

Political agency is more complex than individuals

Thank you to K. O'Brien for her exuberant call for a deeper form of political agency to tackle climate change ("Political agency: The key to tackling climate change," Perspectives, 4 December 2015, p. 1170). O'Brien hopes that each person will be inspired to change him or herself and others, allowing us to "depend on individuals expressing political agency." Although this would work well in an ideal world, its practical implementation runs into reality.

Much research demonstrates that collectives can display political agency far exceeding the sum of "reflection and collaborative action" from individuals. From the *Madness of Crowds* (1) to *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2), extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that it is not necessarily "individuals who will ultimately decide the future." Constructive group dynamics, as opposed to groupthink, produce a collective achieving far more effective action than a collection of individuals (3).

Meanwhile, the current political realities in some parts of the world mean that taking individual stances to change society can be dangerous. Many are imprisoned and executed precisely because they are "participating in grassroots community initiatives" or "engaging...through art and literature." As the climate justice movement has shown (4), not all individuals are treated fairly.

Placing increased responsibility on individuals implies that collectives such as governments and corporations can do less. The burden for resolving societal ills thus falls on individuals, irrespective of their power, resources, or capabilities (5). Instead, without neglecting the long-standing science of extensively documented cases where collections of individual power achieved transformative change (6, 7), we must recognize that real inequalities and

power relations dominate political agency. We must also accept the essential role played by the power of human collectives beyond a collection of individuals.

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