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## Mending Democracy: A response to our readers

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### ABSTRACT

In this piece we respond to three commentators of our book, *Mending Democracy*, and emphasize the ways the book seeks to contribute to the theory and practice of democracy. We reflect on the possibilities and limits of democratic mending in societies characterised by economic inequality and asymmetric power relations, as well as in countries with less established institutions of liberal democracy. We draw attention to the agency and creativity of ordinary people in advancing meaningful democratic reform even under less favourable conditions, and in unlikely places.

### KEYWORDS

Deliberative democracy; democratic reform; mending; interpretive methods; democracy

Our book *Mending Democracy* makes a hopeful case for a mode of democratic repair that has been largely overlooked by both normative theorists and practically-oriented reformers. Whereas most contemporary approaches to democratic reform rely on ‘off to shelf’ institutional or forum-based solutions, our book draws attention to the important yet largely hidden democratic repair work undertaken by everyday citizens, politicians, and public managers. In rich detail, we show how these diverse actors are using resources at their disposal to mend dysfunctional democratic disconnects that they experience, for example, in constituent-representative relationships, in fractured public spheres, and in tangled policy processes. We point to examples of this work – what we call democratic mending – in unlikely places such as town libraries, local cafes, and administrative committee rooms, based on our research in Australia and Britain.

In developing the key arguments of the book, we are indebted to a long line of scholars who have forged a space for critical policy analysis in the study of politics and policy – and as such we are delighted that our work should be the subject of such lively, reflective discussion in the leading journal in this field. We thank the generous and thought-provoking responses from three commentators in this issue. We do not have space here for a point-by-point exchange, but instead take the opportunity to drive the conversation our book has started forward in productive ways.

Joscha Wullweber focuses his comments on *Mending Democracy*’s apparent ‘blind-spot’ of economic inequality. Although we could argue that the committed actors in our stories are stoically working, one way or another, for the cause of greater equality and justice, we agree that a more forensic analysis based on what Wullweber calls ‘political

economy ontologies' would be fruitful. As such, this critique points to something very important. But we are less convinced in his alternative approach. His conclusion – that 'there can be no democratic equality and no just democracy as long as living conditions in society and among societies remain highly unequal' – has its limits and blindspots, too. This approach views deeper, structural transformation a prerequisite of any meaningful reform. While addressing economic inequalities is and should remain an important goal for democracies, it should not take the attention away from recognizing how smaller, incremental, and creative practices can shape and transform modern democratic governance. Our book shines a light on the hidden mending work of everyday actors and the agency they can exercise within the (unfair) political system as it is – those willing to get their hands dirty, to do the best they can with what they've got, to commit to the hard graft of realizing only piecemeal and partial change. The more important re-imagining of Wullweber's challenge, then, is this: how do we actually work towards fairer democratic societies from a starting point of radical inequality? That question certainly needs attention in any properly comprehensive agenda for democratic mending. Promising explorations elsewhere that speak to this question shed light on how communities are establishing self-governance arrangements to address inequalities generated by the market or state – recent research into the work of housing associations and energy co-operatives being prime examples (see Hoicka and MacArthur 2018; Durose et al. 2021).

Tamara Metze's response engages wholeheartedly with the book's spirit, pointing to ways in which our arguments connect to, and extend, key threads in critical policy analysis. She sets *Mending Democracy* against a rich, colourful patchwork of theoretical inspirations in the field, and begins to think through how ideas and associated practices might be further interwoven. She is of course right to point out that our book might be alienating for those working in certain streams of the critical theory tradition. Nevertheless, we hope that our work, rooted as it is in the normative theory of deliberative democracy, contributes to critical theory by celebrating the agency and creativity of ordinary people. Our aim has been to open up alternative pathways for citizens and democratic reformers to address the democratic disconnects they experience. Problematizing power structures is key to the extent that it also means opening up alternative and pragmatic ways of addressing the problems at hand.

Mireille Manga Edimo provides a valuable challenge to the applicability of our claims, translating and at times reimagining our insights about everyday mending to probe how well they fit countries with less established institutions of liberal democracy (with a particular focus on Cameroon). This commentary highlights how well some insights travel – finding, for example, affinities in the work of Knitting Nannas Against Gas with the connective practices of the Cameroonian diaspora – as well as pointing to potential limits or challenges to our claims, notably in the very different 'governance disconnect' faced on the ground in contexts of state dependency on INGOs and foreign aid donors. Of course, as interpretive researchers, we are bound to an extent by what we are familiar with and have studied in depth – while we hope our 'small facts' speak to 'large issues' in democratic governance, we are not so bold as to assume our findings grounded in Australian and British contexts apply universally. Making universal claims about what we found would contradict the interpretive, contextual approach we take in the book. We can however find patterns of similarity and difference in and across very different contexts (Boswell, Corbett, and Rhodes 2019), and also learn from the African cases

(Tavernaro-Haidarian 2020) as we explore the possibilities and limits of democratic mending. We do not believe that a stable liberal democracy is a necessary prerequisite for democratic mending. Indeed, the transformative power of the seemingly mundane work of ordinary citizens is well recognized and celebrated in fields such as sociology, disaster recovery and development, and even in countries with less established institutions and traditions of liberal democracy (Bayat 2013; Mitlin 2008). Our book seeks to engage political scientists and policy scholars in these broader ideas on community-led reform by demonstrating pathways to democratic repair beyond institutional and procedural design.

We have found all three commentaries extremely thought provoking and, overall, hugely encouraging. Considerable academic attention elsewhere remains focused on the rise of innovative design – encapsulated in the celebrated ‘deliberative wave’ (OECD 2020) especially of citizens’ assemblies in Europe – and certain audiences continue to respond to and interpret our contribution in *Mending Democracy* in these terms. However, the commentaries in this CPS forum push the focus in different directions that we think has a great deal of untapped potential. Namely, they push further towards uncovering, seeding and supporting everyday mending practices on the ground, including in relation to different ‘disconnects’ than we initially imagined and applied to contexts very different from where these ideas first emerged. Taken together, these provocations provide the basis for an exciting agenda in research and practice, and invite us to further reflect the structural requirements for lasting and effective practices of democratic mending in societies characterized by dysfunctional disconnections.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Caroln M. Hendriks* is a Professor at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University. Her work examines democratic aspects of contemporary governance, including participation, deliberation, inclusion and representation. She has published widely on different aspects of public engagement in public policy and politics including three books, over 30 scholarly journal articles, and numerous book chapters.

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*John Boswell* is an Associate Professor in Politics at the University of Southampton. His work on deliberative democracy and democratic renewal draws on other key interests in policy studies and interpretive methods and theory. He has published conceptual and empirical work on these themes in journals such as *Political Studies*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Policy Sciences*, and the *European Journal of Political Research*.

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