



BETWEEN DIRECT REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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The concept of political representation is traditionally connected to two reference poles: from one side the electoral dimension, from the other side the practices of participation. This linkage, however, is a relatively recent conceptual constraint and was not present in the development of the “electoral method” in the rising American nation: James Madison,¹ for example, described democracy as a troubled system, destined to a quick and violent death. The same terms “democracy” and “participation” were used with suspicion.

The so-called “crisis of democracy” (which perhaps could be more accurately understood as a crisis of institutional representation) arises precisely within the short-circuit between the delegitimization of representative institutions (the intermediary bodies) and the individuals’ perception of the loss of that power that the mass parties seemed to guarantee in the past. The lack of trust in political and representative institutions generates three possible areas of response from citizens: a) social apathy, which manifests itself as a disinterest in politics, often accompanied by strongly anti-political feelings; b) the request for more specific control over representative institutions – this request is expressed in what Pierre Rosanvallon² defines counter-democracy and evolves into a sort of systemic distrust (the “sanctioning democracy”, as Nadia Urbinati³ has defined it), often finding in the appeal for direct democracy a presumed solution for a stronger citizen participation; c) the request for new forms of participation, ranging from active citizenship to the use of digital platforms for democratic participation, from the most advanced application of open government⁴ to the many different experiences of democratic innovations⁵ (collaborative governance, public debate, participatory budgets, territorial co-management, etc.). In this area, the emphasis on active citizenship and participatory democracy is usually very strong.

The rhetoric on direct democracy is often accompanied by the emergence of what has been called “direct representation”; as Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler⁶ stated, “indirect representation is characterised by an apparently inevitable fracture between the representing centre and the represented outer layer”. In this fracture, some forms of direct representation are developed along two paths, not

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necessarily antithetical: a) on the one hand the use of the internet (from clicktivism to specifically designed online participatory platforms); b) on the other hand, the emerging forms of hyper-representation, where the subjects become representatives of themselves or, more frequently, accept a leader claiming himself/herself for the representative (the hyper-representative).⁷

The request for a more diffused use of direct democracy can be also framed in the development of another trend of post-representative politics:⁸ namely the depoliticisation, that can be defined as a sort of reduction of politics to the only dimension of policy, accompanied by the shifting from “government” to “governance”. In other terms, depoliticisation – in the words of Fawcett, Flinders, Hay and Wood⁹ – is a “bridging concept operating at the nexus between micro-trends (the disengagement of individual citizens), meso-level institutional mechanisms and reforms (modes of governance), and macro-level ideologies and dominant growth models”.

At this point, we are at a crucial crossroads. Democracy seems to have entered a post-representative phase and the recourse to direct democracy fits perfectly in this phase, accentuating both the tendency to depoliticisation and the affirmation of “direct representation”. At the same time, however, the popular demand for greater decision-making power is evident and it cannot be left to the demagoguery of the neo-populist parties. It is not surprising that an ideological element of the neo-populist parties resides precisely in the attempt to delegitimise representation in the name of the practice of direct democracy, which is however based upon the principle of aggregation (who has one more vote wins) and it is meaningfully opposed to the logic of participatory and/or deliberative democracy. It is no coincidence that Stefano Rodotà¹⁰ warned about the risks of plebiscitarianism inscribed in the digital referendums or, more generally, in some forms of online direct democracy.

In everyday language – and also due to simplification operated by some journalists and politicians – there is a tendency to overlap the concept of direct democracy with those of deliberative and participatory democracy. These

are actually three different concepts, even with different cultural backgrounds. Direct democracy previews that people can vote on different topics, having usually a binary choice; the policy making process is distinct from that of decision making. An example of direct democracy is the referendum, an institution which is also present in many liberal democracies (both in consultative and abrogative forms). On the opposite, the distinctive dimension of deliberative democracy lies in the idea that there are not necessarily predefined preferences but that they can be transformed in the course of interaction. In other words, deliberative democracy is based upon the shared formation of opinions and preferences. Finally, participatory democracy involves a series of social practices, continuous over time, aimed at improving representation in the logic of strengthening the quality of responsiveness. The practices and theories of participatory democracy are addressed to the formation of active city communities,¹¹ also improving commitment and politicization of the participants. In short, deliberative and participatory democracies are not alternatives to representative ones, but can enrich them.

The merging of participatory democracy and deliberative procedures can play an important role in increasing inclusiveness, improving the quality of democracy¹² and facilitating a not intermittent citizens’ participation. In this perspective, digital platforms¹³ for democratic participation can be elements of improvement of the participation quality and could also strengthen the legitimacy of representative democracy, if they don’t just offer the possibility of voting. As shown by various international experiences,¹⁴ the use of e-voting, for example, didn’t determine the growth of people’s participation and caused many doubts¹⁵ about its reliability.

The issue is not just about technology, even if the platforms’ architecture plays a role in the policy/decision making procedures; the peculiar dimension, in fact, lies in the adoption or not of participatory and deliberative practices in the e-democracy tools. A deliberative/participatory e-democracy can be the right way to reshape representative democracy and avoid the risks of plebiscitary approaches, that instead structurally belongs to direct democracy.



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