

Fostering Inclusion Online: Can online instruments compensate the elitist bias of representative democracy?

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Proceedings of the Weizenbaum Conference 2021

Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Fostering Inclusion Online

Can online instruments compensate the elitist bias of
representative democracy?

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What is the role of technology in fostering local democracy? How has technology changed our expectations about the proper sites of representation, and the modes of citizen participation in self-governance? Can we even expect a technologically re-empowered local democracy to compensate for structural problems of recent multi-level governance democracy?

This paper starts with a diagnosis of structural problems of modern representative democracy. It explains the practice of multi-level governance as a structural and well-justified feature of democracy. Multi-level governance has a dark side, however. It implies long chains of representation, severely limited relevance of individual interventions, an elitist bias and a lack of citizen participation. “The flaw in the pluralist heaven”, as Schattschneider has famously argued, “is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent”. Multi-level governance is thus not only relevant for European and global governance but also for understanding growing civic frustration. Even complementing representative forms of governance with more direct democratic institutions does not solve the problem. Empirical evidence underlines that citizens who participate in direct democratic initiatives are on average relatively highly educated, older and politically or civically active. They have often been involved on previous occasions and form a group of participants with a low degree of diversity (Michels/ De Graaf 2017: 877). Much of the recently discussed “democratic regression” (Schäfer/ Zürn 2021) is a product of this twin problem.

The paper combines the recent literature on smart cities with the suggestion that digital instruments might be helpful for overcoming the twin problem. The easy availability of online technologies promises to provide for new forms of local participation and ownership, and thus improve the overall legitimacy of democracy. Digital technologies are identified in the literature with innovative instruments for the making of local communities, for strengthening the direct involvement of citizens in the implementation of local budgets, and of providing additional access to decision-makers. They are connected to

- increasing transparency and better opportunities for retrieving information;
- promoting inclusion by giving social actors (especially marginalized ones) better opportunities to contribute to the formation of public opinion outside institutionalized channels and without the filtering function of traditional media;
- opening up of alternative opportunities for participation, allowing people to be more involved in political decision-making processes over the Internet;
- strengthening the responsiveness of political actors by easier access to dialogue with representatives on social media;
- lowering the costs of communication, association, and participation
- stimulating processes of online community building via connective action

The paper reports in its third part preliminary findings from a participatory online process of setting up a smart city strategy for Frankfurt (Oder). The process is conducted in spring and summer 2021, i.e. under conditions of social distancing necessitated by the pandemic. It entails interviews with more than 50 local experts in various aspects relevant for local governance, a full-day digital town hall meeting for all citizens in June, 2021 and a systematic analysis of German smart cities’ initiatives to address the concerns of those most vulnerable in society, i.e. kids in very low income households.

This process is interesting both in itself and with regard to its outcome. A purely online process highlights many of the strengths and difficulties involved with organizing digital democracy. Important strengths are the

- easy availability of experts. Video conferencing allows conducting interviews and organizing meetings with an efficiency unknown in analog times. It is also
- less difficult to provide information to all participants and interested parties,
- to organize discussions among experts and

- to reach out to partners across borders.

Online interviews have proven far less adequate for reaching out to those who are less well-off and living in neighborhoods with low levels of income. Representative structures are difficult to identify, often lack the necessary technological instruments and knowledge for meaningful interaction or are, if equipped with proper resources, themselves part of the elite. In order to overcome this elitist bias of representative structures and to bypass the flaw of equating direct democracy with inclusionary policy, the research project launches in its second empirical part a large-scale online survey with 6.000 households mainly living in social housing.

The paper will present the survey and discuss its likeliness to

- overcome elitism in participation
- give voice to those who are excluded by formal structures of representation
- and stimulate republican attitudes

The paper will conclude with a preliminary – and cautious - assessment of the empirical findings of the project and infer some suggestions about the conditions under which local online instruments can alleviate the legitimacy deficit of representative multi-level democracy.

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