

Workshop Number 3:

Can Democratic Innovations Improve the Quality of Democracy?

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Assessing the quality of democracy became a central theoretical and practical concern in a landscape of increasing political disaffection and disenchantment with democratic institutions. Regardless of the various reasons behind the consistent decline of public trust in governmental institutions, the conviction that reforms are necessary to respond to this problem seems to be shared by those seeking to frame what a “good democracy” is. What seems yet not to be clear, however, is how to translate the normative values of democracy in an empirical formula able to countervail political disillusionment and enhance the quality of democracy, and to accomplish it everywhere democracy has grown roots.

In a major comparative work, Diamond and Morlino (2005) concluded that a particular type of democracy seems better suited to higher democratic quality, namely, one that generates and facilitates high levels of participation and competition. That the latter empirically perform as the “engines of democratic quality” indicates that Dahl’s concept of polyarchy (1971) remains central to measurements, despite the need to reframe it in order to evaluate participation and competition not merely as rights but as effective exercise of rights (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002). The question that remains open, however, is not whether high participation and competition can boost the quality of democracy, but *how* this result can be attained. Reflecting on this, Diamond and Morlino point to a crucial problem: “is it enough to financially support representative channels, such as parties, and have a constitutional design and an electoral system that allow for participation and competition? Or do we need new and more creative recipes?” (2005: xxxvii).

This workshop seeks to investigate recipes to enhance the quality of democracy in representative channels that include more than political parties and in constitutional designs that allow for participation and competition beyond the electoral system. New democratic experiments that provide citizens with opportunities to participate beyond the ballot, and non-elected bodies that claim to provide representation regardless of mandates are among the components that compose the assorted and multifarious repertoire of democratic innovations, whose effect on the quality of democracy this workshop intends to investigate.

That democratic innovations are a response for political disillusionment and a possible cure for the malaises of representative democracy is no new argument (Selee and Peruzzotti 2009,

Geissel and Newton 2012), as well as the potential of democratic innovations to deepen democracy (Fung and Wright 2003) or to improve its quality (Geissel 2009) is not an unknown issue. However, not only the scholarships on democratic innovation and on quality of democracy are divorced, but both present shortcomings that render dialogue difficult and hinder joint efforts to creatively devise new recipes for coping with democratic deficits.

On the one hand, there is still little comparative empirical research on the impacts of democratic innovations, and the few existing cases and studies are mostly limited to the local level. This brings about the question of whether democratic innovations are feasible in different and larger settings, as well as whether they are really inclusive and not cursed by social selection. Without assessing the feasibility of democratic innovations in the macro political level and the inclusiveness of both their procedures and results, it is quite difficult to estimate their effectiveness, and therefore their actual potential increase the quality of democracy.

On the other hand, scholarship on and assessments of quality of democracy disregard research on democratic innovations and therefore produce quite incomplete measurements. Most democratic indices have been unable to account for participatory reforms increasingly undertaken by national and sub-national governments. Those reforms aimed at expanding opportunities for citizen participation display different levels of institutionalization and various design options, most of them unable to fit indicators that insist on measuring participation mainly as electoral turnout, or as voting rights. Even measurements that take rights to assemble (membership in political parties and civil society organizations) and to protest (join demonstrations and sign petitions) into account fail to conceptualize participation in line with democratic innovations. Lacking a more comprehensive and updated concept of participation, democracy measurements cannot properly estimate the actual role of this “engine of democratic quality” (Morlino 2012).

This workshop aims to bring together researchers from all levels who work on quality of democracy and on democratic innovations in a conjoint effort to answer the question: can democratic innovations improve the quality of democracy? Both empirical and theoretical papers are welcome, especially if they fit in one of the following subtopics:

1. How to measure quality of democracy and democratic innovations?
2. How to bring about democratic innovations (what are the best conditions and what are the worse ones)?
3. Which democratic qualities can be improved by specific democratic innovations, and how?
4. Which role democratic innovations play in the consolidation process of new democracies, like those of Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Biographical note:

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