

Participatory democracy?

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I met [Peter Dawe](#), who is standing as an independent to be Mayor of Cambridge and Peterborough next year, for a drink last night. Read nothing into that. Peter and I have known each other for a long time and it's a friendship based on mutual respect and the ability to disagree. And so we did.

Peter is keen on participatory democracy. As he rightly points out, polling is now very cheap and can be done on anyone's phone. Twitter polls can be organised in minutes, although I have not tried to do so. His logic is that if this is the case then a Mayor should use that opportunity to help shape policy.

We agreed that something is required to replace the dire pretence of current consultations. These always take place too late, are usually confirmatory in nature, and questions are invariably rigged to secure the outcome the administration asking the questions want.

What we disagreed upon is what should go in their place. Do we really want regular mini-referenda, done on line? That is Peter's idea at present. His argument is that as people begin to realise that they really do shape policy, unlike consultations, they will want to participate.

My concern is threefold. First, I am not sure most issues can be reduced to a simple question. Take the EU as an example.

Second, I fear about self-selecting audiences taking control from a majority and am not persuaded by the democratic element in that.

Third, I still think people vote for representatives and not delegates and that is precisely because they are busy, otherwise engaged and do not want to have to make decisions on anything from cycle paths, to social care and new housing. They really do want others to, within reason, do that. They want better choice on who that other person is - and it is notable that single transferable vote will be used in this election (so why not in others?) - but do not want to be the decision maker. This is not patronising: I simply

think that those who are passionate about politics (small p) think others must be and they genuinely aren't.

I do as a result see it worth consulting in this way on occasion. But I really can't see it as a basis for decision making and binding politicians into action.

Thoughts?