

Challenges to democratic representation

Political Sciences

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Introduction

Democracies have been more successful than other existing political systems in safeguarding various common goods, such as protection of basic human rights, personal freedom, wealth and equalities of opportunities. However, the historical record also shows numerous examples of unstable democracies that have been replaced by authoritarian dictatorships (such as the Weimar Republic in the 1930s and Chili in the 1970s), as well as countries which are formally represented as democracies, but where opportunities for opposition groups are constrained to such an extent that most observers do not consider them to be "true" democracies, such as contemporary Russia, Egypt and Indonesia. These examples underline the relevance of one of the classic themes in political science: what are necessary and sufficient conditions under which democratic regimes can maintain stability and safeguard basic principles of democratic accountability, representation and legitimacy. In this research program, we address this classic theme from the perspective of normative democratic theory and by way of empirical inquiry. Recognizing that democracy is also a historically contingent political practice, issues of change over time will be embedded in our analytic approaches as well.

Studying and theorizing the conditions under which democracies live up to their principles and aspirations, while still maintaining stability, is not only relevant to hybrid or immature democracies such as contemporary Russia, Egypt and Indonesia, but also to established democracies in Western Europe, North America and Australia, as well as to still consolidating democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Various recent developments urge research in this area.

A first development is that political parties, the prime agents of electoral democracy, experience a crisis. Parties lose members and public trust in party politics decreases. Moreover, as a consequence of the increasing volatility of voters, election outcomes become unpredictable, which weakens the attractiveness of pursuing a career in politics. This trend goes in tandem with another, second, development, which is the emancipation of citizens, who have become more critical of political representatives and possibly more vocal in articulating their disapproval. At the same time, new collective identities grounded in ethnic, religious or gender differences have entered the political arena as new voting blocks, which demand a voice in political practices and discourses. To be sure, the very notion of democratic control and accountability implies that citizens should be critical of their leaders. Yet, when criticism turns into cynicism, the legitimacy of democratic rule may suffer.

These developments are complemented by a third factor, which is the weakening of sovereign powers of national states. In part this is due to the globalisation of national economies, which limits the capacity of national states to intervene in economic processes. Socio-economic policies have traditionally been among the most important areas of policy making, and much research has shown that economic developments affect election outcomes. Thus, at the input side of the political process, citizens expect their representatives to manage the economy properly, while governments have decreasing control over policies and thus fewer possibilities to 'deliver' on the output side. In addition to this, national states have privatised many economic sectors, which previously belonged to their sphere of control. When previously public sectors such as energy production, public transportation and housing are privatised under complicated regimes of responsibility, politics in these areas becomes less transparent and less tractable. Moreover, many national states have increasingly handed over sovereign powers to supranational bodies such as the European Union. The institutional guarantees for democratic control are still weakly developed within these supranational bodies, and in consequence the quality of democratic representation at these levels is dubious.

A fourth, very different kind of development is mass migration. One of the central features of a democracy is the existence of a *demos*, which in the political sense should be understood "as a group of persons who, rightly considered, should govern themselves in a single democratic unit" (Dahl, 1989: 3). Easton (1965) distinguishes the three objects of diffuse support for a political system, and the first of these is the "political community". It is questionable whether a democracy can function properly if the *demos* does not exist in the hearts and minds of citizens in a country. Unless migrants feel that they are part of the *demos* in their new homeland, and that they are represented by its political institutions, they cannot truly be said to be subject to democratic governance. This makes it important to study the conditions in which immigrants are more or less likely to consider themselves to be part of the *demos*. This question is increasingly important, because the discourse and activities of antiimmigration parties and movements in various post-industrial societies show that at least some of the self-appointed "defenders" of the dominant culture reject these new citizens as part of "their" political community. The manner in which ethnic and religious differences become politicised could to a

large extent foster or hinder the incorporation of immigrants into the body politic as voters. Thus an important question is how democratic representation functions in the context of a culturally diverse society - a question that makes Lijphart's (1968) classic notions of consociational democracies once again highly contemporarily relevant.

The research program *Challenges to democratic representation* investigates the consequences of these developments for democratic governance. In this research program we aim to combine insights from normative democratic theory on representation with empirical research. Our empirical research focuses in particular on *political parties* - in their double role of representatives of their supporters, as well as the main agents of democratic governance at the state level-, on *civil society* (most notably social movements and pressure and interest groups), on the *mass media*, on *citizens* and their interests, opinions, feelings and preferences, and on *political ideas*. Empirical inquiry will also concentrate on the manner in which new immigrants and other 'minority groups,' whether constituted on the basis of ethno-religious differences or gender and sexual orientation, are included or excluded in civil society, mobilized in political parties and represented in the media. Various - sometimes overlapping - lines of empirical inquiry are outlined in more detail below.

Political parties

Political parties play an essential role in democracies. Parties are the only type of organization able of aggregating interests and opinions in different areas into a coherent political program: "... political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties" (Schattschneider, 1942, p. 1). Yet, parties are currently experiencing a crisis, which possibly affects the functioning of democracy at large (Mair, 2006). In the first place, political parties can no longer count on the stable support of particular segments of the electorate, which makes election results uncertain and increases the impediments to talented people who might otherwise choose to pursue a political career. A second, but related point is that parties are less distinct than previously in terms of their traditional ideological denominations. This, in turn, makes it easier for voters to switch from one party to another. This opens up possibilities for new populist parties to arise. In addition, due to the relentless process of privatisation and globalisation, national states (and political parties as their main democratic agents) have fewer capacities to determine public policies, particularly in the economic sector. The burgeoning influence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) in many regions of the contemporary world has added yet another institutional source of influence in the formulation of political and economic policies. Decreasing membership of parties, a lower turnout at elections and a deteriorating trust in political parties all pose a challenge to the legitimacy of parties as key democratic representatives. Finally, the increasing fragmentation of the media landscape complicates the communication of parties with their potential voters. Parties constantly adapt to these new realities, for instance by hiring more professional communication advisors to help them conduct professional campaigns.

One question is how these developments can be theorized in a coherent framework. The concept of 'audience democracy' (Manin 1997) may be one useful way of charting the interactions between political parties, civil society groups, the media and the citizens under the conditions broadly outlined above. The concept may also prove useful for re-assessing the relationship between prominent normative features of democratic governance, most notably representation and accountability. In terms accountability, a salient feature of contemporary governance also entails an analysis of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that operate within the so-called 'audience democracies,' since both political parties and the media tend to construct *and* fragment audiences for particular political purposes. For us, the guiding issue is what empirical research can tell us within such a framework about the implications for both the quality of democratic rules of the game and the outcomes generated by these rules.

Research topics in this area are:

- The increasing role of political leaders in campaigns (personalisation and mediatisation). The development of an audience democracy.
- The relationship between audience democracy and the contemporary crisis of representative politics of parties, interest groups, social movements and networks (malaise; immobility).
- How do parties operate at the supranational level? Is there a European party system? What is the interplay between internationalisation of politics (such as European integration) and audience democracy at two levels (national, trans-national);
- Are parties becoming less ideologically distinct? Or do they re-align along new cleavage lines?
- The reformulation of theoretical models of democracy both in empirical and philosophical literature (including the Dutch tradition of the consensus democracy) in the perspective of audience democracy.

Media

In most European countries the media landscape is changing rapidly. Public television faces increasing competition for audience shares from commercial television stations. Traditional newspapers with high journalistic standards confront more and more competition from free newspapers, and the younger generation in particular is no longer willing to pay for quality newspapers. Both printed news and TV-news are losing part

of their market share to the Internet. Increasing media competition may lower the quality of the political news. It has been proposed that, in their effort to increase their market share, commercial television stations frame political news in terms of conflict and elections as a contest resembling a horse race, while hardly paying any attention to the substance of politics, such as issues and policy making. The negative tone of such news is often seen as contributing to the observed increase in political cynicism in the United States (and Europe) during the last decades.

In an audience democracy the media provide politicians with a theatrical stage, which enables them to communicate with - and perform for- their potential voters. In response to the ever-increasing uncertainty of election outcomes, politicians appear more often in game shows and infotainment programs. By increasingly adopting a political style and mode of selfpresentation they may very well contribute to public cynicism about politics. With an increasing number of channels, the growth of commercial television, and the success of the Internet, a demand-driven market has replaced the traditional supply-driven media market of mass communication in democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist countries. Whereas formerly the media largely decided what content to offer their audiences, nowadays the putative wishes and volatile desires of the public have become more decisive in what the media select and provide to the public. This trend of a growing dominance of *media logic* is visible throughout modern democracies. However, this does not preclude the existence of significant differences between countries in the main patterns of interaction between media and politicians. As a result of path dependencies, national media systems incorporate the dominance of media logic in different ways. The lines of research addressing these topics reflect upon current moralizing views of the transformation of the public sphere of democratic societies, such as the pessimist view that the new public sphere creates new forms of authoritarian populism, and the more optimistic view that it reinvigorates civic associationism.

Research topics in this area are:

- The clash between campaign logic of rival parties and media logic of rival media (newspapers; television channels; internet sites).
- Media effects on public images of political leaders.
- Media effects on political cynicism, possibly undermining the political trust of groups of citizens.
- Developments of media systems.
- Changes in the coverage of election campaigns. Is there more hoopla, conflict and 'horse race' news?

Extra parliamentary forms of interest mediation, e.g., social movements, civil society

During the 1980s Western Europe experienced the rise of so-called new social movements (NSM's), such as peace movements, anti-nukes movements, women's movements and environmentalist movements. A large body of research into the activities of these NSM's was conducted in the 1980s, when these organizations were able to mobilize large-scale protests. One of the underlying ideas of many of those studies was that well-educated and emancipated citizens would become less interested in giving a general mandate to traditional political parties in elections. Instead, the expectation was that many citizens tended to become actively engaged in politics only when more specific issues were at stake, whether such issues revolved around new forms of group identities such as feminist and gay organizations or whether the agenda focused on questions of the environment or international security. However, since only a relatively small minority of the citizens participate in the activities of social movements, these movements proved to be complementary to electoral representation rather than functioning as a full-fledged actual alternative to traditional politics. Yet, many social scientists consider them to be a vital part of civil society.

After the 1980s the activities of social movements have not been as massive as before. However, in certain instances their activities exert an important impact on public opinion. Since the 'coming-out party' of the alter-globalization movements during the meetings of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, the democratic potential of the pluriform, transnational *Multitude* has received renewed intellectual attention. *This has also been true of the women's movement that resurfaced towards the end of the 1960s as an epiphenomenon of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, not only in the United States but also in Europe.* Today, the academic analysis of women's status in society is often intimately linked to concerns with ethnicity. For instance, in early 21st century debates concerning the influx of Islamic immigrants in Europe and the United States, the alleged fundamental differences between Muslims and traditional western populations are often symbolized in women's issues such as veiling in public, arranged marriages, retributions for so-called female violations of honour codes or genital mutilation. The same can be argued with regard to the environmental movements that emerged during the 1980s. Nowadays, organizations such as Greenpeace continue to wield an important agenda setting function, by focusing attention on new political issues. In addition, social movements often challenge the dominant discourses about a range of issues, by framing the problem differently, and by proposing different types of solutions. The activist focus of social movements is increasingly directed at international and supranational organisations, such as the European Union, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank. These supranational bodies, as well as national governments and political parties often feel forced to respond to the actions of social movement organisations.

Voluntary organizations are also important in encouraging the political participation of immigrants. Immigrants tend to organize themselves more often through voluntary associations, which enter the political arena as interest, lobby or pressure groups. In this context it is particularly important to focus on the role of religion, ethnicity and gender in democratic politics. The political and social activities of churches and mosques are of special interest here. In conjunction with recognition, it is equally important to study the activities of anti-immigration movements (and parties) of the far and extreme right, which at least in part have arisen in response to these developments.

Research topics in this area are:

- The agenda setting function of extra-parliamentary political movements, as well as their capabilities to mobilize their supporters.
- Mobilization and organization of migrant communities (including ethnic and religious organizations and social capital) and social movements (women's, sexual rights and alter-globalisation movements) and challenges to social stability, political participation, national integration and trust.
- Democracy, public liberties and radicalisation: including the analysis of Islamic and right wing extremism, violence and public discussions on democratic norms and principles.

Citizens and voters

In modern democracies, the only type of political action that most citizens engage in is casting a vote in an election. Elections are a crucial ingredient of democracy, not merely on the strength of guaranteeing peaceful transition of power, but also because they ensure that the preferences, interests and opinions of citizens become represented in the political realm. Research shows that a large majority of citizens in the established democracies consistently support the basic principles of democratic governance. Yet at the same time, support for the core institutions of representative democracy - in particular parliament, political parties and government - decreases steadily in most countries (e.g., Dalton 2004). Moreover, turnout at elections tends to decrease in most countries as well. This raises two sets of questions. The first set of questions pertains to the factors that explain decreasing trust and turnout, and to the consequences of these developments for democratic rule. Is the decline in turnout and trust structural or temporal? Does falling trust in political parties induce citizens to extend their repertoire of political actions to other legal forms such as deliberation and political protest, or to illegal activities, such as political threats or violent acts? What are the consequences of these kinds of political behaviours for the functioning of democracy?

A second set of questions pertains to the kind of electoral mandate citizens give to their representatives. To what extent are electoral choices based on evaluations of the past performance of governing and opposition parties (output oriented legitimacy), and to what extent do they base their choice on plans for future policies (input oriented legitimacy)? Should we interpret the success of new populist parties as a sign of protest against the establishment? Are preferences, interests and ideas of citizens represented at the EU-level? How are electoral processes constrained by the institutional, macro-economic and political context in which the elections take place?

For research in this area it is important to consider the fact that Western European societies have become more culturally diverse, partially as a result of immigration, but also as a consequence of individualisation and the emancipation of citizens. Conceptions of the "good life" may vary not only between culturally diverse groups, but also between men and women, generations and social classes. To the extent that these differences acquire political salience, these diversities may pose new challenges for political processes. The legitimacy of our democratic institutions of democratic modes of governance is jeopardized when specific groups are systematically underrepresented. Therefore, lower rates of political participation of women and immigrant groups, for example, potentially undermine the legitimacy of a democratic regime. As a counter-trend, however, there are various minority groups successfully mobilizing on the basis of their interests and ideas, sometimes by introducing new forms of collective action.

In general, the outcomes of processes of mobilization and contention - as measured in terms of opportunities, resources and effective freedoms - depend in part on the ways nationspecific arrangements and institutions seek to regulate cultural, religious and gender differences in the public realm. Minorities and newcomers, as have developed historically in contexts of colonialism and gender inequalities, sometimes challenge nation-specific regimes of regulation and dominant cultures. Majorities respond, in turn, by defending national cultures and prevailing norms against new challenges. Also, right-wing extremist and populist movements mobilize feelings of insecurity in societies that are increasingly diverse and fragmented.

Research topics in this area are:

- The role of referenda, popular initiatives, and deliberation in an audience democracy.
- Electoral processes: how do we interpret election outcomes (both in terms of turnout as well as in terms of party choice), and particularly the instability of electoral support for parties? Do people vote ideologically, on the basis of issues or of perceived competence of leaders? How does context (institutional, macro-economic, etceteras) structure electoral processes?

- Diversity, diasporas and political mobilization: the articulation of demands and challenges to the norms of the public sphere made by various groups on the basis of cultural, religious, gender, sexual and class differences and the distribution of resources and opportunities.
- Which dynamics explain differences in political participation at the individual level, and at the level of collectives?
- The consequences of political threats and political violence for democratic governance.
- Nation-specific regimes of regulation: including the immigrant incorporation policies in a historical perspective (post-colonial theory) and present day forms of contention, discrimination and inequalities.
- Analysing ethnicity, sexuality and gendered normativity in the context of postcolonial states: the construction of masculinity and femininity in a historical perspective.

Political ideas

The role of political ideas in contemporary democracies in the West is changing. Rather than an end of ideology, or structural exhaustion of great and classical systems of thought (such as communism and socialism), or permanent convergence of partisan views, we observe transformations. First, leaders and followers of parties do not define their relations and contacts anymore in terms of encompassing, closed and fixed views of man, society, and government. Second, idea-based programs and party ideologues are less important in party competition and other modes of political representation, while issue-based programs and media experts have become more important. Third, political ideas (still) have functions, with respect to political identification, bonding, branding, and legitimization of compromise and reform. Fourth, dominant political ideas today entail neo-liberalism (including Third Way social democracy), neo-conservatism, and neo-nationalism, while there are also new religious modes of political thought (neo-Catholicism, Islamic). Fifth, democratic political thinkers are all concerned with phenomena of internationalization of society and politics, such as migration, global capitalism, Europeanization, humanitarianism, and the democratic deficit of inter/trans/supranational government.

Research topics in this area are:

- The basic justification of transformation of the national state and national citizenship (international public goods, justice, and democracy).
- New ideologies of actors with a credible claim to popular representation such as parties, social movements, interest groups, and policy advocacy networks (cosmopolitanism, feminism, ecology, and so on).
- The behavioural relevance and significance of political ideas (idealism, such as utopianism; opportunism; learning, and other behavioural roles).
- The basic justification of contemporary democratic innovations, including concepts of post-democracy.

A final remark

This research program focuses on challenges to democratic governance. These challenges are studied empirically, as well as from the perspective of normative democratic theory. Our empirical research into the political processes described above focuses mainly on the political activities of individual and collective actors. These activities are studied from a (crossnational) comparative and from a historical perspective, which enables us to understand how the historical, institutional and economic context structures the collective behaviour of various actors. In this research program we combine different (quantitative and qualitative) methodological approaches.

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