



# 7 Reasons Schools Should Switch from Elections to Lotteries

*Adam Cronkright - Democracy In Practice*

*Simon Pek - Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria*

Schools that are serious about developing tomorrow's leaders and engaged citizens need to take a closer look at their student politics. Some form of student government exists at schools and universities around the world, and these bodies have the potential to provide students with incredibly rich leadership and civic experiences. In our work, we have seen elementary and high-school student governments establish their school's first library, conduct campus reforestation projects, and meet with public officials to demand improvements in their school communities. In the process, students of all types have learned to facilitate meetings, make democratic decisions, plan and execute projects, manage money, speak in public, and negotiate with school and local authorities. They developed critical thinking skills, a sense of service to others, and pride in their accomplishments.

However, the student governments we have worked with are not the norm. In the vast majority of schools around the world, two problems hold student government back from realizing its immense educational potential. The first is that student government is not typically prioritized in the curriculum and is instead treated as an extracurricular activity of limited importance. As such, it is rarely given adequate support to make the experience truly empowering and educational. While solving this problem broadly would require action from educational policymakers, schools interested in revitalizing their student governments can still make meaningful inroads on their own.

The second, perhaps more important problem, is that student governments are almost always elected. Elections undermine leadership and civic development and violate widely-held educational values such as fairness and equal opportunity. Unlike the first problem, this issue has a simple solution that schools could implement right away, without the need for sweeping policy changes or increasing teachers' workload. That solution is lotteries: the process of randomly selecting student volunteers to form a student government.

## Elections undermine leadership and civic development and violate widely-held educational values such as fairness and equal opportunity.

Based on our first-hand experience introducing lotteries to elementary and high schools, we believe that there are 7 compelling reasons schools should switch from student elections to lotteries:

1

### Lotteries are fairer

Elections heavily advantage the most charismatic, popular, and high-achieving students and effectively exclude the rest. Lotteries, by contrast, give every student who wants to participate in student government an equal opportunity. This reduces the gap in social skills that forms when only the most charismatic students are given public-speaking opportunities. It also makes space for different types of students to develop and display different forms of leadership. We would not let a popularity contest decide which students get to learn math or history, so why do we do this with leadership?

2

### Lotteries increase diversity and representativeness

Because they do not discriminate, lotteries select students from different social circles who have a wide array of interests and personalities, and this better reflects the broader student population.

3

### Lotteries increase interest in student government

In one school, for example, fewer than 20 students ran as candidates in student elections. The next year they switched to lotteries and over 220 students volunteered (see image on previous page). With lotteries, shyer and less popular students realize they have just as good a chance of winning a spot as even their most charismatic and popular peers. Moreover, not getting selected is just bad luck, so no one has to be worried about being publicly rejected by their classmates in a school-wide popularity contest.

4

## Lotteries are more fun

Removing popularity and competition from the equation means that 'winners' have no reason to feel better than their peers and the outcome is not divisive. The randomness and the fact that everyone has a realistic chance also makes the process more exciting. Furthermore, the increased diversity brought about by lotteries often leads to the formation of new friendships that students cherish.

5

## Students and teachers prefer lotteries

In a research study based on interviews with participants from two schools we worked with, students and staff compared the advantages and disadvantages of lotteries and elections, and broadly preferred lotteries while recommending their use in other schools. These and other findings can be found in the peer-reviewed article, *Democracy Transformed: Perceived Legitimacy of the Institutional Shift from Elections to Random Selection of Representatives*, published in the *Journal of Public Deliberation* and made possible with support from the *newDemocracy Foundation* (Australia).<sup>1</sup>

6

## Schools should be leaders of innovation

So many schools pride themselves on being innovative, yet they stick with the same model of student government that has generated apathy and disengagement for decades. Student government lotteries, on the other hand, were selected by *HundrED* as one of the 100 most inspiring educational innovations globally. Why not lead the way with a bold and creative approach to civic education and leadership development? Especially given our 7th reason...

7

## Switching from elections to lotteries is easy

Lotteries can be done quickly, simply, and cheaply. Lotteries take less time away from regular classes than typical student campaigns and elections. They can also be made so simple that 12-year old students can conduct them on their own. Furthermore, lotteries can be done with little or no cost.

Bolivian students  
conducting a lottery



---

## Did you know?

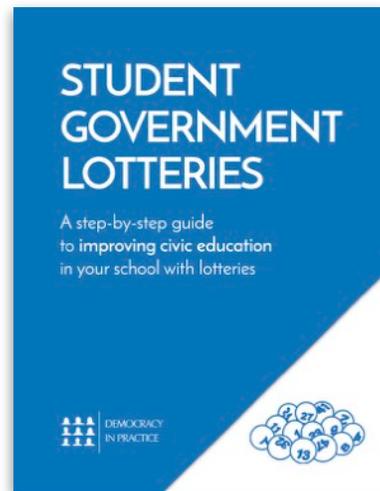
In ancient Athens, the birthplace of democracy, lotteries were used to fill legislatures and most public offices. They were also used to form juries in the courts, a practice used in many countries today.

---

## So, what is your school or school district waiting for?

You can find free step-by-step guides and how-to videos on our organization's website to help you make the switch to lotteries. You can also find resources to help you reinvent student government in other innovative ways, such as incorporating rotation to increase participation and horizontal teamwork to deepen collaboration and learning.

Get started today at [www.democracyinpractice.org/resources](http://www.democracyinpractice.org/resources)



1. Access the full article for free at <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol14/iss1/art3/>

This document was created by Adam Cronkright and Simon Pek for *Democracy In Practice* with the support of the *newDemocracy Foundation*

*Democracy In Practice* is a non-profit organization dedicated to democratic experimentation, innovation, and capacity building in schools. Find out more on our website: [democracyinpractice.org](http://democracyinpractice.org)

*Please feel free to share this handout, any other resources we provide, and the ideas they contain. After all, we want to get the word out! We only ask that you credit our work.*



DEMOCRACY  
IN PRACTICE

new  
DEMOCRACY  
FOUNDATION