Workers want more say in the decisions that affect their workplaces, and effective unions can be a way to achieve that. Democracy is key, as it can improve union effectiveness, ensure their vitality, and teach members valuable skills they can then deploy off the shop floor. However, there is a long-standing concern that union democracy doesn’t meet members’ expectations, with concerns including limited descriptive representativeness, member apathy, and the potential for leaders to pursue their own agendas. Drawing on new work in political science, Simon Pek took a fresh approach to the causes of these problems to identify a novel solution.

Simon has learned that an important cause of these problems may be the way union leaders are selected, which is almost universally through the use of elections. While we often equate elections with democracy, a growing body of research suggests that elections have some inherent flaws that may be at the root of the crisis in democracy around the world today.

Usually, not all members have an equal chance of being elected, and the people who are elected are often not representative of the membership as a whole. The use of elections also tends to disempower the broader membership, and incentivize leaders to pursue interests that diverge from those of the members, at times motivated by the need to compensate groups that helped the leaders get elected.

Inspired by the way democracy was practiced in Ancient Athens, Simon looked at sortition – the use of a lottery – to select union leaders as a way to overcome some of the limitations of elections. Sortition is regularly used in a wide range of contexts: making decisions among friends, selecting athletes for drug testing, or choosing jury members in some countries, for example. It was used to select leaders in Ancient Athens and other city-states, and is currently seeing a resurgence, being used in innovations like the 2004 British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform and other practical and research areas.
Using sortition to select representatives offers several advantages, including increasing descriptive representativeness, social equity, and participation while reducing the risk of corruption and the financial and social costs of elections. Based on these advantages, Simon argues that the use of sortition could help unions overcome the problems facing their internal democracy.

Sortition is an extremely flexible tool, and Simon has developed ways in which union leaders and members could begin to integrate sortition. For instance, unions interested in comprehensively integrating sortition into their governance structures could adopt a system based on John Burnheim’s model of demarchy. Decision-making power would be distributed among small functional units, each focused on a specific issue such as social justice initiatives, with members selected using sortition and rotated out after a defined term of service. Decisions about the structure and overall role of the functional units could be made by higher-order bodies, whose members would be randomly selected from a pool of people with experience in functional units.

Unions interested in partial integration could incorporate a variety of randomly selected bodies into their governance structures. For example, they could create permanent bodies of randomly selected members tasked with providing feedback on the leadership’s proposals or providing a mandate in terms of organizational priorities.

Simon hopes this paper draws attention to the benefits of sortition for unions seeking to improve engagement, equity, and effectiveness.

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