

**The Project on Foresight and Democracy:
A Systems Approach
Overview**

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The Project on Foresight and Democracy was proposed to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund on 28 May 2018. On 13 July 2018, the Fund decided to support it with a grant, which it awarded to Leon Fuerth and Sheila Ronis, designated as Co-researchers. Their final report was submitted to the Fund on 12 February 2020. This is a summary of the main features of that report, together with an additional comment from co-researchers, bearing on the implications of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Premise

Hyper-partisanship is gravely undermining the norms and procedures that are essential for effective democratic governance. It will not be possible to counter these effects in the absence of a demand from the "grass roots" for a return to common sense and practicality. The desire for such a return exists, but the means to express it need to be developed. This can be done by encouraging the development of networked communications between self-initiated groups at the grass-roots level, comprised of citizens who are interested in fact-based approaches to present and on-coming issues, but who presently lack a common analytic framework for considering them.

Objectives

To demonstrate on a test-basis how such a group would function, using methods suitable for use on a larger scale.

Organization

The test model had four components: (1) the "Round Table," comprised of persons selected to represent the polity; (2) the "Standing Advisory Group", comprised of experts on systems analysis and foresight methodologies; (3) a briefers' panel, comprised of experts on an array of issues relating to technological and demographic trends; and (4) a communications team, consisting of rapporteurs and the Co-researchers, to record discussions and to distill them into themes for circulation to the Round Table participants.

Methodology:

- Series of three meetings of the Standing Advisory Group to decide upon an agenda for presentation of foresight concepts to the Round Table.
- Series of briefings to the Round Table on foresight concepts.
- Series of briefings to the Round Table on major drivers of change relating to technology and demography.
- Series of Round Table discussions to explore the views of members.

Preliminary Inputs for Round Table meetings

- Complexity (systems, non-linear behavior of systems, implications for policy, and multiple possible future consequences).
- Foresight methodologies (overview of basic types and exercise).
- Trends arising from technology (advanced artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, climate disruption, mass social surveillance).
- Trends arising from demographic change (transition of the United States from dominant white majority to majority of minorities).

Key themes discussed by participants in Round Table

- The continuing impacts of white supremacy and male dominance.
- The gaps between the universal values expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, and the experiences of minorities within the population.
- Prospects and means for eliminating these gaps and reforms of the system needed for this purpose.
- The implications of technologically and demographically driven change for fundamental values from the perspective of the nation as a whole and from the perspective of minorities within that whole.
- Prospects for sustaining core values in the presence of very rapid, discontinuous forms of change.

Co-researchers Findings:

Exposure to foresight methodology adds a critical dimension to discourse: an ability to make connections between seemingly disparate subjects, along timelines that connect – rather than subdivide – the past, the present, and the future. Specifically, the Round Table Process generated:

- Awareness of democracy as a conjoined system of values (captured in universalist language in the Declaration of Independence), and presented as an operating system for a self-correcting system of self-government (in the form of the Constitution).
- Heightened awareness of the central importance of values at the core of democratic governance.
- Heightened awareness of the existence of alternative sets of values among different groups within the population (to centrifugal effect), counter-balanced by other values deeply held across the population as a whole (to centripetal effect).
- Awareness that equilibrium between these forces is the basis for a sense of national identity and the basis for mutual acceptance of the legitimacy of the social order (aka “The Commons”).
- Recognition that values are meant to be perdurable, while the operating system is designed to adjust itself, based on systems that enable it to “learn” from experience.
- Heightened awareness that values representing the Commons are severely challenged as the result of “legacy” issues representing as yet incompletely resolved issues pre-dating the foundation of the country.
- Awareness that values representing the Commons are also subject to an emergent set of new issues: some generated by the unprecedented (and very often, the unintended) consequences of technological change; and others generated by profound changes in the demographic composition of the United States that are “baked” into the next several decades.
- Awareness that societal challenges that appear at first to be domestic problems are manifestations of global problems, for which global solutions are going to be needed.
- Awareness that the global environment is becoming increasingly competitive.

- Heightened awareness of the very short window for action in the present, for the purpose of influencing outcomes in the longer-term future.
- Awareness that, notwithstanding the gravity of challenges facing democratic governance in the present and continuing on into the future, the United States has experienced periods of intense polarization and crisis at intervals, which it has survived.
- Recognition that there is a tension between pessimistic and optimistic biases that needs to be taken into account insofar as neither of these dispositions entirely captures the truth of our circumstances.
- Need for re-vitalization of democratic governance.
- Agreement that this revitalization must include structural measures in the form of new systems designed to manage the complex, non-linear nature of the challenges we are facing.
- Agreement that existing systems for linking foresight, policy formation, and policy execution are deficient for the task, but that practical methods for overcoming this are available.
- Agreement that the defining characteristic of the resulting system would be that it would be anticipatory.

Next steps

We believe that our project has demonstrated in a small-scale experiment that foresight can strengthen democracy as a political system fit to deal with accelerating rates of change. The alternative is a drift towards authoritarian methods. And our idea is this: to make it possible for groups of people who are already networked to apply the Round Table methodology on their own, as a means of exploring for themselves what the future holds, and for thinking about how to respond to its challenges outside the boundaries established by rigid ideology. Co-researchers are developing a proposal for such a phase, and a plan for its implementation.

PANDEMIC: Foresight and Democracy

The following observations represent the personal views of the co-researchers, written March 21st, subsequent to the submission of their final report to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund..

- The appearance of a virus with a lethal potential comparable to the so-called Spanish Flu is not a surprise. It was always a question of “when, not whether.”
- The disarray of governments in the face of the present crisis is not a surprise, either.
- There has been more than adequate forewarning. Historians will have plenty of time to write about culpability for the massive failures of governance to anticipate, and to prepare.
- The implications of this failure, going forward, are as yet incalculable, but not unthinkable. On the contrary, they had better be thought about now, lest – like the current pandemic – they are recognized too late for action.

- One of these longer-range consequences will be the impact of pandemic on democracy.
- In the short-term, there will be a tradeoff between individual liberty and collective survival. In the longer-term, that tradeoff will leave an imprint that will last for a generation.
- Other crises will arise. The question is whether democratic governance will have displayed the capacity to have anticipated them.