Systematising Comparison of Democratic Innovations: Advanced explanations of the emergence, sustenance and failure of participatory institutions

Abstract: In response to a perceived ‘democratic malaise’ (Dalton 2004, Stoker 2006) the institutionalization of new mechanisms through which citizens can directly take part in the democratic process has become increasingly popular amongst public authorities at different levels of governance. This ECPR Joint Sessions workshop falls on the 25th anniversary of the instigation of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre. It is also over ten years since Archon Fung’s seminal survey article called for greater attention from political theorists and scientists to ‘mini-publics’ that create instances of ‘more perfect public spheres’ (2003).

Following these developments a growing research community has begun to analyze such participatory reforms, paying particular attention to their deliberative quality, democratic outcomes and impact on the policy process. However, the question of why participatory reforms have been implemented by some authorities and not by others has been largely neglected. Smith has recently provided a valuable argument for the need to address a gap in the literature, namely the conspicuous absence of systematic comparisons of democratic innovations (c.f. 2009: pp. 8-12).

This workshop will contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice in the field. Three related questions, all of which remain under-examined by the current literature, will be addressed. First, how can we explain adoption of different types of participatory process (e.g. mini-publics, participatory budgeting, etc.)? Second, what institutional, societal and/or political characteristics are associated with the presence and absence of effective participatory governing strategies? And third, what factors affect adoption (or abandonment) of participatory strategies by political authorities?

We invite papers from different methodological and theoretical perspectives and on different types of participatory reform. Comparative papers at any level of governance are most welcome, but we are also very interested in theoretical papers and contributions that concentrate on single cases aimed at contributing to or challenging a comparative agenda.

Extended workshop description:

The institutionalization of new mechanisms through which citizens can directly take part in the democratic process is increasingly popular amongst public authorities at different levels of governance. These democratic practices have emerged in and spread across both highly and less industrialized democracies and have been promoted by governments of different ideologies. Examples of democratic innovations include participatory budgeting, randomly selected mini-publics, deliberative opinion polls and 21st century town meetings.

The research community has shown an increasing interest in these new forms of citizen engagement (Smith 2009; Warren 2009), with a particular focus on their deliberative quality, outcomes and policy consequences (Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). Much of the
participatory reform has taken place at the local level, but regional, national (e.g. Icelandic and Irish constitutional councils) and even the EU (e.g. Tomorrow’s Europe deliberative poll) and other international agencies have established laws, policies and particular forms of engagement in policy-making. However, the discussion of why participatory reforms are implemented by some public authorities but not by others has received less systematic attention (Vetter, 2009), as well as the investigation of failed examples.

Where research has considered this question, it has tended to take two forms. The first is a general analysis of the societal and political changes that have favored the spread of participatory processes, for example the growing recognition of democratic deficits (Dalton 2004; Stoker 2006). Second, a growing number of studies have analyzed the set of motivations behind the development of particular cases of participatory reform, in particular participatory budgeting (Fung, 2004; Baiocchi, 2005), but with limited research focusing specifically on the (historic) origins of these processes (Bacqué and Sintomer, 2010).

We lack systematic comparative analysis that helps us understand why some public authorities have chosen to promote participatory processes while others have not. Which contextual factors (if any) contribute to participatory reform? What is the role played by factors such as relative affluence, societal demand, intense electoral competition and/or particular national cultures? How can we get a more systematic understanding of the diffusion of these participatory experiments? Why, how and with what intensity do each of these factors affect the reform process? Does ideology matter; and if yes, which ideological forms facilitate the implementation and spread of such mechanisms? There is an assumption in much of the literature that participation is associated with governments of the Left; but, for example, the spread of New Public Management discourse has diversified the ideology of governments promoting participatory reform (Font and Galais, 2011). Again, while ideology may be significant, legal frames, enabling policy and fiscal independence of public authorities may also be crucial.

While such factors may help explain the presence or absence of participatory reforms, we also need to recognize that there are different types of participatory reform, focused on different institutional designs (e.g. participatory budgeting, mini-publics, etc.). For instance, it is possible to distinguish three main types of participatory initiatives: direct democracy, co-governance and consultative-discursive procedures (Geissel 2012). In forms of direct democracy, for instance referenda, citizens directly make decisions. In consultative-discursive procedures, such like public hearings, citizen juries, round tables, focus groups or deliberative polls, the emphasis lies on the quality of the discussion process and usually not the transfer of decision-making competences to citizens. In co-governance initiatives like participatory budgeting, by contrast, citizens typically have at least some degree of influence on decisions as well as agenda-setting power. Here, the leading principle is that “citizens and public authorities in some way ‘share’ political power” (Smith 2005: 57). Moreover, they are usually on-going forms of engagement in contrast to one-off events (ibid.). Within particular families of design, we find significant differences in the way in which they are institutionalized. For example, Sintomer and colleagues (2008; see also Röcke, 2013, forthcoming) provide evidence that different political contexts foster diverse types of participatory budgeting
processes. Comparisons can help create and improve useful typologies for analysis and understanding of democratic reform.

Last but not least, where researchers have focused their attention on participatory reform, it is typically on the emergence and institutionalization of best-case practices. There is a dearth of inquiry into the failure and disappearance of participatory reform strategies. What conditions explain such a negative trajectory? What is the role of agency-related factors as compared to structural (political system, funding, etc.) and ideational (ideology, ideas, etc.) ones? Explanations of stagnation and crisis in democratic reform are just as valuable as accounting for participatory innovation. Overall, research on ‘failed cases’ provides a more realistic picture of the reality of many participatory initiatives, where a limited number of far-reaching ‘light-house’ examples stand next to a much higher amount of rather small-scale initiatives with limited results (Font and Galais 2012).

In sum, we seek to attract papers that systematically analyze the emergence, sustenance and failure of participatory reform strategies across different levels of governance and political systems.

**Participants:** The workshop aims to attract a wide variety of participants. We will make sure to have a good balance of junior and senior scholars to benefit from the ethos of ECPR Joint Sessions. Some participants are likely to come from the active ECPR Standing Group on Democratic Innovations, which officially supports this panel. This group is fortunate to be able to call on a large spread of active members at all different stages of academic careers. However, we also want to reach out to attract both new and consolidated researchers from the growing research community that is dealing with these issues throughout ECPR-member research institutions. Our comparative focus would particularly benefit from papers which compare innovative participatory institutions with traditional institutions of democratic governance and/or more spontaneous publics. We would be particularly interested to receive contributions from Eastern European scholars, who have been traditionally less active within this field.

**External Funding:** We wish to secure a number of small grants to cover costs for PhD candidates and other early-career researchers to remove any chance that costs unreasonably prohibit attendance. We already have been given a guarantee that Participedia.net will fund an early-career researcher who is willing to present a paper using comparison of crowd-sourced data. There is also a culture of open-competition for small grants for major conferences among some of the main network’s and research organisations in the field to fund presenters at ECPR general conferences, We are confident they will continue such support to a relevant Joint Sessions Workshops and we will advertise such opportunities as we disseminate details of the workshop.

**Types of papers:**

We welcome papers that aim to provide insights into the different aspects of the success or failure of participatory reform strategies and that take very different theoretical and/or methodological approaches. For example:
- The particular role played by a given explanatory factor or set of factors, either at the general level (political disaffection, cognitive mobilization, new public management) or as an explanation of the policy choice of public authorities (ideology/political preferences, personal characteristics of elites, budget constraints).

- Empirical analysis of a diverse set of participatory reform strategies to assess the relative strength of different explanatory factors.

- Comparative analysis across a range of cases and/or political systems focused on the institutionalization of particular participatory designs.

- Comparative analysis across democratic innovations, traditional institutions and non-institutionalised participation.

- Detailed case-studies of particular participatory reform strategies which have value for systematic understanding—whether successful or failed.

- Longitudinal analysis of the evolution of participatory reform strategies.

- Theoretical and empirical analysis of the agents of change, be they political leaders, civil society organizations and/or international policy networks, as well as of their role in the diffusion and adaptation of participatory instruments across different political contexts.

- Theoretical and/or empirical analysis of the different motivations that drive participatory reform and explain the choice of the application of particular designs.

- Methodological papers dealing with the challenge of gathering appropriate data.

- Methodological papers dealing specifically with the challenge of constructing a comparative framework (qualitative or quantitative) for the systematic analysis of democratic innovations.

We appreciate papers coming from different methodological and theoretical backgrounds, but particularly welcome papers that combine a theoretical framework with empirical analysis.

**Biographical note:**

**Anja Röcke** is postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Sciences at Humboldt-University, Berlin, Germany. She has written her Ph.D. on the diffusion and framing of participatory budgeting in France, Germany and the United Kingdom at the European University Institute, Florence. Recently she was a key collaborator on the ‘Participatory budgeting in Europe’ project, the outputs of which has been published in various languages.
Matt Ryan is a Teaching Fellow and PhD candidate working at the centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance (C2G2), University of Southampton, UK. His doctoral research focuses on the comparative analysis of democratic innovations, with a particular interest in the methodology and application of fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis. He is a project collaborator with www.participedia.net, an SSHRC-funded innovative platform for open-sourcing case data on democratic innovations. His latest work uses applications of QCA to provide a systematic comparison of the institutionalization of participatory budgets (with Smith 2012).

References


