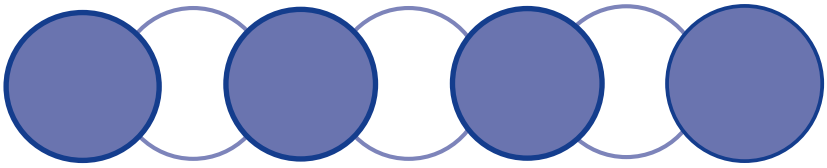

Introduction

There is a common and widespread concern expressed in both policy and academic circles that citizens are disillusioned and disenchanted with the political process at all levels, be it local, regional, national or beyond. Such disillusionment and disenchantment is most clearly expressed in:

- **o** Declining levels of electoral turnout;
- **o** Low levels of trust in mainstream political institutions and politicians;
- **o** A decline in traditional networks and organisations (e.g. political parties, trade unions) through which citizens engage with the political process

How can public authorities respond to these trends? One approach might be a strategy of embedding democratic innovations that specifically aim to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process.

At the rhetorical level at least there is growing political support for increasing citizen engagement. We have all become familiar with policy documents that are full of references to 'active citizenship', 'partnership', 'capacity building' and other fine words that signify a commitment to citizen participation in decision making. The UK government has even made citizen participation compulsory in certain areas of policy, such as Best Value in local government, urban regeneration partnerships and community representation on primary care trusts and local strategic partnerships. The question that haunts us however, is the extent to which this rhetoric is transformed into democratic practices that truly increase and deepen participation. There is some evidence of creativity and good practice and we must learn from these experiments and innovations if we are to increase and deepen citizen involvement. This *Local Work:Voice* aims to give an overview of some of these innovations, drawing on a longer study undertaken for the POWER Inquiry.

Electoral and Consultative Innovations

Given the centrality of the electoral process to our democracy, it is surprising that the method of voting has changed little over the last century. We are generally familiar with debates over the efficacy of majoritarian and proportional electoral systems. However, there are alternative electoral practices that might increase the attractiveness of electoral participation. These range from the use of remote forms of voting - e.g. postal and electronic - to more challenging innovations such as positive abstention (the 'none-of-the above' option), compulsory voting and the recent proposal for a 'deliberation day' - a national democracy day - before major elections. Whilst these innovations may increase participation in elections and (in some cases) improve the quality of participation, their more general effect on citizen participation in decision making is rather limited.

Consultation is thus generally viewed as a necessary feature of the political system because it is difficult to understand citizens' policy preferences from occasional elections - our votes are motivated by a range of different concerns. Most public authorities (and other organisations) use a plethora of techniques such as opinion polling, open meetings and focus groups to inform decision makers of citizens' views. However, there are well-known weaknesses in the design of such techniques. For example, open meetings predominantly attract politically-interested citizens, whereas the more statistically-representative polling and focus groups tend to lack depth. There is also widespread (and often justified) scepticism amongst the public that such consultation exercises are often used to legitimate decisions that have already been made.

The 1990s witnessed a growth of interest in a range of consultative innovations that were explicitly designed in response to the perceived weaknesses of traditional

Democratic Innovations: Engaging Citizens in Political Decision-Making

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By Dr Graham Smith

Local Work: Voice is a guest author's perspective on regeneration and local economic development. If you would like to share your thoughts in a *Voice* or to comment on someone else's, please email victoriabradford@cles.org.uk

Author: Dr Graham Smith
Senior Lecturer, Division of Politics and International Relations, School of Social Sciences
University of Southampton.
Tel: 023 8059 3308
E-mail: gsmith@socsci.soton.ac.uk

Edited by. Victoria Bradford
Policy & Information Researcher, CLES
Tel: 0161 233 1927
E-mail: victoriabradford@cles.org.uk

consultation techniques. Deliberative innovations such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, deliberative opinion polling, and more recently, America Speaks and the National Institute of Clinical Excellence Citizens' Council emphasise the importance of ensuring the participation of a statistically-representative sample of citizens - no social group is systematically excluded - and promoting informed deliberation between citizens in order to improve the quality of decisions.[1] Such innovations have been organised sporadically in the UK and beyond at different levels of governance (local to national) and on a range of different policy issues (urban regeneration to science and technology policy). Evidence suggests that citizens are willing and able to deliberate on often complex policy issues and make sound and reflective recommendations. The success of deliberative exercises points to the importance of careful institutional design and the fact that citizens can play a more creative and active role in political decision making.

A number of public authorities have also begun to experiment with consultation techniques that utilise information and communication technologies (ICT). There have been some significant developments - for example the Hansard Society has used secure e-consultation to engage politically-marginalised groups such as young people and women who have suffered domestic violence.[2] However, unless carefully designed, many e-consultation techniques reinforce the 'digital divide' - the differential access to ICT.

Beyond Consultation

In contrast to traditional forms of consultation, experimentation with deliberative innovations points towards the idea of meaningful involvement of citizens in both the agenda-setting process and final decision making - the citizen as active participant in the policy process. This is an area of democratic practice that is relatively weak in the UK and it is often necessary to look further afield to find examples of democratic innovations that recast the relationship between citizens and public authorities. This briefing will discuss three of the most interesting innovations - participatory budgeting, the citizens' assembly on electoral reform and direct initiative. What these three approaches highlight is that democratic innovations can be used successfully to engage citizens in critical areas of public policy.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a method of engaging large numbers of citizens in the annual budgetary process. PB first emerged in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989. As it established itself as an effective mechanism for engaging citizens, it has influenced developments in about 180 other Brazilian municipalities, one Brazilian state and a number of other cities across Latin America. PB is one of a number of democratic innovations that have emerged in less-economically developed nations, but which are now beginning to influence thinking on democratic practice in advanced liberal democracies.

The original Porto Alegre model is a clever combination of popular assemblies and representative forums. There are clear incentives for citizens to participate and outcomes have been redistributive in nature.

The annual budgetary cycle begins with a series of neighbourhood assemblies that feed into larger regional assemblies. These assemblies draw up lists of investment priorities (e.g. sanitation, paving, health care, etc.) and elect delegates to Regional Budget Forums and two councillors for the Municipal Budget Council. The assemblies attract large number of citizens because there is a clear incentive to participate - the higher the level of participation, the more delegates can be elected for the Regional Budget Forums. Thus the likelihood of investment in a neighbourhood or region is in part tied to levels of participation.

The 16 Regional Budget Forums work with the city administration to prioritise the investment requests from the different neighbourhoods and produce an overall list of investment priorities for each region of the municipality. Decisions are based on both needs-based criteria and direct negotiations between delegates (whose numbers relate to the level of participation in the earlier assemblies). The Forums also monitor the implementation by city agencies of works programmes agreed in previous years.

Finally, the Municipal Budget Council decides on the relative distribution of resources between the different regions of the city and the overall distribution of resources between the various city agencies. Decisions are guided by needs-based criteria and the priority lists generated by the regions. The Budget Council presents the budget to the city's elected assembly - the legislature - who have final decision-making power (although it is difficult for them to overrule a budget that has been developed through such a popular process).

There are a number of obvious lessons that we can learn from PB. First, it has produced a high degree of transparency in the budgetary process, generating trust in the process and legitimating a transfer of resources to poorer areas of the city.

Second, PB offers evidence that consistently impressive levels of participation are possible. For example, in 1995, 7,000 people participated in the first set of large regional assemblies while 14,000 participated in the intermediary neighbourhood meetings. In the late 1990s, as many as 8.4% of the adult population in Porto Alegre stated that

they had participated in budget assemblies at some point in the last five years.[3] One of the well-known barriers to participation is the failure to ensure outcomes from the participation process. Aware of this, the designers of PB ensured that in the early years of the process, investments would be completed within a year - those neighbourhoods who had not engaged could see that other neighbourhoods had profited from participation, thus offering an incentive to participate. Additionally, the process has been particularly effective at engaging poorer social groups, who typically find themselves marginalised from the political process. One of the reasons for this is because the distribution of budgetary resources is explicitly linked to a combination of needs-based criteria and the power of elected representatives on the budgetary councils - the higher the level of mobilisation, the more delegates from that neighbourhood and region. There are thus explicit incentives for citizens to engage built into the innovation. One of the interesting outcomes of the process - aside from the redistribution of resources - is that in those areas of the city where there was little civic activity, participation in PB has led to the development of civic associations.

There is growing interest in PB in the UK. In partnership with Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme, the community-based organisation Community Pride in Salford has worked with activists from Porte Alegre to learn about the PB process and how it might be transferred to the UK. The local council is currently 'shadowing' participatory budgeting alongside its established budgetary process.[4] This is primarily an exercise in increasing the budgetary literacy of local citizens and community groups, although why British citizens lack the competence of their Brazilian counterparts to take budgetary decisions is an open question.

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was established by the government of British Columbia (with full support from the legislature) to review the BC electoral system and, if necessary, to recommend an alternative system.[5] The BC government committed itself to holding a referendum on the Assembly's recommendations. The Assembly was made up of 160 randomly-selected citizens - one man and one woman from each electoral district plus two Aboriginal members. An independent chair oversaw and directed the Assembly's work.

The Citizens' Assembly builds on the developments of earlier deliberative initiatives, but explicitly gave the citizens involved in the Assembly increased influence in the decision-making process. The work of the Citizens' Assembly took place throughout 2004. Initially members spent a series of weekends learning about different electoral systems and then took evidence during 50 public hearings and received 1,603 written submissions. Finally, the Assembly spent a period of time deliberating over the merits of different electoral systems before voting on different options. In December 2004, it produced a report - Making Every Vote Count - that recommended the introduction of the single-transferable vote (STV) electoral system. To ensure that citizens were able to attend, meetings were held at weekends, childcare and other support services were available to members with special needs and all expenses associated with serving on the Assembly were covered. Members also received an honorarium of $150 per meeting day.

The Citizens' Assembly represents possibly the most impressive democratic innovation based on random selection of citizens (also known as sortition) - other deliberative innovations that share similar features (e.g. citizens' juries) have not had this level of political power. Observers have been impressed by the competence of the selected citizens and the reflective nature of their report (although, unsurprisingly, not everyone agreed with their recommendation). The initiative also highlights how different democratic innovations can be combined to good effect - the Assembly deliberated on the options and provided a recommendation; the decision of whether to accept the Assembly's recommendation was taken by the full citizen body though a referendum.

Direct Initiative

Often confused with referendums, the direct initiative provides a way for citizens to propose a legislative measure (statutory initiative) or a constitutional amendment (constitutional initiative). If they are able to submit a petition with the required number of citizen signatures, the proposal goes straight to a ballot. The direct initiative is used in Switzerland and some states in the USA. A sister innovation - the popular referendum - is similar to the direct initiative, but is used to challenge laws already enacted by the legislature. There is no common figure for the number of signatures required on a petition for an initiative - the typical requirement of US states is about 8% of those who voted for the governor in the previous election.

The direct initiative is a rare democratic innovation - it allows citizens to directly set the political agenda and gives them final decision-making power. If citizens are able to collect the requisite number of signatures, they are able to place their proposal on a ballot and the decision on whether to accept or reject the proposal rests on a popular vote. The requirement to collect a high number of signatures also promotes political mobilisation within communities. Proponents of direct initiative maintain that it is the only way to realise political equality and direct citizen control in large-scale democracies. The initiative also allows new issues to be put onto the political agenda which may otherwise have been ignored by the political establishment. Evidence suggests that issues such as

universal suffrage and environmental protection were taken more seriously by political elites after initiative campaigns. Many of these campaigns were initially unsuccessful in changing laws, but they raised the issue in the public consciousness.[6]

However, the actual practice of direct initiative (and forms of referendum) raises obvious challenges. The power of money is often highly significant in generating signatures (through the use of professional petition circulators) and affecting campaign outcomes, particularly where business interests are threatened. There is also some concern that initiatives can produce outcomes unfavourable to minorities. Although there are a small number of well documented examples of successful discriminatory initiatives, it appears that voters are more tolerant than critics contend. It is important to compare the decisions made using this mechanism with those passed by legislatures that do not use the initiative - there is no clear evidence that the former leads to less tolerant judgements - and to recognise that constitutional safeguards can limit the range of legitimate proposals.

The turnout on direct initiatives is often lower than in general elections, except where they are on particularly controversial or emotive issues. And as with ordinary elections, there are uneven participation rates by different social groups. Studies of both American and Swiss use of direct voting find that middle-aged males with higher incomes and levels of education are more likely to vote - black and minority ethnic communities, the poor and young people tend to remain politically marginalised.

The direct initiative generates heated debate. It certainly deserves further consideration given that it is one of the few democratic innovations (if not the only one) that gives citizens direct control over agenda-setting and decision making. It also has the potential to be used at any level of governance - local to national. What requires urgent attention however is the institutional safeguards that could be put in place to ensure that information is balanced and that the influence of money is limited and consideration about how to overcome uneven participation rates.[7]

Building Democratic Innovations

What is clear from studying democratic innovations is that they have been effective where there is strong political support for citizen engagement. The rhetoric of participation is currently strong amongst the political elite in the UK - the question is whether this can be translated into political reality. It will require political will and dedicated resources and public authorities must be given the freedom to experiment with different approaches to engagement.

Importantly, the relationship between participation and decision making must be transparent - too often citizens give up their time to participation exercises whose effect is unclear. This builds distrust and a disinclination to engage again in the future.

The other lesson that can be drawn from this brief discussion of democratic experiments is that the design of innovations is crucial. We need to think more creatively about how to actively and effectively engage citizens in political decision making - participatory budgeting, the citizens' assembly on electoral reform and direct initiative offer significant guidance on how this might be done.

Dr. Graham Smith is a senior lecturer at the University of Southampton. This *Local Work: Voice* is based on research undertaken for the POWER Inquiry and published as Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World, in 2005. The report can be downloaded at www.powerinquiry.org.

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