REVISED ESSAY ON CITIZENSHIP

Dialogue

Why the right to vote gives us a reason to listen

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Why should I listen to the person who will vote against me? The simplest answer is that they may know something I need to know. There is a deeper answer. They have as much right as I do to decide who governs us. I shall live with the consequences of their choice, and they with the consequences of mine. That gives each of us a reason to ask how the other came to think as they do.

A dialogue begins with two people and a subject they are willing to examine together. Each brings experience. Each leaves room for the other to change something, even the question itself. Think of two parents outside a school. One wants the gate closed to cars in the morning. The other objects.

First parent *“What would closing the road mean for you?”*

Second parent *“My daughter uses a wheelchair. The only dropped kerb near the gate is on that road.”*

First parent *“I didn’t know that. What if we kept an accessible drop-off and moved the queue away from the crossing?”*

Second parent *“Come at ten to nine and I’ll show you where the problem is.”*

The first parent learns where a child can get onto the pavement. The second hears why the queue frightens other families. Between them they have thought of a third possibility. Now suppose both can question their councillor, vote at the next local election, or stand for the council themselves. The knowledge exchanged at a school gate has a route into the government of a city.

What I want for Iran is that short distance between an ordinary conversation and a public decision. A citizen should be able to follow an idea all the way to the ballot box, and to ask, afterwards, what became of it.

What my neighbour’s vote means for me

Suppose a woman in Abadan tells me she will vote for a party I distrust. I could spend our few minutes together listing everything wrong with its leaders. Or I could ask which promise first caught her attention. Perhaps the water reaching her street is unreliable. She has read the local budget, spoken to an engineer and noticed that my preferred party has costed a new project while overlooking the pipes already in the ground. Her judgement about that party may still differ from mine. Her question about the pipes now belongs in my thinking too.

This is what I mean by gaining access to another person’s thought process. Someone tells me what they noticed, which facts they trusted and what they fear losing. I can test a claim, give credit for an idea and revise my own proposal. They can do the same with mine. In my earlier essay on dialogue and rhetoric, I argued that genuine persuasion leaves the listener free to decline it. My neighbour owes me an honest hearing if she asks one of me. She owes me no vote. [1]

To choose, and to be chosen

Inside an association, a member who can propose a motion, nominate a chair and challenge the budget has a reason to read the accounts. Inside a political party, a member who may stand for selection can bring an idea forward even when the leadership dislikes it. In a city, the resident who points out a neglected street can become the councillor answerable for repairing it. At each level, the right to be chosen changes what a person can do with what they know.

In a parliamentary election we choose people and parties carrying different political philosophies. In a constitutional referendum the question is about the rules under which future governments may act. Those are different decisions. In both, a citizen needs intelligible alternatives, time to question their advocates and a secret vote. The UN Human Rights Committee links the free exchange of ideas among citizens, candidates and elected representatives to the effective exercise of political rights. It also recognises the place of public debate between elections. [2, 3]

What a good objection can do

In Plato's Euthyphro, a man confident that he understands piety meets Socrates. Socrates asks whether the gods love an act because it is pious, or whether their approval makes it so. It sounds like a small change in the order of words. It opens a large question about authority. Does the approval of a powerful figure explain why an act is right? The dialogue leaves the reader with work to do. A good question can outlive the answer that provoked it. [4]

John Stuart Mill offered a second reason to welcome disagreement. A person may inherit a true belief, repeat it faithfully for years and have little grasp of the reasons for it. A thoughtful objection asks us to recover those reasons. I can leave a conversation believing what I believed at the start and understand it better because somebody took the trouble to challenge me. That, too, is an education. [5]

The person who loses the argument

There is a further test for a public argument. What happens to the person who loses? Suppose my candidate wins and my neighbour's warning about the water budget proves right. Will an opposition councillor be able to obtain the figures, press for a repair and receive credit for the correction? If yes, my neighbour can afford to accept defeat at the election. If raising the matter costs her a job or a place in public life, the whole town loses a source of knowledge. In my writing on parliamentarism, this is why I treat lawful opposition as a democratic achievement people must learn to sustain. [6]

An assembly, a parliament and an electorate

Ireland gave these roles distinct places in a difficult decision. Its 2016–18 Citizens' Assembly included a chair and 99 randomly selected citizens intended to be broadly representative. On the Eighth Amendment, it sent recommendations to parliament for consideration. The proposal to change the constitutional provision on abortion went before the electorate in May 2018. A small group had time to hear evidence. Elected representatives had to answer for what they put forward. The electorate decided. Iranians discussing a future constitution can ask each body, in advance, which of those responsibilities it will hold. [7, 8]

Who could speak for Iran?

In 1906 the first Majles gave constitutional representation an institutional home. Newspapers in Tabriz, Tehran, Isfahan and elsewhere carried arguments about who could govern and on what terms. A reader could encounter a challenge to authority from well beyond their own street. Yet the September electoral law confined the franchise to men aged at least twenty-five from six social categories. A woman might follow every argument in print and be better informed than her brother. Only he, if otherwise eligible, could turn that judgement into a vote. [9, 10]

A question raised in Hamadan's name

In 1911, during a debate on the electoral law, a deputy from Hamadan, Vakil al-Ro'aya, argued in the Majles for women's right to vote. The law continued to exclude them. Women pressed the case for suffrage over the following decades. In 1963, during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, women gained the national rights to vote and to stand for election. Six women were elected to the Majles that year. The difference is worth pausing over. A woman could now take the floor as a deputy and cast her own parliamentary vote on the law under discussion. [10, 11, 12]

Two different decisions in 1979

In the spring of 1979 Iranians were asked to vote yes or no on establishing an Islamic republic. In December a separate referendum put the new constitution to them. Agreement on a name in the spring could tell a voter very little about the powers that the eventual text would assign to an unelected religious leader. When I think about the next constitutional choice, I want Iranians to have the competing texts in front of them. Who appoints the judges? Who can dismiss a government? How can our children amend what we approve? [13, 14]

My parents' generation could make a decision for its own time. It could never fairly spend my children's vote for them. That principle applies just as strongly to the constitution I favour. I would defend a lawful route by which a future majority could change it, with the rights of those who lose protected throughout. [14]

The thought behind the opinion

When someone gives me an opinion, I have heard the end of a thought process. I would like to know its beginning. What happened to this person? Which part have they observed themselves? What would worry them most if my proposal went ahead? In Common Language I wrote about relatives who loved one another and held sharply different views of Iran. My father's experience of advancement as a naval officer helped me understand his loyalty to the Pahlavis. To understand my left-wing relatives, I had to give their hopes the same attention. A political label could never have done that work for me. [15]

The impulse to defend ourselves is familiar. While another person is speaking, we are already preparing our answer. In four experiments, Guy Itzchakov and colleagues varied how well people listened during disagreement. More attentive, understanding listening helped speakers reflect with less defensiveness and, on the measures studied, express less extreme attitudes. These findings concern particular conversations. They give us a modest, teachable starting point. Try saying back the reason you heard, then ask the speaker where you got it wrong. [16]

What fear takes out of a conversation

Where a government can lose power, a teacher's criticism of the curriculum may become an opposition proposal. A candidate may ask her to help write it. A minister may have to defend the existing policy in public. Under the Islamic Republic, vetting has narrowed voters' choice of candidates, and speech restrictions and surveillance have encouraged self-censorship. The teacher still knows exactly where the curriculum fails. At a family meal she may judge it wiser to talk about the traffic. An education ministry looking for complaints can mistake her silence for satisfaction. [17]

Conversation can keep a friendship alive under a dictatorship. People can teach one another, preserve memories and imagine a different country. What coercion takes away is the ordinary political consequence of speaking. Why tell an official the truth if doing so puts your livelihood at risk and the official can never be removed? A democracy can lose some of that knowledge too. Each unanswered complaint teaches somebody to stay at home the next time.

Who can afford to be heard?

PESTEL is a way of looking at the conditions around a public decision. Take the two parents at the school gate. Suppose their council can change access to the street and has a modest budget for a trial. Six questions help explain whose knowledge reaches the council and what it can do with that knowledge.

Political / Who can change the proposal?

If a contract has already fixed every detail, parents quickly discover the limits of the invitation. The councillor should say which choices are open, who will vote on the trial and when the public can see the reasons. An elected representative can reject a popular suggestion and explain why. The parents then know whom to hold responsible. In national politics the same principle applies. A citizen needs a genuine choice of representatives and a lawful way to replace them. [2]

Economic / What does a seat in the room cost?

At a six o'clock meeting, a retired resident may be able to stay to the end. A parent on an hourly wage may lose pay to attend and have to leave before the vote. A shopkeeper who receives morning deliveries faces a different cost if the scheme goes ahead. Pay reasonable participation expenses, offer another session and put the cost of each street design on one plain-language sheet. These measures improve the information available to everyone who must decide. The OECD includes payment and care costs among its principles for inclusive deliberation. [18]

Social / Whose experience is treated as knowledge?

A traffic engineer can estimate the turning radius of a van. A child can show where that van hides the view of the crossing. Ask them both to mark the same map. Give a parent who speaks another language an interpreter, and let a pupil explain the route before an adult summarises it. Status shapes whose account sounds authoritative. A chair can change the order in which people speak and allow them to correct how their words enter the minutes.

What evidence reaches the table?

Technological / What does the platform reward?

A photograph can show where a parked vehicle blocks the dropped kerb. The same photograph, stripped of its time and context, can draw a crowd to condemn a driver. In a study of US political and news accounts on Facebook and Twitter, posts referring to political opponents were shared more often than posts referring to the authors' own side. A count of shares tells a council very little about the merits of either street plan. Publish the underlying documents, accept evidence on paper as well as online, and give corrections the same visibility as the original claims. [19]

Environmental / Where does the harm go?

Moving a queue away from a school gate may move idling engines beneath someone else's window. Extend the map one street further. Invite the residents there, record baseline traffic on both streets and agree how to compare similar mornings. Include weather and school holidays when interpreting any air-quality readings. Ask a child which stretch feels dangerous even where traffic counts are low. The Aarhus Convention offers an international model for involving the public in covered environmental decisions while alternatives remain open and taking its contribution into account. [20]

Legal / Can a citizen challenge the decision?

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects opinion and expression. Article 25 protects citizens' participation, including the right to vote and be elected at genuine periodic elections by universal and equal suffrage and secret ballot. Article 26 guarantees every person equality before the law and equal protection. For a future Iran, I would give those commitments practical effect through independent election administration, published eligibility rules, accessible polling places and a timely appeal against disqualification. At a school consultation, the equivalent question is simple. Where can a parent take an objection if the council disregards its own rules? [2, 3]

At the school gate all six questions meet. A route drawn on a map becomes a political decision about who may travel, an economic decision about who bears a cost, and a public promise about who gets to question the result.

What keeps a room silent?

Kurt Lewin described patterns of group life as an equilibrium among forces. Applied to dialogue, his question is practical. What sustains the silence of people who know something worth saying? Calling on them to speak more loudly can increase the price they pay for speaking. It may be easier to change the conditions that make silence sensible. [21]

Consider a council that wants residents with different views to question one another and influence a school-street trial. The forces below are my working hypotheses for this example. Residents and organisers would need to test them locally.

Driving force	Restraining force	A change to try
Parents share concern for children crossing.	Each side fears it will be blamed for putting children at risk.	Start with a joint walk. Ask each side to identify one danger the other has seen.
Residents know the street at different hours.	Shift work and caring duties exclude some of the best-informed witnesses.	Offer two meeting times, expenses and a written or telephone route.
Engineers can test competing accounts.	A technical report can silence a resident who cannot challenge its terms.	Release a short evidence sheet and let residents question the engineer.
A reversible trial gives the council room to learn.	Past consultations ended without an answer, so people expect another delay.	Name the official who must respond and publish the review date before invitations go out.

Where I would begin

I would first remove the obstacle the council controls. Give residents a decision date and a commitment to explain the outcome. At the review, ask people who stayed away what kept them out. In a political party, test the same principle at the point of nomination. If members fear that questioning a leader closes the door to standing for office, publish the nomination rules and provide an independent appeal. The test is whether a critic can actually put their name forward at the next selection.

What can a citizens' forum contribute?

Here the unit of analysis is a proposed local forum. Its strengths and weaknesses arise from the way it works. Its opportunities and threats come from the political and social setting around it. The same distinctions matter when a national assembly invites citizens to consider a constitutional question.

Strengths

A forum can put several kinds of knowledge on one map. A disabled resident can question an access assumption in front of the engineer who made it. Both can correct the record. A written minority view also preserves a warning that a majority may need to revisit.

Weaknesses

People who enjoy public speaking can dominate a small group. Volunteer attendance can favour those with time, and even a carefully selected panel speaks for a limited set of experiences. A good chair asks who is missing, invites written corrections and records the arguments behind the vote. Unanimity is a poor measure of how much the group learnt.

Opportunities

A forthcoming transport-budget decision gives the group a real question to answer. A school can lend a room and a local newspaper can publish a map showing what residents changed. If the council later uses the same process for a park or a bus route, people bring experience from the first meeting to the next.

Threats

An organised faction can flood an online consultation. A public official can praise a forum while quietly withholding the evidence it requested. Publicity can expose a dissenting participant to harassment. Publish the selection method and the decision record, protect personal details, and let an independent chair record unanswered questions. A forum loses credibility the first time it erases an inconvenient objection.

A forum that discovers something important must be able to pass it on. Give its report to elected representatives, publish their response, and let electors judge it at the next election. An unanswered minority objection belongs in that record. It may turn out to be the most valuable thing the meeting produced.

How we teach dialogue

Begin at a table small enough for everyone to speak. In a classroom, ask two pupils to investigate a question on which they disagree. Each writes down one thing they believe and one thing they are unsure of. They exchange answers. Before making a case of their own, each pupil explains the other's reason until the other recognises it. The teacher can reward the best follow-up question. Children then have a reason to listen all the way to the end of a sentence.

For a public decision, the exercise needs an owner and a timetable. In our imagined school-street trial, I would ask the council to make four commitments.

Before invitations	Publish one answerable question, the budget, the choices still open and the name of the decision-maker. Recruit beyond the usual attendees and pay the costs that would otherwise keep them away.
At the meeting	Give everyone the same short evidence pack. Hear experience in pairs before open discussion. Record a proposal, its strongest objection, an unresolved fact and any minority view. Allow participants to correct the record.
At the decision	Publish the authority's response to each recommendation within an agreed period, for example 30 days. Say what changed, what was declined and why. Name the person responsible for the trial.
At the review	After one school term, compare access and traffic on both streets. Ask participants privately whether anyone's account changed their understanding. Ask who was absent. Publish the findings and the date of the next decision.

Before a party asks for the country's vote

I would ask every political party to practise this exercise on itself. Give a member who opposed the leadership's policy time to explain it. Ask the leadership to state the objection in terms that member recognises. Then hold the vote under published rules and keep the minority's reasons in the minutes. Six months later, when the consequences can be seen, return to those reasons. A party that gives its own members this experience has something credible to say about how it will treat citizens in opposition.

What can we promise one another?

The question for Iranians today is whether people who disagree about the future government can work together to end the Islamic Republic and keep the country and its citizens safe through a democratic transition. I believe that they can. I favour a secular constitutional monarchy and see Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as a focus for cooperation in the transition. A republican is entitled to ask what happens to their vote if my side wins. I would want my answer in writing before asking for their trust. [1, 22]

Imagine a republican asking me, "If your constitution is adopted, can I still stand for parliament and campaign peacefully to change it?" My answer is yes. Then I would ask, "If a republic wins, may I organise a constitutional monarchist party and ask voters to reconsider?" I want the same answer. We might remain unpersuaded by each other's arguments about the head of state. We would already know enough about each other to defend the freedom of the next election.

The work we could do together

Iran needs parties able to compete on the things people live with. How should a province share water with its neighbours? Which taxes can finance better schools? What powers belong in Tehran and which decisions should a city make for itself? Our territorial integrity is stronger when citizens in every province can put these questions on the public agenda and elect people who will answer them. Equality before the law means that language, sex, faith and political loyalty cannot determine the weight of a citizen's vote or the protection they receive after casting it.

I want an Iran at peace with its neighbours, able to build constructive relations with Israel, the United States and the countries of Europe. Iranians should be free to argue about what those relationships are for. A shared river, a trading agreement or a scientific exchange gives elected representatives something concrete to question. Citizens should be able to read the terms, hear the objections and judge the government that signs. That is how foreign policy, too, can serve a prosperous and independent Iran.

At the school gate, one parent ended by saying, "Come at ten to nine and I'll show you." I would like our political life to keep that invitation open. Show me what you see from your part of Iran. Let me question it. Let my answer change yours if it deserves to. Then let us both vote, count each other's vote equally, and meet again as citizens the next morning.

NOTES

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