

Avoiding System Failure: How Process-Design Can Help Fix Politics

Chiara Rosselli, Rebecca Farulli, Ronith Schalast, and Helena Wittrich

Popular dissatisfaction with “the system” should not be seen as caused by particular policy failures. It may signal the early stages of complex system failure, where policy and political challenges acting in concert threaten the resilience of democratic infrastructure. Policy thinkers tend to look for solutions in their own expertise. This tends to address systemic challenges through short-term policy fixes, which risks distracting from the depths of the problem and could do more damage than good in the long run. Beyond individual policies, the issue is that democratic processes of decision-making are no longer fit for purpose.

Rethinking decision-making fora and processes through the lens of process design can help deliver higher ownership of policy solutions, stronger political consensus over divisive issues, and more transparent, innovative policymaking. A well-designed policy process can greatly improve policy outcomes and address pervasive distrust in political institutions.

Three case studies explore how very simple process-design fixes could help improve policy and political outcomes of multilateral climate action, cross-border dialogue in Europe and citizen-led debates on the future of Europe.

Introduction

Current political and societal trends highlight a striking dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo. The many different and thoroughly researched explanations about why citizens are fed up with “the system” range from sociological to economic ones. However, none sufficiently addresses the all-pervasive nature of these “anti-systemic” sentiments. These span policy areas, ideologies, political parties, and borders—and their very pervasiveness seems to point to a deeper unifying root cause.

When addressing the frustrations with political, economic, and social institutions, it would be a mistake to keep searching for individual policy solutions. If today’s crisis is a systemic one with many manifestations and catalysts fueling discontent, each with its own validity, it is necessary to dig deeper to identify and address its common root causes. To focus on individual elements of the system while ignoring the underlying systemic drivers of dysfunction would be irresponsible, intellectually dishonest, and in the long run dangerous.¹

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While there are many possible explanations for the crisis, two key features should lead to investigating political processes and their supporting the democratic infrastructure as probable root causes.

First, political trust is plummeting. Citizens do not believe that the system in its current state is able to deliver, and they do not “trust the process.”² Second, there is an observable innovation gap between fast-

paced societal changes and the rigid, stale, and largely immutable nature of democratic infrastructure. These combined factors should, at the very least, raise some questions about the way in which political life is organized and lead to a reexamination of the political processes that govern societies.

What if the political system is failing, not because of any single policy malfunction, political class, or political philosophy, but because the processes that regulate it are no longer fit for purpose? What if the answer lies in the very infrastructure of political decision-making and its inability to keep up with the needs of its constituents in today’s rapidly evolving society?

What Is System Failure?

A complex³ or sophisticated⁴ system failure can occur when a system, composed of subsystems (economic, political, societal, technological, etc.) undergoes what seems to be a set of seemingly separate, complex challenges. However, the interdependence of these challenges threatens the very resilience of the system and its components. The system appears to function and no single challenge or challenged subsystem poses an existential threat, yet their compound effect is the erosion of its central infrastructure—driving toward system failure caused by the inadequacy of the democratic infrastructure.

How decision-making and political processes function can be studied through the lens of process design. Process design invites us to take a deeper look at what all the symptoms have in common: the processes that regulate political lives and shape political choices. It advocates greater attention to the “how” of politics.

The discipline of looking at how a process is designed offers a chance to change the way the frailties of the political system are understood by avoiding

1 Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*, Penguin Books, 2020.

2 Trust in government is deteriorating in OECD countries. In 2019 only 45% trusted their government. OECD, “[Trust in Government](#),” [OECD](#), undated.

3 Richard Cook, “[How Complex Systems Fail](#),” [Researchgate](#), April 11, 2019.

4 The definition of Jan Techau’s “sophisticated” state failure rests on the illusion of a functioning democracy where nothing gets done. He attributes this to the growing complexity of the state, but particularly to the lack of political courage. Jan Techau, “[Sophisticated states are failing — politicians need to take risks](#),” [Financial Times](#), April 19, 2016.

the temptation to focus on the outcomes of individual policies and thus miss the bigger picture, and it helps to understand and ultimately strengthen political decision-making. It promotes more adaptive and effective policymaking by improving how decisions are made rather than focusing on any single policy decision or political actor.

Political Process Design

Political process design studies the design of the policymaking process and its auxiliary processes—from identifying and assessing a policy challenge to stakeholder dialogues and the creation of political consensus, to formulating a solution and its implementation. It looks at the decision-making infrastructures of society not as isolated, static parts but interconnected elements within the same dynamic process—and analyzes its functionality as a whole.

The discipline of process design pays close attention to how any given part of the process is designed to achieve its intended outcome—and assesses whether the process is fit for purpose. This approach raises elementary but often overlooked questions: how does any given part of a process interact with the broader political decision-making context and infrastructure? Are interactions between different stakeholders happening in a way that is conducive to the desired goal? Are the right people in the room? Is there sufficient time to achieve the desired goal? And so on.

Unfit for Purpose

From a design perspective, the political system has been weakened by its inability to adapt to a new political reality, resulting in a gross mismatch between policymaking tools and approaches and the changing demands and realities created by today's political and societal challenges. These challenges include:

- the increasing unpredictability of the outcomes generated by policy interventions in complex contexts,
 - the increasing variety and diversity of stakeholders that are active parts of the political system, and
 - the transformative and crosscutting challenges represented by the technological and communication revolution and the impact these have had on the political tissue of societies.
- The overlap of these macro challenges, their unprecedented scale, and their nature has rendered political infrastructure outdated. The world has changed, but politics has not and it is no longer fit for purpose.
- The application of process design principles—starting with clarity of purpose, aligning objectives and instruments, and integrating a given process into its broader context—can help update, adapt, and upgrade policymaking processes.

Four Process Flaws and How Process Design Can Address Them

Borrowing from process design, and the related disciplines from which it draws its insights—such as behavioral science, psychology, neuroscience, or the study of trust as well as that of heuristics and cognitive bias—it is possible to identify four key process flaws that contribute to the weakening of today's political system. They are:

- Jumping to conclusions without proper diagnosis of a policy problem,
- Assuming the rationality of policymakers and citizens,
- Failing to think outside the box, leading to severe policy blind spots, and
- Stifling adaptive and innovative policymaking due to hyper-rigidity.

Good process design can assist in mitigating these weaknesses through three positive levers:

- Building a deeper understanding of the policy challenge for improved and innovative policy solutions;

- Supporting greater ownership of policy solutions for stronger political consensus, more effective implementation, and a broader mandate for experimentation; and
- Increasing transparency and trust building to improve confidence in institutions and create the preconditions for more flexible, less risk-averse policymaking.

While process design is not a silver bullet, it can help ensure that political infrastructure is upgraded to make the best use of the processes and resources in place in order to bolster effective and efficient decision-making.

Through these levers, political processes and spaces can be designed that encourage:

- More explorative policymaking that is instrumental in the face of complex and unprecedented challenges;
- More inclusive deliberation to engage a greater diversity of stakeholders; and
- More active listening and constructive exchanges between stakeholders holding different political positions, which is essential to striking political compromises and creative problem-solving.⁵

Together, these improvements can strengthen the overall ability of the political system to remain adaptive and fit for purpose in a fast-changing society defined by “wicked problems; that is, “problems with many interdependent factors making them seem impossible to solve. Because the factors are often incomplete, in flux, and difficult to define, solving

wicked problems requires a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved.”⁶

While process design is not a silver bullet, it can—particularly in the context of rigid protocols common in policymaking—help ensure that political infrastructure is upgraded to make the best use of the processes and resources in place in order to bolster effective and efficient decision-making.

Good process design is proven to dramatically improve policy outcomes: the adaptive and inherently flexible nature of the discipline can help political processes keep up with a rapidly changing society. Whatever the task or challenge at hand, it is the prerogative of process designers to ensure that a process is tailored to provide for the best possible outcome. Political process design teaches that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to policymaking, and that the devil is in the details when it comes to ensuring the ambitions of any given policy process are coherently and logically reflected in the decision-making and deliberating infrastructure that is designed to support these ambitions. Furthermore, process design has the potential to address the current perception that policymaking lacks authenticity, competence, and empathy—the three main ingredients that are needed to build trust⁷—by designing processes that are specifically tailored to highlight, strengthen, and reflect these values.

Small Tweaks with Huge Consequences

Political process design principles can be applied from the macro level—the reconceptualization and organization of the decision-making process as a whole and the way institutions function—down to the micro level—designing and organizing the various components of the policymaking process, such as the successful execution of parliamentary hearings, debates, and stakeholder meetings.

5 Caspar Kolster, Isotta Ricci Bitti, Chiara Rosselli, and Helena Wittrich (eds), “[Declaration: Creating Better Political Conversations](#),” Open European Dialogue, 2021.

6 Interaction Design Foundation, “[What are Wicked Problems?](#)” 2021.

7 Frances Frei and Anne Morriss, *Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader’s Guide to Empowering Everyone Around You*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2020.

At the institutional level, many associate the upgrading of political process with the push for greater inclusion of citizens in decision-making, which has been strongly advocated over the last decades. Yet, the redesign of political processes means much more than that. It means embracing an approach that is strategic and human-centric when it comes to the “how” of politics—one based less on how people believe the world should work and more on working within the limits of their rational minds.⁸ It means taking into consideration the insights provided by cognitive and behavioral science to fashion fora and processes for political exchange and decision-making that are suitable for the way the human mind and society actually works.

These changes do not require major overhauls of political institutions; hence, the cost of implementation is relatively low and the potential benefits could be exponentially high. Process design principles can be integrated into very different levels of decision-making. In their most modest application, it would suffice to make certain changes to the way internal meetings are designed to witness a substantial change in attitudes of policymakers.

One example of this is provided by one member of the Open European Dialogue parliamentary network who chairs the European Affairs Committee in one EU national parliament. She reports that a very small change in the way she runs committee meetings, inspired by her experience at the Open European Dialogue, almost immediately had a positive effect on the manner and tone in which government and opposition politicians addressed one another. She says:

I tasked opposition members to act as rapporteurs, which led to noticeable change from discussions based on personality to more content-based discussions. People refrained from attacking each

other as frequently as they used to. It also helped to decrease attacks on the chair and the governing party, and it did indeed lead to more constructive engagement, and I felt that it improved the atmosphere and discussion climate in the committee.⁹

Three Fora that Could Benefit from Process Design

A multitude of policymaking processes and fora lack the tools to achieve their objectives. The problem largely lies in the lack of any design rigor when conceptualizing these. The challenge spans across the policymaking and policy thinking field—from, say, the creation of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly with the ambition to unlock avenues for open and eager dialogue, and yet fashioned to reproduce a rigid parliamentary plenary protocol that is not the most conducive format for encouraging dialogue¹⁰ to the expensive gatherings hosted by philanthropic foundations with the objective to create a civil society network without ever including any networking time. It is precisely such details that process design argues can make or break a political process. Indeed, like all design, what might seem to the untrained eye like the “offspring of idle fancy” is rather the “studied result of accumulative observation and delightful habit.”¹¹ A lot of what political process design advocates is quite logical and straightforward, and, in that sense, simple. Yet, negligence in meticulously and rigorously applying process design expertise and principles can often be the cause of the greatest frustrations with political processes and fora. Below are presented three examples that illustrate well these issues: the UN Climate Conference, the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union

8 Various seminal texts exist that highlight our overreliance on the assumption that our minds work rationally. One prime example covers the experiments presented by Daniel Kahnemann in *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Penguin, 2013.

9 Open European Dialogue, “[Why Do We Need Open and Informal Dialogues in European Politics? A Conversation with Lolita Cigâne: Open European Dialogue](#),” July 2, 2020.

10 Caspar Kolster, Isotta Ricci Bitti, Chiara Rosselli, and Ronith Schalast, [More Than Just a Ticking Clock: The New Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly](#), German Marshall Fund, May 2019.

11 John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, Good Press, 1859.

An Un-level Playing Field for Climate Action

The annual UN Climate Conference (COP) aims to foster international cooperation on climate change action. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, its primary role has shifted to facilitating the process of reviewing and upscaling the commitments by signatories.¹² Apart from trying to reach tangible agreements, the COP's indirect purpose is also to provide a regular place for dialogue on climate issues where views are exchanged between governments and non-state observers, commitments are made, and best practices are shared. This is especially crucial for civil society and grassroots movements. The COP is an important platform for countries particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as the least developed countries or the small island developing states, to make their voice heard.

In practice, however, the COP often fails to meet these goals. Although it has increasingly recognized the role of civil society and other stakeholders, such as subnational entities, many groups remain under-represented and most negotiations take place behind closed doors.¹³ While the conference orchestrates the initiatives of non-state actors, the climate commitments that are made by non-state actors remain largely separate from those of states, and are dominated by actors from the political Global North.¹⁴ Even in official negotiation rooms, the playing field is not level. COPs routinely run over time, sometimes by days, over the previously set schedule. Delegates of the most vulnerable developing countries are often unable to stay these extra days and ultimately find themselves faced with a final agreement that was reached in their

absence, with many issues most important to them having been erased.¹⁵

In light of these systemic inequalities in climate-change negotiations, process design can create spaces for formal participation initiated from the top as well as translating the demands of grassroots mobilizations.¹⁶ A process redesign of climate talks could focus more prominently on the diagnostic of local challenges and opportunities by actively reaching out to more diverse stakeholders and allowing for encounters on a more level playing field, something that is currently prevented by existing hierarchies and inaccessible closed-door negotiations. At the very least, a small, yet important, commitment could be made to never let negotiations run over time. An institutionalized and meaningfully designed process for stakeholder engagement could make inclusive and accessible deliberation a permanent and integral element of UN conferencing on climate change, rather than just a desired goal based on the capacity of different actors to participate.

A Mismatch in EU Cross-border Dialogue

Established in 1989, the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) provides a forum for national parliamentarians to come together and discuss EU affairs. It creates the space and means through which the member states' national parliaments are able to communicate and cooperate with each other.

However, the COSAC format allows for very little dialogue. The agenda, set almost a year in advance, is the product of consultations among an extremely small subset of actors in a very top-down manner, which leaves little room for deviation from the stip-

12 Eva Lövbrand, Mattias Hjerpe, and Björn-Ola Linnér, "[Making climate governance global: how UN climate summitry comes to matter in a complex climate regime](#)," Environmental Politics, April 2017.

13 Ibid.

14 Karin Bäckstrand and Jonathan Kuyper, "[The democratic legitimacy of orchestration: the UNFCCC, non-state actors, and transnational climate governance](#)," Environmental Politics, April 2017.

15 Saleemul Huq, "[Are the climate change Conference of Parties still fit for purpose?](#)" The Daily Star, March 1, 2022.

16 Laura Berry, Jessica Koski, Cleo Verkuijl, Claudia Strambo, and Georgia Piggot, "[Making space: how public participation shapes environmental decision-making](#)," Stockholm Environment Institute Discussion Brief, January 2019.

ulated topics of conversation. Given the long time-frame between the setting of the agenda and the conference, there is little opportunity for dialogue around important topics that emerge between the two. Furthermore, the format of the two-day conference is articulated in hundreds of two-minute statements. Given the number of interventions, there is often no space for questions or discussion between the participants. Dialogue, if any, happens during the breaks, which is often the most interesting part of the conference. While informal dialogue is a valuable and legitimate tool for trust-building, this creates a two-tiered process which, in turn, contributes to hollowing out the institutional attempt to provide for dialogue. It also fosters an image of the EU institutions as overly rigid and a stage for formalities and not for actual politics. As a forum designed to promote exchange of ideas across countries, COSAC's design and structure do not meaningfully advance its own aim.

Starting from the assumption that “dialogue is about what we value and how we define it [...], about looking beyond the superficial and automatic answers to our questions,”¹⁷ one basic application of design principles to COSAC would reduce the number of statements in order to make time for actual dialogue and a two-way exchange in order to activate participants' capacity to learn from one another. The application of dialogue methodologies would be a fundamental starting point in the context of a process redesign of COSAC.

Additionally, considering the elements that make up trust—a fundamental component of effective dialogue—this requires the ability to share, connect, and exchange as well as receive recognition and care from interlocutors. Better designed processes can create spaces where these interpersonal requirements can be met, creating the preconditions for trusting relationships and cooperation to flourish. The application of process design—to COSAC's format in particular, but to all policy work at large—has the potential to overcome the incoherence between objectives and

real practices, often the foundation of declining trust-building with regard to EU institutions.

Lack of Clarity of Purpose on the EU's Democratic Revival

The Conference on the Future of Europe has opened up a space for citizens to engage in debate and share expectations on today's challenges and future priorities for the EU. It brought together people through an interactive multilingual digital platform, decentralized events across the union, citizens' panels, and conference plenaries.¹⁸

The Conference on the Future of Europe was expected to be an innovative democratic project to reimagine the role of citizens within the governance structure of the EU, which is often argued to be suffering from a democratic deficit due to its perceived inaccessibility to citizens. Yet, the initiative, overseen jointly by the presidents of the European Parliament, the EU Council, and the European Commission, lacked alignment among its conveners over what the ultimate goal should be. The EU Council anticipated “a forum for reflection” without committing to a set of actions to be derived from it, while the European Parliament had foreseen it as a “vehicle for reform” and anticipated “tangible reforms, including treaty reforms.”¹⁹

The presidents finally settled for a declaration of intent in line with the reflective exercise anticipated by the EU Council. This lays out the conference's aim as giving “citizens a say on what matters to them”²⁰ without committing to follow up with “tangible action, beyond the production of a report.”²¹ A well-known criticism of this approach is one that resonates with the principles of process design, namely the

17 Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

18 Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, “[Engaging with Citizens for Democracy – Building a more resilient Europe](#),” *European Union*, March 18, 2021.

19 Sergio Fabbrini, John Erik Fossum, Magdalena Góra, and Guntram Wolff, “[The Conference on the Future of Europe: vehicle for reform versus forum for reflection?](#),” *Bruegel*, June 15, 2021.

20 Joint Declaration, “[Engaging with Citizens](#).”

21 Fabbrini, Fossum, Gora, and Wolff, “The Conference on the Future of Europe.”

gross mismatch between the envisioned process and the anticipated outcome. When the results of consultations are inconclusive or yield no real results other than a report, “citizen participation weakens rather than strengthens the democratic legitimacy of the EU. It creates an illusion of participation opportunities but ends up having no impact.”²²

The application of process design could have helped to develop a conference that avoided such a classic pitfall in the design of citizens’ participation processes by fashioning a process created around the real needs of participants and away from the inter-institutional power struggle. Process design starts with defining a clear purpose and outcome. In doing so, it must place the needs of its primary audience at the core of the planning process. Once the purpose is defined, the process design ensures that every step of the planning aligns with achieving it. A good process eases participation, aligns expectations, and allows participants to collectively achieve the best possible outcome.

It is too early to predict outcomes for the Conference on the Future of Europe while it is ongoing. This democratic exercise has, however, missed the opportunity to rethink, develop, and test new methods for citizen participation at the EU level. The lack of commitment and the confusion over the purpose and ambition of the conference has already left a bad taste in the mouth of many and risks fueling further distrust in the EU institutions as participants emerge somewhat confused, unsatisfied, and frustrated over their contribution. In the worst-case scenario, the conference risks discrediting the idea behind more inclusive deliberation processes altogether, due not to the intrinsic ineffectiveness or weaknesses of these processes but to the lack of meticulous process design that should have accompanied the planning from the start.

22 Nicolai von Ondarza and Minna Ålander, “[The Conference on the Future of Europe: Obstacles and Opportunities to a European Reform Initiative that Goes beyond Crisis Management](#),” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, March 19, 2021.

Making Politics Fit for Purpose Again

Integrating process design into policymaking does not mean adapting constitutions or revolutionizing representative democracy. Much to the contrary, and as illustrated by the above examples, most process designers would argue that even very small tweaks within existing structures can have an enormous impact. Furthermore, working to update the way society is organized politically is a potentially bipartisan cause that could—if properly communicated—provide a much-needed impetus toward change and constructive political renewal in times when polarization and fragmented decision-making power is blocking major advancements on other, more divisive, policy issues.

If nothing else, process design can be an olive branch in times of heightened polarization, an opening toward finding a common ground, if not on specific policies, at least on how society and democracy should function.

Finally, there is a reason beyond the return-on-investment argument for looking more carefully at how anything—from town halls to online ministerial websites, citizen consultations, or experimental policies—is designed. There are values enshrined in the way decisions are made. While it is true that redesigning political institutions is not as polarizing or partisan as other topics, there is nevertheless a vision of what a good society looks like, one reflected in the way political life is organized. Hence, if process design can help create a political system that is more adaptive, inclusive, constructive, competent, transparent, and empathetic, then we have the responsibility to make sure institutions reflect these values. If nothing else, process design can be an olive branch in times of heightened polarization, an opening toward finding a common ground, if not on specific policies, at least on how society and democracy should function.

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About the Author(s)

Chiara Rosselli is the head of the Open European Dialogue and senior program officer at the German Marshall Fund. Since 2016, she has been leading efforts to innovate the way we think of and design political conversation spaces and political collaboration tools. She is a trained process designer and facilitator, co-ideator of the Policy Design Sprint. She serves as lead mentor for Veracura Social Impact Accelerator and is vice president of Sistema Italia Adaptive Leadership Association.

Rebecca Farulli is a researcher specialized in anticipatory governance, public-sector reform, and institutional-driven innovation. She is a fellow at APROPOS—Advancing Process in Politics and was previously a project associate at the Open European Dialogue. She has worked for the European Commission, Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is a product owner of Staat-up, a Berlin-based non-profit promoting public entrepreneurship, new collaboration methods, and innovative public procurement for Germany's public administration.

Ronith Schalast works as a facilitator in political youth education and recently joined Germanwatch's climate policy team. Between 2018 and 2020, she supported the Open European Dialogue where she organized activities for parliamentarians across Europe. She is pursuing a Master's in International Relations at Freie University Berlin, Humboldt University and University of Potsdam.

Helena Wittrich is a research associate and Ph.D. candidate at the Chair of Technology and Innovation Management, Technical University of Berlin. Before joining TU Berlin, she worked as a program coordinator at the Open European Dialogue, designing and facilitating political dialogues.

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The Open European Dialogue is a politically neutral platform that aims to improve European politics by supporting policymakers in better understanding challenges and perspectives from across Europe. It connects European politicians across parties and countries, providing space for dialogue and cross-border collaboration. In 2021, it was selected as an OECD global best practice for public-sector innovation.

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