

Where Democracy Discharges

The citizens' assembly read as a coupling between two rungs of the net

J. Konstapel — August 2026

1. The dispute as it stands

On 18 August 2026 the Dutch financial daily *Het Financieele Dagblad* printed a conversation between Eva Rovers and Hanneke van Eijken. Rovers founded Bureau Burgerberaad. Van Eijken holds the Alex Brenninkmeijer chair in Rule of Law and Democracy at Utrecht.

They agree on the diagnosis. Trust in politics is low. The right to demonstrate is under pressure. Judges are being framed as activists. The phrase "because the people want it" is used to narrow rights.

They differ on the remedy. Rovers wants a lotted body with real competence, eventually a Third Chamber. Van Eijken sees quality input, but also constitutional obstacles: the ban on the binding mandate, the legitimacy paradox, the time cost for participants.

Both arguments are made in the language of institutions and norms. That language has one weakness. It cannot say why the trouble arrived now, or why it arrived in the same decade in France, Ireland, Britain and the United States.

This article uses a different language. It treats a state as a physical coupling between two rungs of one net. From that starting point the citizens' assembly is not a moral improvement. It is a component with measurable properties. Some of those properties are good. One is dangerous, and neither speaker names it.

2. The model, in eight rules

The article is self-contained. Everything used below is stated here.

Picture a fishing net. Not a net in space — the net *is* the space.

1. **One primitive: the strand.** The strand is self-resonance: a current that returns into itself. It has two states. Open is the ground state. Closed is the first knot.
2. **Knots form by fit.** Where a strand returns in phase with itself, it stays. Where it returns out of phase, it does not. Nothing pushes it. Selection is by fit, not by cause.
3. **Knots are made of knots.** The same winding appears at another depth. Particle, cell, person, group, city, state, planet, star, galaxy: rungs on one ladder, not separate domains.
4. **The mesh carries tension.** Tension accumulates in the mesh between knots. This is loading.
5. **Loading is measurable.** Before a discharge, variance rises, autocorrelation rises, and fluctuation spectra flatten toward $1/f$. The same signature appears in markets, in earthquake swarms, in heart rate, in neuronal avalanches, and in societies.
6. **Discharge restores the mesh.** Postponed discharge is not avoided discharge. It is a larger discharge later. Forests, debt, and grievance obey the same arithmetic.

7. **Coupling can be dosed.** Two knots can lock phase, drift apart, or be deliberately decoupled. Coupling has a cost and a bandwidth.
8. **Describe at the right depth.** There is no separate thing to point a causal arrow at. A description at the correct winding depth replaces a chain of causes.

Rules 4 to 7 do the work in this article. Rules 1 to 3 are why the same machine may be applied to a parliament and to a fault line without changing the vocabulary.

3. First derivation: a state is a coupling, not a container

Take the population as a fine mesh. Roughly 18 million knots in the Netherlands. Each is coupled to a handful of others: household, street, workplace, school gate, timeline. Local coupling is strong. The characteristic time is a day.

Take the state as a coarser winding on top of it. A few hundred nodes with decision competence. The characteristic time is a year.

Rule 3 says these are not two worlds. They are two depths of one winding. Rule 7 says something must couple them, and that the coupling has a bandwidth.

That coupling is what we call representation.

So the first result follows immediately. Democracy is not primarily a truth-finding device. It is a **discharge architecture**. Its function is to let the tension of the fine mesh reach the coarse rung and be released there, before it releases itself somewhere else.

This reframing costs nothing and buys a lot. It makes the health of a democracy a question about flow rates, not about virtue.

4. The election as a valve: three numbers

A valve has a period, a throat, and an orientation. Take them in turn. The numbers below are Dutch, but the arithmetic is general.

Period. The valve opens once per parliamentary term. Formally four years. In practice, over 2010–2025, closer to two and a half. Call the discharge interval 30 to 50 months.

The mesh does not load on that schedule. A housing shortage loads monthly. An asylum backlog loads weekly. A price shock loads overnight. Rule 4 says tension accumulates continuously; rule 6 says postponement compounds it.

So the first mismatch is a **phase mismatch**. The valve opens on a calendar. The loading follows no calendar. Between openings, the only available discharge paths are the unofficial ones: demonstration, litigation, strike, boycott, non-voting, emigration, riot.

Throat. Now count the independent channels.

The Second Chamber has 150 members. Rovers cites political analyses showing they vote along party lines about 99.9 per cent of the time. Take that as an engineering figure, not as an accusation. It means the 150 seats are not 150 independent channels. They are roughly fifteen. Inside the chamber the throat narrows by a factor of ten before anything else happens.

On the input side the compression is far more severe. Each voter emits one choice from a list. That is under five bits, once every three years or so. Everything the voter is loaded with — the job, the rent, the waiting list, the noise, the fear — is projected onto a single party axis.

Set the two rates side by side. The fine mesh loads across tens of independent tensions on a timescale of months. The valve opens across roughly fifteen channels on a timescale of three years. The mismatch is a factor of thirty or more, in both bandwidth and rate.

Orientation. A valve also has a direction of sampling. Bovens and Wille measured it. About sixty per cent of Dutch adults hold a vocational-level qualification. In parliament that group is under five per cent. The sampling is not merely thin. It is systematically drawn from one region of the mesh, and that region is not where the highest tension sits.

Three defects, then, and none of them moral: wrong phase, narrow throat, biased orientation.

Rule 6 finishes the argument. A valve that cannot pass the load does not make the load disappear. The tension goes somewhere. In the last fifteen years it has gone into new parties that appear and collapse, into the courts, into the streets, and into the parts of the population that stop voting altogether. Each of those is a discharge path. None of them is a design flaw in the citizen. They are the overflow of an undersized valve.

5. What the citizens' assembly actually changes

Now put the component in and measure it.

It restores dimensionality at the input. Weighted lottery samples the mesh directly. The Dutch National Climate Assembly seated 175 people, aged 17 to 87, drawn to mirror age, education, region and prior opinion on climate. The party filter is bypassed. The sample carries the variance of the mesh, not its mean. That repairs the orientation defect of section 4.

It replaces competitive coupling with mutual coupling. Rovers insists on dialogue rather than debate, and the distinction is exact in the model.

Debate is competitive coupling. Each node tries to impose its own phase on the other. Two things can happen. The system splits into two attractors, or it stalls. Sunstein's law of group polarization describes the first case: like-minded groups drift to the extreme of their initial tendency.

Dialogue is mutual coupling. Each node adjusts. Rule 7 permits a common phase to form that neither party held at the start. This is the same entrainment that appears between musicians, between rowers, and between two people in conversation whose heart rhythms drift into step.

It produces a measured coherence. The Dutch assembly set its own threshold at 75 per cent. Thirteen of its 23 recommendations cleared it, several reaching the mid-nineties. Those percentages are not a vote count in the ordinary sense. They are a coherence measurement on a sample of the mesh, taken after nine months of coupling.

It runs at the right period. Nine months of loading and deliberation is closer to the timescale on which the mesh actually loads than a three-year election cycle is.

On four counts, then, the component is well designed. It repairs orientation, coupling mode, dimensionality and period.

6. What it does not change — and the result nobody states

The assembly repairs the input side. It does not touch the throat.

Its output is delivered to the same coarse rung, through the same fifteen channels, at the same rate as before.

Now apply rule 7 with care. A coupling that carries phase but delivers no discharge does not leave the system where it was. It concentrates energy. A resonant cavity with no output port stores what you put into it.

That gives the result:

A citizens' assembly without a discharge path is not a neutral experiment. It is a tension amplifier.

The mechanism is not psychological. It is structural. Before the assembly, the 175 participants carried ordinary, dispersed, low-coherence tension. After nine months they carry high-coherence tension with an explicit, articulated, near-unanimous form. If it is not discharged, that is a far more loaded configuration than the one you started from. And the participants go home into the fine mesh, coupled to everyone else, carrying it.

Van Eijken states the political half of this: if nothing is done with the proposals, citizens lose still more trust. The model says it is worse than a lost opportunity. Running a high-quality assembly and then not discharging its output is an operation that *increases* the load on the exact people you selected for their representativeness.

This is the one point on which the model contradicts the mainstream framing of the debate. The mainstream treats non-implementation as a disappointing but harmless failure to gain. It is not harmless. It is a net negative against doing nothing at all.

7. The record, read as valve tests

Four cases. In each, ask only one question: what fraction of the assembly's output became new binding policy that was not already in train?

Call that fraction the **transfer coefficient**, τ .

The Netherlands, 2025–2026. Nine months of work by 175 people. Final advice on 1 December 2025: 23 recommendations, of which 13 cleared the 75 per cent threshold, decomposed into 82 concrete measures. The cabinet response of 29 May 2026 adopted 41, deferred 18, rejected 23. Nominally $\tau = 0.5$.

But the reporting on that response notes that many of the adopted items were answered by pointing at plans the government already had. A cheaper off-peak rail fare was already coming. A used-EV subsidy had already been presented in April in response to oil prices. In coupling terms, the output was projected onto coordinates the coarse rung already occupied. Nothing new passed through those channels. The true τ is well below 0.5, and nobody has yet measured it.

Note also which items were rejected. The more structural ones. A quarter of agriculture organic by 2030: dropped as unfeasible. A warning mark on unhealthy food packaging: deferred to Europe. The narrow channels pass the light items.

France, 2019–2021. One hundred and fifty citizens, nine months, 149 proposals. The President promised to pass them on *sans filtre* and accepted 146. Two years later *Reporterre* went through them one by one and counted fifteen transcribed into the climate bill. $\tau \approx 0.10$. Participants said publicly that their work had not been respected.

France is the amplifier prediction in its pure form. A maximally coupled sample, a maximally explicit promise, and a throat that passed one measure in ten. The demonstrations of March 2021 were called by members of the convention itself.

Ireland, 2016–2018. The assembly's recommendation on the Eighth Amendment went to a referendum. The referendum is a wide channel: it bypasses the party filter entirely, on one question, in one step. τ for that question was effectively 1. Irish deliberative assemblies remain the international reference case, and this is why.

Paris, since 2021. A permanent lotted assembly of 100 residents, renewed every twelve to eighteen months. It has two output instruments. A *vœu* is a motion. A *délibération citoyenne* is a draft with the standing of ordinary municipal legislation, put to the Conseil de Paris. The second promotion produced a *délibération* on street homelessness. The third took up loneliness and the question of citizen powers themselves.

Paris is the design the model asks for, at small scale. Not because it is more democratic in spirit, but because the output has a port of its own.

Four cases, one ordering. τ tracks whether a structural channel exists, and nothing else. It does not track the quality of the deliberation, the size of the majority, or the sincerity of the promise. France had all three and still scored 0.10.

8. The ban on the binding mandate, read as a decoupler

Van Eijken raises the constitutional obstacle. Members of the States General vote without instruction. You cannot simply make an assembly's advice binding.

The model reads this article as a piece of engineering, and the reading is worth the detour.

A ban on the binding mandate is a **decoupling device**. It was installed to stop a representative from phase-locking to an external source: a district, a patron, a guild, a donor. Rule 7 says coupling can be dosed, and the constitution here doses it to zero.

It works. But it works asymmetrically.

The article blocks coupling to voters, to petitioners, and now to citizens' assemblies. It does not block coupling to the party. And the party coupling is, by Rovers's figure, essentially total: 99.9 per cent.

So the device screens out every coupling except the one it cannot see, because that one was internalised rather than imposed. The representative is decoupled from the mesh below and phase-locked to the node above. That is the opposite of the intended orientation.

From this a sharper conclusion follows than either speaker draws:

A lotted chamber is the only body in which the ban on the binding mandate would actually be true.

A lotted member has no party whip and no re-election to fear. Both standing coupling forces are absent by construction. The independence the constitution asks for is, for the first time, physically available.

That does not remove the need for a constitutional amendment. Creating an organ requires one. But it relocates the objection. The problem with binding advice is not sortition. The problem is binding *elected* members, who are already bound elsewhere.

9. Six design conditions the model requires

These follow from rules 4 to 7. They are not preferences.

1. Open on the meter, not on the calendar. Rule 5 says loading is measurable. Variance and autocorrelation in the relevant indicators rise before a rupture. Build the meter — trust series, demonstration frequency, litigation against the state, inter-poll volatility of party preference, non-voting — and let an assembly convene when it moves, not when the constitution says so. A valve triggered by pressure beats a valve triggered by a clock.

2. Match the bandwidth at both ends. Lottery restores dimensionality at the input. It is wasted if the output is collapsed into a single yes-or-no. Eighty-two measures must arrive as eighty-two decisions, each answered separately and on the record. The Dutch duty to give reasons is exactly this instinct, one step short.

3. Let the loaded side set the question. The question is a projection operator. Whatever tension does not lie in the span of the question cannot pass, however good the deliberation is. The Dutch assembly was asked how the country might eat, buy and travel better for the climate. That question projects onto individual consumption. Structural tension — land, industry, income, ownership — could not enter at all. The participants noticed. Their closing message asked politics to stop with meaningless surface talk. Rovers is right that the question was too general, and the model says why it is not a detail: it is the aperture.

4. Give the output its own port. This is the whole of section 7 in one line. Paris has one. Ireland improvised one. France and the Netherlands did not.

5. Discharge small and often, not large and late. Rule 6. One national assembly every few years is the fire-suppression strategy: quiet for a decade, then a canopy fire. Many small local assemblies with real competence are controlled burns. Van Eijken observes that local experimentation is where the learning is. The model says it is also where the physics is.

6. Make the coupling cost affordable, and short. Six or seven weekends is a coupling cost, and it is paid unevenly across professions. Compensation and childcare address the fairness. They do not address the sample: if the cost is high, the lottery is filtered by who can pay it. Reduce the required duration by raising coupling quality — fewer, better-phased sessions — and by distributing the work over many small bodies rather than one long one.

On the Third Chamber, the model gives a divided answer.

Rovers is right that a permanent lotted body needs its own competence and its own time constant. A coupling inherits the rate of whatever it hangs on. Van Eijken's proposal to house it in an existing advisory council would give it the discharge rate of an advisory council — which is the rate we already measured, and it is low.

But Rovers's own route sends the assembly's bills to the First Chamber, which she herself calls politicised. That reinserts the throat one step later. Condition 4 is not met by a Third Chamber as sketched. It would be met by a Third Chamber whose output goes to referendum, or to a constitutional court, or straight into force absent a two-thirds override.

10. What would kill this reading

Rule 5 makes the model answerable. Five tests.

Test 1 — the loading signature. In the years before a political rupture, indicators of social tension should show rising variance, rising autocorrelation and critical slowing down. This is the same signature that precedes market crashes and ecosystem shifts. Take the Dutch series through 2002, 2021 and 2023. If no such signature appears, rule 5 does not hold at this rung and the model loses its main claim to be physics rather than metaphor.

Test 2 — the amplifier. Measure trust and political efficacy among assembly participants: at intake, at closure, and at twelve and twenty-four months. Split the sample by whether their own recommendations were enacted. The model predicts a rise during the process in both groups, and then a fall *below intake* in the non-enacted group. If the non-enacted group merely returns to baseline, the amplifier claim is wrong and section 6 collapses.

Test 3 — τ against structure. Score assemblies internationally on whether a structural output channel existed before the process began. The model predicts τ tracks that variable, and not deliberation quality, majority size, or the strength of the political promise. France is the strong case against every alternative explanation. More cases would settle it.

Test 4 — entrainment. Measure physiological synchrony across deliberation sessions: heart-rate variability coherence, ideally inter-brain measures on a subsample. The model predicts synchrony rises across sessions, and that final agreement percentages track the synchrony measure rather than the argument count. Debate-format control groups should show the opposite. This is the sharpest test, because no other account of citizens' assemblies predicts it at all.

Test 5 — the aperture. Vary the question width across comparable assemblies. The model predicts that the fraction of participants reporting that their real concern was addressed scales with the width, independently of process quality.

11. Status ledger

Honesty about what has been shown.

- **Derived from the rules:** the state as a coupling between rungs; the three defects of the electoral valve; the amplifier result; the six design conditions. These follow from rules 4 to 7 and hold if those rules hold.

- **Measured elsewhere, imported:** the loading signature (rule 5) is established in markets, ecosystems, earthquakes and physiology. It is *not* yet established at the political rung. Test 1 is owed.
- **Empirical, established:** the τ figures for France and the Netherlands, the party-line voting rate, the education gap, the Paris instrument set.
- **Asserted, not shown:** that the ladder of rungs is one physical object rather than a family of analogies. That is the claim of the wider net programme and is argued elsewhere. This article does not need it. Everything above survives if the net is only a good description of coupled systems at this rung.
- **Outside the model entirely:** whether an assembly's recommendations are *right*. The model says where tension goes. It says nothing about whether the resulting policy is wise. Anyone who reads it as an argument that lotted citizens decide better than elected ones is reading in something that is not there.

12. Conclusion

Both speakers in the FD conversation ask whether citizens' assemblies make the Netherlands more democratic. That is the wrong question, and it is why the exchange ends in a standoff between a utopian proposal and a constitutional objection.

The question the model asks is narrower and answerable. Does the assembly widen the channel through which accumulated tension reaches the rung that can act on it?

As currently built in the Netherlands, no. It widens the intake and leaves the outlet where it was. That combination is not neutral. It loads the mesh further, and it loads it precisely in the people who were selected to represent it.

Paris shows the cheap fix: give the output a port of its own. Ireland shows the expensive one: send it past the throat entirely.

The rest is arithmetic. A valve that opens on a clock, across fifteen channels, sampled from the wrong part of the mesh, cannot pass the load of eighteen million knots. The load does not vanish because the valve is undersized. It leaves by the paths that remain open, and those paths are the ones both speakers spent the first half of their conversation worrying about.

Annotated references

Own line

1. **J. Konstapel, "The Net — The Vacuum from the Smallest Strand to the Greatest Knot" (2026).** *Why read it?* The parent document of the series. The eight rules in section 2 are the compressed form; this is the full derivation from the single primitive.
2. **J. Konstapel, "Where War Comes From" (2026).** *Why read it?* The same machine applied one rung up. Argues against reading conflict as intention. Read it alongside section 4 here: the two articles are the same argument about discharge paths, at different scales.
3. **J. Konstapel, "The Inventions of the Net" (2026).** *Why read it?* Contains the tension-meter family that design condition 1 assumes. If you want to build the meter rather than argue about it, start there.

4. **J. Konstapel, "Where the Exodus Comes From" (2026).** *Why read it?* The one-way valve appears there as a border. The formal structure is identical to the electoral throat in section 4. Useful as a check that the concept is not being stretched to fit.
5. **J. Konstapel, "Waarom D66 in 60 jaar niets heeft bereikt" (constable.blog).** *Why read it?* The party-level version of the same diagnosis, written without the model. Read it to see how far the institutional analysis gets on its own.

On elections and representation

6. **Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge, 1997).** *Why read it?* The indispensable book. Manin shows that elections were understood by their eighteenth-century designers as an aristocratic device, and that sortition was the democratic one. Section 4 is Manin's argument restated as bandwidth. Read chapter 1 and chapter 4 if you read nothing else.
7. **David Van Reybrouck, *Tegen verkiezingen* (2013).** *Why read it?* The short, readable route into the same case, and the book that put sortition on the Dutch and Belgian agenda. Weaker on institutional design than on history.
8. **Christopher Achen & Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists* (Princeton, 2016).** *Why read it?* Sixty years of evidence that voters do not behave as the folk theory of democracy requires. Their conclusion — that the electoral signal carries far less information than we credit it with — is section 4's throat, measured by political scientists who had never heard of this model.
9. **Richard Katz & Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics* 1 (1995).** *Why read it?* The mechanism behind the 99.9 per cent. Parties fused into the state apparatus stop transmitting from the mesh below and start transmitting from the rung above. Read it directly after section 8.
10. **Mark Bovens & Anchrit Wille, *Diplomademocratie* (2011).** *Why read it?* The source of the education gap Rovers cites. The orientation defect in section 4, with Dutch numbers.

On deliberation and assemblies

11. **Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy* (Princeton, 2020).** *Why read it?* The strongest theoretical case for lotted institutions with real competence, including the argument from cognitive diversity. Closest existing position to design conditions 2 and 3, arrived at without the physics.
12. **James Fishkin, *When the People Speak* (Oxford, 2009).** *Why read it?* Four decades of deliberative polling, with the measurement apparatus. The place to go for what actually happens to opinions inside deliberation. Test 2 would be built on Fishkin's instruments.
13. **OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (2020).** *Why read it?* The census: several hundred cases across member states, coded by design. The raw material for test 3. Read the design-principles annex, not the executive summary.

14. **Cass Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002).** *Why read it?* Why homogeneous debate diverges. The formal contrast to dialogue in section 5, and the reason mixed sampling is not optional.
15. **Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge, 1990).** *Why read it?* Design condition 5, evidenced. Ostrom's polycentric systems are many small discharge paths, and she documents why they outperform single large ones. Read the eight design principles in chapter 3 against section 9.

Cases

16. **Nationaal Burgerberaad Klimaat, final advice (1 December 2025); cabinet response (29 May 2026); CE Delft impact analysis.** *Why read it?* The Dutch case in primary sources. Read the cabinet response against the advice, item by item, and keep a tally of how often the answer points to a plan that already existed. That tally is τ , and nobody has published it.
17. **Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat, 149 propositions (June 2020); *Reporterre's* item-by-item count (April 2021); the government's own tracking site.** *Why read it?* The cleanest amplifier case on record. Read the promise and the count together. The gap between "sans filtre" and fifteen measures is the whole argument of section 6.
18. **Citizens' Assembly of Ireland (2016–2018), reports on the Eighth Amendment.** *Why read it?* The counter-example. The one large case where τ approached 1, and the design reason why: the output bypassed the party throat via referendum.
19. **Ville de Paris, Assemblée citoyenne (2021–), founding *délibération* and the citizen *délibérations* of the second and third promotions.** *Why read it?* The working instrument. A hundred lotted residents with the power to put a draft with legislative standing before the council. Design condition 4, implemented, at city scale. The most directly copyable thing in this article.
20. **Eva Rovers, *Waarom we politiek niet alleen aan politici kunnen overlaten* (2025); and the FD conversation of 18 August 2026.** *Why read it?* The proposal in its own words, and the exchange this article responds to. Read Van Eijken's objections closely: they are correct as constitutional law, and section 8 is an attempt to answer them on their own terms.

On loading and coupling

21. **Marten Scheffer et al., "Early-warning signals for critical transitions", *Nature* 461 (2009).** *Why read it?* The measurement basis of rule 5, and the template for test 1. Rising variance and autocorrelation before a transition, across ecosystems, climate and finance. The political rung is the obvious gap in their table.
22. **Guillaume Dumas et al., "Inter-brain synchronization during social interaction", *PLoS ONE* 5 (2010).** *Why read it?* Direct measurement of two nervous systems locking phase during spontaneous interaction. The empirical anchor for reading dialogue as entrainment, and the method behind test 4.