# Governing for the Future:
Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow

Reviewed by Bruce E. Auerbach

Jonathan Boston's *Governing for the Future* is an impressive and ambitious work. It seeks to understand the reasons why public policy in democratic nations is focused on the short term at the expense of long-term interests, and to assess the extent of the short-term bias. Boston's work also seeks to examine how the effects of this "presentist" bias can be alleviated in democratic political systems. Boston assesses the advantages, disadvantages, limitations, and prospects for success, of a wide variety of approaches. *Governing for the Future* is 576 pages in length, including an extensive bibliography, and is well documented throughout. Boston's work is systematic in its approach. It begins by defining what Boston means by a "presentist bias", which he explains as "a tendency for policy makers to focus on the present or near-term at the expense of the future or, more specifically, at the expense of certain things in the future that are widely regarded as important and valuable." (20) Boston seeks to assess the severity of the problem presented by this short-term focus in public policy-making before examining the many causes of this bias.

Boston's assessment of the strength of the presentist bias is that it is weak to moderate, rather than severe. As he notes, this conclusion is not based on a rigorous, systematic assessment of this bias. Although Boston proposes a number of approaches for measuring the severity of presentism, he concludes that these measures are either insufficiently feasible or insufficiently rigorous to be defensible. In the end, Boston estimates the extent of the presentist bias by contrasting what a severe presentist bias would look like, and the consequences it would have (including a rapidly decaying society unable to respond to long term problems), with the actual situation in most democratic nations. Boston concludes that because politics in liberal-democratic nations does not present with such a severe case, the presentist bias in these nations should be considered weak to moderate rather than debilitatingly severe.

Boston traces the causes of the presentist bias to a number of factors, including "deeply ingrained features of the human condition, the pervasive impact of uncertainty on decision making" (95), the complexity of many public policy issues and salient asymmetries in power (95). The multitude of causes suggests that the presentist bias is difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate entirely, but also that it varies in strength over time and across issues and nations. More importantly, the variable intensity of the short-term bias makes it possible to improve our capacity to govern for the long term. Hence, the fundamental goal of Boston's book:
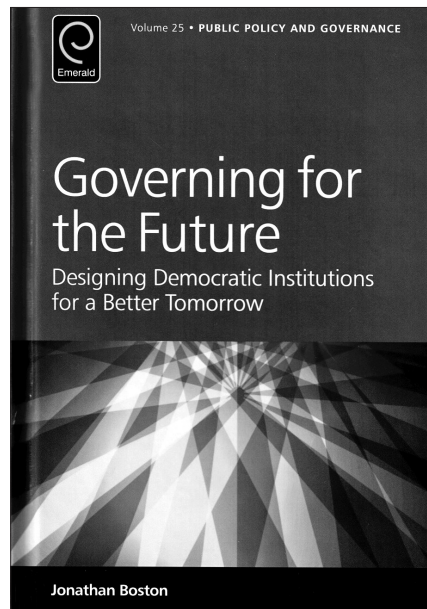
to "understand the nature, demands, and constraints of intertemporal governance", and to "offer realistic suggestions for innovative and effective democratic reform – in particular, initiatives that will encourage farsighted decision-making, protect future interests, and establish and cement the foundations of a good society over multiple generations." (xxii)

The majority of *Governing for the Future* is devoted to assessing a wide variety of options for ameliorating the presentist bias in democratic nations.

"In the absence of complete and effective 'solutions' to the presentist bias, advanced democracies have no choice but to 'muddle through' – countering such tendencies as best they can, drawing on the lessons of other jurisdictions, experimenting with new decision-making processes and policy approaches, and attempting, wherever possible, to make small but useful gains. Pragmatic adaption and learning by doing must be the primary tools." (472f)

To this end, Boston examines a wide range of both "demand-side" and "supply-side" strategies. Demand-side options focus on modifying the political incentives facing elected officials. These include seeking to improve citizens' knowledge and understanding of important "intertemporal" issues, influencing societal values and aspirations, and "framing policy issues and options in ways that are likely to galvanize public support for initiatives to enhance long-term outcomes." (473) Supply-side options include measures to constrain decisions by elected officials,

"build the capacity for forward thinking within the legislative and executive branches, and overcome deficiencies in policy coordination.… By such means, governments can be encouraged and/or enabled to give greater attention to long-term risks, take precautionary measures, and invest more prudently, thereby delivering greater economic, social, and environmental sustainability." (473)

Among the questions Boston addresses is one of particular relevance for this edition of the *Intergenerational Justice Review*, namely whether constitutional provisions can help alleviate the tendency to place the interests of future generations at risk by giving preference to short-term interests. A number of thinkers have argued that constitutions can be effective in providing some protection for the interests of future generations or for the protec-

tion of interests that will benefit both current and future generations (such as the guarantee of a healthful environment). Boston is generally skeptical that constitutional provisions are useful for accomplishing this goal (with the possible exception of the right to an ecologically healthy environment). He argues that defining the interests of future generations can pose difficulties, as can designing institutional mechanisms to protect those interests. Finally, constitutional engineering imposes costs as well as offering potential benefits, and in the absence of strong evidence that the benefits outweigh the costs, the enterprise strikes Boston as both difficult and inherently risky (235f). In the end, he concludes that "[r]elying on constitutional reforms to mitigate presentist tendencies … is unlikely to be the most effective of the options available." (236)

The other side of this argument is that many of the same questions can be raised about any changes to constitutional provisions, or, indeed, about adopting a constitution in the first place. They, too, are difficult to adopt, may impose costs as well as conferring benefits, and can be difficult to design well. Yet there is widespread agreement that the benefits of constitutions generally outweigh the costs, and that they are worth the effort. This is not to say that Boston's assessment of the desirability of using constitutions to protect the interests of future generations is necessarily wrong. But it is also not clear that this assessment is right.
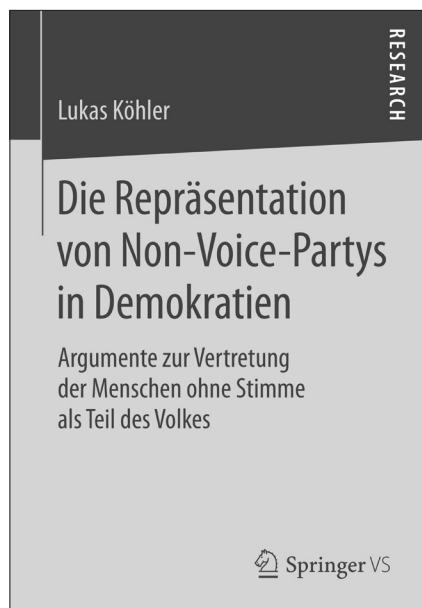
Governing for the Future is not a book one reads casually. Even for readers with some background, it can be a difficult read. This is largely a consequence of the systematic approach the author takes to examining the many aspects of the problem of governing for the future. The most obvious target audience for this work is as a text in an advanced public policy course. The book will also be of great interest to academics and policy-makers looking for a rigorous work on developing long-term public policy. It is a book one would read and then return to re-read chapters of special interest. On the other hand, readers without sufficient background in public policy are likely to find *Governing for the Future* frustrating. In a number of cases, the conclusion of a chapter is that the particular approach examined is not fruitful. It is hard to fault Boston for his conclusions, and even harder to fault him for the difficulty inherent in finding solutions to the problem of presentism he seeks to address – but while *Governing for the Future* is an important work, it is also a complex and, at times, a difficult work.

Representation of Non-Voice-Parties in Democracies: Arguments for the Representation of People without Voice as Part of the Citizenry

Reviewed by Elena Simon

In the Anthropocene, man is put back at the heart of the universe. In this era, where human technology may not only alter the immediate surroundings but the atmosphere of the planet, the questions of intergenerational justice have to be posed with new vigour. In light of radioactive waste, permafrost melting and rising sea levels, it is well known that the decisions that lead to a higher standard of living for many today, may leave future generations with a planet hostile to life. Future generations, though, have of course no possibility to participate in the decision-making process of the present. Yet there has been a debate on whether this might be changed and how. The most recent published volume is Gosseries and González-Ricoy's

Lukas Köhler

Die Repräsentation von Non-Voice-Partys in Demokratien

Argumente zur Vertretung der Menschen ohne Stimme als Teil des Volkes

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Institutions for Future Generations (2016), wherein Karnein (2016) and Skagen Ekeli (2016) address the challenges of political representation for future generations. Lawrence (2014) explores the possibilities of representing future generations in international law; Bailey, Farell and Mattei (2013) discuss the possibilities of protecting the rights of future generations through commons; and Thompson (2010) argues that it is possible to anticipate future generations' interests and therefore they should be represented. Is this justifiable under democratic rule? The monograph *Die Repräsentation von Non-Voice-Parties in Demokratien* by Lukas Köhler goes even further and argues that it is not only justifiable but necessary. He seeks to base the argument for the representation of future generations on a theo-