



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2022 Lebowitz Prize: What Is Wrong With Democracy and What We Should Do According to These Two Philosophers

This special episode of Key Conversations is joined by Dr. Cristina Lafont, Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, and Dr. Alex Guerrero, Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University. Each year, the Lebowitz Prize is presented to a pair of philosophers who hold contrasting views of an important philosophical question that is of current interest both to the field and to an educated public audience. The professors discuss the topic for the 2022 Lebowitz Prize, which is "Democracy: What's Wrong? What Should We Do?"

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend.

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2022 Lebowitz Prize

Today it's my great pleasure to welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa, two remarkable philosophers, Dr. Cristina Lafont and Dr. Alex Guerrero. Cristina Lafont is the Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, and Alex Guerrero is Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University.

These two scholars are the 2022 recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution, awarded each year by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, the APA. The prize is in recognition of their outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy.

Each year, the Lebowitz Award is presented to a pair of highly regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. Our 2022 winners' topic is "Democracy: What's Wrong? What Should We Do?", which they presented at the 2023 APA Pacific Division meeting in San Francisco in early April. We're thrilled to be with them here today to talk about their respective viewpoints on this topic.

Welcome professors.

Dr. Cristina Lafont: Thank you.

Dr. Alex Guerrero: Thank you so much.

Fred Lawrence: Your topic that you proposed and was selected as the winner of the 2022 Lebowitz Prize could not be more relevant: challenges faced by democracy in the United States, and by implication, I think all liberal democracies in the world.

In your proposal for the Lebowitz Prize, you both said democracy is in trouble, or democracy is in crisis.

Indeed, the idea of democracy in crisis has almost become a cliché at this point, because we all talk about it in all walks of our personal, social, and political lives. The question is, what do we do about that crisis? What do we do about that problem?

You have fascinating contrasting prescriptions for the crisis of democracy. Cristina, I might describe your view without in any way minimizing its power as the more traditional view, that we need to find ways dramatically of improving the quality of public debate to enhance the citizenry's ability to play a constructive role in participatory democracy.

Alex, for lack of a better expression, you have a more radical view, that we should adopt a new form of democracy, the lottocracy, by which we replace the electoral representative framework with a lottery to select our leaders.

Now, it's tempting to begin with Cristina and the more traditional view, and then turn to Alex, but instead, I want to do this the other way around, because I think in many ways

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the essence and the real power of Cristina's argument is the ways in which it replies to the more radical approach.

So Alex, let me start with you. What is a lottocracy and why is it a preferable way to select political leaders at this moment in our history?

Dr. Alex Guerrero: The basic idea of the lottocracy is animated by the worry that electoral mechanisms are broken, that elections are actually a big part of our problem now rather than an effective way of helping us work together to address our problems.

And so the vision I have is that although maybe we shouldn't only do this, we should be thinking really big picture about how to change things at a maybe more systemic level than we are. Not just trying to elect a different person or put someone new in place, but rethink the very structure that we're working with.

And so in my work, I try to do that. There's really two parts to the project. One is trying to get an accurate diagnosis of what's going wrong with electoral democracy, and then the second part is putting forward this kind of crazy idea of using lotteries rather than elections to choose our political representatives.

And I think everyone hearing that thinks that sounds crazy. We probably shouldn't go that far. And so a big part of my work is trying to make it seem less outside of the realm of possibility and to build enough institutional framework around it so it might be attractive.

The lottocracy, in essence, a couple big mechanisms that I would recommend changing. So rather than having a generalist elected legislature, instead subdivide the political space into 10 or 20 or 30 different issues. So we'd have single issue legislative bodies, each of those, rather than having elected representatives serving on them, each of those would be made up of people chosen at random from the political community. Genuine lottery, they would come together, they would serve for three year terms at the beginning of each year, each topic, there'd be a learning phase where they hear different ideas from experts and advocates and stakeholders about what we ought to do with respect to that issue.

So if we're focused on energy policy or education or agriculture, there'd be a narrowed introduction of a topic and discussion, hearing from experts about that topic, then there'd be phases of community consultation and deliberation, and eventually these randomly chosen citizens would have the power to enact legislation, to change existing legislation, to introduce new legislation, and they would be empowered to do this via this random selection mechanism.

Fred Lawrence: I can see already that we proceed both philosophically and practically in going back and forth. There's a broad philosophical conception here of what best advances the purposes of democracy, but then one almost can't help but go immediately into the implementation issue. So Cristina, on either or both of those grounds, what is your critique of Alex's lottocracy approach?

Dr. Cristina Lafont: So let me say first that where Alex and I agree, we agree that we do need to change the way we do things, that there are a lot of problems, that there is a crisis with democracy. So that's the part where we agree. I don't think we agree on the diagnosis, so I don't think that elections are the culprit at all. I think elections are as most people assume, where the power of citizens lies.

And so for me, protecting elections is essential. Because elections are occasions where citizens collectively and peacefully decide the political direction of their country. And this is something that authoritarian regimes, for example, do not allow citizens to do. And so in elections, on a regular basis we decide whether we want to go a more risky, progressive kind of social policy direction or whether we want to go in a more liberal, market oriented direction.

And we do that together with all our disagreements, and then we own the consequences of having done this. And to me, this is essential. And so that's why I don't agree that elections are the culprit.

So in terms of then what will be wrong with lottocracy? There are so many things I could say, but just maybe focusing on the big picture diagnosis, lottocracy is a form of rule of the few. There is no role for citizens collectively making any important political decisions, particularly not deciding the direction of the country.

And so the very idea of lottocracy is that we will blindly defer to some few who will be randomly selected, and who will actually decide what to do as they see fit. They are not supposed to represent us and then do what their constituents want them to do. There is no real representation in that sense, relationship.

So they are kind of part of the constituent power. It's just that it's a part and not the whole who decides. And so I call them the ultimate usurpers, because they look like us, but they don't really represent us. They just simply decide as they see fit. The problem is that they are the few lucky guys who will be doing that, and the rest of the citizenry won't be informed, won't be able to have this high quality deliberation.

And probably that means that in the long term, at best, there will be a clear misalignment between what these groups of randomly selected people do and decide, and the actual values, interests, and information of the population. But then I also see an instrumental argument. The problem with having a misalignment between the

decisions that are being made, even if they are wonderful ones, and what the values, the interest, and the views of the population who are misinformed.

And who you don't need to inform anymore, because actually you are bypassing them. They are not decided. Now we need to be informed because we do make very fundamental decisions every few years. Once we don't do anything, we are disposable. Is it relevant what we think or what we value, whatever, because we are not having any power to make actual decisions.

And so the problem I see with the misalignment is the problem with all kinds of technocratic proposals, which is that passing legislation is never enough. What you want is to get outcomes, and to get outcomes, you need the citizenry to do their part.

Fred Lawrence: Now, you two are the philosophers, but it seems to me that we have both the deontological critique and a consequentialist critique coming at you. Both a critique about the very nature of the legitimacy of democracy, which Cristina says is undermined by cutting off the selection of representatives, legislators from some kind of a participatory democratic process on the one hand.

And then she makes a perhaps surprisingly consequentialist argument, that you're actually going to get worse decisions because the process is not going to do the things that the process needs to do, which ultimately is to leave the halls of the state legislature in Congress and to permeate out through the society.

People have to buy in order for these things to actually work. I'm just guessing that you've thought of both of these critiques. So how do you respond on these lines?

Dr. Alex Guerrero: This is such a wonderful opportunity, because I really admire Professor Lafont's work, and it's very nice to be able to respond in real time like this. So yes, both very good worries. I think on the rule of the few side, the first thing I'd say is often democratic theory can float away from what the world is actually like.

So our actual system, we elect 535 representatives in the United States. That's ruled by the few. They are not representative of us. So 130 of them, roughly a few years ago, had a net worth of over \$2 million each. 80% of them are male, 80% of them are white. Those things change a little bit over time, but not all that much. Many of them have backgrounds in law or business. They are not us. They're a socioeconomic elite that we have chosen, often with very limited decisional choice.

So we're given very few options to choose. In many places we live in a political community where it's always going to go one way or another between two dominant political parties. We don't get into the details of issues, often we're just focused at some level on the personalities of these people and what they look like and how they sound.

So I think there's a real way in which we already have rule by the few and furthermore, I think frankly in a scale and size, like most modern democracies, you're going to get something like rule by the few. We do have this ability to do this thing every two or four years to participate in elections. That's not nothing. It's hugely important in human history, quite an advance over what has come before. But I think it's easy to over valorize how much that actually means by way of control.

So one of my big worries is that our elected officials aren't really accountable to us anymore. They can do whatever they want. They're captured by special interests. They don't work for us, for the most part, they don't represent us for the most part. And so I think we have deep problems in already living in something like an oligarchy. And so if that's our situation, then maybe the deontological critique applies to our current system as well, and we need reforms in that way.

We currently myopically focus on elections as our only point of influence for many of us, and I think for many people they don't feel like that's enough. And I agree. I think we need something where we have people with genuinely open ears listening to us. And for that same reason, I think on the consequentialist side, would there be some massive misalignment between what these randomly chosen citizens would end up recommending and what everyone else will think or want?

I really don't think so. I think there's many issues for which the ordinary public has almost no knowledge. So what should our policies be with regard to agriculture, with regard to energy, with regard to insurance industry regulation, with regard to healthcare policy. Often people have only a limited idea here. They don't have some very specific view.

And when they see people who are otherwise just like them, who've learned more about the issue and come to think something about it, I think it's quite reasonable that they'll think, it seems like a good idea to me. We're currently not fixing it. Let's try this out for a while, see how it works.

So I think both of the worries are ones that although good worries to have, they can be met, and I think we should be asking those same questions about our current system.

Fred Lawrence: I don't want to cartoon Alex's response as a what have we got to lose response, but it has a little bit of that flavor to it. There's a real underlying power to that argument, it seems to me, that he's saying that the current system is broken, I'm going to suggest another way in which it might be broken, and therefore the effort to continue to try to fix it may not be the right next step. Maybe we just widen our lenses and take a different approach to it.

I was thinking, Cristina, about reading some of your work about the need to improve the way we educate voters and improve the way in which people can participate in this.

We seem to have continued to move in the wrong direction on that. Why do we think if we just keep working at it, it's going to be fixable, as opposed to saying, let's just take a deep breath and try something else because it can't be worse and it might be better?

Dr. Cristina Lafont: I absolutely share the concern. I just finished a piece on how social media is destroying the possibility of an inclusive public sphere. This is a commentary on a new book from Habermas who is exactly making the case that this is another structural transformation of the public sphere.

So to me, that is clearly one of the culprits, is there is a real risk that if we continue having this business model for social media and this fragmentation, the business model that creates echo chambers, if we keep having this ecosystem for forming public opinion, it's going to be very hard to know exactly what it is that we are facing, what political options we have in general, what are the political problems?

We can't hardly have a conversation if people are only listening to those who already agree with them in their echo chamber. We need to have an inclusive public sphere, and this is an important point where I see a problem with what Alex is assuming as conditions that will be needed for lottocracy to work the way he expects, which is that in my view, citizens under free institutions really have deep pluralism of values, interests, views, et cetera.

So do not agree basically. And it's not only because we have a kind of oligarchic system, which I do agree we do. That once you get rid of the ruling class, the people agree. No, the people do not agree at all. They are as divided as they seem, at least in terms of interest, values, et cetera.

And so the point of the need to have a conversation is not because then we realize how identical and homogeneous the people are. No, it's because that's how we try to change minds and hearts, and that is what it takes to advance in society, even regardless of how political decisions fall and when. We need to have the conversation. We need to know what we think is right and wrong, what we need to do socially, et cetera, that is essential.

And so of course, having a decent inclusive public sphere is the condition sine qua non for us to figure out what we want to do, no matter what particular political system then we construct in order to make decisions, and that is very much in danger.

Fred Lawrence: Alex, what is the role in the lottocracy of this conversation, which I hear Cristina to be suggesting not only in a kind of marketplace of ideas might give us a better result, but

again, in a different sense, the very process of that conversation is important for a pluralistic society to continue to function as a single society.

And that by doing an end run around that group, you might be disabling that process from going forward. That conversation isn't going to take place.

Dr. Alex Guerrero: I agree with Professor Lafont. There's no reason to expect a fundamental value agreement across all these groups. There'll be lots of hard conversations. Those have taken place with randomly chosen citizens in places like Ireland, where they talked about abortion and same sex marriage, and came to interestingly important proposals with respect to those topics.

I don't expect that to go away. That's the nature of politics. But I think it's unrealistic to have a detailed, broad mass public conversation about these things in a way that would actually then inform policy making about what we should do to regulate the insurance industry or how we should change immigration policy in some detailed way.

I think that's an unrealistic aim. Relating to this, I think the problem of electoral democracy is it requires the mass public to be informed in a detailed way about what their potential representatives or their actual representatives are doing and about the policy issues.

If you can pass things called the Clean Air Act, where in fact the Clean Air Act is about environmental degradation and pollution, that's going to be a big problem in actually getting good results from politics. And I think it's very hard to expect people to be very well-informed, not just as a matter of the media, the press isn't very good, they also just don't have the time. This was the whole reason for using elected representatives, that those people would be able to research.

But I think at the center of the theory is this issue of accountability. How can we really hold elected officials meaningfully accountable, informed by actual knowledge about what they're doing, and whether it's a good idea, rather than just by misinformation or manipulation come election time.

And I worry a lot about the possibility of media reform or anything else. So John Dewey and Walter Lippmann and Marie Collins Swabey, and a lot of philosophers were worried about this back in the 1920s as we started to have a more global world interconnected in all kinds of ways.

How is it that somebody living in Kansas is going to be informed about what's going on in Moscow or Beijing? That's going to be very difficult. We're going to have to rely on the press. Who's going to pay for that press to do the detailed investigative reporting? It's going to be a free market, commercial, supported enterprise. That's going to drive

the direction of media incentives. They want more people to listen. They want more people to watch.

That's going to shift into entertainment mode. So we see Neil Postman raising these worries in the 70s and 80s, his wonderful book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, nicely captures the worry that we are going to engage in politics in a way that's entertaining, maybe involving hate watching, but it's not going to be enough to give us detailed information to hold our elected officials accountable. It's just become worse with social media and the internet, and massed this information along various lines.

That's in a way a new problem, but in a way it's the same problem. The alternative to market-driven for-profit media is something where the government gets involved and public subsidization of media, but then we have the worry, what about a critical press that's going to really raise hard questions about the government? If they are getting their funding from the government, will that be stable over the long term?

And so I think these are deep problems. The lottocracy avoids some of them by not requiring the detailed knowledge of everyone in the whole political community. People will get those details filled in later if they're randomly chosen to serve or if they have a particular interest in that issue.

Fred Lawrence: So Cristina, I hear Alex to be saying that the problems with an informed electorate are not just that we're not doing it right, it's that they're deeply structural. This is not solvable, and that trying to solve it apropos of Einstein's famous dictum, the definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, that we're trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, and we're not going to get a better result. We're going to have an uninformed electorate behaving in ways that are not even in their rational self-interest or enlightened self-interest.

And so therefore, we should try something else, because this is a system that can't be fixed, that the structural problems are such that it can't be fixed.

Dr. Cristina Lafont: I would like to highlight the difference between technical questions and political questions. There are no political questions that are only technical. No matter how you decide technically to craft a policy, it will have political implications. It always does. It will be more or less just or unjust. It will be more or less discriminatory.

So you can fix the healthcare system in any country in a variety of technical ways. It will make a difference in terms of whether there is universal coverage, who pays for it, who has more protections, who has less. So in my view, the beauty, the reason why you cannot not have political partisan and therefore political programs, which is to me, one of the biggest dangers and problems with lottocracy. I think that if lottocracies ever get

to exist, they would have to create political parties and political programs, and they will end up being exactly pretty much what we have now in the sense that citizens don't need to be informed on the technicalities.

What they need to know, what political programs give them, is the assurance that this way of technically fixing say healthcare will be aligned with the values that that political system is putting upfront. What matters the most? What are we trying to do when we fix healthcare?

Are we trying to get universal coverage and everyone protected? Do we think that this is what society ought to be doing? Or are we trying to save money and make it a market issue? Those are ideologically very different ways of doing technical work.

So the problem of current democracies is not that people don't have technical knowledge, we don't need that. We created political partisan programs precisely to let citizens choose what matters, which is the political orientation, and then you can trust that if you vote for this party instead of the other one, those values will be the ones when you confront the technical problem of exactly how to fix this and that.

And so I don't think that is a problem. Now, the problem I say with having a lottocracy is that yes, we have a lot of politicians who are not accountable, sufficiently accountable. I don't think it's because people don't know technicalities, it's for other reasons. But in any event, it is a system of accountability, and so they cannot completely forget the interests and values of their constituents, because they will vote them on and off of office. And so they have to actually have that conversation with their constituents.

To me, it's very weird to argue that because the problem is so unaccountable already, let's go with a system with zero accountability. I think that some accountability is better than no accountability, and lottocracy doesn't have any accountability, neither can it have it.

For this fundamental problem, people that look like us cannot represent us. I am the one choosing when I vote who I am, am I a woman, and which socioeconomic status? No, I choose what my political priorities are. That's how I vote. And I ultimately decide which political program, which direction I want the country to go on. The real decisions are always political, not technical.

Fred Lawrence: The very purpose of the Lebowitz Prize, it seems to me, is not just what the two of you have done on this particular topic, but in a way you have modeled through your approach to this topic, another approach to deliberative democracy.

The fact that people of very different views of a very significant problem begin by articulating common ground, and then listen to each other, engage with each other.

But for those who've listened today and joined us on Key Conversations, I think they are all the better for this kind of articulation of contrasting views.

Thank you for your contributions to these topics, and thank you so much for sitting down today with me on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Dr. Cristina Lafont: Thank you, thank you very much.

Dr. Alex Guerrero: Thank you very much.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC, Kojin Tashiro is lead producer. Paulino Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Trent Liborn. Hadley Kelly and Aurora Sherman were the Phi Beta Kappa producers on today's show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Jann Percich.

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Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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