Studying Democratic Innovations: From Theory to Practice and Back Again

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Participation appears to be the order of the day. Whether we are interested in the policy pronouncements of government or the ideas of democratic theorists, citizen participation in political decision making is perceived as one strategy (if not the strategy) for re-engaging disillusioned and disenchanted citizens. Indicative of this participative turn is the recently launched Power to the People, a report by POWER, an independent Inquiry into Britain’s Democracy funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable and Reform Trusts (Power Inquiry 2006).

I mention the POWER report because in late 2004 I was commissioned by the POWER Inquiry to undertake a review and evaluation of democratic innovations – different types of mechanisms that aim to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process. I had expected to summarise previous studies of this area, perhaps adding details of recent democratic experiments. But I was surprised to find that, as far as I could discover, there is a lack of systematic and comparative analysis across different types of democratic innovations. There would appear to be a gap in the literature on democratic theory and practice. As Michael Saward observes, ‘a systematic look at the potential role of a range of deliberative devices alongside others that may be ‘aggregative’ or reflective or informative has not occurred’ (Saward 2003: 167). Obviously what I was able to present to the POWER Inquiry was limited given the time constraints I was working under. Nevertheless, the report includes initial evaluations of some 60 democratic innovations (Smith 2005).

My hope now is to develop and deepen this initial evaluation of democratic innovations – this paper being a first, tentative step. To begin to understand the role that different democratic innovations might play in contemporary democratic governance, we need to be aware of how innovations realise or embody different democratic goods. To this end I offer a broad analytical framework which will allow us to compare and evaluate the range of innovations. I also believe that democratic theory has much to learn from studying participation mechanisms. The assessment of democratic innovations provides an opportunity to reflect back critically, not only on the extent to which the theoretical commitment to citizen participation can be effectively
institutionalised, but also on the often untested empirical/sociological assumptions that are pivotal to particular democratic theories.

The limits of existing analysis

There is a general recognition within democratic theory that questions of institutional design are highly significant, but most discussions remain at too high a level of abstraction. There is a widespread failure to systematically engage in the ‘messy’ and detailed task of institutional design. Theorists are strong on arguing the case for institutional restructuring; generally lacking in the details. Perhaps this is an unfair criticism and we need to recognise that there is a division of labour within the politics discipline – there are other scholars who (should) pick up this task. There is, for example, a formidable community of political scientists who study citizens’ democratic attitudes and behaviour (some of them are involved in this workshop!), but they tend to focus on elections and other standard modes of political activity. Democratic innovations are relatively marginal forms of democratic practice and typically fall under political scientists’ radar. What we find is numerous independent evaluations of particular participation exercises, but with little consistency in their frameworks of analysis. There would thus appear to be a gap in the discipline – a lack of concerted attention to theoretically-informed and comparative studies of democratic innovations. David Beetham goes as far as to suggest that this can be explained by ‘the disciplinary divorce within the academic study of politics, between normative theory and empirical political analysis, which has encouraged the separation of institutional accounts of democracy from any analysis of democracy’s underlying principles, as if they belonging to quite different worlds’ (Beetham 1999: 29). We are left with a series of unconnected empirical case studies of particular innovations and a body of work from democratic theorists where discussions of institutional design remain on a fairly abstract and aspirational level. We are therefore too often in the uncomfortable and arguably unsustainable position of contrasting actual practices of existing democracies with ideal theoretical constructions.

There are, of course, exceptions – a small but significant body of theorists do engage in more detailed discussion of democratic innovations. But even when they turn their attention to questions of institutional design, there is one approach that tends to dominate, namely a search for institutions that best ‘fit’ or express the basic principles of a particular theoretical model of democracy. Examples include:
citizen initiative and referendum as the expression of the principle of political equality or responsive rule within theories of direct democracy (Budge 1996; Saward 1998).

• citizens’ juries and deliberative opinion polls as the institutional realisation of deliberative democracy (Fishkin 1997; Smith and Wales 2000).

• gender quotas or group representation as the enactment of the politics of presence / difference (Phillips 1995; Young 1990).

These examples reflect what Saward takes to be the dominant deductive approach to institutional questions within democratic theory: democratic principles can be ‘deduced from a deeper religious (or contractarian) foundation, and in turn institutions and practices can be deduced from the principle’ (Saward 2003: 162). This deductive approach to institutional design is symptomatic of a ‘common approach in political theory’ which attempts ‘to stipulate a literal or proper meaning for a political principle. Behind this strategy is the assumption, normally unspoken, that there is one, correct, interpretation of a given principle’ (Saward 2003: 165). We are thus left in a situation where much of the writing within democratic theory is little more than the defence and refutation of competing ‘models’ of democracy. How many times do we come across articles and books that are written to demonstrate the strengths of a particular model of democracy against all-comers? – e.g.

deliberative* vs. direct* vs. cosmopolitan* vs. liberal* vs. aggregative* vs. ecological* vs. communicative* vs. difference* vs. agonistic* … (* delete as applicable)

Such an approach necessarily limits the type of institutions discussed and analysed. No practical design can realistically hope to fulfil the rigorous demands of any particular model. Only a few innovations come close to passing the strict theoretical tests and typically only squeeze through by overlooking certain aspects of their design. The deductive approach does a disservice to the range of actually-existing democratic innovations. It means that there is little or no comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of different types of innovation and how they might be combined to complement and overcome the deficiencies of particular designs.

A further problem with this tendency to evaluate innovations from within particular models of democracy is that models tend to be incomplete – they offer only a partial analysis of our democratic condition. For example, deliberative
democracy may provide a powerful theoretical critique of actually-existing institutions, but it lacks a theory of collective choice or a decision rule. At some point decisions need to be made and preferences aggregated in some manner; and yet there is no decision making principle implicit within deliberative theory. Deliberative democracy cannot be understood as a self-contained model of democracy. Rather, deliberation is a desirable element of democracy – one that has often been overlooked. This does not undermine the theoretical and practical significance of deliberative insights, but it does mean that we need to understand how democratic deliberation might be ‘blended’ with other institutional goods and structures (Smith 2003: 73). The problem of focusing too heavily on deliberation is that other elements of democratic institutional design are ignored.

Saward provides a useful corrective to the tendency to work from within a particular model of democracy. Using the example of direct and deliberative democracy, he argues that instead of viewing them as competing and often antagonistic models, we should recognise that their ideals and practices can be mutually supportive. In isolation, both models are (arguably) deficient; but mutual engagement indicates how their deficiencies might be overcome. For example, there is a tendency within deliberative democracy to criticise models of direct democracy for lacking an account of how citizens develop reflective preferences before decision making. Similarly, direct democrats are right to highlight the lack of any decision rule within deliberative democracy. But if they are not held as antagonistic positions, then we can see how mutual engagement may be productive – deliberation prior to direct decision making creates a more legitimate democratic process where citizens are encouraged to reflect on their preferences before making political choices (Saward 2001).

Saward develops these ideas further in his significant article ‘Enacting Democracy’ (2003). Here he attempts to move beyond deductive ‘modelism’, offering a ‘reflexive proceduralist’ approach that recognises that ‘the detailed and practical meaning of, and justifications for, the principles [of democracy] can only be worked out through (a) their institutional embodiment in practical institutions and processes, and (b) their coherence with other compelling principles’ (Saward 2003: 163). Rather than offering another model of democracy, his is ‘a framework or approach which recognises that multiple devices and principles can and will constitute democratic practice, and that we need systematically to stand back from existing models precisely in order to manipulate and combine their elements in democratically promising, tailored ways’ (Saward 2003: 167). By not dogmatically committing ourselves to one particular model of democracy, we should be able to draw on the different
insights of democratic theory to explore and evaluate the varying contributions of democratic innovations and the way in which they might be combined and sequenced to enhance and enrich democratic practice.

Towards an analytical framework

Rather than setting strict theoretical conditions from one model of democracy against which democratic innovations are judged, it is important to develop a fairly open and broad framework which allows us to compare and contrast different designs – a framework that allows us to understand how democratic goods are expressed in different innovations. This will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and deficiencies of innovations and therefore allow us to think creatively, and more realistically, about the roles they might play in democratic governance. It also provides a framework within which we can assess and incorporate the findings of existing empirical evaluations of individual innovations and provide some guidance for further and systematic evaluations across innovations. This combination of the insights from contemporary democratic theory and empirical social science is crucial if we are to build a systematic understanding of the potential of different institutional designs.

The first step, then, is to recognise the range of democratic goods that may be realised in the design of democratic innovations. Here we can look to competing democratic theories to generate a reasonably comprehensive list of democratic goods that are associated with increasing and deepening citizen participation. There is no space in this paper to go through this exercise. However, drawing from (for example) models of participative, direct, liberal, deliberative, difference and cosmopolitan democracy, such a list would include goods such as:

- political equality
- popular control
- inclusion
- expressive freedom
- deliberation
- transparency

The particular interpretation of these democratic goods often differs between models of democracy. But, for our purposes we simply need to be aware that a range of democratic goods can be realised in different institutional settings – we can then draw out their content when analysing individual innovations.
If the first step is to isolate a set of democratic goods related to citizen participation, the second step is to consider how combinations of these goods are enacted in different institutional settings. To progress to a systematic comparative analysis of designs, we need to recognise the characteristics of democratic innovations that have a significant effect on democratic goods. Below I offer a schematic approach to institutional design. Each of the characteristics generates significant questions, the response to which will indicate how democratic goods are realised within different institutional arrangements.

1. Selection mechanism
   - To what extent does the innovation increase the number of citizens engaged in political participation?
   - Is the innovation open to all or is there a selection mechanism such as election, random selection or appointment?
   - To what extent are politically-marginalised groups engaged?

2. Agenda-setting capacity
   - To what extent are citizens able to affect the choice of issues that are the focus of engagement?

3. Information provision
   - How is information provided to citizens?

4. Form of engagement between citizens (and other actors)
   - Do citizens have the opportunity to debate and discuss issues?
   - To what extent is engagement between citizens (and other actors) structured or unstructured?

5. Role in decision making
   - What are the outputs of engagement – a collective decision or recommendation, individual preferences, etc.?
   - How do these outputs affect final political decisions?

6. Scale and transferability
   - Can the innovation operate effectively at different levels (local to global) and across different policy issues?
   - Can the innovation be transferred across different democratic systems?

7. Resource implications
- What resources (financial, time, skills, etc.) are necessary for effective implementation of the innovation?

Such an open analytical framework allows us to explore the way that different democratic goods are realised or expressed in practice. It allows us to make explicit the trade-offs between democratic goods implicit within any particular design. It also offers a framework within which existing empirical evaluations of individual innovations can be incorporated into a broader comparative analysis.

**Evaluating democratic innovations**

The detailed evaluation and comparison of the different types of democratic innovation will have to wait for another day – all that can be offered in this paper is an indicative discussion of what we might learn from a systematic analysis of democratic innovations. For an initial analysis and relevant references, see my report for the POWER Inquiry *Beyond The Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Across the World* which is available online [http://www.powerinquiry.org/publications/documents/BeyondtheBallot_000.pdf](http://www.powerinquiry.org/publications/documents/BeyondtheBallot_000.pdf) (Smith 2005).

What we find is a quite phenomenal array of democratic innovations with varying characteristics. In an attempt to bring some order to the range of practice and proposals, I have brought the different innovations under three categories:

- Consultation innovations – aim to inform decision-makers of citizens’ views.
- Co-governance innovations – aim to give citizens significant influence over aspects of the decision-making process.
- Self-governance innovations – aim to give citizens agenda-setting and final decision-making power.

The categorisation follows a simple logic – as we move from consultation to co-governance to direct democratic innovations the potential impact of citizens on decision making increases. However, as we will see from the brief evaluations below, innovations within the same category can differ quite markedly – a wide variety of design choices exist that have different implications for the democratic quality of citizen engagement. The initial exploration below can only begin to tease out some of these implications.

**Consultation innovations**
This is the largest category of innovations, including fairly traditional consultation mechanisms such as opinion polls, open meetings and focus groups. There have been interesting developments to these basic engagement techniques, most notably the use of randomly-selected citizen forums (e.g. citizens’ juries, deliberative opinion polling, etc.) and e-consultation innovations.

Generically, consultation innovations are criticised for lacking agenda-setting capacity and any clear impact on decision making. However, there are significant differences in design that highlight the importance of using the broad analytical framework offered in this paper and help us understand the way that different designs embody different democratic goods.

Opinion polls are designed to provide standardised information from a cross-section of the population. Statistical representation offers one way of realising political equality – everyone has equal opportunity to be selected. However, polling is charged with being a simplistic and superficial approach to engagement. Citizens are asked their immediate opinions, but often with little or no knowledge of the subject and/or opportunity to reflect on relevant information. The use of standing citizens’ panels by a number of public authorities where 1,000-plus citizens are used as a sounding board and surveyed regularly on services, policies and proposals (usually with detailed information provided) offers one example of how opinion polls have been developed to overcome some of their deficiencies.

In principle, open meetings offer the opportunity for debate and deliberation and formally enact political equality. In practice, only a small section of the community is usually attracted to such meetings and it is typically only the most confident and vocal citizens who contribute to discussions. The emergence of participation techniques such as Planning for Real and community visioning recognise the need to work directly with often hard-to-reach social groups in their own communities if their voice is to be heard and inclusion institutionally embodied. Perhaps the most impressive development of the open meeting, however, is America Speaks 21st Century Town Meeting – one day events that have involved between 500-5,000 citizens. ICT is used to enable small group discussions that feed into broader debates and votes. America Speaks is open to any interested citizens, but organisers engage in outreach prior to the event to ensure a reasonable level of participation from hard-to-reach groups. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) allows organisers to analyse voting on the basis of socio-demographic data.
America Speaks recognises the importance of bringing together citizens from diverse backgrounds to discuss and debate issues. This is the primary rationale for randomly-selected citizen forums such as citizens’ juries, consensus conferences and deliberative opinion polling (DOP). Citizen forums can be seen as an explicit response to the deficiencies of existing consultative mechanisms, with their emphasis on selection mechanisms that ensure participation of a cross-section of the population and the highly structured approach to deliberation between citizens and the provision of evidence by experts. These designs are an explicit attempt to institutionalise both political equality and deliberation. DOP, in particular, is a response to the lack of information and deliberation in traditional opinion polls. It is no surprise that deliberative democrats have shown an interest in this family of innovations given the evidence that citizens are willing and able to deliberate about often complex policy issues. There are however significant differences in design which highlight the importance of taking into consideration a wide range of criteria when comparing innovations. For example, in terms of selection, the small size of citizens’ juries and consensus conferences requires stratified sampling to ensure participants reflect a range of relevant socio-demographic characteristics. The larger size of DOP means that simple random sampling can be used. In terms of output, DOP (as the name suggests) produces post-deliberation preferences from individual citizens which are then collated by organisers of the events. In contrast, citizens’ juries and consensus conferences produce a group report, which requires citizens to engage in a more creative exercise, working together towards mutually acceptable recommendations.

Finally, one of the most hyped areas of innovation in consultation is the emerging practice of e-democracy – the use of ICT to engage citizens. It is easy to overstate the potential of e-democracy – most innovations in this area are actually in e-government (provision of services), rather than e-democracy (engagement in decision making processes). However, there are some interesting developments. For example, deliberative opinion polling has been transferred to the internet (online deliberative polling), thus removing the need for citizens to be literally face-to-face to engage in deliberations. Early experiments indicate that there may be differences in the form, intensity and effect of deliberations and positive intervention is needed to ensure that the ‘digital divide’ in access to and ability to use computers does not affect participation. The digital divide is certainly a problem when considering the use of ICT as the main medium of consultation, whether it is simply the electronic publication of official documents (for example DirectGov in the UK) or interactive discussion forums, the most famous of which is probably Minnesota’s MN-Politics. It is no surprise that it
is the already politically-interested who tend to engage in such forums, thus raising questions about political equality and the inclusion of hard-to-reach social groups. However, the promise of e-consultation is well-demonstrated by a couple of imaginative consultation projects run by the Hansard Society in the UK which has made use of secure sites to involve two politically-marginalised groups. HeadsUp provides a forum for registered school children to discuss issues amongst themselves and engage with MPs in a safe environment. Similarly it is the security and anonymity of the internet site developed for the Womenspeak project that gave women who have suffered domestic violence the confidence to engage with each other and answer questions and contributions from MPs.

Just from this short discussion of different types of consultation, we can begin to see the value of an awareness of how different innovations balance or blend different democratic goods – for example, form of political equality, quality of deliberation, type of output, etc.

Co-governance innovations

However innovative, one of the main deficiencies of consultation mechanisms is their lack of impact on agenda-setting and the unclear relationship between participation and final decision. There is a group of democratic designs that I term ‘co-governance innovations’ that offer varying environments for increasing the role of citizens in the decision-making process. The different approaches to engagement highlight how different goods are embodied and given precedence in different institutional designs.

Perhaps the most celebrated co-governance innovation is participatory budgeting (PB), particularly as practiced in Porte Alegre in Brazil where it was initially devised. PB involves a relatively complex arrangement of popular participation at the local level with elected community representatives involved in more strategic forums. PB is an interesting mixture of direct and electoral forms of participation – significant numbers of citizens (particularly from lower economic groups) participate in neighbourhood and regional forums where they put forward investment proposals and elect representatives for regional and city-wide forums. There are important distinctions between the regional budget forums where representatives decide on regional investment priorities and the municipal budget forum which decides on the distribution of finances between regions and different types of investment. Levels of representation in the regional budget forums is related to levels of participation by citizens in
assemblies. This can affect outcomes of the budget process – representatives must take into account needs-based criteria, but there is an element of discretion in decision making. In comparison, there is equal representation for every region of the city in the municipal forum and representatives are limited to 2-year terms and subject to immediate recall. The relationship between levels of participation and community representation certainly provides an incentive to participate, something we will return to later in this paper. Much of PB’s legitimacy rests on popular participation, particularly amongst traditionally marginalised groups, and the agenda-setting role in budget allocation and distribution. Although the PB process does not have final decision-making power, it is difficult for the legislature to ignore its recommendations given the level of popular involvement and support.

An interesting co-governance design that builds on the citizen forum innovations, discussed under ‘consultation’, is the recent Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, established by the legislature in British Columbia. Politicians had continually failed to agree on whether the province’s electoral system should be reformed and so passed the issue to a randomly-selected forum of citizens drawn from across the state. One man and one woman from each electoral district, plus two Aboriginal members made up the 160-strong assembly. Throughout 2004 the Assembly met regularly, taking evidence and deliberating on the question of electoral reform. The report produced in December 2004 recommended a new electoral system. Prior to the Assembly’s deliberations, the legislature had agreed that their recommendations would be put direct to a province-wide referendum. The Citizens Assembly played a key agenda-setting and deliberative role and received a great deal of media and public attention.

Although both of these co-governance arrangements take quite different approaches to structuring citizen involvement – blending democratic goods in quite different ways – they create participative designs where public authorities take more of a back seat, handing over a significant element of power and influence in the decision-making process to citizens.

A third approach to co-governance which is popular in the UK, particularly in governance of urban regeneration, is citizen participation on partnership boards. In principle this brings citizens into the process of agenda-setting, deliberation and final decision making alongside other actors (or stakeholders) such as local authorities, health authorities, voluntary and community organisations, etc. In most partnerships citizens do not have a direct role – rather organised voluntary and community groups are surrogates for citizen participation. There are
examples of partnerships where citizens are selected to sit on the board through community elections or even according to specific criteria. Birmingham Race Action Partnership (BRAP), established in 1998, is an interesting and unusual example of selection by interview. Prior to BRAP community representatives were elected from within black and minority ethnic community umbrella groups – these representatives then formed a consultative forum that met with official bodies. However, there were continual criticisms that the views of the community representatives were unrepresentative of the broader, heterogeneous communities they claimed to represent. To replace the traditional mode of community representation, BRAP created a framework where community advocates were selected by interview to ensure a commitment to recognising and representing diversity. These community advocates had positions on the BRAP board alongside established organisations such as the city council, health authorities, police, etc. Selection by interview certainly offers a challenge to our typical conceptions of how political equality can and should be enacted. In another interesting experiment, the regional panels of the Community Fund (responsible for the distribution of lottery funds) randomly select one or two of their members from the electoral register. But, whatever the selection mechanism – election, interview, random selection – most studies suggest that although citizens are formally included on these influential boards, they tend to be marginalised by institutional stakeholders that have a high level of bureaucratic support and political experience and who have familiarity with operating in these types of partnership forums. Even with education and support programmes, citizens typically find that they lack the capacity to engage with representatives of public institutions on a level playing field. This raises some interesting questions, not only about the kind of support that is needed to allow citizens to engage effectively in such partnerships, but also whether it is better to design engagement forums where citizens are in some sense ‘protected’ from the potentially manipulative power of institutional representatives.

**Self-governance innovations**

It is widely assumed that in complex, large-scale democracies, citizens cannot be directly responsible for decision-making – rather that role is left to elected representatives. But there are at least three forms that direct decision-making by citizens can take.

The earliest form of self-governance – the open forum that takes legislative decisions – is still prevalent in New England in the US. Effectiveness of open town meetings is constrained by the size of the political unit – levels of
participation appear to be inversely related to the size of the town. Such meetings are celebrated as one of the rare sites of direct citizen control, although studies raise concerns that such face-to-face deliberations tend to privilege the interests of those who are most comfortable speaking in public and pressure to achieve agreement can often silence those in a minority. Much rests on the skill of the moderator (who is elected by the community).

On a larger scale, self-governance – as practiced in Switzerland, some US states and increasingly elsewhere – can be enacted through the use of referendum and initiative. Political equality and popular control can be enacted in highly complex societies. Government-sponsored referendum that are only advisory are in reality another form of consultation. However, meaningful popular control of agenda-setting and decision-making is realised through citizen initiative and popular referendum. The former allows citizens who submit a petition above a certain threshold to have their legislative or constitutional proposal placed on a ballot for a popular vote. A popular referendum is similar, although in this case it is used to challenge an existing government decision. Recall again shares key characteristics – a successful petition forces a vote on an elected official’s continued tenure in office. There are a number of concerns with this mode of direct participation, most notably that there is social differentiation in turnout – much like ordinary elections. The growing influence of money, paid petition circulators, direct mail deception and deceptive advertising campaigns also raise questions about equality in agenda-setting and the impact of unbalanced information on deliberation and judgements. There is some contention about the capacity of citizens to make often complex judgements, although analysis of citizen competence suggests that citizens tend to reject extreme proposals and that they generally take their responsibilities seriously. Proponents of direct democracy suggest that ballots could be more sophisticated by providing multiple options rather than the simple yes/no; that advances in ICT mean that it will be easier for citizens to have a direct impact on decision making; and that institutional safeguards can be developed to reduce the distorting impact of money.

Compared to Town Meetings and citizen initiative and popular referendum where participation is open to all affected citizens, the final direct democratic design uses random selection to create a citizens assembly with final decision-making powers. Although such an assembly has never been instituted, it is the logical extension of citizen forums and the Citizens Assembly in British Columbia. As with these consultative and co-governance innovations, such an assembly would use random selection to realise political equality in a particular
form such that structured deliberation involving a diversity of participants can occur – this time with direct legislative consequences.

Discussion

What this brief analysis of democratic innovations reinforces is the extent to which different democratic goods are realised and blended in quite different ways. The design of democratic innovations has significant implications.

For example, political equality – for many the primary good of democracy – is enacted in quite different ways and at different stages by different democratic innovations. Referendum and initiative enact the principle of political equality by providing an equal right to vote in final decision making. In comparison, in randomly-selected citizen forums ‘the principle involves not so much an equal right to participate in a formal vote as an equal opportunity to be selected to exercise a right to participate in a specialist deliberative forum focused on the issue at hand’ (Saward 2003: 168). Much care is taken in the design of the citizen forum not only to realise a form of political equality in selection and outcome, but also to ensure equality amongst participants in deliberation, ‘thus challenging the centrality of formal and moment-of-decision enactments of the equality principle’ (ibid.).

Whilst innovations can embody a single democratic good in different ways, it is also the case that they will realise different combinations of democratic goods. There may be unavoidable trade-offs. For example, we may wish to promote deliberation between citizens in order to engender more enlightened understandings and preferences. Evidence suggests that this is more easily achieved in designs such as randomly-selected citizen forums where deliberation is highly structured and ‘protected’. However, enacting fair and free deliberation amongst citizens in this way means that it is probably not possible to realise political equality understood as a right of all citizens to participate directly in the process. Trade-offs and compromises have to be made.

Any innovation will have deficiencies – the perfect democratic innovation only exists in the theorists’ imagination. The choice to embed certain democratic innovations in the political system rather than others will be affected by the way that they complement existing institutional goods within broader structures of democratic governance.

Combining/sequencing innovations
The partial nature of any particular design points to the possibility of combining or sequencing innovations such that they overcome or ameliorate deficiencies. As Saward suggests, ‘devices favoured by advocates of particular ‘models’ of democracy may be combined in new ways to enact new styles of democracy’ (Saward 2003: 169). We have already pointed to one possible combination in our earlier discussion of the compatibility of direct and deliberative democracy. The obvious strength of citizen initiatives and popular referendums is they offer popular control of agenda-setting and final decision making. Critics argue that it is far from clear how citizens will develop reasoned preferences. However, embedding citizen forums between the petition and the final vote provides an opportunity for citizens to either participate in or follow more intensive and structured deliberations on the issues at hand. Such a combination is compelling because it realises a ‘cumulatively richer evocation’ of democratic goods and principles (Saward 2003: 170).

The Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia shares similar ambitions. Here the legislature passed the responsibility of deciding whether there should be a new electoral system and, if so, what that electoral system should be to the assembly of citizens. Their recommendations were then put direct to a referendum of all citizens. The Assembly played an agenda-setting role, with its deliberations also having an educative function for the wider population. A popular vote was then used to ascertain whether the Assembly’s recommendations carried popular legitimacy.

Participatory budgeting provides another example of how different forms of engagement can be drawn together – it is itself an amalgam of open meetings and two different types of elected forums. Deliberations are less structured than citizen forums, but the process mobilises larger numbers of citizens.

Rather than simply viewing democratic innovations in isolation, we need to explore the way that innovations can be combined to realise different sets of democratic goods. Equally, we need to be aware how different innovations – or combinations of innovations – might enhance existing institutions of governance where there are perceived democratic deficiencies.

**And back to theory**

The argument in this paper is a fairly simple one – we need to develop a more theoretically-informed comparative analysis of democratic innovations if we are
going to effectively embed citizen participation in systems of democratic governance. However, there is another argument at work here too – analysis of democratic innovations can make a contribution to the development of democratic theory, in particular by testing basic assumptions and raising issues that are not satisfactorily dealt with in contemporary democratic theory.

The most obvious assumption that can be tested is the theoretical commitment to participation. To what extent can participation be institutionalised in the way theorists envision? Obviously if there is no relationship between the theoretical arguments and actual practice, then democratic theory becomes nothing more than philosophical exercise. What the initial discussion in this paper suggests is that the general answer to the question is that effective institutionalisation of participation is indeed possible – but that there are multiple ways that participation can be embedded and theorists need to be sensitive to the implications of different modes of participation. For example, deliberative democrats typically propose participation that enhances political equality and free and fair deliberation. However, innovations such as citizens’ juries and the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform suggest that such a form of deliberation is perhaps best achieved in forums where citizens are selected by stratified random selection. Political equality is enacted, but only if it is understood to be an equal opportunity to be selected to participate. However, this is not the interpretation of political equality that predominates within the literature on deliberative democracy. But more open access may have a negative effect on the quality of deliberation and lead to differential levels of participation across social groups. A focus on institutional design forces democratic theorists to recognise the possible compromises and/or clashes of goods and principles that may occur in practice.

A focus on the practice of citizen participation can also offer interesting insights into issues that are not satisfactorily dealt with in democratic theory. One of these is the question of motivation to participate. Theorists often seem to assume that citizens come ready formed, brimming with enthusiasm to engage and make decisions in the common good. But what is the incentive for citizens to take part and orientate themselves towards mutual understanding and respect?

Here the study of democratic innovations offers some interesting insights that are worthy of reflection by theorists. Evidence from innovations open to all (e.g. open meetings through to referendums) suggests that there are systematic differentials in willingness to participate across social groups. But the design of other innovations provide ways of dealing with this problem. First, consider
randomly-selected citizen forums – citizens’ juries, deliberative opinion polls, Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform, etc. Personal invitation – actually asking citizens to participate – is a crucial element of their design. The incentive to participate is that the citizen has been chosen (albeit by random selection) and asked to make a contribution to the decision-making process. An unwillingness on the part of citizens to participate in politics can be overcome. Personal invitation is a powerful incentive. Further, the structured nature of engagement provides a conducive environment within which citizens encounter the perspectives of others with quite different backgrounds and experiences, offering motivation to make more reflective judgements.

Participatory budgeting (PB) provides a different perspective on the question of motivation. Its motivational structure provides increased incentives for poorer social groups to engage. There are two interconnected incentives at play in this institutional design. The first is that investment decisions are related in part to the level of participation – the number of representatives eligible to participate in the regional budget forums, and thus affect decisions, is calculated according to the level of participation in popular assemblies. There is a direct appeal to neighbourhood/community self-interest. And the combination of the impact of levels of representation and the use of needs-based criteria skews the incentive to participate towards lower socio-economic groups – i.e. those who are often the least motivated to participate. This incentive is complemented by another – the demonstration effect. In the early years of PB, the mayor of Porte Alegre was careful to only delegate powers over areas of infrastructure investment that could be completed within one year so that participants could see that there was a relationship between their participation and outcomes. This provided an incentive for citizens in neighbourhoods with little tradition of participation and therefore where investment had not occurred to mobilise. Again, this was a particular motivating factor for traditionally hard-to-reach social groups.

Many democratic theorists may baulk at this apparent celebration of self-interest as a mobilising force. But Rebecca Abers, who has undertaken detailed studies of PB, argues that it ‘has an extremely competitive component which is precisely what gives it its vitality: if it did not provide the prospective of providing returns to their specific needs or concerns, most people would not go to the meetings’ (Abers 2003: 206). But she goes on to note that PB is also a civic learning space: ‘Through the participatory process itself, people begin to perceive the needs of others, develop some solidarity, and conceptualise their own interests more broadly… Competitive participation, I would argue, initiates a learning process from which deliberation results, and which leads to continued learning as
participants develop their capacity to argue and reason. Or, put simply, to get deliberation, you need self-interest’ (Abers 2003: 206). PB offers a quite different approach to questions of motivation than randomly-selected citizen forums – it draws participants in on the basis of self-interest, but provides a context where self-interest can be transformed into a more public-spirited orientation.

A final area where democratic theorists would do well to study the actual practice of citizen participation is the role that public authorities play in the facilitation of democratic innovations. What is clear from numerous studies of citizen engagement from across the world is that the attitude of public authorities is crucial for the success of citizen engagement in the decision making process. If the participation exercise is poorly organised; if citizens do not believe that their participation will make any difference; if there is organisational resistance to participation; if citizens feel that authorities are simply using them to legitimate preordained outcomes; etc. – then democratic innovations are unlikely to be effective. Certainly the success of some of the most creative innovations – for example, PB and the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform – has rested on strong support from key actors in public institutions. Democratic theory is reasonably strong at explaining why public institutions would avoid engaging citizens, or why, if citizen engagement is promoted, it is often part of an illegitimate strategy of cooption. Where it is weak is in theorising the nature of the state/public institutions that enable citizen participation.

For most democratic innovations to be effective, we need an enabling public authority, both to promote and organise participation, and in most cases to take outputs from these innovations into account when making final decisions. Surprisingly, this is not much discussed in the theoretical literature. We find plenty of arguments that the state should create and nurture spaces for citizen engagement and – on occasion – discussions of the type of democratic innovations that should be created for this purpose. But the creation of democratic innovations also requires a change in the practices of the state in terms of its orientation towards citizen participation and the outputs that will emerge from these participative exercises. How should the outputs from citizen participation be weighed against other inputs and constraints to decision making? What changes does this imply to the bureaucratic workings and decision-making processes of contemporary public institutions? There is not a great deal of empirical work to help us here – most material is on participation failures! But, analysis of the conditions under which democratic innovations have been embedded effectively may well help us to develop more nuanced theories of the ‘participatory’ public authority.
Conclusion

This paper has made the case for more systematic attention to the design of democratic innovations. There are at least two reasons to undertake this task. First, if we are going to increase and deepen citizen participation in the decision-making process, we need a sharper understanding of how different democratic goods are realised by different institutional forms. At the moment this represents a significant gap in our knowledge. Second, analysing democratic innovations provides an occasion to reflect back critically on the often untested assumptions that are crucial to contemporary democratic theory. There is both a significant practical and theoretical gain to be had.

Bibliography


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