



Designing Liquid Assemblies Against the Ungovernability Objection

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Introduction

Background

About the origin of this manuscript, and why am I presenting here today

Presentation outline

Part I – Paper summary

Part II – Considerations about accountability and trustworthiness within liquid assemblies



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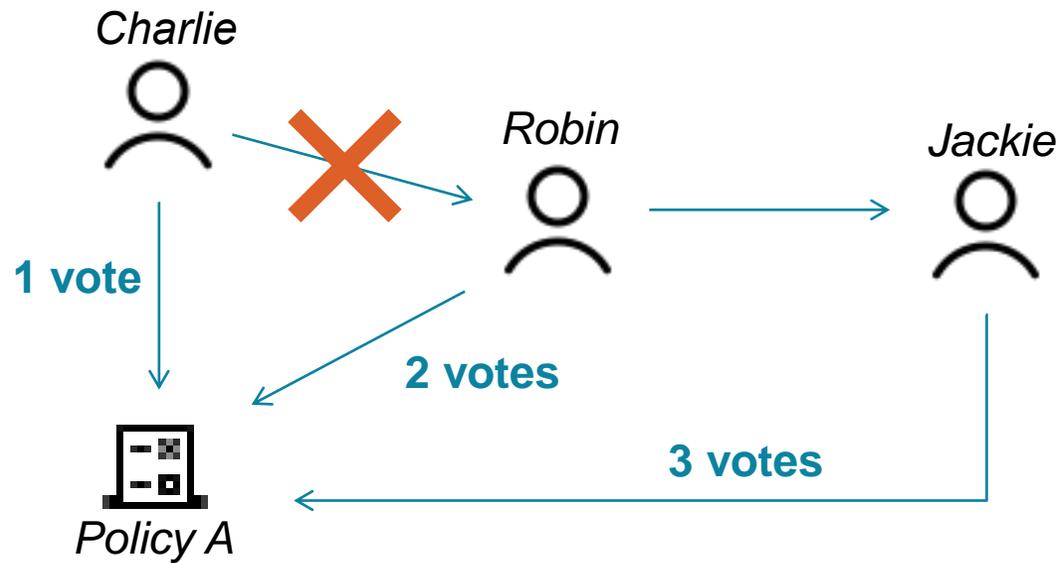
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Part I – Paper Summary



What is Liquid Democracy?

A decision-making scheme characterized by liquidity—the systemic, flexible mixture of **direct and representative democracy**—based on the principles of **voluntary delegation** and **proxy voting**.



- Derivative features
- Instant-recall
 - Metadelegation
 - Area-specificity
 - Open-seat parliament
 - Perfect proportionality



Liquid Assemblies

Working assumptions

- Liquid democratic principles can be **injected into existing political systems** for the sake of innovating democratic law-making via the instrument of liquid assemblies
 - **A liquid assembly to replace existing legislative bodies**

Structural features of a liquid assembly

- **Large** (openness to participation + open-seat parliament)
- **Volatile** (proxy voting + area-specificity + instant recall)
- **Fragmented** (perfect proportionality + multi-party system + low party discipline)



Ungovernability

The ungovernability objection

A liquid assembly complicates the policy-making process because it entails an inherent tendency towards **policy incoherence** and **gridlock** (i.e., ungovernability). Therefore, a liquid assembly should be regarded as undesirable and inferior to traditional legislatures. More generally, liquid democratic principles should not be injected into existing democratic systems.

- Policy incoherence: lack of consistency between laws; conflicting goals
- Gridlock: political stalemate within and/or between branches of government; absence of stable coalitions

Research question

Can we accommodate this objection?



Designing Liquid Assemblies Against the Ungovernability Objection

My argument

- **Institutional design theory** can provide us with solutions to accommodate the ungovernability objection without abandoning the core idea of liquid democracy

Two main approaches

- **Designing liquid assemblies** (Section 4)
 - How should liquid assemblies be designed internally to enable governability?
- **Fitting a liquid assembly within the broader political system** (Section 5)
 - In which contexts does a liquid assembly fit best, and has higher chances to be governable?



Internal and Systemic Design of Liquid Assemblies

General argument Section 4

Structure and **rules** are needed to reduce policy incoherence and gridlock

Four core aspects

- a. Structure of the assembly
- b. Legislative agenda setting
- c. Deliberation
- d. Opportunities and burdens for actors

General argument Section 5

The **context** where a liquid assembly is injected matters because **non-liquid institutions** can **compensate** for its shortcomings

Three favorable contexts

- a. Hybrid or semi presidentialism
- b. Classic bicameralism
- c. Weak bicameralism with a supreme assembly



Conclusion

The paper argues that, with the help of institutional design theory and due precautions, liquid assemblies could be institutionalized in ways that avoid, or at least constrain, ungovernability. This sheds a more positive light on the possible inclusion of liquid principles and institutions within existing democratic systems.

Liquid assemblies

=

A new and viable democratic innovation



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Part II – Considerations about accountability and trustworthiness within liquid assemblies



Accountable and trustworthy liquid assemblies? (I)

Liquid assemblies as an institution

- Definition (Turner 1997): «a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems» → institutions as organizations
 - **Liquid assemblies as a formal institution, which provides a behavioral framework for individual and collective action, and which is part of a broader political system**
- Approach (Goodin 1996): either internal accounts that focus on the form and functioning of institutions, or external accounts that focus on the aims and effects of institutions
 - **This paper focuses on the internal criteria for the good design of liquid assemblies (goodness of fit, smooth functioning, well-ordered internal relations)**

Valsangiacomo (2022): Liquid assemblies, a legitimate democratic innovation?



Accountable and trustworthy liquid assemblies? (II)

Operability/governability of liquid assemblies

- Definition: «A non-operational public institution is one where the system of roles is internally compromised or corrupt» in such a way that it «betrays the raison d'être of the institution in question» (Ceva, Bocchiola & Giunta 2022) → governability
 - **Governability as a feature of institutional arrangements, the capacity to fulfill the function the institution was created for («raison d'être»)**
- Operability depends on the «officeholders' interrelated uses of their power of office» (Ceva, Bocchiola & Giunta 2022)
 - **If liquid assemblies end up in situations of gridlock and policy incoherence, the capacity of the actors to sustain the «raison d'être» of the assembly is compromised**



Accountable and trustworthy liquid assemblies? (III)

Normative implications of ungovernability in liquid assemblies

- «The trustworthiness of non-operational institutions may easily be questioned» (Ceva, Bocchiola & Giunta 2022)
 - **Similarly, the legitimacy of ungovernable institutions may be called into question: a minimal degree of governability seems necessary and prior to any quest of legitimacy**
- Endogenous trustworthiness (i.e., mutual trust among the group of officeholders) as the necessary precondition for operability and, indirectly, exogenous trustworthiness
 - **Need for normative commitments: proxies are elected officeholders and as such they have duties of office accountability and answerability**
 - **Need for incentives: mutual oversight between political opponents, oversight by media and public opinion, systemic checks and balances, rule of law, punishment via recall of delegations**

Valsangiacomo (2021): Political Representation in Liquid Democracy



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Thanks for your attention 😊