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Democratic Innovations in North America

Abstract

This chapter assesses the state of democratic innovations in North America, including the United States, Canada, and English-speaking countries of the Caribbean. We begin by setting these innovations in the contexts of democracy on the continent, which includes both established democracies and countries that have only recently decolonised. We go on to discuss major trends in democratic innovations over the past two decades in North America, including referendums and initiatives, mini-publics and collaborative governance, and digital participation in political and civic life. We note the broad range of issues addressed by these innovations and their effects on democratic institutions at different levels of governance. Finally, we draw several lessons and ideas for reform from the uneven impacts of democratic innovations in North America.¹

Contexts

The nations that comprise the focus of this chapter – the United States, Canada, and the Anglophone Caribbean – encompass a wide variety of institutional approaches to democratic decision-making, from the United States with its 18th Century revolution and founding, to Canada's constitutional monarchy and 19th Century Constitution Act, to the small island states of the Caribbean, most of which only emerged from colonial rule in the mid to late 20th Century.

The United States

The U.S. Constitution anticipated little direct citizen involvement and divided power in multiple ways – across different branches of government at the national level and between the national government and the states. Questions of public participation, such as voting rights, were left almost exclusively to the states, which imposed a variety of voting restrictions for men and completely excluded women and slaves. Still, the Constitution enshrined the notion of popular consent for government and the logic of political equality in ways that contributed to a long, if uneven, struggle over the following centuries for full enfranchisement, growing civic and partisan engagement, and an increasing sense that ordinary Americans ought to play a key role in the political life of the nation. Given its federal system, the U.S. offers multiple access points for citizen involvement and enjoys a long tradition of lively and meaningful engagement at the state and local levels, especially in associations (Tocqueville 1835 [1969]) and town meetings (Mansbridge 1983).

Today, experts tend to rank the United States highly on key principles of democratic life, including free and fair elections, open party competition, limits on executive authority, freedom of speech and the press, and protection from political violence (Bright Line Watch 2017). Still, there are enough warning signs in contemporary American life that one group of scholars recently titled their report on civic engagement in the United States *Democracy at Risk* (Macedo et al. 2005). Democratic innovations in the United States occur against a backdrop in which citizens lack political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1989); political participation is unequally distributed by socio-economic status and other factors (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady 2012); public trust in traditional political institutions, including elections,

national legislatures, political parties and the news media, is declining (Hetherington & Rudolph 2015); broad popular involvement in interest group politics is waning (Skocpol & Fiorina 1999); and government responds unequally to public preferences (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Achen & Bartels 2016).

Canada

Canada is a parliamentary democracy modeled after the British system, with a cabinet government in which the prime minister is chosen by vote of the majority party or coalition in the House of Commons, where members are elected in a single-member plurality (SMP) system to represent one riding, or geographic district. The legislative system also includes an appointed Senate, which reviews legislative proposals passed by the House but only occasionally makes suggestions for amendments. Reform of the Senate is the subject of ongoing political debate.

Sovereignty in Canada is shared between the national government and provincial governments, though there are important differences from the U.S. approach to federalism. The Canadian system emerged partly as a result of the cultural and linguistic differences separating English-speaking, mainly Protestant regions from French-speaking, mostly Roman Catholic areas and partly as a result of concerns about the threat of American economic and military power. The “Fathers of Confederation” who helped establish the Canadian constitution believed that federalism would bring a sense of national unity to a sparsely populated but expansive geographic area, while allowing all regions to preserve their cultural, legal, educational, and political traditions. Multiculturalism was thus a key aspect of the Canadian political system from the very beginning (Keane, 2009). However, the nature and extent of provincial power – especially with respect to Quebec – continue to be live questions in Canadian politics.

The most comprehensive recent study of the health of Canadian democracy finds cause for both concern and cheer (Gidengil et al. 2004). Turnout in federal elections fell precipitously during the latter years of the 20th Century, though it rebounded substantially in 2015 (Elections Canada 2017). Interest in politics is unequally distributed by education, income, and age. Somewhat unusually for a developed democracy, turnout for provincial elections is typically higher than for national elections. Over the course of the 20th Century, political satisfaction among voters – as measured by trust in government, and confidence in the House of Commons and the political parties – also declined substantially. However, Canadians are highly civic minded outside of politics: nearly 75 percent reported in the 2000 Canadian Election Study that they had been active in one or more voluntary associations in the past five years.

Caribbean

The Anglophone Caribbean is typically understood as comprising twelve English-speaking nations, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, and Guyana. Most of these very small states gained independence between 1962 and 1983, often without violent struggle or dramatic social upheaval. On the other hand, decolonisation also occurred in the absence of preconditions that are sometimes identified as necessary for successful democratisation, such as robust economic growth. Other territories, including Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, and the Cayman Islands, are still under the control of the British government. The long experience with the British system had a profound impact on the political institutions Caribbean states adopted after independence, and most nations chose some version of the Westminster form of government, characterised by parliamentary sovereignty and a prime minister and cabinet drawn from the legislature. While the successful persistence of these democratic institutions stands in stark contrast to the post-colonial

experience in many African and Latin American nations, there is also resistance among some who dismiss the ‘Westminster’ model as a symbol of colonialism, oppression, and slavery (Hinds 2008).

Scholars have identified both strengths and weaknesses of democratic institutions and practices in the Caribbean. Formal indicators of democracy seem to paint a picture of institutional and political success: Caribbean democracies regularly hold free and competitive elections, and the political traditions include accountability and smooth transfers of power, including across party lines, the absence of military rule or civil war, and protections for civil rights and liberties (Quinn 2015; Dominguez 1993). However, there are concerns about the quality of democracy, including a tendency toward top-down authoritarian leadership, party polarisation (sometimes along ethnic or tribal lines), patronage, clientelism, and corruption. These challenges are exacerbated by economic and social stressors, including globalisation and international trade policy, the transnational drug trade, rising crime and the growth of powerful gangs, and other economic vulnerabilities. There is robust debate about the nature of democracy in the Caribbean and the possibilities for democratic innovations (Barrow-Giles 2015; Corbett & Veenendaal 2016; Duncan & Woods 2007; Hinds 2008; Quinn 2015).

The small size of Caribbean nations presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges for representative democracy. Populations range from Jamaica’s 2.8 million people (a little less than the population of Kansas) to St. Kitts and Nevis’s 54,000 residents. Though it does not seem to be associated with higher levels of political participation, smallness may facilitate personal access to those in power and reduce informational asymmetries between elites and citizens (Duncan & Woods 2007). Close personal links can also have the perverse effect of reducing political discourse to personality conflicts and personalising citizens’ relationships to officials in ways that undermine the impartiality of government functions. In addition, in very small places like St. Kitts and Nevis, where each of the 11 members of parliament is a cabinet minister, there is no ‘loyal opposition’ of backbenchers who can hold the government to account, and such a small parliament is unlikely to reflect the rich set of interests and perspectives found in the larger society (Corbett & Veenendaal 2016). For citizens, small size can mean a loss of political anonymity because everyone seems to know the views and political affiliations of everyone else. Thus, the questions of whether and how institutions and traditions designed for much larger states translate to very small states are ongoing scholarly and political concerns.

Referendums and Initiatives

North Americans vote on referendums (put on the ballot by legislatures) and popular initiatives (originated by citizens and organisations), primarily at the local and state or provincial levels. In the U.S. and Canada, the Populist and Progressive movements at the turn of the 20th century inspired the spread of the referendum and initiative, especially in western states and provinces. Populists advocated direct democracy as an *alternative* to representative democracy, seen as corrupted by wealthy interests and party machines, while Progressive reforms aimed to *integrate* the virtues of an empowered citizenry and independent legislators (Donovan 2014). Canada and most U.S. states enacted the progressive vision by facilitating the legislatively-referred referendum, while several U.S. states also embraced populism by adopting citizen initiatives to bypass legislative power. Frequent use of the popular initiative in a handful of states has become the most distinctive aspect of North American direct democracy. In the Caribbean, referendums emerged with decolonisation, especially after World War II, as a vehicle to consider sovereignty, to establish or rewrite democratic constitutions and electoral systems, or, conversely, to legitimate authoritarian rule. Thus, while direct democracy has a long history in North

America, its form and functions continue to evolve, especially since interest groups became more involved in backing initiatives in the 1970s, dramatically expanding the number of ballot measures.

United States

Given the American founders' skepticism about the wisdom of direct democracy, the U.S. Constitution does not authorise national referendums or initiatives, and citizens have never been permitted to vote directly on federal issues. Instead, these powers are derived from state constitutions, where rules for qualifying both kinds of ballot measures vary widely. Local officials also regularly hold referendums at the municipal level across the U.S. In contrast, only half of states and municipalities allow citizen-originated initiatives. States that offer relatively easy access to the ballot for referendums also tend to have more liberal rules for qualifying initiatives. The five states with the least restrictive regimes (Colorado, North Dakota, Arizona, and especially California and Oregon) have accounted for over half of all statewide initiatives (Donovan 2014).

Referendums and initiatives tend to address different kinds of issues. The referendum has been used especially for constitutional changes, major fiscal decisions, and policies regarding public education, electoral rules, and local land usage. Most state referendums are constitutionally-mandated popular votes on administrative decisions and rules, such as changes to public employee compensation and new taxes. The initiative has been the main vehicle for enacting reforms that directly challenge the interests of political incumbents and major parties, including term limits for officials, restrictions on legislative powers of taxation and spending, campaign finance restrictions, non-partisan primaries, and independent commissions for electoral redistricting (Donovan 2011). Initiatives have also tackled some of the most divisive issues among the public, especially since the 1970s. For example, in 2016, multiple states voted on marijuana legalisation, raising the minimum wage, health care, and gun control. Over the past four decades the approval rate for initiatives has hovered around 40 percent, well below the roughly 75 percent of referendums passed by voters (Donovan 2014).

These instruments of direct democracy have grown intertwined with representative democracy, not simply in opposition to it. Elected officials have their own purposes for initiating referendums, which are more likely to appear on the ballot if they align with the aims of legislative agenda setters and in states where one party holds a majority in both houses of the legislature (Damore et al. 2012). But legislators also call referendums to 'pass the buck' to the electorate, shifting responsibility for making unpopular decisions (such as raising taxes or issuing bonds), to avoid supermajority thresholds some legislatures require to raise taxes, or to make it harder to undo policy changes by writing them into the state constitution.

In contrast, popular initiatives often empower interest groups at the expense of officials. Interest groups use initiatives to impose budgetary and tax constraints or electoral restrictions, such as term limits, and to use the threat of taking a question to the ballot to pressure officials to act first. Mounting initiative campaigns allows advocacy groups to attract new resources and allies, and to publicise issues that have garnered little official attention or are mired in political gridlock (Damore et al. 2012). However, political parties can also drive initiative battles to set the electoral agenda and boost turnout among the party faithful (Nicholson 2005). Thus, even initiatives can be partially integrated into representatives' electoral goals.

How well has direct democracy fulfilled the hopes of its proponents in the U.S.? Certainly, many policies that challenged entrenched political and economic interests have been more amenable to passage via the popular initiative, and successful state-level initiatives have put many issues on the national agenda

(Donovan 2014). In addition, states in which the initiative is more common use it to pass more laws targeting corruption and to pass more stringent regulations on parties (Bowler & Donovan 2006). It is less clear whether initiatives and referendums increase accountability by aligning laws more effectively with majority public opinion than legislatures do (Damore et al. 2012). High profile initiative campaigns can increase voter turnout, and may stimulate voters' interest and knowledge (Smith & Tolbert 2007).

At the same time, American direct democracy has been criticised for threatening minority rights and the constitutional separation of powers. Kenneth Miller's comprehensive study of these questions finds that, on balance, the initiative has 'limit[ed] the *expansion* of rights in a numbers of areas, including affirmative action, bilingual education, marriage, and certain areas of the criminal law' (Miller 2009, pp. 154-5; emphasis in original), though these limits are often reversed by the courts. Another concern is that despite the hope that direct democracy would overcome the power of money in politics, the process has been captured by large donors who finance ballot measure campaigns. However, if money plays a large role in shaping the political agenda, it is less powerful at determining the outcomes of ballot initiatives. Measures backed by corporations to promote their narrow interests lose more often than other kinds of initiatives, and the wealthy often craft initiatives designed to advance their ideological goals, rather than narrow economic interests (Damore et al. 2012; Donovan 2014).

Canada

Direct democracy has played a smaller role in Canada than in the U.S. (Boyer 1992). While municipal referendums are common, especially on public infrastructure projects, national and provincial referendums have been rare and the initiative is almost absent from the political landscape. However, unlike the U.S., Canada has held three national referendums. An 1898 plebiscite on prohibition of alcohol passed narrowly but was not implemented, as the lack of a strong consensus resulted in a decision to leave prohibition to the provinces. A vote on military conscription in 1942 passed handily but was implemented only partially because of strong opposition from Québec. A 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Accord, which would have devolved power from the federal to provincial and aboriginal governments, was widely rejected.

Most provinces allow referendums, but there have been fewer than in U.S. states and many have been nonbinding. Provinces are rarely required to refer constitutional questions, taxes, or bonds to the voters. Provincial governments have often required supermajority support in each electoral district of the province for passage. The main issues addressed included prohibition of liquor (from the 1890s to the 1940s), federal and provincial sovereignty (1940s-1990s), and electoral rules (1916-2009). British Columbia is the only province that allows popular initiatives, but the requirements are so challenging that only one initiative has qualified for the ballot: a 2010 proposal that repealed the sales tax.

Canada's experience with direct democracy has been influenced strongly by the challenge of managing ethnocultural differences (Qvortrup 2014). The strategic malleability of the country's rules for interpreting the results of national referendums stems from concerns about balancing federalism with demands for greater provincial autonomy, especially by francophone Québec (which has held three referendums on secession). Each of the national plebiscites has required its own enabling legislation and rules. The votes on prohibition and conscription were carefully interpreted to avoid conflict with dissenting Québec. The optimistically-named Canadian Clarity Act does not specify what sort of majority is needed for a province to approve secession, instructing only that the legislature consider the turnout, whether voting produced a 'clear majority', and 'any other matters or circumstances it considers to be relevant' (Qvortrup 2014, pp. 130-31).

If the failure of multiple secession votes in Québec and of the Charlottetown Accord provided opportunities for important public debates over power-sharing in Canada's multicultural confederation and revealed important differences among the public, these referendums did not resolve them. Similarly, referendums in British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island in 2005-2010 allowed provinces to reconsider their first-past-the-post electoral systems, but turnout was low and none passed, thereby preserving the status quo. On the weightiest matters of self-governance, direct democracy has helped Canadians to interpret a divided public will, but not to enact reforms, and their ineffectiveness probably helps to explain their rarity, especially at the national level.

The Caribbean

In the Caribbean, direct democracy has mainly been a tool for establishing sovereignty and constitution-building in recently decolonised states and territories (Donovan 2014). Six of the eleven former English, French, and Dutch colonies that are now independent states have had national referendums. The most consequential of these was Jamaica's 1961 decision to secede from the Federation of the West Indies. Only Belize permits the popular initiative, which has never been used. Outside the English-speaking nations of the region, Haiti has had the largest number of plebiscites of any Caribbean nation – twenty referendums, all on constitutional reform. Most of these were held in coercive conditions and engineered to demonstrate popular consent to authoritarian rule, often passing with 98 percent or more of the vote, according to official figures (Schmidt 1971).

To summarise, North American direct democracy has been consequential but constrained. Initiatives flourish mainly in the western U.S. and Canada, where the legacy of populism is strongest. Referendums are more common – at the national level in the Caribbean, and at the state and local levels in Canada and the U.S. Rules for qualifying initiatives and referendums vary widely, shaping the types of issues that are amenable to direct democracy and delimiting the power of voters to enact direct change. In the U.S., direct democracy tends to be more decisive, in Canada and the Caribbean more consultative, especially in regard to longstanding divisions over sovereignty. North American direct democracy is intertwined around the architecture of representative democracy, not separate from it.

Mini-publics and Collaborative Governance

North Americans are organising a growing number of civic forums, including mini-publics, co-governance institutions, and popular assemblies. An astonishing variety of forums are sponsored each year by a myriad of organisations, including non-profit and for-profit organizations, public officials, churches, schools, and scholars, and with a wide variety of political and social goals (for overviews, see Karpowitz & Raphael 2014; Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). According to Participedia.net, which maintains a database with summaries of almost 200 forums in the U.S. and Canada combined, the main issues tackled have included planning (34 percent of forums), community development (28 percent), political institutions (24 percent), budgeting (20 percent), health (17 percent), environment (15 percent), and education (11%).² Just over half of the forums have been local in scope, 29 percent regional, about 15 percent national, and 5 percent international. The number of participants at these events ranges from 10 people to over 210,000 (median = 206). Forums in the database met for as little as one day or as many as 100 (median = 5 days). More than half of the forums were open to all comers, while about 36 percent involved some form of targeted recruitment strategy to ensure that certain groups were included, and 28 percent selected participants randomly.

Some of these experiments are inspired by the tradition of the New England Town Meeting, which is as old as U.S. democracy itself (Mansbridge 1983). As with initiatives and referenda, some forums draw legitimacy from the Populists' call for local participation in governance and the Progressives' belief in the value of a well-informed citizenry deliberating over the common good (Keane 2009). More recently, these efforts have been kindled by participatory and deliberative democratic theory and practice, as an antidote to polarising, manipulative, or technocratic political discourse that often dominates contemporary media, elections, and public meetings (Gutmann & Thompson 1996; Fishkin 2009; Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012; Nabatchi et al. 2012). Most experiments with empowered forms of participation are occurring in the U.S. and Canada, with a few initial reforms in the Caribbean (Girvan 2015). In part, these innovations are on the rise because many American and Canadian federal agencies and local governments are required by law or custom to seek public input during the policy making process, and some officials are seeking more constructive ways to consult citizens than the traditional public hearing. Growth is also facilitated by a professional cadre of organisers of public consultation in both countries, represented in networks such as the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Mini-publics and Other Deliberative Forums

North Americans often organise mini-publics outside of existing institutions of political power and decision-making and as a way of highlighting the limits of public participation in those institutions. In the Participedia database, about 55 percent of forums were coded as having 'public awareness' as their intended purpose, 40 percent had a goal of 'community building;', and 23 percent were meant to 'develop individual capacities' (categories are not mutually exclusive).

North Americans have developed a number of innovative mini-public formats that have been adopted elsewhere in the world. Examples include larger, representative gatherings like the Deliberative Poll (Fishkin 2009), which brings together a random sample of several hundred residents of a community, state, or nation and allows them to discuss a public policy issue chosen by the organisers over several days in both small groups and larger plenary sessions. The goal is to produce a snapshot of well-informed public opinion. Citizens Juries are small groups that meet to examine a policy proposal intensively and render a collective verdict for or against it. The 21st Century Town Meeting is another large-scale format that can involve thousands of participants in small groups at one or multiple sites. Rather than random sampling, organisers affirmatively recruit a critical mass of the kinds of people who are usually under-represented at public meetings, to ensure that their views are included. Major themes are elicited from small group discussions and assembled electronically in real time, forming the basis for policy recommendations that all participants vote on individually at the end of the forum. National Issues Forums also convene many small group discussions, often at multiple locations. Participants discuss three different ways of framing a single policy issue, searching to align their values with each frame's policy preferences; they may conclude by voting individually or expressing a consensus.

Deliberative forums in North America often hold provisional, rather than final authority. For example, the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review Commission (CIRC) gives voters a source of information that is distinct from the buzz of campaign commercials and other typical sources of political information (Gastil & Richards 2013). The CIRC is a small, randomly-selected group of citizens tasked with analysing ballot measures and writing one-page statements outlining arguments for and against measures, and reporting the group's vote on whether to endorse them, which is printed in the state's voter guide. Thus, initiatives are still decided by voters, but the CIRC can influence them by providing a source of reliable, thoughtful information. Additional examples come from Canadian popular assemblies on electoral reform, including the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Warren & Pearse 2008) and the

Ontario Citizens' Assembly (Fournier et al. 2011). In both cases, the aim was to insulate controversial political decisions about electoral reform from existing political interests and actors by asking a representative sample of the citizens from the province to deliberate together and recommend a plan for a new voting system. Each plan was submitted to the full electorate in a referendum, meaning that the BCCA and the OCA were only provisionally empowered. Both plans were rejected in the referendums, suggesting that autonomous forums may face challenges when their decisions are subjected to the high-stakes, rough-and-tumble of political campaigning, mass communication, and the power of existing political interests.

Empowered Participation via Collaborative Governance and Participatory Budgeting

Other types of North American participatory forums are more directly empowered by their connections to existing political institutions or decision-making authority. About 60 percent of forums in the Participedia database were designed to 'advise decision makers' in some way, and more than one quarter of all forums either shared decision-making authority with public officials, exerted 'direct authority', directed the delivery of public services by entities outside of government, or focused on the collaborative delivery of public services with public authorities. These connections can also be seen in the target participants for various forums. Of the events in the database, nearly 97 percent were meant to include the lay public, and of those, about two-thirds were geared toward a target audience of elected or appointed public servants. Given the importance of federalism in the United States and Canada and the fact that direct citizen engagement is not anticipated at the national level by either nation's constitution, the most creative experimentation with co-governance institutions has occurred at the local and state or provincial levels. Nearly three-quarters of the groups in the Participedia database dedicated to co-governance or the direct exercise of public power had a local focus and scope.

Johnson and Gastil (2015) identify two key dimensions of empowered forums. One dimension is the extent to which they are embedded in or insulated from existing sources of political and social power or existing hierarchies of interests. A second dimension is whether decisions produced in the deliberative process have provisional or final authority over policy decisions. Embedded civic forums with final decision-making power include the city of Chicago's Community Policing forums, where neighborhood residents and police worked closely together to identify policing strategies and priorities (Fung 2004). Another example is the California Citizens Redistricting Commission, where a panel of fourteen citizens is carefully selected – through voluntary applications, then a random selection from a group of sixty finalists chosen by the state auditor – to redraw the boundaries of political districts within the state (Ancheta 2014). In both cases, citizens play a recurring and directly empowered role in political decision-making. Chicago Community Policing is embedded in the existing power structure of the police department. The California Citizens Commission is somewhat more complicated. In one sense, it is insulated from the state legislature's influence over decisions that affect incumbents' likelihood of re-election. But the commission is also embedded in existing power structures because its membership is drawn from a set of applicants who reflect the most politically active Californians and, by law, must include five Republicans, five Democrats, and four who are not registered with either party. In addition, the commission's decisions are subject to judicial review. Thus, the commission is not fully autonomous, but it does have significant decision-making authority.

Examples of embedded civic forums with provisional power can be found in the growing number of North American participatory budgeting (PB) processes designed to incorporate the voices of residents in budgeting and public works decisions. In the United States, PB began as a small pilot experiment in Chicago, but has since expanded to more than a dozen cities. As described by Pape and Lerner (2016), the PB process in the United States is overseen by a local steering committee of community groups and

civil society organisations and includes various stages: idea collection, where all local residents are invited to contribute ideas for budget projects, then deliberation among budget delegates who review suggested ideas and develop project proposals, and finally, a vote from residents to determine which projects to fund. If the process were to end with the vote, then it would have final decision-making power, but PB often occurs within the context of existing local institutions. In Vallejo, California, for example, the city council has the final say on the implementation of PB, an institutional choice that both serves the goals of scrutiny and accountability and also integrates participatory budgeting into existing representative institutions.

As this brief and partial review demonstrates, innovative civic forums can be found in a variety of different institutional forms across North America. The large number of mini-publics and co-governance structures demonstrates both the significant appetite for new varieties of democratic engagement and the considerable creativity and energy that has gone into creating space for these new opportunities. In part, this turn to civic forums is a response to declining trust in existing institutions of representative democracy. But organisers of new civic forums also face challenging questions about their legitimacy. How can organisers include underrepresented voices, and how do those new voices interact with existing stakeholders and power centers? How can organisers create meaningful opportunities for high-quality deliberative participation that come to be seen as meaningful, binding, and legitimate among the wider polity? And how can such new forums earn the trust of citizens, complementing and shoring up existing institutions without further undermining public confidence in them?

Digital Innovations

Web sites, apps, social networks, and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are transforming North Americans' civic participation, albeit unevenly across the continent. We focus mainly on the U.S. because digital innovations have been most widespread there, especially in open government initiatives, electoral campaigns, activism, and the public sphere.

Open Government

In 2011, the U.S. initiated the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a global framework for countries to become more open, accountable, and responsive, largely by interacting with the public via the Internet. The U.S. and Canada now rate in the top ten percent of nations on OGP-type measures, including adoption and implementation of open government policies, and provision of government data for use by civil society and business (World Wide Web Foundation 2016). Americans and Canadians also have high rates of Internet access and skills (ITU 2016). Most Caribbean nations rank in the middle of the global pack on both sets of measures, but Internet and social media usage rivals U.S. levels in some states, such as St. Kitts and Nevis, and Antigua and Barbuda.

In the U.S., the Obama administration launched its own Open Government Initiative (OGI) on its first day in office in 2009 (obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/open). To enhance transparency, the administration created web sites for disseminating government data sets (Data.gov) and information about federal spending. Collaboration platforms solicited a wider range of expert advice by crowdsourcing problem solving and technology design (e.g., Challenge.gov and ExpertNet). Other platforms facilitated citizen participation by soliciting online input on federal rulemaking (Regulations.gov) and inviting Americans to create electronic petitions on the administration's 'We the People' site. The OGI also inspired a cadre of civic technology enthusiasts, who designed digital tools to make use of newly-released government data to improve services, volunteerism, and participatory decision making (McNutt et al. 2016).

In contrast, Canada's open government plans were hampered by weaker executive commitment and coordination at the federal level, lack of clarity, and slower implementation (Francoli 2011). Provincial and local take-up has been more limited than in the U.S., despite some effective crowdsourcing projects that involved the public in monitoring local water quality, encouraging safe driving, and allocating arts grants and disaster aid to other countries (Dutil 2015; Gruzd & Roy 2016).

Despite clear benefits, open government efforts still face significant barriers in both countries, especially to promoting participation. Agencies have not been fully transparent about how they make decisions, withholding the kind of information that could most enhance accountability (Katz et al. 2013). Collaboration and participation are limited by lack of incentives for agencies to innovate, legal and regulatory hurdles, and a dearth of technical and public engagement skills within many agencies (McNutt 2014; Noveck & Verhulst 2016). Civic technology projects often end up building lightly-used 'apps to nowhere' because designers conduct too little outreach and evaluation with potential users or offer only low-stakes forms of participation (Abdullah et al. 2016a). Even online platforms used in robust engagement processes, such as some participatory budgets, need improvements to help participants connect information and citizen proposals to decisions and implementation over time (Parra et al. 2017).

But the greatest barrier may be that large administrative states in representative democracies remain profoundly ambivalent about citizen participation, especially when it involves delegating power. Crowdsourcing on sites like Challenge.gov has been more easily adopted because it is efficient, cost-effective, and allows administrators to choose the winning ideas (Dutil 2015). E-rulemaking has made it easier for stakeholders and citizens to express their policy views, but there is little evidence that open government has increased citizens' ability to shape the policy agenda or outcomes (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). For example, a review of the first five years of the White House's 'We the People' site found that citizen petitions influenced just one law: requiring cell phones to be interoperable with multiple service providers (Hitlin 2016). Amplifying online citizen voice has complicated but not resolved enduring questions about how government should interpret input from unrepresentative slices of the populace, often prompted by interest group organising; how to weigh competing claims by experts, stakeholders, and citizens; and how to translate sometimes voluminous and inchoate public comments into actionable policies.

Electoral Campaigns

Home to major internet companies like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google, the U.S. has been a center of innovation for expanding online citizen involvement in campaigns, and Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign demonstrated that online participatory techniques could contribute to electoral success. The Obama campaign and its imitators integrated online participation platforms, social media, and data analytics in many ways. Some involved strengthening old methods of face-to-face and legacy media interactions, such as monitoring the public conversation about the candidate, responding to attacks and fact-checking the opposition's claims, informing voters about the candidate's issue positions and character, and soliciting donations of time and money. But campaigns like Obama's also created new forms of personalised participation that shared some control over the candidate's messages by encouraging followers to circulate campaign messages across their social networks; creating community by encouraging supporters to exchange their stories about the campaign and discuss issues online; soliciting supporters' advice on issues, strategy, and tactics; and analysing personal data to target more individualised appeals to voters (Kreiss 2016). These innovations open up some space on social media and campaign web sites for followers to personalise the campaign's messages and talk back to its

leadership, even if some campaigns listen more than others (Baldwin-Philippi 2015). At the same time, campaigns still mostly use these techniques to amplify traditional functions of pushing information and pulling donations, rather than engaging followers in substantive co-production of strategy and policy positions (Katz et al. 2013), as is also the case in Canada (Dumitrica 2014).

Activism

North American activists are also employing digital innovations widely. Caribbean civil society organizations (CSOs) have used digital media to confer about issues and strategy with each other, but not as much with CSOs outside the region or with constituents (Harrison 2014; Thakur 2012). American and Canadian CSOs have been hotbeds of three main kinds of digitally-enabled activism.

Socially-mediated street protests have been the hallmark of urban uprisings, such as those prompted by the Toronto G20 meeting, Occupy Wall Street, and the Black Lives Matter movement. In these cases, viral social media have helped loosely-connected, horizontal organisations to mobilise, choreograph, and report on demonstrations in multiple cities, signaling resistance to economic and police power in traditional public spaces (Poell & Van Dijck 2015).

Digitally-enabled movements focused on the state have used many of the same mediated tactics to mobilise online and offline support for specific policies, but also to focus members on legislative and electoral change. These range from single-issue campaigns, such as Quebec students' demands to roll back tuition fee increases and Americans' support for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, to movements with broader agendas, such as the Idle No More movement to strengthen the rights of indigenous peoples in Canada, and the Tea Party's efforts to cut taxes and elect fiscally conservative Republicans in the U.S. (Wood 2015; Zuckerman 2016).

Perhaps the biggest innovations stem from *online-only organising* conducted by multi-issue organisations (such as MoveOn.org), which have spread this kind of activism globally (Karpf 2016). These 'netroots' organisations employ sophisticated online analytics to develop e-mail and social media that will attract donations and promote rapid responses to high-profile events, virally spreading appeals from members to new potential supporters. If online-only organisations are criticised for fostering 'clicktivism' that demands less time and effort than traditional political action, these groups offer members more opportunities to participate and more influence over the organising agenda, which may make them more accountable to small donors and occasional participants than traditional social movement organisations are. However, the headlines-chasing strategy can undermine online-only groups' ability to pursue long-term strategic goals, as their agendas and tactics change often.

The breadth of examples discussed here should caution against hasty conclusions that online activism has had uniform effects on politics in North America. While some digital activism promotes thin participation, which requires less of participants, many uses aim to move people up the ladder of engagement to thicker forms of activism, and some online activism is born thick (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). While some digital campaigns are ephemeral, others endure for years. While some organisations engage participants only online, most try to mobilise people to participate in face-to-face meetings, social events, and protests too.

Public Sphere

In the new media environment, North Americans increasingly encounter news, information, and political discussion from multiple sources. Nonetheless, Americans especially express growing worries about living in echo chambers, in which people expose themselves only to agreeable points of view (Sunstein

2009), and filter bubbles (Pariser 2011), in which social media and search engine algorithms screen out information we are likely to find disagreeable or dull.

Evidence of Americans' online media use suggests that these effects are probably real but small. Use of social networks and search engines for news is modestly associated with ideological polarisation, but also with increased exposure to ideologically conflicting views, and Americans continue to get most of their news online by visiting mainstream news web sites (Flaxman et al. 2016). American Facebook users are more likely to share news stories that align with their friends' ideological views, and individuals' choices about what stories to click on may play more of a role in limiting their exposure to cross-cutting news than Facebook's algorithms do (Bakshy et al. 2015). Most Twitter users in the U.S. construct ideologically diverse networks, and exposure to diverse views on the platform moderates users' political opinions (Barberá 2015). Partisan polarisation of Americans during the Internet era has grown most among demographic groups that make *least* use of the Internet and social media, especially the elderly (Boxell et al. 2017). And the positive face of echo chambers is that those who report higher levels of exposure to political information from their own point of view also engage in more online political participation (Feezell 2016).

Nonetheless, the spread of fake news during the 2016 Presidential campaign raised new concerns about whether Americans' participation is misinformed and manipulated, including by foreign governments using digital tools to interfere with the election. While Americans were somewhat more likely to believe false news aligned with their partisan views than to believe fake news that was not aligned, one study concluded that the impact of fake news on Americans' votes was probably minimal (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). Still, the election prompted several social networks to take steps to curb false news, and to enable users to check facts and find news that challenges their partisan views.

In sum, it is clear that the integration of digital media has begun to transform how many North Americans take part in politics, but mainly in ways that align with the incentives of existing political actors and institutions (Fung et al. 2013). Digital innovations have increased public input on governance, while reserving significant decision making for representatives and administrators. The new media have facilitated recruitment and mobilisation of support for electoral and issue campaigns that are still directed by candidates, parties, and movements. Digital media have multiplied voices in the public sphere without engaging many more people in deliberation with others who hold clashing views, and have modestly enhanced citizens' interest in restricting their information diets to their preferred tastes.

Conclusion

Looking across the North American innovations surveyed here, we see three especially important areas for further improvement.

Hybrid Innovations

Scholars of democracy increasingly recognise that all political institutions, including democratic innovations, are partial solutions to the problem of addressing tradeoffs in the pursuit of democratic goods (Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012). In particular, it is difficult for any single innovation to strengthen political equality, universal participation, and deliberation at the same time (Fishkin 2009). For example, deliberation among equals typically needs to happen in small groups, which limits participation, and participation is often motivated by partisanship, which can limit openness to deliberation with people of different views. Well-designed hybrid innovations that integrate multiple types of democratic participation – direct, deliberative, and representative – may complement their strengths and

compensate for their weaknesses (Smith 2009). In that sense, hybrid innovations may also represent an important step on the path toward institutionalising innovative approaches to democracy. Examples include the proposals for electoral reform created by Canadian Citizens Assemblies (involving high quality deliberation in conditions of relative equality) and put to referenda (enabling full participation) or the Oregon Citizens Initiative Review Commission's evaluation of proposed ballot initiatives (deliberation among equals) and recommendations to voters (electoral participation). While no political institutions are perfect, these hybrid innovations seem to hold special promise for meeting the sometimes contradictory goals of democracy, at both the local and national levels.

Making Participation Fun

We should not underestimate the value of restoring some of the pleasure that more North Americans once found in civic and political life (Schudson 1998). Some of that fun seems corrupt today, as when 19th century political parties bid for voters with beer and barbecue, patronage and pocket money. But the pleasures of participation in party and movement politics came also from building community, overcoming social alienation, and banding together to counter the power of elites and experts (Tocqueville 1835 [1969]). Twentieth-century reforms, such as the secret ballot, tamped down the carnivalistic atmosphere of prior election days. Many civic associations were taken over by professional staff, leaving little role for lay members. Public hearings and meetings became highly-controlled and often tedious affairs, sometimes punctuated by brief tirades from frustrated citizens. For many North Americans, political participation seems 'boring, painful, and pointless' (Lerner 2014, p. 13). Could more people derive profound pleasure both from individual expression and collaborating with others, from reasoned discussion and affiliation with larger communities?

Online spaces offer one promising avenue. Online networks formed around common passions for the arts and entertainment can, for example, help youth to build participatory skills in organising, planning collective action, and managing collaborative groups (Kahne et al. 2015), though it is less clear whether this involvement extends to electoral participation too. Online communities can also mobilise around political issues that emerge from the group's interests, such as many gaming communities' activism for fair use of intellectual property and net neutrality. Online neighborhood forums can help reconnect people to local politics in more fulfilling ways. Place-based platforms, such as NextDoor.com allow people to monitor public safety and exchange free stuff, but also to encounter opportunities for civic participation that arise organically from discussions of the everyday life of their cities and neighborhoods (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015). While online forums are not a magic cure for parochialism and residential segregation, the best of these forums actively recruit low-income and immigrant populations, and facilitate online discussions to promote civil interaction among people of different backgrounds and perspectives (Abdullah et al. 2016b).

Another solution involves redesigning political processes along the lines of games. North Americans have begun to experiment widely with introducing constructive competition, role-playing, rewards, and other elements of games into public meetings, budgeting, community planning and economic development, organising and fundraising (Lerner 2014). Because games rely on popular ways of interacting and communicating, they may make the political process more accessible and equitable than traditional ways of deliberating over policy proposals in public meetings. Some social movements are using game principles to engage members in establishing goals, tactics, and collective action. Crowdsourced design contests, like those held on Challenge.gov, harness competition and rewards to spur participation. Gastil and Richards (2017) have envisioned a game-like, online civic platform that would allow citizens to connect and track all of their political actions. Game mechanics would reward desirable activities, such as recruiting under-represented groups to participate, deliberating, coalition

building, and face-to-face engagement (in demonstrations, town meetings, etc.) with greater influence over setting the policy agenda and making recommendations to government. While clearly still in the initial stages, creative approaches like these are worth additional attention and exploration.

Equity

Inequities afflict all kinds of democratic institutions in North America, contributing to growing rates of political and economic inequality. As our discussion of new civic forums demonstrated, democratic innovations are not immune to one of the key challenges of contemporary democracy: how to promote participation and influence by those who are underrepresented in and disempowered by traditional political processes (Karpowitz & Raphael 2014). Even participatory budgeting, developed in Brazil to promote the voices of low-income neighborhoods in the urban budget process, has lost some of its commitment to equity as it was translated into the North American context (Pape & Lerner 2016).

One response is to foster innovations that especially appeal to disempowered communities, which often includes inviting them to talk among themselves before talking with more privileged groups. This kind of enclave or affinity group deliberation can strengthen participants' confidence and skills, and help them clarify shared interests, while preparing them for knowledgeable and constructive engagement with other residents and officials (Abdullah et al. 2016b). For example, the Chicago Community Policing forums, which convened residents in their neighborhoods, were unusually successful at drawing in poorer, less well-educated participants who lived in areas where crime was a more pressing problem to participate fully in public meetings (Fung 2004). We should evaluate all democratic innovations in part by whether they enhance equity. If participatory innovations merely engage already-engaged groups in new ways, perhaps they are not innovations after all.

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² Issue codings are not mutually exclusive, so forums may have tackled more than one of the issue categories. The Participedia database is a crowdsourced resource that is not comprehensive, but it is the largest available catalogue of recent forums.