

# Molten: An anti-plutocratic governance protocol

Butter

December 2022

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# 1 Butter

Butter is a DAO governance system. Its objective is to align DAO governance outcomes to DAO objectives through the direct application of incentives.

This paper describes a prototype, Molten, that attempts to influence DAO stakeholders and governance participants to cooperate using one-off payments.

# 2 Summary

One token, one vote mechanisms are the most popular governance mechanisms used by DAOs. However, one token, one vote, and other token voting systems are plutocracies and widely considered vulnerable to corruption and attack.

Large or mature DAOs, and many newer DAOs, have introduced vote delegation to scale governance and alleviate the risks of plutocracy.

However, many recent and well-known examples of plutocracy involve DAOs, including ENS DAO, Sushi DAO, and MakerDAO, in which vote delegation is allowed and often enforced.

We examine the DAO governance problem space and highlight promising in-market solutions, including hybrid governance, metagovernance, and market-based governance.

We propose cryptoeconomics, a system of economic incentives designed to produce behaviors at the micro-scale that create desirable, emergent properties at the macro scale, as a viable solution space for further exploration.

Finally, we describe Molten, a system that aims to address the risks related to plutocracy in DAO Governance using incentives designed to make corruption an unprofitable strategy.

# 3 Motivation

## 3.1 Decentralised Autonomous Organisations

DAOs are a novel form of organization uniquely enabled by blockchains.

The components of an organization include, but are not limited to:

1. an **objective** or **purpose**
2. a **membership policy** that produces a set of members, e.g., holds shares, holds tokens, is contracted.
3. an **allocation mechanism** which defines how the organization allocates resources
4. a **standardized store of value** which defines how the organization values and represents its resources, e.g., currency, equity, tokens

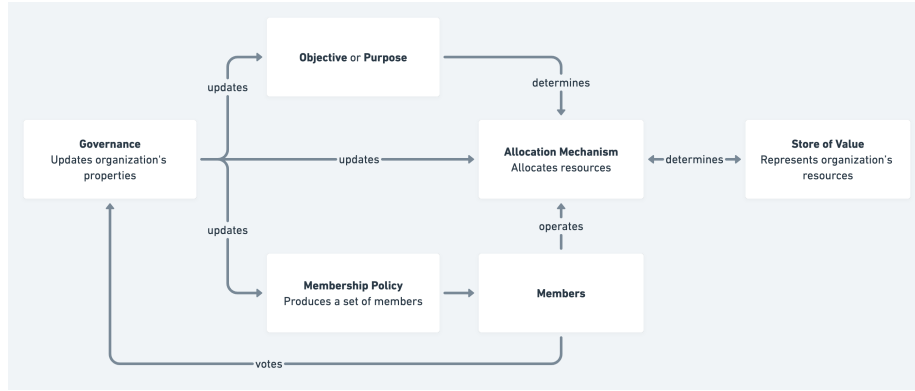


Figure 1: DAO Components

5. a **governance mechanism** that defines how to update the organization's properties, e.g., membership policies and allocation mechanisms.

DAOs, through their use of blockchains, claim to provide the benefits of large-scale coordination without the downsides of centralization. These downsides include capture, corruption, and collusion—problems that undermine our most-trusted institutions.

Generally, DAO proponents expect DAOs to replace traditional institutions in providing public, common, or club goods. When these institutions fail, centralization is usually a root cause, e.g., bureaucracy, corruption, and principal-agent problems.

In practice, however, DAOs do not offer solutions to these problems and often move them elsewhere in the value chain. Current DAO implementations, therefore, remain vulnerable to the same issues faced by our incumbent institutions.

### 3.2 DAO Governance

*DAO governance involves a network of participants that coordinate to make decisions, **without a centralized actor with privileged rights**, in pursuit of some goal or outcome, and is formalized or defined under a set of shared context(s), e.g., a territory, the law, a market, or a cause.*

DAOs, like other organizations, implement internal policies that govern their components and the interactions between them. Internal policies include the law in the case of nations, compensation, taxation, resource allocation, and social choice.

Similarly, external policies enforced by the environment govern organizations. External policies include corporate law, market forces, international relations, physics, and blockchain protocols.

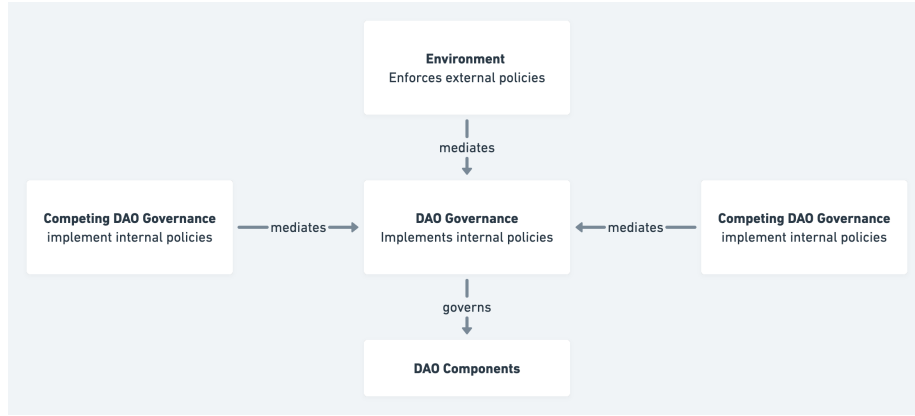


Figure 2: Governance Influence

Therefore, governance mechanisms can be considered the component of DAOs responsible for mediating all DAO components. They are, in turn, mediated by their environment and competing DAOs.

Considering a DAOs ability to affect its outcomes, a DAO’s governance mechanism can be considered the DAO itself. Therefore, we expect improvements in DAO Governance to be an effective means to realize the expected positive value of DAOs on society.

### 3.3 DAO Governance Models

*Note: We recognize that token voting, though democratic in nature, is far from a democracy in the literal sense. However, we will use the term democracy to adhere to market convention*

Models include:

- Direct Democracy
- Representative Democracy
- Reputation-based Voting

#### 3.3.1 Direct Democracy

***One token, one vote on every proposal***

##### **Description**

In a direct democracy, token-holders make decisions by voting on proposals, where each token is equivalent to a vote. Direct Democracy is the governance mechanism used by most DAOs, specifically smaller, younger DAOs.

Governance must configure the following parameters:

- Who has the right to create a proposal
- How to convert token votes to a decision, e.g., majority-rule, supermajority, quorum rules

#### **Benefits**

- Bundling financial upside and governance rights aligns risk and responsibility, which incentivizes those with the most to gain from price appreciation to make decisions that directly or indirectly maximize price appreciation
- This replicates features of the equity system, which makes it simple for holders to understand

#### **Limitations**

- Keeps out those who may be affected by governance but do not have the capital to acquire governance rights
- Tends towards plutocracy, which, if left unchecked, leads to failure through a focus on price appreciation, regardless of negative externalities

#### **Examples**

- PleasrDAO, Aavegotchi, VitaDAO

### **3.3.2 Representative Democracy**

#### ***One token, one vote on every proposal with vote delegation***

##### **Description**

In a representative democracy, token-holders make decisions by voting on proposals, where each token is equivalent to a vote but can also delegate their voting power to a representative. Delegated voting is increasingly becoming the most popular governance mechanism, especially for mature, large DAOs.

Governance must configure the following parameters:

- Who has the right to create a proposal
- How to convert token votes to a decision, e.g., majority-rule, supermajority, quorum rules
- Which rights are delegatable and to whom

##### **Benefits**

- Aligns incentives by unbundling financial risk and governance power and allocating them to domain experts
- Allows governance rights to accrue to representatives whom voters believe best represent their preferences
- Reduces voter apathy

##### **Limitations**

- As delegation scales, the nuance of voter preferences is diluted to the preferences of a smaller subset of voters, i.e., the delegates, which is less representative of the population
- Forces the voter to find a single delegate who represents their entire range of preferences across all possible decisions (though voters can split tokens across wallets or enhance delegation functionality)
- Allowing voters to delegate enables a more persistent form of voter apathy, as seen in our traditional political system

#### **Examples**

- Uniswap, Gitcoin, Compound, ENS, MakerDAO, AAVE, Radicle, Nouns DAO

### **3.3.3 Reputation-based Voting**

*One person, one vote OR One contribution/reputation unit, one vote on every proposal*

#### **Description**

Non-transferable voting. Based on an entity's membership, reputation, and, or contribution.

#### **Benefits**

- more equitable relative to token-weighted voting, i.e., meritocratic
- aligns contribution and power
- does not produce plutocracy

#### **Limitations**

- only as performant as the system's ability to measure contributions and assign relative value
- assumes equal exposure to externalities
- inability to express preference intensity

#### **Examples**

- Optimism's Citizen's House

## **4 Problems**

### **4.1 Problem Space**

The problem space is DAO Governance, in particular:

- DAO Governance Corruption, including Capture, Collusion, and Opportunism
- DAO Governance Attacks, including Capital Structure Exploitation

## 4.2 Properties

- **Stakeholder.** Any individual, collective, or entity that experiences externalities due to the actions of the DAO, e.g., Token-holder, user, delegate, staker/miner.
- **Participant.** Any individual, collective, or entity that participates in governance
- **Preference.** A stakeholder's subjective, comparative evaluations over a range of options, e.g., a miner prefers to increase the block reward over reducing rewards or keeping rewards constant
- **Objectives.** The goal or set of goals that constitute the DAO's organizing purpose, e.g., "Buy the constitution," "Fund Public Goods"
- **Acts.** The set of actions or decisions the DAO's governance mechanism can produce and its stakeholders consider, e.g., Add a new asset as collateral in our lending protocol, remove a particular voter's voting power, increase token supply, offboard a contributor, suspend the protocol
- **Outcomes.** The set of outcomes the DAO's governance mechanism can achieve through its actions, e.g., Token Price increases or remains stable, protocol users increase

## 4.3 Dimensions

To measure the effectiveness of a DAO's governance, we consider the following dimensions:

- **Stakeholder Representation.** The distribution of voting power relative to DAO stakeholders, i.e., users, token holders, stakers, and liquidity providers.
- **Preference Representation.** The degree to which governance participants can express their preferences concerning the DAO's objectives, e.g., a voter does not believe the voting mechanism is legitimate
- **Alignment.** The consistency of a decision when compared to a desired outcome
- **Coherence.** The consistency of a series of decisions when compared to one another concerning a desired outcome
- **Legitimacy.** Power granted by governance participants to the governance mechanism through their ongoing implicit agreement to be bound by its decisions

## 4.4 Problems

### 4.4.1 Corruption Problems

**Opportunism** Where a single stakeholder or group of stakeholders receives rewards for acting in self-interest while punishing all other stakeholders and producing outcomes that do not align with the DAO's objectives.

**Example:** Proposing or voting for salary increases or against salary cuts during a budget-cutting exercise.

**Symptoms:** - Deviation between outcomes and objectives - Increase in actions or decisions that do not align with objectives - Illegitimate diversion of funds

**Capture** Where a minority group of stakeholders possesses the power to dictate the DAO's actions to serve their self-interest while punishing all other stakeholders and producing outcomes that do not align with the DAO's objectives.

**Example:** Plutocracy, Bureaucracy

**Symptoms:** - Deviation between outcomes and objectives - Increase in actions or decisions that do not align with objectives - Illegitimate diversion of funds

**Collusion** Where two or more stakeholders or stakeholder groups operating within or outside the boundaries of the DAO cooperate for their mutual benefit, to the detriment of all other stakeholders and the DAO's ability to achieve its objectives.

**Example:** Vote Buying

**Symptoms:** - Deviation between outcomes and objectives - Increase in actions or decisions that do not align with objectives - Illegitimate diversion of funds

#### 4.4.2 Attack Problems

**Capital Structure Exploitation** Where an individual or group can exploit vulnerabilities in the DAO's governance mechanism to extract capital.

**Example:** Treasury Drain Attacks, Price Manipulation Attacks, and Arbitrageurs.

**Symptom:** - Illegitimate diversion of funds

## 5 Governance Innovations

Unlike corporate and public governance, DAO Governance is both public and open source. The principles of the open-source community, which anyone can copy and reuse for free, provide many opportunities for governance innovation—some of which we have shared below.

*Metagovernance*, *Hybrid Governance*, and *Market Governance* are three categories of governance innovation that may offer practical solutions concerning our problem space.



## 5.1 Metagovernance

Metagovernance, in the context of DAOs, is the term commonly used to describe any activity where one governance mechanism, typically a protocol or a DAO, exerts influence on the governance of another DAO.

Metagovernance is a transparent, often automated, vote-buying mechanism that incentivizes a target DAO’s token-holders to take an action that benefits the mechanism’s stakeholders, e.g., influence over governance decisions and the direction of token emissions.

Metagovernance creates a secondary set of incentives, or meta-incentives, that augment the behavior of the target DAO’s stakeholders.

In one-off instances of metagovernance, such as in the case of Fei and Index Coop, the Fei team gained influence in AAVE’s governance using Index Coop’s AAVE holdings.

There are also extended forms of metagovernance with DAOs whose entire purpose is to control the governance of other DAOs, such as Convex Finance.

### 5.1.1 Curve emissions with Convex Finance

Convex maximizes control over CRV emissions on the Curve protocol.

Convex works by reimplementing Curve’s vote-escrow token mechanic to pay CRV holders with CVX emissions in exchange for locking their CRV tokens in Convex’s contract.

Convex, in turn, locks these CRV tokens using Curve’s contracts to maximize their CRV emissions, which they share with CVX holders, and voting power, which they use to vote for increased token emissions for pools selected by CVX holders.

As of this writing, the Convex protocol controls 51% of all vote-escrowed CRV, an indicator of the effectiveness of meta-incentives in one-token, one-vote governance mechanisms.

### 5.1.2 Redacted Cartel, Hidden Hand

Hidden Hand from Redacted Cartel facilitates vote-buying campaigns for participating DAOs.

Vote buyers, or bribers, can deposit bribes for governance proposals at participating DAOs, and users can delegate governance tokens to the Hidden Hand protocol. The protocol then distributes votes to maximize returns for its users in exchange for a 4% commission of bribes received.

For example, as of September 7, 2022, \$851,364 worth of bribes were deposited on Aura Finance and \$2,346,024 on Balancer.

Hidden Hand also allows its partners to operate bribe marketplaces so their token holders can sell votes to bribers directly.

### **5.1.3 FEI Asset Listing on AAVE with Index Coop**

Index Coop, a provider of token indexes, actively encouraged metagovernance for a small number of the tokens held in their DeFi Pulse Index, namely Maker, AAVE, and Compound—a service they promoted as metagovernance-as-a-service.

Under this arrangement, holders of INDEX tokens could use governance tokens held as part of the index service to make or vote on proposals within MakerDAO, AAVE, and Compound.

In September 2021, Fei protocol, a stablecoin issuer, created a proposal to list the FEI token on AAVE, using the AAVE token holdings in Index Coop’s DPI.

AAVE’s governance requires 80,000 AAVE tokens before a holder can make a governance proposal. At that time, AAVE was trading at \$327.04, setting the cost of proposal creation on AAVE at over \$26m.

As a result of metagovernance, the Fei team used \$4m of INDEX tokens to control over 118,000 AAVE, worth ~\$36m, allowing the team to list their token on AAVE successfully.

## **5.2 Hybrid Governance**

Hybrid governance combines two or more governance models within a single DAO governance mechanism.

DAOs typically pursue this approach where DAO governance designers believe they can better align outcomes to the DAO’s objectives by limiting the influence of stakeholders whose preferences are over-represented in a one-token, one-vote model.

Implementing hybrid governance can also give greater weight to the preferences of a group of stakeholders who are underrepresented or have no means to express their preferences except to “vote with their feet,” which is a loss for all stakeholders.

Hybrid governance modulates the influence of one set of stakeholders by distributing voting rights to another set of stakeholders, especially groups that may be marginalized by the preferences of dominant voters.

Voting power is redistributed until each group can provide sufficient checks and balances on the power of other groups.

### **5.2.1 Lido’s stETH Dual Governance**

LidoDAO’s is governed by LDO holders. Unfortunately, users that stake ETH in the Lido contract receive stETH, which confers no voting rights to the holder.

This structure allows Lido holders to make decisions that benefit LDO holders at the expense of stETH holders.

The goal of Lido’s Dual Governance proposal “is to prevent the Lido DAO governance from changing the covenant between the protocol and stakers without consent from the latter.”

The proposal grants stETH holders a vetocracy over proposals deemed to break the agreement under which users stake their ETH on Lido. stETH holders can signal their disagreement with a proposal by staking stETH in a vote escrow contract. Once staked stETH reaches a threshold, the proposal is temporarily blocked to allow the community to negotiate. stETH holders can vote to block, amend, or pass the proposal after negotiations.

This power gives stETH enough power to limit opportunism by LDO token holders without burdening stakers with ongoing governance overhead.

### 5.2.2 Optimism’s Hybrid Governance

Optimism, through the Optimism Collective, has implemented a bicameral legislative process comprising a ‘Token House’ which grants voting powers through token ownership, and a ‘Citizens’ House,’ which grants voting powers through non-transferrable NFTs or “soulbound tokens.”

The Citizen’s House reserves its remit for retroactive public goods funding. In contrast, the Token House’s remit is closer to traditional DAO governance, e.g., governance fund grants, protocol upgrades, director removal, and so on. The team explains that this approach is “a large-scale experiment in non-plutocratic governance,” but so far, there are few details.

## 5.3 Market Governance

Market Governance is co-opted from Market Governance Mechanisms to describe a mechanism that leverages the competitive forces of the open market to influence the behavior of stakeholders.

As DAOs have scaled in scope, market cap, and contributors, token-based governance has created opportunities for corruption and in-fighting, especially where the DAO’s operations are complex.

As the range and diversity of stakeholders increases and the potential set of actions and decisions expand, governance must increase its throughput to accommodate without creating a self-serving bureaucracy.

### 5.3.1 MakerDAO’s MetaDAOs

The solution proposed by Rune in Endgame constitutes a decomposition of MakerDAO into a single core DAO housing the main functions of the Maker protocol and a collection of smaller “MetaDAO” governance units with their own

governance and governance token. “MetaDAOs” can pursue any viable market opportunity while leveraging the resources of the core DAO.

This innovation allows MakerDAO to maintain several governance-controlled parameters for the core protocol. At the same time, the market provides the incentives to steer MetaDAO governance to pursue new market opportunities.

MakerDAO is in the process of deploying this governance upgrade, so its effects are yet to be measured.

## 6 Proposal

Each governance innovation provides a tool for addressing problems in DAO Governance.

*Metagovernance* provides a system of secondary incentives to reward governance participants for taking a set of desired actions, which helps limit opportunistic behavior.

*Hybrid Governance* redistributes voting power among stakeholders using a secondary governance mechanism. The second mechanism provides a system of checks and balances between the two groups, guaranteeing that a single group of voters can only capture a governance mechanism partially.

*Market Governance* decomposes governance into self-contained organizations, allowing market forces to govern each organization’s decisions. As a result, consistently productive organizations outcompete organizations that become bureaucracies or engage in corruption.

These mechanisms improve stakeholder cooperation and alignment using three types of incentives. *Metagovernance* incentives are incentives provided by a mechanism or protocol. *Hybrid Governance* relies on incentives provided by other stakeholders or peers. *Market Governance* incentives are incentives provided by the market through competition.

Should governance attack, corruption, or capture be detectable by a governance mechanism, other stakeholders, or competing mechanisms, incentives offer an opportunity to offset the proceeds of these acts, rendering them unprofitable.

Through our investigations in the field of cryptoeconomics, we aim to design a mechanism or collection of mechanisms capable of providing sufficient guarantees about cooperative behavior in DAOs.

Next, we present an initial exploration of the solution space.

## 7 Molten

*Molten is WIP. This document will be updated as we conduct ongoing research and development.*

Molten incentivizes voters to pool their votes to deter opportunistic behavior by large token holders.

## 7.1 Actors

Molten coordinates the actions of three actors:

**Representative.** Stakeholder that wants to accrue voting power but needs more resources. Equivalent to a delegate in a DAO with vote delegation.

**Voter.** Stakeholder that wants protection against large voters and has adequate resources.

**Target DAO.** DAO that wants to allocate resources in pursuit of its objective.

## 7.2 Components

Molten's components include:

**Campaigns.** A period within which Voters pool their tokens in order to delegate voting power to a Representative. Can be launched by the Representative once deposits exceed the Campaign threshold, e.g., 100,000 governance tokens deposited.

**Campaign Manager.** Contract that manages all Campaigns, including types, parameters, and rewards.

**Molten Pot.** Contract created by Representatives to lock tokens during a Campaign. Voters deposit and claim tokens from Pots. Launching the Campaign freezes deposits.

**Molten Pot Factory.** Contract used to create Pots.

**Reward.** Fixed token reward, e.g., 30,000 DAI, claimable in proportion to Voters' Pot claim at the end of a Campaign.

**mTokens.** Tokens issued to Voters during a Campaign. Each token represents a proportional claim on the underlying governance tokens and rewards locked in the Pot contract.

## 7.3 Operation

1. Molten uses the Campaign Manager to create a new Campaign Type and sets Campaign duration, Target DAO Governance Token (ERC20)
2. Representatives create Campaigns and broadcast their Campaign and Molten Pot contract address to Voters
3. Voters deposit tokens into Molten Pots attached to Representatives they believe will pool the most voting power for a Campaign

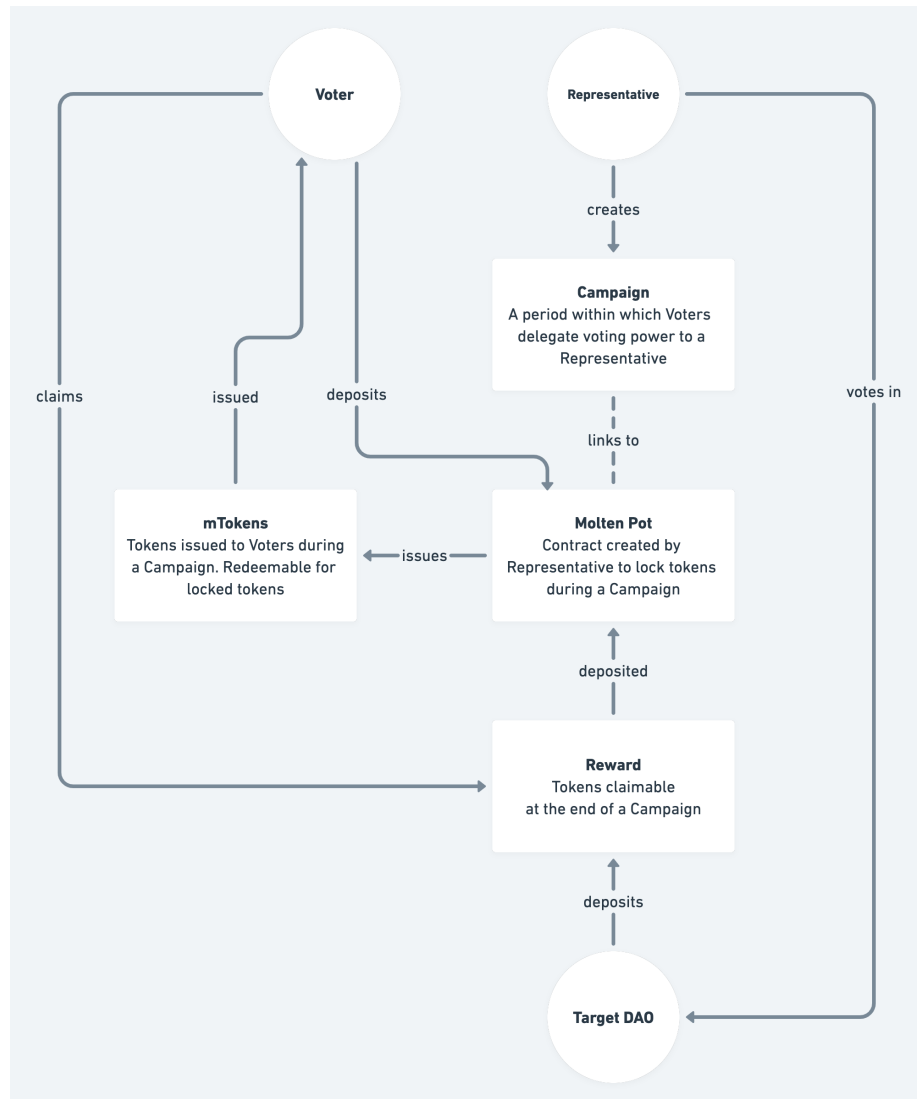


Figure 3: Components Interacting

4. Target DAO deposits Reward in the Campaign Manager for the respective Campaign Type and sets Campaign threshold
5. Once a Molten Pot attached to a Representative exceeds the Campaign threshold, the Representative can launch the Campaign. Campaign launches end all other Campaigns of the same type, allowing Voters to claim tokens from the Molten Pots
6. At the Campaign launch, Molten Pots will delegate pooled governance token voting power to Representatives, e.g., AAVE, and issue mTokens to Voters, e.g., mAAVE
7. After a Campaign reaches duration, the underlying governance tokens and Rewards are claimable from the Molten Pot & Campaign Manager
8. During the Campaign, should mToken holders decide that a Representative is no longer protecting their interests, they can vote to terminate the Campaign, removing the Representative's voting power and forfeiting the Reward for all parties

## 7.4 Outcome

Molten combines peer incentives and market incentives. It uses peer incentives to incentivize Representatives to identify governance capture and corruption and increase stakeholder cooperation. It uses market incentives to surface and distribute voting power to the most competent and motivated Representatives capable of keeping the most influential voters in check.

Peer incentives will provide sufficient rewards to Representatives that identify corruption or capture<sup>2</sup> in the form of delegated voting power to limit potential gains from either strategy, creating an effective deterrent.

Market incentives should encourage competent Representatives to emerge, able to monitor and counter opportunism by large voters.

Given the presence of both peer and market incentives, coordination costs are the most significant barrier to voters pursuing a collective voting strategy. We aim to prove the effectiveness of incentives on voter coordination.

## 7.5 Implementation

See prototype implementation [here](#).