

Tiered Democratic Governance

An Essay on an Alternative System of Governance

By Dave Volek

Introduction

My maternal grandfather was of the peasant classes in Bukovina, Ukraine. After the tumult of World War I and the Russian Civil War, he experienced a change of governance in which he had no say. He saw the transition merely as one group of elites being replaced by another group of elites. As a young man, he envisioned more opportunity and freedom—and immigrated to Canada in 1922. When he gained his Canadian citizenship, he had the right to vote out governments which he and many other Canadians saw as ineffective.

In western democracies, the periodic elections have been a great social engineering tool for citizens to express their anger when a government becomes out of touch with the people they govern. Hence, those who aspire for public office in western democracies must consider the needs and aspirations of a significant minority—if not majority—of citizens to earn the legitimacy to govern. The rulers of Bukovina in the early 20th century were not subject to this social force.

For much of the 20th century, citizens in western democracies were thankful for their periodic elections. They needed only compare themselves to the parts of the world without this opportunity: they realized that their life was indeed better under western democracy. Because of this simple comparison, there was no desire or social force to change the system.

But something has changed in the past two decades. More and more citizens in western democracies are not happy with the results of their elections. Like my grandfather in Bukovina after WWI, they are seeing any political changes merely as one group of elites being replaced by another group of elites. The opportunity to replace ineffective governments is no longer there. This breeds more cynicism and more apathy. How long can this trend continue before the citizenry no longer gives legitimacy to elected governments? What is the future for western democracy?

In this essay, I will describe 12 limitations of western democracy, a replacement system of democratic governance which addresses those 12 limitations, a new culture for that replacement system, a new check-and-balance, a new relationship between government and the citizen, and a transition process from western democracy to this alternative system—called “Tiered Democratic Governance.”

Twelve Limitations of Western Democracy

Let's imagine we are a mechanic for democracy. A customer (the citizenry) brings his broken down car (western democracy) for us to fix. Before we start the repair, we should ask the customer what is wrong. Very quickly, we are likely to get a long list. This is my list of things we need to fix.

1. Political Parties Belong to an Exclusive Club

Being an active member in a political party requires time, energy, personal sacrifice, and fortitude to work within a semi-dysfunctional culture. Many citizens do not have these assets, thereby leaving political influence for those who do. This means many capable people will never be in government.

2. Political Parties are Not Think-Tanks

Political parties like to sell the citizenry that they have some vision for their world. But the fact is that most of the effort generated within the party goes towards electioneering, not policy development.

3. Political Parties are not a Screening Process

The internal party electoral processes have proven that people with a little too much controversy to be in governance can still make it into governance. There is little screening at the party level to find the better people.

4. Political Parties are Mostly Marketing Machines

Political parties are constantly marketing themselves as the best choice for governing. But being good at marketing is only marginally related to being good at governance.

5. Simplistic Explanations

To reach the public through mass and social media, political parties have to simplify every issue. Many citizens are led to believe the solutions are also simple. Maybe the parties themselves believe the issues are simple. Good decisions are not likely to happen when the roots of complex problems are not appropriately understood.

6. Politics vs. Governance

Good politicians are very busy people: long days, lots of traveling, lots of meetings. But a significant part of this effort is spent for the benefit of the party, not society.

7. Voters are Poor Judges

Despite freedom of the press and freedom of speech, most voters know very little about the people who aspire for elected office. Voters are voting based on an image of those people. That image is created by the conflicting propaganda from the political party, opposing parties, and the media. It is hard to know the true person behind the image.

8. Failure to Plan for the Long Term

Political parties can only look to the next election which means they only have a five-year outlook at best. So there is no long term planning. Many societal issues will take decades to resolve.

9. Political Parties are Beholden to Those who Feed the Marketing Machine

Donors of time and money to a political party sometimes want a less-than-altruistic reward for their commitment to the party. If the reward is not somehow addressed, the party will have fewer resources to contest the next election, and electoral success is less ensured. The political party must give some consideration to corruption.

10. Political Parties Cannot Deal with Internal Corruption

Political parties highly value those members who can win elections. If a winner engages in corruption, the party is not likely to discipline that member—until it becomes public knowledge. And history has proven a party can handle a few instances of corruption that make the public's eye.

11. Adversarial Nature

Members of political parties are required to constantly promote the virtues of their own parties and display the flaws of the opposition—even if the other side has something positive to offer. This adversity is inherent with the politician's interaction with the public, the media, and even within his or her own party. In most other occupations, it's hard to imagine much getting done when so such adversity has been normalized.

12. Inability to Shape Society in a Positive Direction

When the citizenry sees politicians and political parties behaving inappropriately, this shapes the value systems of the citizenry in a negative way. This, in turn, affects the quality of people later elected for public office.

Removing 12 Limitations by Popular Suggestions

The world already has many ideas to improve western democracy. For example, advocates for democratic change in Canada believe in replacing its Westminster-style parliament with one based on proportional representation. This idea does not address any 12 limitations in any significant way. For example, if Canada ever moves to proportional representation, will Limitation #8 be fixed? Not really, because citizens of western countries with proportional representation believe their governments are also incapable of wise long-term planning.

In my opinion, most popular suggestions for improving democracy will result in very little change in governance outcome. It is almost as if the suggested changes are designed to placate the public for a decade or two, but leave existing power structures in place.

The New System

If we are a mechanic and we see a car with 12 serious repairs, should we really try to repair that car? No, it is time for a new car! And knowing what we know about the old car, we should not buy a car with similar problems.

One common phrase in the 12 limitations is “political party”. It is logical that if we can remove the political parties from the democratic process, the limitations have a better chance of being fixed. So removing political parties is a very necessary part of this alternative system of governance which I have called the “Tiered Democratic Governance” (TDG). In this section, I will provide a brief explanation of how the TDG works.

The Neighborhood

The basic unit of the TDG is the neighborhood. Neighborhoods are geographical areas that contain 50 to 250 residents who have some reasonable opportunity to know one another. Boundaries for a neighborhood could be geographical such as rivers or ridges, man-made such as busy streets and non-residential areas, socioeconomic such as certain demographics, and current political boundaries. Each neighborhood should have a common facility such as a community center or school where meetings can be held.

Once a year, the members of the neighborhood TDG elect one member to represent the neighborhood in the TDG. All members are eligible to vote—and be voted for. There is no nomination or ballots with specific names. Voters write in the name of the person they feel best suited for the job of neighborhood representative.

The TDG should have a culture that abhors election campaigns, political parties, self-promotion, and denigration of another member. Any member employing these tactics to win should not be voted for. Rather, the members should look for someone who has proven good character and capacity as being worthy of his or her vote.

The term for a neighborhood representative is one year. If the representative is found to be ineffective, he or she can be replaced at the next election.

The District

Districts consist of three to 20 adjacent neighborhoods. The neighborhood representatives will meet occasionally to discuss affairs of the district and make decisions. In these meetings, the neighborhood representatives will learn about each other to figure out who is of good character and has capacity for governance.

Six months after the election of the neighborhood representatives, these representatives will vote one of themselves to be the district representative. Again, there is no campaigning, nomination, self-

promotion, or denigration of other members. Each neighborhood representative simply writes the name of the member he or she believes is best to serve as the district representative.

Note that the general members in these neighborhoods do not vote for the district representative. The reason is that the general membership is not in a good position to know which of the neighborhood representatives are suitable for this higher position; most likely they might know only one person really well, so they really can't make a wise comparison. The neighborhood representatives, who have been working amongst themselves, have a better understanding of whom has a better character and capacity—and is worthy of advancement in the TDG.

This means the TDG is an indirect election. This does not, in any way, diminish the importance of voting at the neighborhood level for those neighborhood representatives play an important part at the district voting level. Each neighborhood needs to send one of its better members to a higher level for the TDG to work well.

Higher Tiers

Each TDG jurisdiction will evolve differently. Some jurisdictions may have just one tier; others may find six tiers works well for them. Calgary, Alberta will be designed differently than Atlanta, Georgia—or Barrie, Ontario—or Buenos Aires, Argentina. Whatever form the TDG evolves to will be decided by the TDG members of those areas.

The Highest Tier

This is the ultimate decision making authority of the TDG jurisdiction. It will devolve responsibilities to the lower tiers as it sees fit, making the TDG a unitary system of governance.

The members of the highest tier will have worked their way up by being effective at the lower levels and earning the trust and respect of the representatives at these lower levels. There is no riding on the back of a temporarily popular political party to make it into the highest tier.

As well, the members of the highest tier will see their position as one of service. Remember that they never asked for that position. Nor did they ferociously compete for it. They have earned it, based on their good service within their community and the TDG.

Comparing the TDG to the 12 Limitations

The TDG definitely has some new ideas about democracy. At this point, I challenge the reader to determine how the TDG, as explained so far, can address the 12 Limitations of Western Democracy—especially when political parties have been removed from governance.

The New Culture

Part of the new TDG culture has already been mentioned: voting is based on good character and capacity for governance and there is no electioneering. These cultural features will take time to develop and the early TDG builders will be responsible for teaching them to the members so that voting will become more effective at selecting the better people.

Another aspect of the TDG culture is making decisions with “consultation.”

While consultation has been so easily stated by people in many current leadership positions, the reality is that many of us have found our knowledge, wisdom, and experience not being utilized in many decision-making processes. Conversely, many of us have also—consciously or unconsciously—ignored or suppressed viewpoints that are a little contrary to our own. Clearly consultation is much more than a platitude.

To explain consultation, it may be helpful to explain what consultation is not. I have created a paradigm of decision-making processes I have encountered in my life.

Power Based Decision Making

In a power decision-making process, one individual has the authority to decide and the subordinates are there to carry out the orders. Viewpoints that are contrary to the decision maker are not welcome. The decision maker has means to suppress contrary opinions.

Democratic Based Decision Making

In a democratic decision-making process, all members are free to speak—but no one is obligated to listen. Members with competing agendas use the formal and informal rules of democracy to get their way implemented. Often an idea moves forward not based on its merit, but how well its principle supporter works the democratic process to implement it.

Consultative Decision-Making

Consultation is combining the knowledge, wisdom, and experience of all participants into one mindset. It is like an adult moving into old age where he or she realizes that decisions made in youth were not very good. The reason is that the person did not have the knowledge, wisdom, and experience to make better decisions when he or she was 20 years old.

Consultation requires an acceptance that regardless of much knowledge, wisdom, and experience we currently have, we could always use more. We get these extras by listening to other people. If they are listening to us, then we won't have to live several lifetimes to expand our knowledge, wisdom, and experience to reach that level of understanding that is needed to make the effective decisions we really need to be making.

To briefly demonstrate consultation, if you are a person who enters a meeting with a certain agenda and leaves the meeting with the same agenda, you are probably operating with a power or democratic mindset. But if what other people say actually changes your mind, you are probably operating under a consultative mindset. You are ready to learn from other people—and your knowledge, wisdom, and experience can be combined with theirs.

Developing a culture of consultation is necessary for the TDG to work well. It will require TDG members to understand the difference between power, democracy, and consultation so that they can vote more wisely in TDG elections. Part of that good character and capacity for governance will be the ability to consult. Members with the better consultative skills should be moved up the TDG tiers.

The New Check-and-Balance

While the TDG will find great people to fill its elected bodies and give them the culture of consultation to make decisions, it still needs a check-and-balance. While the one-year term is important to ensure that people who shouldn't be in government are not in government and the tiers keep not-so-effective people at the lower levels of governance, perhaps the more important check-and-balance is the TDG's advisory board.

This board will be made up of advisors who will have access to any meeting of the elected bodies. When an advisor attends such a meeting, the advisory position will be one of respect and trust, so those elected bodies will listen carefully to whatever the advisor says. The advisors have no voting power in the elected bodies. The elected bodies are not obligated to take the advice of the advisor.

A good question: "Without any tangible influence, what then is the role of the advisor?" Here are the attributes of an advisory position:

1. Advisors should have had experience in the elected bodies of the TDG. This experience can be passed on in those meetings.
2. Advisors can frame questions that will cause elected representatives to think differently, giving new and fresh perspectives for their deliberations.
3. Elected bodies may not be able to reach consensus. An advisor can help unravel their issues so that they can find consensus by combining their wisdom, knowledge, and experience.
4. Advisors will be meeting with different parts of the TDG. They will be a source of knowledge about what the other parts are doing.
5. Advisors can investigate whether a citizen's concern was addressed at a meeting and seriously considered. If so, the advisor can assure that citizen their concerns did somehow contribute to the decision.
6. Advisors will be the educator of the TDG principle to both the elected bodies and the general citizenry.
7. Advisors might have a better ear to the mood of the citizenry. They can alert the elected bodies that some issues need to be addressed in a timely manner.
8. Advisors can conduct and oversee the elections of the elected bodies.

The highest tier will appoint a few individuals to serve as the highest tier of advisors for a three-year term. Ideally, these advisors should have some experience on the elected side of the TDG to understand the formal and informal mechanism of the elected bodies in the TDG.

When appointed to the advisory board, the advisor must resign any elected position within the TDG. No one is allowed to serve on both sides of the TDG (elected and appointed) at the same time.

While the highest tier on the elected side appoints the highest tier of the advisory board, the TDG constitution should provide structure for the lower advisory tiers. The high-tier advisors will appoint members to those tiers. The tiers of the advisory board will meet to discuss other advisors' findings and assign responsibilities.

For the elected bodies, advisors will be a source of new perspectives, experience, encouragement, and maybe even a little chastisement. This makes the advisory board a positive check-and-balance, which should work better than the various negative check-and-balances of western democracy.

The New Relationship

There will be a new relationship between a citizen and the government. When a citizen disagrees with a decision from the TDG, he or she will know that decision didn't come from some powerful person successfully applying an expedient agenda. Rather, that decision will come from three positive attributes of the TDG. First, the neighborhood and higher tiered elections found great people to work through to the final decision. Second, these great people will be working with a consultative mindset. And third, the advisors will be helping (or maybe just watching) these great people making those decisions.

Even though the citizen might still not be happy with the final decision, he or she will realize there were good reasons for it. While TDG decisions are not infallible, they are worthy of an experiment. Time will prove whether the TDG's decision or the citizen's position was the better path to take.

Many citizens under a TDG will put a lot of trust into this system of governance. They will not have the angst or anxiety or attempts to surveil the actions of government to affect their psyche. They can put their time and energy into more productive facets of their lives.

The Transition

Moving from western democracy to the TDG will take at least a decade of conscious thought from the early TDG builders. The main challenge is that the TDG builders will have to build a new culture for the TDG. This culture will include voting for good character and capacity for governance, no electioneering, indirect elections, consultative decision making, and respecting the decisions of the elected bodies. This culture won't come easy for many early TDG builders because we have become so ingrained with the idea that our opinions and perspectives are superior to those who disagree with us. It will take time to get over this arrogance.

The early TDG builders won't gain this culture by reading this essay. They will learn by practicing it and making mistakes and watching others make mistakes. But the TDG culture will eventually rise from all these lessons learned. When the culture is in place, then the TDG will be in a position to earn the trust of the general citizenry as the replacement for western democracy.

TDG builders in a specific neighborhood should meet to start building their local TDG. They should prepare a constitution that includes:

1. TDG and humanistic principles
2. Boundaries of the neighborhood
3. Definition of the member of the neighborhood TDG
4. Electoral rules to elect an early TDG committee
5. Responsibilities and authority of that committee
6. Amending formula for the constitution
7. Amending formula for the merging with other TDGs

The early TDG builders for neighborhoods will create their constitution with a consultative mindset. All members should be free to discuss their ideas, and no one should feel forced to withhold their opinions and perspectives. However, an individual with a viewpoint that is a little contrary to the consensus should first assess whether he or she has been heard and understood by the other members. If so, then the individual should yield to that consensus rather than continuing to battle it.

Another reason to "let a viewpoint go" is that the TDG constitutions are going to undergo a lot of change in their evolution. Any constitutional clause or directive attained by consensus, while probably the best decision the builders could collectively reach at the time, is only a social experiment that is worthy to be tried out. There is no guarantee it will work—or won't work. If a certain TDG feature bears good things for the TDG, it can be retained. If not, it should be replaced. Hence, from whatever wording created in the early constitutions, there will likely be little that remains in future constitutions. So there really is no reason for any TDG builder to insist that his or her way is the only best way to build the TDG. By yielding to the consensus and observing the experiment unfold, the builders will learn the process and patience of consultation.

When the early builders are building their first constitution for their neighborhood, they should draft for an elected committee rather than an elected neighborhood representative. Shortly after their constitution is finalized, they should conduct an election under the rules of their constitution. The elected committee then takes over the formal authority of the local TDG. This committee should be charged with increasing its membership within the neighborhood, analyzing the past election for improvements to the constitution, and making necessary amendments to the constitution. When the committee feels its affairs have stabilized, it will be time to consider merging with a nearby TDG.

Two adjacent or overlapping TDG neighborhoods are great candidates for a merger. Representatives from the two TDG committees should meet and compare their two constitutions. Remember that these two constitutions were created by different people with different perspectives for different geographical areas. Differences in their constitutions should be expected—and be seen as great experiments both TDGs can learn from.

By merging, the representatives of the two TDGs are essentially building a new constitution for the merged area. Again, this is great practice to build that consultative culture for the TDG. When the two elected committees approve of the new constitution, it is put to a vote to the membership of both TDGs. If approved, the two TDGs become one TDG. An election is held to determine the new committee—or perhaps neighborhood representatives. Eventually this new TDG will merge with another TDG.

An early TDG that fails to merge with other TDGs will eventually become redundant. There is nothing to stop another TDG to gain members in the territory claimed by a TDG that seems stuck in its ways and unwilling to change to move forward.

This “early TDG” is the first stage of the evolution of the TDG. There will be three other stages. Next comes the “middle TDG” where the TDG starts getting serious attention and needs to become a legal entity. After that is the “maturing TDG” when the TDG can start commenting on societal issues—and be of some influence on public policy. Last is the TDG-in-waiting when the TDG starts preparing itself to replace the western democratic model. Building of the TDG will take at least a decade.

It should be understood that this transfer of one system of governance to another will not occur unless the TDG-in-waiting has gained the trust and respect of a significant majority of citizens. If it is not obvious that western democracy needs to be retired, then the TDG-in-waiting has more work to do on itself.

Because the TDG-in-waiting will have had considerable experience shadowing government, the transfer from western democracy to the TDG will not be any more tumultuous than when a victorious political party takes governance from the previous political party. The big changes will be when electoral laws have changed from voting for political parties to voting for citizens of good character and capacity for governance at the neighborhood level. But if most citizens understand the nature of the TDG (and why western democracy is flawed), this change will be fairly acceptable.

Conclusion

When a new president or new prime minister comes into power, there is usually a lot of optimism from that person's supporters that "finally, things are going to be different." But after a year or two of being in office, that person fails to meet many of those expectations and starts losing their optimistic support.

So when another election comes around, different supporters rally behind a new political leader with the same optimism that the previous leader had. If the new person is cast into power, he or she soon loses his or her optimistic support—and is cast into the dustbin of "just another politician." This cycle repeats itself election after election after election.

Albert Einstein said: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." If we continue with western democracy, we truly must be insane.

This essay points out the repairs that should be made to the run-down old vehicle that is western democracy. But there are too many repairs to make, leading to the alternative system "Tiered Democratic Governance." This alternative does away with political parties and electioneering. But to work effectively, the TDG needs to develop a new culture, one that employs consultation throughout its decision-making processes. The TDG's early builders need to understand their culture-building role. And the evolution of the early TDG to the TDG-in-waiting will give the builders the practice to create this new culture.

There is quite a bit more to the TDG than the brief explanation in this essay. I have spent considerable effort anticipating questions about the TDG, and these details are on my website www.davevolek.org/TDG.

If you have read this essay to this point, I commend you on your open mind and willingness to consider new ideas. Many open minds will be integral to the building of the TDG.

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