Rule by the people? Alternative perspectives on citizen participation in democratic policymaking

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Introduction

Popular sovereignty is a cornerstone of democracy. Traditionally, this has been exercised through regular free and fair elections. Yet is participation in elections every four or five years a sufficient degree of democratic popular control?

Research shows that people have 'become more and more disenchanted with the traditional institutions of representative government, detached from political parties, and disillusioned with old forms of civic engagement and participation' (Yetano et al., 2010, p. 783). This is supported by a recent Eurobarometer poll, which reveals that only 32 per cent of EU citizens trust their government and only 33 per cent trust their parliament. In the case of Ireland these figures are 42 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively (European Commission, 2011).

The European experience resonates with a global trend whereby the interests of citizens are increasingly seen to be disregarded by governments, particularly in relation to the 'Great Recession' of the early twenty-first century. Hacker & Pierson (2010) show how the interests of American citizens have been disregarded in favour of support for the organised interests of corporations. Schneider &

Ingram (1993, 1997, 2005) argue that 'target populations' allow elected officials to view some citizens as more deserving or dependent conditional on their willingness to exercise political power. Robins et al. (2008) call for empirical and critical interrogations of citizenship, particularly in post-colonial states. All of this research points to the central paradox of modern democratic states: why do ordinary people feel powerless in a system based on the premise 'rule by the people'? One way to address this question is to employ new ways of examining the relationship between the citizen and the state. This shift requires a willingness to look beyond the ballot: to interrogate existing forms of citizenship and political culture, and consider complementary deliberative and participatory decision-making institutions outside of parliaments. This paper will concern itself primarily with the latter.

Understanding deliberative and participatory democracy

The participatory and deliberative turn in democratic politics has come to the fore in Ireland in recent times as part of the government's wider political reform agenda, including its proposal for a constitutional convention. It has also been influenced by the demise of civil society engagement with the state, via social partnership, and its replacement with alternative forms of civic engagement (Carney, 2010; Carney et al., 2012). Deliberative and participatory approaches can be found in democratic innovations as well as within political parties, legislatures, social movements, civil society organisations (CSOs) and community pillars of corporatist systems (Gaynor, 2009).

Many democratic theorists argue in favour of the creation of deliberative and participatory public forums, or 'mini-publics', that give citizens a voice between elections, providing them with an opportunity to influence policy and political decisions (Fishkin, 2009; Smith, 2009). Swiss political scientist Jürg Steiner (2012, p. 37) has suggested that this facilitates a shift from 'election-centred' democracies to 'talk-centred' democracies, in which citizens get to deliberate on policy issues on a regular basis.

Deliberative and participatory innovations, such as citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, consensus conferences and citizen juries, can give citizens both agenda-setting and advisory powers, and even on occasion final decision-making powers.[1] They aim to move beyond the aggregation of preferences and the representation of

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[1] For a brief description and analysis of each of these innovations see Harris (2012).

group interests to engage citizens in the process of deciding on political issues. Citizen-led approaches require participants to deliberate respectfully, justify their preferences in terms of the common good and be willing to change their views in the light of a better argument. It is worth elaborating on the distinct potential offered by participatory and deliberative approaches.

Research has shown that deliberation encourages more informed, rational decisions, fairer and more publicly oriented outcomes, and improved civic skills (Hendriks, 2006). Deliberative approaches to governance are also seen to improve the quality of decision-making. Decision-making is improved by sharing information and pooling knowledge. Deliberation can reveal the connection between certain preference formations and sectional interests, promoting legitimacy, encouraging public-spirited perspectives on public issues and promoting mutually respectful processes of decision-making (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Held, 2006). Cohen argues that deliberative democracy promotes justice, improves outcomes and has 'intrinsic virtues as a way to make collective decisions' (2007, p. 228). These normative arguments have been tested empirically in a number of contexts. Most notable are Fishkin's well-regarded deliberative polls, held at all levels of government since 1994.

Over thirty of Fishkin's deliberative opinion polls have been held across the world (Australia, China, the EU, Thailand, the US, the UK). These experiments show that, as a consequence of deliberation, citizens become more informed. As a result, citizens are more likely to change their positions on a given policy issue. Research has also found that deliberation has led to changes in voting intentions, public dialogue, collective consistency and civic capacities (Farrar et al., 2010; Fishkin, 2009).

Participatory democracy is often concerned with the capacity of powerless or politically quiescent groups to articulate their needs (Chambers, 1997; Gaventa, 1982), and participatory approaches are particularly prevalent in CSOs. Where groups cannot or will not speak for themselves, their needs are often articulated by CSOs, which have become important 'intermediate institutions' in modern representative democracies, forging complex and multifaceted links between state and citizen (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Examining the role of CSOs as intermediate institutions reveals much about the quality of democratic deliberation in a polity. However, it is worth noting that there is a wide diversity of organisations operating in the 'participatory sphere' (Cornwall, 2008). A vibrant civil society is not comprised solely

of interest groups. Rather, CSOs emerge from an engaged and questioning public, free to question institutions of the state, thereby endorsing those same institutions as legitimate sources of authority.

International examples abound, such as the case studies presented in Gaventa & McGee's 2010 volume, which documents citizen-led movements for change in eight different national contexts. It offers clear examples of how participatory approaches can complement deliberative democratic innovations, as 'organised citizens can play a critical role through … mobilising pressure for change and monitoring government performance' (Gaventa & McGee, 2010, p. 1).

Deliberative and participatory perspectives on policymaking

A recent e-book published by the Political Studies Association of Ireland specialist group on participatory and deliberative democracy critically evaluates alternative modes of development for politics, democracy and civic engagement in Ireland (Carney & Harris, 2012). It assesses both deliberative and participatory citizen experiments. New perspectives included are developments in CSOs' relationship with the state and the role for formal and higher education in promoting and facilitating citizen deliberation and participation.

Recent innovative, deliberative and participatory citizen experiments include the G1000 citizens' summit in Belgium and the 'We the Citizens' pilot citizens' assembly in Ireland. The G1000 event took place in Brussels on 11 November 2011 and brought over 700 citizens from across Belgium together to discuss the country's political challenges and develop proposals on key issues. In parallel, citizens who had not been selected to attend the G1000 event actively participated in the deliberations either online at home (G-homes) or at smaller events organised by CSOs at diverse locations across the country (G-offs). Web-based technology was used to feed the recommendations from the G-offs to the main event in Brussels. The final phase of this project, which is ongoing, involves a smaller group (G32) of citizens. Those citizens are currently working with experts on the proposals resulting from the summit as they develop them into concrete recommendations. These will be presented by the citizens to the Belgian Parliament by the end of 2012.

Since the G1000 summit, CSOs in Belgium and the Netherlands have used the same format to conduct similar events. This indicates the value they see in such a process, and highlights how such innovations can be adapted to incorporate the views of both citizens

and CSOs. Like participatory budgeting, the format provides a blended participatory and deliberative approach to public problems.

Ireland has also seen similar sorts of activities, including the country's first pilot citizens' assembly in June 2011. 'We the Citizens' hosted a group of 100 randomly selected citizens in Dublin for a weekend. The rationale underlying the initiative was to demonstrate the value of deliberative approaches in involving ordinary citizens at the heart of debates on political and constitutional reform.[2]

The assembly discussed a variety of topics such as gender representation in politics, the electoral system, the abolition of Seanad Éireann and economic matters. Detailed survey work that was carried out on the members of the citizens' assembly showed substantial and significant effects in terms of their opinions on these issues, but also with regard to their feelings of efficacy and satisfaction with democracy generally (Farrell et al., in press). The research was presented to senior government ministers and appears to have had some role in influencing the design of the constitutional convention.

Another perspective examines how developments in the participative web have led to new opportunities for public engagement. Liston et al. (2012) have designed a computer mediated e-deliberative model that demonstrates how the participative web can be used to redefine the public sphere as part of this new era of decision-making. The model, entitled SOWIT (Social Web for Inclusive and Transparent democracy), enables citizens, CSOs and political representatives to engage directly in policy development processes on an ongoing basis. While many online forums for political discussion exist, SOWIT is *integrated* to local authority decision processes and is rooted in empirical studies on deliberative democracy. It is currently being piloted in Fingal County Council.[3]

New perspectives on participatory approaches may be of interest to policymakers and CSOs in Ireland as they re-evaluate and redesign their relationship with the state since the economic crisis. As social partnership has become replaced by 'social dialogue', a transformation is occurring in the dynamics of decision-making in Ireland.

For more than a decade CSOs in Ireland had been divided into those who were members of social partnership and those who

[2] For further discussion see chapter by Farrell et al. in Carney & Harris (2012) and www.wethecitizens.ie.
[3] For more information see www.sowit.eu.

worked outside the system of corporatism. There were many debates about whether this led to the co-option of civil society into government (Meade, 2005; Murphy, 2002). More recent research has found little evidence of incorporation (Carney et al., 2012). In fact, since the demise of social partnership in 2010, CSOs in Ireland have demonstrated high levels of resilience and a willingness to turn to mass forms of social and political organisation (Carney et al., 2012).

This trend is well documented in a case study by Murphy (in Carney & Harris, 2012), which documents how the 'Claiming Our Future' movement endeavours to facilitate CSOs to push beyond narrow, state-defined roles, articulating potential pitfalls and prospects facing civil society in developing an alternative vision for Ireland. Murphy argues that the debate about political alternatives is unlikely to happen from 'above', adding that 'the challenge remains to nurture and cherish public spheres and civil society where citizens can deliberate and develop their political imagination' (p. 30).

There is increasing interest in the role of civil society as an important 'third sector' in policy development, provision and representation of groups vulnerable to social or political exclusion (see www.tsrc.ac.uk). However, there is little public investment in the sector, which is dependent on philanthropy or piecemeal, short-term grants on the basis of political patronage. Given the growing importance of the sector globally, it is worth considering how research and development in the sector can or should be supported by public institutions. McInerney & Carney (in Carney & Harris, 2012) discuss the way universities can play a role in supporting civic engagement through community-based learning and participatory action research. They advocate 'a broad and ambitious research and practice programme on lifelong civic participation, education and capacity building'. Bottom-up participatory approaches that 'bring citizens into the university' and the university into the community 'to facilitate discussion of important long-term social, economic and political challenges' are required (p. 36). Universities, by virtue of their political independence and educative function, can provide training in third-sector management, participatory approaches to policymaking and research, methods for community-based learning and a raft of hitherto underdeveloped initiatives that would develop civil society in a variety of ways.

Steiner (2012) makes a seminal contribution to thinking in this area by highlighting the need for deliberative practices to be incorporated

into formal schooling from kindergarten onwards. Deliberation is not just an academic exercise but is the essence of what makes us human. Learning to deliberate, and in particular democratic deliberation, he argues, is core to our development as citizens and should be included in all levels of formal education.

Conclusion

Low levels of trust in our representative institutions are a source of concern from the perspective of democratic legitimacy. Moreover, as the government faces a number of years of austerity budgets, it may also have consequences in terms of the implementation of new taxes and charges.

The dramatic changes both in global capitalism and in Ireland's national economic and social situation have strained the relationship between government and the people. A regressive form of democracy where one group is pitted against another on the basis of age, gender, employment status or race should be avoided (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Rather, the aim should be to make this crisis an opportunity for democratic innovation, where new forms of political participation become available to the diversity of people living in Ireland today.

These crises provide a potential opportunity to reform and rebuild Irish democracy. Complementing existing representative institutions and processes, the perspectives presented here offer openings for wider and deeper citizen engagement in the democratic process. The possibilities offered by participatory and deliberative democracy are all the more important at a time of rising citizen distrust of politicians and institutions, offering the potential to give citizens a greater voice in decision-making beyond democratic elections. At the time of writing (October 2012) the government is posed to launch the constitutional convention, which will be given a brief to review a number of reform measures. It has also included participatory budgeting in its *Action Programme for Effective Local Government* (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2012). This indicates some intent on the part of the government to use deliberative and participatory methods. The level of seriousness behind that intent has yet to be seen, but the potential of these approaches to lead to a more progressive and inclusive form of democratic rule cannot be overstated.

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