

Rethinking Democratic Participation through Quadratic Voting

By Jiayi Chen

According to the University of Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy, young people in the modern generation have the lowest faith in liberal democracy, with [millennials](#) more disillusioned than Gen X or boomers were at the same life stage. In the four regions of southern Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Anglo-Saxon democracies including Britain and the United States, [“younger generations have become steadily more dissatisfied with democracy”](#)—contradicting the historical norm that democratic discontent decreases with age. Furthermore, a 2024 pre-election survey of 16-21 year olds in the United Kingdom found 49% [dissatisfied](#) with how democracy works versus only 29% satisfied, even higher (52%) among 16-18 year olds. This partly reflects an eroding belief that democracy matters at all—the percentage of young Americans saying democracy in America is important [dropped](#) from 78% in 2021 to 72% in 2025, and only 13% say the U.S. is headed in the right direction. Harvard's Institute of Politics attributes that decline to a [strained](#) generation defined by deep economic insecurity, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and growing social fragmentation. And that dissatisfaction is deeply correlated with the perceived ineffectiveness of voting, as 41% of young Americans say they [“don't believe my vote will make a real difference.”](#) up three points from 2020. It shows in behavior too: the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [estimates](#) that 47% of youth aged 18-29 voted in 2024, down from the historic 50% in 2020.

The core alignment between liberal democracies and voting and why both have decreased in terms of social satisfaction can be explained by John Locke's social contract [theory](#). According to him, the government is legitimate only through consent of the governed, and voting is the main mechanism of consent. With people increasingly believing voting [does not](#) translate their preferences into policy, they thus perceive the social contract as failing, then seeking alternative forms of participation such as protests and political movements. Thus, the alignment between democratic sentiment and voting shows how the perceived ineffectiveness of voting is not just a sign of unaccountable politicians or methodological failures but rather an indication of systemic democratic decline. Freedom House, a nonpartisan organization devoted to preserving democracy, reported that global freedom declined for an eighteenth consecutive year in 2023, with flawed elections, manipulation, and armed conflict driving the [deterioration](#) in freedom.

However, the core reason underlying increasing dissatisfaction with liberal democracy and voting, according to [Amartya Sen](#), is because [ordinal](#) preferences alone record only which option a citizen prefers, never by how much, thus treating someone desperate about an issue identically to someone who is indifferent. Because of this, Anthony Downs showed in 1957 that singular vote based electoral systems drives parties toward the [median](#) voter, flattening real differences, since the intensity of political opinion did not matter as long as the vote was cast. Additionally, his [paradox](#) of voting revealed that because a single ballot is almost never decisive, rational citizens have little reason to inform themselves at all. This is the main reason why the modern generation feels that voting has yet to realize the will of the people.

The most optimal model for political participation that targets this defect directly is quadratic voting ([QV](#)), formalized by economist Glen Weyl and statistician Steven Laffley and popularized in Weyl and Eric Posner's 2018 book [Radical Markets](#). Its premise is based on the flaw that under one person, one vote, a passionate citizen wields the same power as an indifferent one. QV gives each voter an equal budget of credits that may buy as many votes as desired on any issue, but the price climbs quadratically: one vote costs one credit, two cost four, three cost nine, and so on. A voter who cares intensely can pile votes onto what matters most, but only by surrendering influence elsewhere. As a result, the total votes an issue draws track the true intensity behind it. QV decouples a voter's intensity toward an issue from wealth, because, unlike lobbying or campaign finance, it assigns equal, artificial credits to every citizen. Posner has called QV the most [important](#) idea for law and public policy to come out of economics in a decade.

In 2019, the Democratic caucus of the Colorado House faced too many spending bills, little money, and no reliable way to tell which proposals members truly prioritized. The prior year's method, an equal handful of votes per member, yielded what one representative called an undifferentiated ["big blob"](#) of bills bunched at near-identical levels of support. Under quadratic voting, the signal sharpened immediately. The Equal Pay for Equal Work Act surfaced as the clear priority with [60 votes](#), trailed by a long tail of lesser favorites. [No representative](#) spent all their credits on a single bill, showing how the rising price restrained radical voting. This points to how QV belongs most comfortably in bounded, multi-issue decisions like budgeting and legislative prioritization, possibly in public polls and ballot initiatives as well.

For philosophers like Jeremy Waldron, the one-person-one-vote system shouldn't be abandoned because it embodies [equal](#) civic standing that is intrinsically valuable,

while [Michael Sandel](#) believes similarly, and that supplying citizens with unequal voting power systemically degrades the quality of political participation. However, blindness to intensity in political opinion is itself a kind of unfairness. The fairer principle is accounting for citizens' naturally different intensities of conviction rather than flattening them into identical votes in the blind pursuit of equality.

Even E. Glen Weyl, the co-creator of QV, acknowledges that [collusion and fraud](#) are important vulnerabilities because coordinated groups and bribery can undermine the system's quadratic costs by distributing it across multiple people. However, these risks can be greatly [reduced](#) through secure identity verification that limits each person to one voting account and secret-ballot systems that make individual votes impossible to verify. While these safeguards are not perfect, [“it is reasonably robust... and \[QV\] quite robustly outperforms one-person-one-vote.”](#) says Weyl.

Implemented in such a setting today, quadratic voting's benefits are tangible. It would capture the intensity discarded by ordinary voting. It would let a committed minority prevail on the issues it cares most about while curbing outright fanaticism, and it turns a muddle of equally ranked options into a clear collective priority. But its risks are just as concrete. In a practical setting, the system worked partly because it was anonymous; its architect, Representative Chris Hansen, [argued](#) that secrecy let lawmakers register their honest preferences free of pressure from peers and party. Yet in January 2024 a Denver judge ruled the practice [illegal](#), finding that its anonymous ballots violated the state's open-meetings law, which bars elected bodies from taking formal action in secret. It showed how a self-governing public cannot hold representatives to account for votes it is forbidden to see. Secret ballots are democratic bedrock for ordinary citizens and abnormal only for officials acting on the public's behalf, so the conflict largely resolves wherever QV is applied to public polls and ballot initiatives.

No system can perfectly capture the will of the people, but that was never the bar. With efficient, well-managed safeguards, gradual implementation, and careful regulation, QV can effectively make an impact as another model of political participation in today's society.