorite phrases, I encourage you to knock on some doors and stop some people on the street, to see for yourself which terms resonate and which fall flat. And share what you find! Our point is simply that different strokes work for different folks, and we would be wise to focus more on what *our audiences* hear, than on the words *we* hold dear.

## Winning Hearts & Minds

Another reason we struggle in our communication is less obvious and more difficult to address, because it's rooted in something we deliberative democrats care deeply about and do well: we give people facts, evidence, and reasoned arguments and eschew other influences to avoid distorting their decisions. As practitioners communicating with participants in mini-publics, this neutral, reason-based approach is absolutely crucial to the integrity, reputation, and success of sortition. But as advocates communicating with the broader public, it can significantly undermine the appeal and spread of sortition.

We may hope for a more deliberative and democratic future, but currently most people don't have the benefit of being randomly selected to join diverse peers and dive deep into complex issues. And most people don't have access to good information, vetted experts, and skilled facilitators. Instead, they are busy, distracted, and isolated in echo chambers. As such, they understandably take conscious and unconscious shortcuts in their thinking toward politics. They support

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\* According to Gallup, 49% of American adults played the lottery in 2016. I (Adam) have heard some in the Sortition Space reject the word *lottery* because they see state-run lotteries as regressive taxes that con poor people out of their money. Fair enough, but adding *civic* counters that connotation, and again it's not how *we* feel about the word that matters (we're already onboard with sortition), but rather how *our audiences* feel. Also, we should not assume that the term 'civic lottery' could only play well with poorer and less educated audiences, since Gallup reports that a significantly higher percentage of wealthy Americans (53%) played state lotteries that year than poorer Americans (40%), and about the same percentage of people with postgraduate degrees (45%) played as those with only high school degrees or less (47%).<sup>1</sup>

causes and candidates they like and identify with, without careful consideration of the issues, let alone the pros and cons and trade-offs. And they are moved by ethical and emotional appeals far more than by statistics and reasoned debate. Yet even when we address this un-deliberative audience, many of us stick just the facts, evidence, and arguments. So if we reach anyone at all, we may get them to see sortition as sensible, but probably not sexy or significant.

Our suspicion is that many of us in the Sortition Space suffer from a general lack of skill and comfort persuading others, having spent so much time as impartial conveners and researchers trying not to influence the participants of the process. Or, as good deliberative democrats, we may even mistakenly think that persuading others by appealing to their emotions is inherently manipulative. Like any other form of communication, emotional appeals *can be* manipulative if used in ways that are dishonest, disingenuous, or malevolent. But if we are honest, genuine, and benevolent, it is not manipulative to persuade others to feel angry when there really is something they should be angry about. Or to give people hope when there is good reason to be hopeful. Or to rouse people to action when inaction would result in injustice.

Persuasive emotional appeals move, inspire and impassion. If we want others to see what we see in sortition, we have to make them feel what we feel. If we want to reach not only people's minds but also their hearts, we need to share sortition with some *soul*. So, pushing past any emotional hang-ups we might have, how could we round out our dry, neutral, rational appeals and make them more compelling?

### Principles *Before* Process

One way we can give our communication more weight is to start putting principles *before* process. Modern US party politics provides a great case study in the importance of talking about principles. As the influential, progressive linguist George Lakoff laments:

Progressives tend to talk about policies and programs. But policy details are not what most Americans want to know about. Most Americans want to know what you stand for, whether your values are their values, what your principles are, what direction you want to take the country in. In public discourse, values trump policies, principles trump policies, policy directions trump specific programs.<sup>2</sup>

American conservatives, on the other hand, have had decades of success connecting even radical stances on marginal issues with people's values, by repeatedly taking principled stands. So while Democrats often sound like policy wonks offering a grab-bag of proposals to satisfy different constituents, Republicans have managed to paint themselves as the principled party that protects life, the sanctity of marriage, our borders, our streets, our hard-earned paychecks, our faith, and our flag. It's no secret how they've done it, either. Frank Luntz, a prominent message man for many successful Republicans, offers an insight that echoes Lakoff's: "If your principles match their values, the details won't matter."<sup>3</sup>

So how does this connect with us? We may not talk much about policies and programs, but we do talk a lot about *our* equivalent: process. We pitch sortition (the *process* of randomly selecting representatives), or deliberation (the *process* of weighing trade-offs), or Citizens Juries (a *process* that combines sortition with deliberation). Or we open with abstract attributes of our processes, like high levels of participation, representation, and transparency. But aside from process geeks and democracy devotees like ourselves, why should anyone care about this stuff?

Most people don't intrinsically value randomness, statistical representation, or diverse stakeholder involvement. They value their families, their jobs, their piece of mind, and they don't want to sort through complex proposals in their free time. They just want government to work, and work for people like them. And this point is not only relevant to the general public. Everyone has values—politicians, bureaucrats, grantmaking foundations, and *we* have values that underlie our work with sortition. But we rarely talk about them, perhaps for fear of coming across as unprofessional. Or we only let them leak out toward the end of our presentations in a list of benefits of sortition or of the particular process we offer.

We need to be clear about our values and take principled stands that clearly connect them with the values held by our different audiences. For example, some people's values are centered on equality and cooperation. We share those values, and we could highlight this overlap with a principled stand like "In a democracy every voice should count, and if everyday people can work through their differences and find agreement, government should follow their lead. So we help governments bring people together from all walks of life to become informed on the issues, talk with one another, and find common ground. We use an innovative process called..."

In contrast, other people's values might be centered more on opportunity and personal responsibility. And our values overlap there too. We could connect with these people by taking principled stands like "We believe the problem with our politics is not that we ask too *much* of citizens, but that we ask too *little*. That is why we push citizens to stop outsourcing their civic duty to politicians and start tackling their own problems, start improving their own communities, and start shaping their future themselves. We do this with a process called..."

These are merely examples, the point is that unless we are engaging with someone who wants nothing more than to dive into the details, we should talk principles and values first. And note from our examples that we can do this in a way that is honest, true to *our* values, and doesn't involve pandering.

## Storytelling

A second way we can be more compelling is to increase and improve our use of one of the most powerful forms of communication and human connection: *story*. Stories are a key way we humans make sense of the world. They help us make meaning of our lives and everything around us. Good stories captivate us and stay with us. And for these reasons, we use stories to teach our children important lessons and pass along our values. Religions use stories to guide the faithful and politicians use stories to guide voters decisions at the polls. These include simple stories that convey a single moral, all the way to master narratives that define and unify a culture, a political party, or an entire nation.

The psychologist Drew Westen lays out the basic anatomy of a good story in his book, *The Political Brain*:

A coherent story has an initial state or setting ("Once upon a time..."), protagonists, a problem that sets up what will be the central plot or story line, obstacles that stand in the way, often a clash between the protagonists trying to solve the problem and those who stand in their way or fail to help, and a denouement, in which the problem is ultimately resolved ("And they lived happily ever after"). Most stories—and all that try to teach a lesson, as political stories do—have a moral.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, stories tend to resonate more when they are personal (i.e. focused on a few people with names and faces) and relatable (i.e. something or someone we can identify with). This is why a story of a little girl trying to survive a brutal war



will usually leave a stronger impression on us than a dry story of the longer arc of the war with dates, locations, and death tolls (especially if we ourselves were once a little girl or have a little girl).

All of us in the Sortition Space probably have a sense of this, yet we use relatively few stories to promote sortition and they tend to be impersonal—centered on a dozen to a couple hundred random and nameless citizens. Our suspicion is that not only are we a bit uncomfortable with the way many great stories tug at the heartstrings, but we’re also uncomfortable with the idea of protagonists. We are, after all, proponents of democracy and political equality, so that shining-individual-leader stuff doesn’t sit well with us. And it shouldn’t. But we can probably find a middle-ground between forming some cult of personality, or offering no protagonists at all for others to identify with and root for.

MASS LBP’s [Metrolinx video](#) strikes a perfect balance by giving us an intimate look at 3 of 35 Citizen Panelists. Watch that 6-minute video and you can’t help but like Buelah, Darren, and Helen. And even though you don’t know many details about the actual process, you can’t help but *feel* good about having them help shape your transportation system. This beautiful, upbeat video puts a handful of relatable participants front and center—exactly what we need to dispel people’s fear of having important public decisions be guided or made by ‘RANDOMS’.

Similarly, the *All Hands On* video [When Citizens Assemble](#) shares the process of the Irish Citizens Assembly through smaller stories told by a few protagonists who were involved in the Assembly. And we can’t wait to see media that combines these two approaches, melding life stories of participants with inspiring stories about the process.

But stories need not be limited to video. Chris Ellis of MASS LBP peppers his powerpoint presentations with vivid and dignified pictures of individual participants (right). And he tells

MASS LBP Panelist Photos  
Courtesy of David Pike



stories like the time a former panelist, years after their panel ended, lost their certificate during a move and called MASS LBP to ask for a replacement. These personal stories can stick with audiences and drive home important points (in this case how much participants value the experience) far better than just statistics (i.e. participant surveys) or observations alone. And even when we are proposing something new and cannot mine stories from previous experience, we can still employ a familiar story structure by appealing to our audience's imagination: "Imagine that one day you get a letter in the mail saying you have been selected to serve on your state's legislature..."

So building off these examples, we would do well to ask ourselves, what stories can we tell others about sortition? What stories can we share with one another in the Sortition Space? Who are the protagonists? Who are the antagonists? How can we make our stories as personal and relatable as possible? And—thinking a big bigger—what might a master narrative for sortition look like?

## Figures of Rhetoric

A third way to improve our communication is to make deliberate use of time-honored techniques for crafting messages that are moving and memorable. One easy one is *alliteration*, where you use multiple words that start with similar sounds to make them flow and stick with your audience. When you start paying attention, you see alliteration everywhere, including in literature ("from forth the fatal joins of these two foes; A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life."<sup>5</sup>); in television (The **W**est **W**ing); in brand and product names (**C**oca-**C**ola, **F**reedom **F**oundation, **P**ower**P**oint); in hashtags (**#**fridays**f**or**f**uture); in chants ("Power to the **p**eople!"); and in folk sayings you've probably heard before ("dead as a **d**oornail", "**c**uriosity **k**illed the **c**at"). Alliteration works just as well for political causes like sortition (**C**onsensus **C**onferences, "**b**eyond the **b**allot", the **S**ortition **S**pace). And if you pay attention, you'll find **alliteration** almost everywhere in this essay.

Another is the *Rule of 3's*, based on the robust observation that things are generally more appealing, digestible, and memorable when presented in 3's. Three adjectives, three arguments, three examples... you get the point. Four or more is typically avoided, *unless* it's an actual list (e.g. The Ten Commandments) or you really need to drive a point home without your audience necessarily remembering the specifics (see Churchill's quote below). It's also good practice to have the part

with the fewest syllables at the front and the part with the most syllables at the back. A classic example is “I came, I saw, I conquered.”\* A great example from the Sortition Space can be found in Brett Hennig’s popular [TEDx Talk](#), where he asserts that “Our politics is broken, our politicians aren’t trusted, and the political system is distorted by powerful vested interests.”<sup>6</sup>

Still another time-honored technique is the purposeful (and grammatically unnecessary) repetition of certain words to add punch or to add passion.† For example, a keen student of rhetoric, Lincoln knew what he was doing when instead of the grammatically correct ‘government of, by, and for the people...’ he opted for the longer “government of **the people**, by **the people**, for **the people**...”<sup>7</sup> (note he also followed the Rule of 3’s). Or take another inspirational quote that clearly could have been shorter and less repetitive, but was crafted to enhance its raw emotional power: “**We shall** defend our island, whatever the cost may be, **we shall fight** on the beaches, **we shall fight** on the landing grounds, **we shall fight** in the fields and in the streets, **we shall fight** in the hills; **we shall** never surrender.”<sup>8</sup>

Alliteration, the Rule of 3’s, and Repetition are just three of the numerous *figures* or *flowers* of rhetoric, many of which were identified in the original bastion of sortition, ancient Athens. They underlie most communication that is poetic and persuasive—whether or not they are consciously used. They show up in the few catchy phrases and slogans we have for sortition, and in the few works that have garnered significant attention outside the Sortition Space.‡ And we would be wise to make more conscious and deliberate use of the treasure trove of rhetorical devices that have been identified over the ages.

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\* Although in Latin it was originally the more uniform “Veni, vidi, vici.”

† We thought it best to just call it *repetition*, but if you’re interested in the Greek and Latin terms for all the specific kinds of repetition, such as *anaphora* or *polyptoton*, you can find more in the free online resource *Forest of Rhetoric*: <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Figures/Groupings/of%20Repetition.htm>

‡ A popular and compelling book proposing sortition is David Van Reybrouck’s *Against Elections*. Van Reybrouck brilliantly structures the entire book around a key figure of rhetoric: an extended *metaphor*. He states that Democracy is in bad health, and then walks us readers through the symptoms of “democratic fatigue” syndrome, possible diagnoses, pathogenesis, and remedies.

# Conclusion

There are many more ways we could and should make our communication about sortition more persuasive. Our goal here is simply to bring attention to an overlooked challenge we all face in some form or another, and provide illustrative examples that point to a path forward. Our exploration of this vast and fascinating stream of research and practice is only just beginning, and our goal is to incorporate our learnings into the Sortition Space in the form of relevant and useful recommendations. We invite others in this diverse space to join us.

This shift in our communication will take work, time, and a willingness to rethink old perspectives and retrain old habits. But it's well worth it, because it's central to gaining buy-in and buy-in is central to our success—however diverse our individual and organizational goals may be. Some of us seek only to improve policymaking with consultative mini-publics while others seek more radical change beyond consultation. We can all agree, however, that traditional electoral politics is sinking. And we may have found a lifeboat in sortition, but unless we find inspiring words that can cut through the sea of noise and misinformation, no one will hear our calls, no one will climb aboard, and we will all go down with this ship.

# Citations

<sup>1</sup> Auter, Zac. "About Half of Americans Play State Lotteries". News.gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/193874/half-americans-play-state-lotteries.aspx> (accessed January 9, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff, *The ALL NEW*, 136.

<sup>3</sup> Luntz, *Words That Work*, 207.

<sup>4</sup> Westen, *Political Brain*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, William. "Script of Act I Romeo and Juliet: The play by William Shakespeare". William-Shakespeare.info. <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/act1-script-text-romeo-and-juliet.htm> (accessed January 9, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Hennig, Brett. "What if we replace politicians with randomly selected people?" Filmed [May, 2017]. TEDx Video, 9:32. [https://www.ted.com/talks/brett\\_hennig\\_what\\_if\\_we\\_replaced\\_politicians\\_with\\_randomly\\_selected\\_people?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brett_hennig_what_if_we_replaced_politicians_with_randomly_selected_people?language=en)

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. "The Gettysburg address." AbrahamLincolnOnline.org. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm> (accessed January 9, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Churchill, Winston. "We shall fight on the beaches." WinstonChurchill.org. <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/> (accessed January 9, 2019).