

The Pragmatic Turn of Democracy

Combining Representation and Participation

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In recent years, a long list of “symptoms” has been associated with the crisis of democracy: decline in electoral turnout, dropping party membership, greater volatility in voter preferences, greater difficulty in obtaining majority support for governments, declining centrality of parliament, and increased devolution of authority to administrative bodies. Several explanations for political discontent have been considered over the years. These include a rise in levels of education and information, changing values, economic shifts, and mass media’s overexposure of governmental shortcomings.

Yet some scholars argue that longitudinal evidence shows fluctuation over time rather than linear downward trends, leading to the conclusion that public support for the political system in established democracies has not consistently eroded. Furthermore, surveys and analyses also show that most citizens in established and newer democracies still share widespread adherence to the ideals and principles of democracy.

If normative support for democracy remains solid, then it is reasonable to suppose that the extent of political disaffection and talk about “crisis” of democracy are somehow over- or misstated. Further, if the level of trust in political institutions like parliaments and political parties decreases while the level of support for democracy itself remains stable, that may indicate at least two things: 1) citizens’ expectations towards democracy are higher than the ability of representative institutions to fulfill them, and 2) citizens no longer associate democracy exclusively with representative institutions.

Citizens expect more from democracy and demand more participation in governance. Demands for increased participation and more responsive governments are rising steadily, despite findings that civic participation in social organizations is declining along with membership in political parties and electoral turnout. Higher demands for participation lead to higher political dissatisfaction when institutions do not properly accommodate them.

If such diagnoses make sense, then the present situation indicates a misalignment between citizens’ demands for participation and the capacities of traditional political institutions to match those demands – not a crisis. This misalignment would point to the notion of “democratic deficits,” or more specifically, to an imbalance between higher demands for more democracy and the perceived lower supply of the latter.

Recent studies on the quality of democracy have concluded that the greater the participation, the higher the probability that government and its decisions are responsive. However, participation today means more than voting, assembling, protesting and lobbying. It also means more than monitoring, questioning and demanding justification. Participation also implies more than just validating or vetoing a previously framed policy (e.g., in referendums and plebiscites). Participation is not just about *choosing* candidates and *controlling* their performance or *influencing* decision-making. Participation is also about *taking part* in the decision-making process, *having* a say about policy priority and *deliberating* on policy issues. An updated and more comprehensive notion of participation is an integral part of the task of reforming political institutions, especially when one

Summary: Rather than a crisis of democracy as such, there seems to be misalignment between citizens’ demands for democratic participation and the supply of it by political institutions. Many Latin American states are responding to the growing need for active involvement. Non-electoral forms of participation are expanding and being more institutionalized. Whereas in Europe civic participation in the political process is still linked to traditional electoral acts like referenda, Latin American experiments combine participation and representation in innovative ways.

envisages assessing the causes of the supposed crisis of democracy. Without taking into account such non-electoral forms of participation, representative institutions threaten to be increasingly isolated from citizens and their democratic demands.

An enlarged account of political participation seems to be one of the key elements that distinguishes recent democratic reform in Latin America and Europe. In Latin America, where levels of political trust have been noticeably rising in the last decade, non-electoral forms of participation have been increasingly institutionalized within representative institutions, providing citizens with opportunities other than voting to express their interests and needs. The new democracies seem to be finding creative ways of aligning citizens' demands for participation with opportunities to do so within the realm of representative institutions.

In addition to incorporating direct democracy mechanisms (like referendums, plebiscites and citizen initiatives) into new constitutions, many Latin American countries have developed more far-reaching and effective participatory institutions. Beginning with participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre in Brazil, experiments now include local and national policy councils, community councils, advisory councils, national policy conferences, municipal development councils, participatory urban planning, and several other experiments that allow citizens and civil society organizations to play a larger role in decision-making processes and set policy agendas along with government. Participatory innovation has proliferated in countries as diverse as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela.

The impact of citizen participation in Latin America is already apparent in public expenditure prioritization, reallocation of budgetary provisions, management of local resources, policy planning, design and implementation of local development projects and reforms, and also in drafting and enacting laws and public policy. Citizens are entitled to deliberate on policy priorities along with their representatives, suggest specific policies to be adopted by their respective governments, or even propose entirely new areas of policymaking.

The potential of institutionalized participatory mechanisms to achieve political and social inclusion is remarkable. Experiments like participatory budgeting have resulted in greater equality through more equitable redistribution of public goods, and increased levels of participation among disadvantaged groups, lesser-educated and lower-income citizens. Other innovations like policy councils have ensured recognition and inclusion of minority groups by promoting rights and developing corresponding policies to address matters of gender, race, ethnicity and other cultural minority issues. Participatory innovation gives the voiceless a voice, for example indigenous populations who have been reintegrated into the political process and have engaged in public life, taking an active role in the new participatory design of the Andes region.

The combination of participation and representation in Latin America is not only displaying potential to increase political and social inclusion, but is also proving that large scale participatory innovation is possible and is able to impact national politics. Remarkable examples are the national public policy conferences in Brazil. Those large-scale participatory experiments have been gathering millions of people together over all three levels of the Brazilian federation over the last years, with the main scope of providing societal input in the design and implementation of public policy. Official data from Brazil's federal government estimates that around seven million people have participated in the eighty-two national policy conferences that took place in Brazil between 2003 and 2011. Out of those, two million would have only participated in the eight national policy conferences that took place in 2011, comprising all of the country's twenty-seven states and involving almost all of its 5,564 cities.

While able to mobilize an impressive, growing number of citizens and civil society organizations all over the country to deliberate policy proposals alongside the government, the Brazilian national public policy conferences impact policy- and lawmaking. Approximately 19.8% of all legislative bills under discussion in

the Brazilian federal legislature in 2009 were substantively convergent with policy recommendations from national policy conferences held in the previous years. In addition, 15.8% of all constitutional amendments enacted by Brazilian parliament between 1988 and 2009 deal with specific issues deliberated by the national policy conferences and included in its final recommendations. Ordinary citizens, civil society organizations, private entrepreneurs and elected representatives from all three levels of government deliberate together and converge on a common policy agenda for the country.

In Latin America, political participation grows beyond representative channels of elections and parties, is however integrated by them. Governments increasingly institutionalize participatory mechanisms that allow citizens to play a larger role in the decision-making process. Those *participatory reforms* seem to indicate that instead of just consolidating representative institutions, certain Latin-American countries experiment with new forms of political participation, combine them with new venues of representation, and redesign political institutions in order to create more opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making process. The once “pseudo,” “delegative” or “defective” democracies of Latin America seem to give way to *pragmatic democracy* – an experimental form of governance that integrates non-electoral forms of participation into representative institutions.

Whether the experimental forms of combining representation and participation positively affect citizen’s satisfaction with democracy is an open, empirical question. The democratic innovations recently introduced in Latin America are certainly not the only possible causal explanation for the sudden rise in levels of political trust on the continent. A number of other concurrent factors have certainly contributed, like economic growth, control of inflation, better economic performance associated with redistributive policies, significant decreases in poverty and inequality, the rise and expansion of a vigorous middle class, minor but perceptible progress in law enforcement, rights protection, crime control and corruption prevention, to mention just a few. However, citizens’ expectations towards democracy do seem to be increasingly absorbed by representative institutions through participatory mechanisms, and that may play a role in Latin America’s improved democratic performance.

In Europe, reforms intended to promote participation are not a new item on the democracy agenda. However, up to now they have been associated mostly with and subsumed under reforms aimed toward electoral institutions, like party and voting systems. At the most, demands for more effective citizen participation in the political process have been incorporated into the “direct democracy” agenda. Nevertheless, referendum and plebiscite are also circumscribed to voting, and therefore encompass a limited form of political participation.

Moreover, uses of direct democracy mechanisms in Europe thus far are mostly restricted to the local level on a small scale. Citizen initiatives (which of all three main direct democracy mechanisms is the one that relies least on voting) typically do not reach national boundaries and only manage to engage a very small number of citizens. Their feasibility and effectiveness in the national (and transnational) level is yet to be assessed.

So far, non-electoral forms of participation in Europe have only been experimented with very limitedly. Participatory budgeting has traveled from Latin America to the old continent with relative success. In 2009, over two hundred European cities had already implemented a variation of participatory budgeting. Scholars estimate that in that same year about eight million European citizens had already participated in participatory budgeting experiments, whereas ten years earlier fewer than five such experiments had been tried out on the continent. European cities have found their proper way of adapting the experiment to their specific local contexts, but participatory budgeting is far from being an institutional reality in Europe as it is in Latin America.

Expanding and institutionalizing non-electoral forms of participation is definitely a recipe for political reform that should be taken into account if one ac-



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cepts that the present situation is one of misalignment of citizens' demands and political institutions' supply, and not a crisis of democracy. Interestingly enough, it is the new democracies that are making such a recipe available to the old, established ones. Whether participatory innovation could improve representative institutions in Europe, and whether that achievement could minimize the "crisis diagnosis" by increasing citizen's satisfaction with democracy, are questions worthy of being answered empirically.

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