

## Challenges to Democracy

### Session 11: Solutions – Participation

## Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster  
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

7 January 2026

## Plan for today's session

- preparation of questions for next week's session with the Hansaforum
  - think, pair and share
  - main reading on democratic innovations
    - Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge University Press

## Think...

*In the next five minutes, think about the idea of more direct influence of citizens on decision-making. What do you see as the main strengths? What challenges do you expect?*

## Pair...

*In pairs, discuss your thoughts, create a pro/contra scheme and list open questions.*

## Share...

Pro	Con
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• education (learn democratic structures and on issues they decide on)</li><li>• gives people impact</li><li>• can be combined with elements of representative democracy</li><li>• deliberation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• difficult to reach whole population (similar issue in representative democracy)</li><li>• legitimacy?</li><li>• majority could oppress minority</li><li>• some people may not stick to democratic norms (more consequential than in representative democracy)</li></ul>

### Requirements

- design-choices

## Share...

### Questions:

- ...how can democratic innovations overcome low turnout?
- ...
- ...

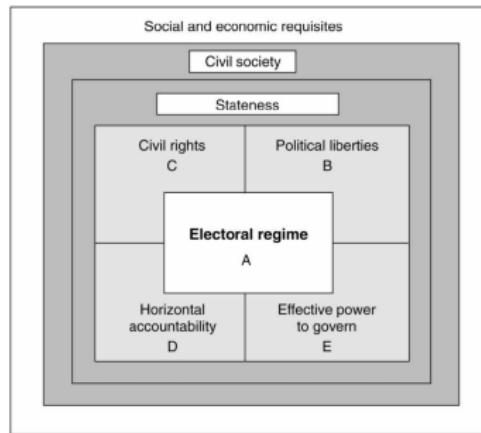
# Democracy and Participation

We have mainly followed procedural theories of democracy according to which democracy is an

*“institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”*  
*(Schumpeter 1942, p. 269). ...*

# Democracy and Participation

We have followed an extension of this minimalist theory of democracy by Merkel (2004):



What's the core element of these concepts?

# Democracy and Participation



They are all centred on representative democracy, in which citizens delegate the act of decision-making to politicians they voted into office. The conventional form of democratic linkage is via **elections**.

## Fear of Participation

As Pateman (1975) summarises, democratic theorists have often been concerned with unintended consequences of political participation.

- e.g., Sartori (1967) argues “A democracy, then, is a political system in which the people exercise power to the extent that they are able to change their governors, but not to the extent of governing themselves.” (66)

In many theories, participation means voting; or controlling the representatives (e.g., through intra-party democracy, protests, etc.).

*Why are people afraid of direct democracy?*

## Fear of Participation

Common fears of participation, aside from voting, are...

- ...tyranny of the majority (violation of civil rights)
- ...instability
- ...polarization
- ...lack of expertise

*Why are theorists still thinking about democratic innovations?*

## Critique on Contemporary Representative Democracy

Critique on the working of representative democracies is not new.

For example, observing shrinking numbers of turnout, party membership and increasing levels of voting volatility, Mair (2013) denotes, there is a “transformation of party democracy into ‘audience democracy’” (Mair 2013, p. 43).

Dalton (2007) observes a similar renunciation of conventional forms of participation, and argues “the predominant response is not a withdrawal from democratic politics but a search for new democratic choices.” (202)

## Democratic Innovations

Democratic innovations comprise “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process.” (Smith 2009, p. 1)

## The Values of Participatory Democracy

Participation has an *instrumental value* (Smith 2009, p. 5).

Following Rousseau and Mills, Pateman (1975) emphasizes the **integrative, educational** aspect of participatory democracy

- citizens learn that they are interdependent; their private lives become embedded in the public sphere
- they learn democratic norms and acquire a sense of collective identity through the process of participation
- finally, participatory democracy is thought to increase the acceptance of political decisions

For her, it is also about increasing participation at the workplace.  
*And for Smith (2009)?*

# The Values of Participatory Democracy

Smith (2009) envisions institutionalised forms at strategic levels of decision-making, potentially extending the local level.

## The Challenges of Deliberative Democracy

To be **inclusive** (= increasing participation) and reaching well-informed decisions may be impeded by some barriers (cf. Fishkin 2009)

- people may not be interested/capable of acquiring necessary knowledge on an issue domain
- people may be indifferent about political decision
- people may shy away from leaving their bubbles and engage with other arguments
- misinformation may hijack public deliberation forums

**Question by Kevin:** Can the poor quality and quantity of the citizens participation be explained as a problem of the citizens education?

# The Challenges of Deliberative Democracy

“In short, we can expect an under-informed and non-deliberative mass public. In that case, if we include everyone, it seems that we are unlikely to get a thoughtful public input from our democratic institutions.” (Fishkin 2009, p. 7)

## Indicators to Judge Quality of Democratic Innovation

Smith (2009) suggests six quality measures democratic innovations need to be judged on:

1. **inclusiveness**: achieve political equality in presence and voice
2. **popular control**: similar to effective power to govern; power at different stages of decision-making (**Question by Christina**: Any features promoting popular control?)
3. **considered judgement**: quality of decision-making
4. **transparency**: internal and external transparency about the process

## Indicators to Judge Quality of Democratic Innovation

5. **efficiency**: costs of an innovation (monetary but also effort)
6. **transferability**: how far an innovation can travel (in terms of decision-level, system, content)

*Can you think of any trade-offs between these indicators?*

# Indicators to Judge Quality of Democratic Innovation

- example in the book: trade-off between popular control, transparency and considered judgement (Smith 2009, p. 97)
- in the *NICE* citizen assembly, there was no explicit problem definition
- in principle, popular control is high (although restrictions on the topics were made); but people were confused about what their task is [low internal transparency] preventing better informed judgements

## The Democratic Innovation of Mini-Publics

Mini-publics differ in various aspects (like their size, inclusiveness, processes and aims), but they share some aspects.

- quasi-random selection
- citizens assemble for several days
- they receive reimbursement
- consultation by experts
- deliberation among themselves [small group + plenary]
- BCCA quite unique as it led to a binding referendum (not passed threshold)

**Question by Miká:** Could mini-publics with binding decisions potentially also decide on issues on a nationwide level with far reaching consequences (For example on a nuclear phase-out)?

# Selection Modes

<i>Method of selection</i>				
<i>Public opinion</i>	1. Self-selection	2. Nonrandom sample	3. Random sample	4. "Everyone"
<b>A. Raw</b>	1A SLOPs	2A Some polls	3A Most polls	4A Referendum democracy
<b>B. Refined</b>	1B Discussion groups	2B Citizens juries, etc.	3B Deliberative Polls	4B "Deliberation Day"

**Figure:** Different Forms of Selection and Types of Deliberation (Fishkin 2009, p. 20)

*What are the main advantages/disadvantages of random selection vs. non-random sampling?*

## Selection Modes

In mini-publics, “equal opportunity to participate [...] is replaced by an equal probability of being selected to participate” → (more or less) **random sampling**. This can be hampered by

- incomplete data on citizens
- due to the non-compulsory nature, self-selection still plays a role
- usually stratified sampling that ensure representation of some social groups

## Review your priors...

After our discussion, do you have any different views on your initial assessment of citizen assemblies?

Has it sparked any new questions?

## Conclusion

What we have learned from today...

- What 'conventional forms' of participation in current democracies are
- What may be their caveat
- What's the underlying idea of democratic innovations
- How mini-publics are formed and potential criteria to consider

## Next week...

- Hansaforum will visit us
- keep your questions with you
- if you want, visit their account on [YouTube](#)

Any further questions?

## Literature

Dalton, R. J. (2007). *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford Univ. Press.

Fishkin, J. (2009). *When the People Speak : Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. OUP Oxford.

Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. Verso.

Merkel, W. (2004). Embedded and defective democracies. *Democratization*, 11(5), 33–58.

Pateman, C. (1975). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Sartori, G. (1967). *Democratic theory* (2. print.). Praeger.

Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. Harper Torchbooks.

## Literature

Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge University Press.