

# Improving Sortition with More Sortition

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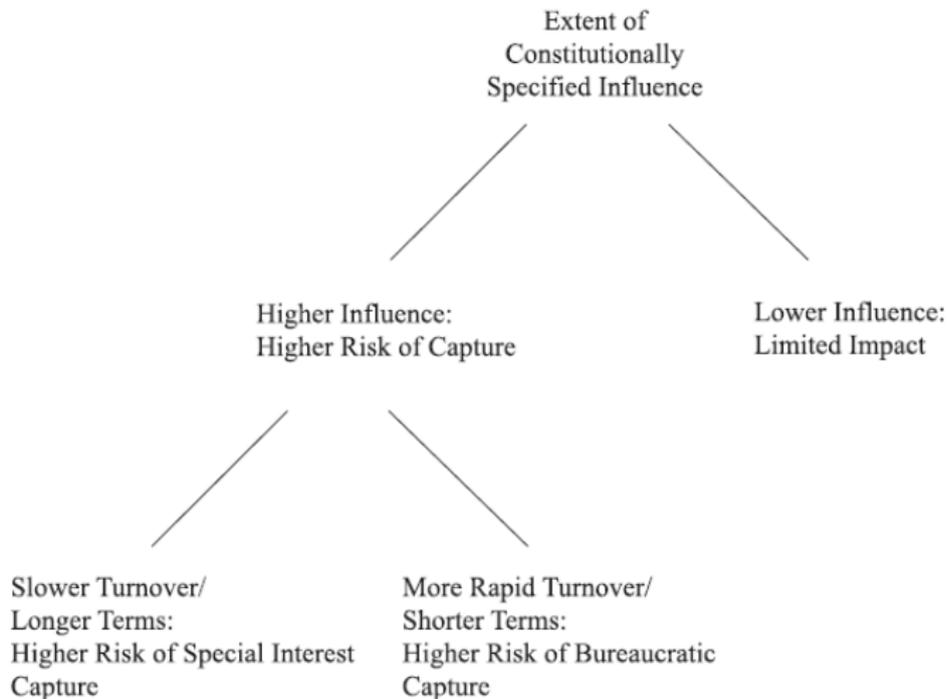
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- Landa, Dimitri and Ryan Pevnick. Forthcoming. “Is Random Selection a Cure for the Ills of Electoral Representation?” *Journal of Political Philosophy*.

Landa and Pevnick (forthcoming) introduce strategic considerations into the analysis of sortition-based institutional schemes. Taking a non-ideal approach, they make “realistic assumptions” (6) about the potential for self-interested behavior and conclude that sortition-based systems lack an accountability constraint (9).

The authors argue that the apparent promise of sortition-based systems stems from the low stakes that have hitherto been involved, and that randomly-selected representatives with great power would be pursued by special interests in the same way that elected politicians currently are (7).

They also argue that “lottocratic systems” that did confer substantial power would face a tradeoff between special-interest capture and bureaucratic capture, depending on the term of office given to selected representatives (13).



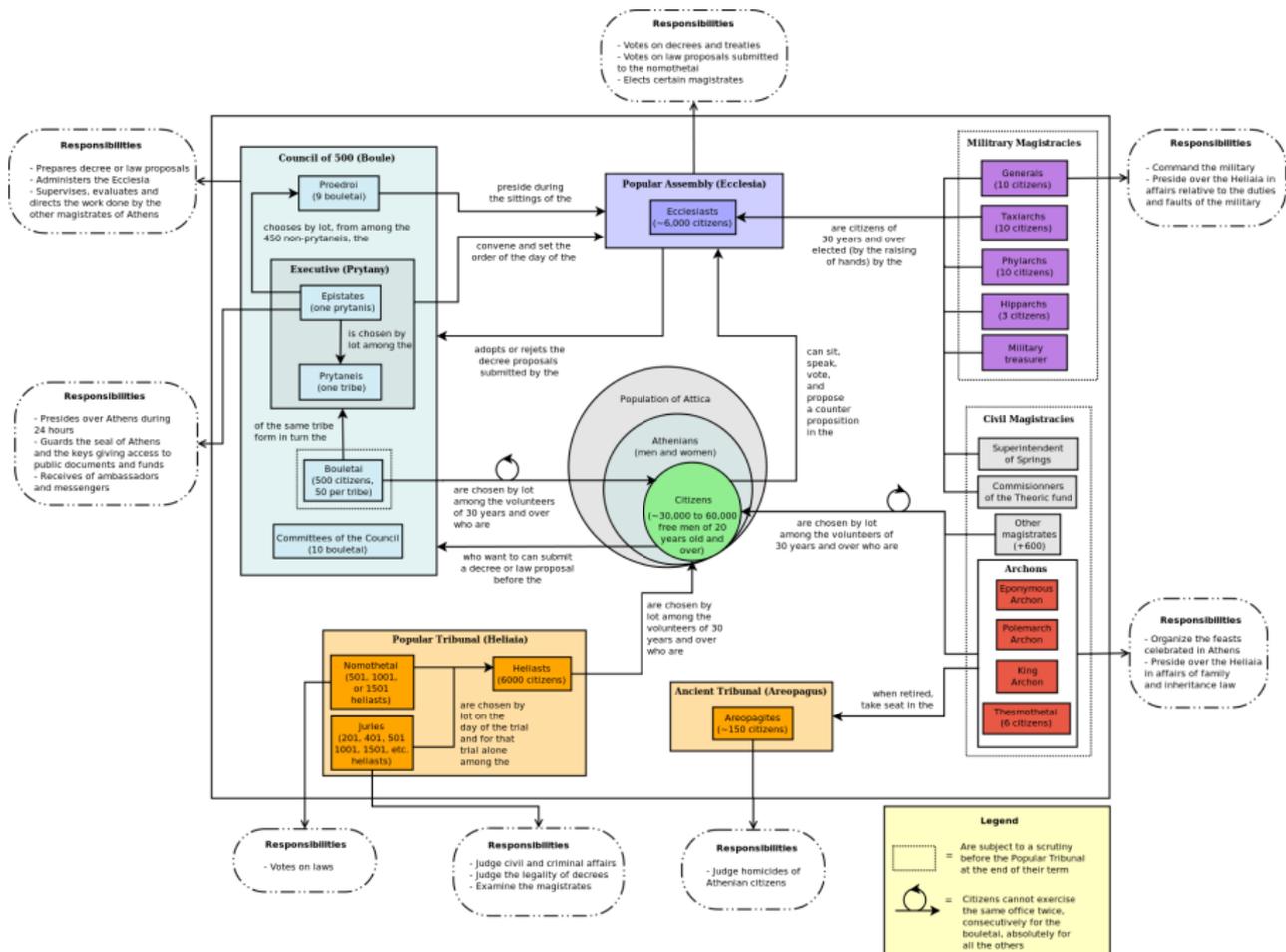
*Figure 1. Design dilemmas for sortition-based proposals*

Landa and Pevnick argue that electoral representation is preferable because it increases “pivotality” within an environment of high accountability (15). They observe that “[a]ccountability in an environment of low pivotality is unlikely to be effective” because of the absence of incentives for good performance, and that “pivotality without accountability is outright dangerous” (15) because of the potential for self-interested behavior.

*...the general problems that lottocrats often attribute to electoral systems with regard to capture are not, primarily, problems created by election. They are, instead, problems created by systems in which representatives are given a significant degree of independence to act as they like while holding office (14).*

In many current electoral systems the accountability that Landa and Pevnick assume is disrupted by term limits. Electoral incentives cannot apply to politicians in their final term of office, nor to those who have chosen to retire. This gap allows the possibility of self-interested behavior while in office.

I argue that the two tradeoffs that the authors identify can be resolved through further use of sortition. Accountability can be imposed, even on randomly-selected citizens momentarily in positions of great power, by empowering still other randomly-selected citizens to hold them to account. I contend that we can arrange a sortition-based system to confer pivotality in an environment of high accountability.



The Athenian system was characterized not only by sortition but by collegiality and rotation. Citizens always held office with a number of colleagues, and held offices for very short periods of time, sometimes only for a single day.

Aristotle viewed elections as an oligarchic method of selection, (Politics 1294e) and it's notable that while the Athenians mainly used the more democratic sortition, they did use elections to select a small number of offices thought to require special competence: military commanders, the army treasurer, the keepers of the festival fund<sup>1</sup>, and the custodian of the city water supply (Constitution of Athens 43i). Other offices were thought to require loyalty to the polis but no special skill.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This was a (rudimentary) system of social benefits for the very poor.

<sup>2</sup>Socrates makes much of this distinction; see *Protagoras*, *Timaeus*. 

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- 2 More generally, could groups selected by sortition impose accountability on one another? Would it be possible to design a system of checks and balances alleviating concerns about capture?
- 3 The Athenians also used sortition within subsets of the eligible population (those over 30, those who self-nominate, those nominated by their tribe, etc.). Can we see a role for such subsets?