

Citizens and Democratic Institutions: Issues and Challenges



NOTE D'ANALYSE

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INTRODUCTION

In the many interpretations and definitions of democracy, there is one common denominator: the citizen. The evolution of citizen attributes, rights and responsibilities reflects the transformation of democracy itself. Nevertheless, the polysemic nature of democracy imposes a conceptual challenge regarding the importance and scope of citizen participation: what a citizen can do and what paths of influence are available within the representative system vary significantly between, for example, Schumpeter's model of democracy and Pateman's participatory democracy. While theoretical questioning helps frame the citizen, it remains too abstract to help us understand the growing discontent within democratic societies seen in empirical attitudinal studies that highlight citizen disengagement from representative institutions:

We find that citizens have grown more distant from political parties, more critical of political elites and political institutions, and less positive toward government; this points to fundamental changes in the political orientations of democratic publics over the past generation. (Dalton, 2004, 46)

A mismatch between the assessment of institutions and adherence to democratic ideals — what Robert Dahl called the democratic paradox (Dahl, 1989,2) — is thus contributing to the current state of representative democracies. Assumptions about the source of this malaise include the “overload” of democracies (Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki, 1975), the performance of its institutions (Norris, 2011), along with higher levels of education and greater

access to information that make citizens more critical of their institutions and representatives (Norris, 1991). This discontent has scholars preoccupied with support for democracy itself: "[...] if dissatisfaction is generalized to the point that citizens lose faith in the entire political class, then the chances for democratic renewal are seriously diminished." (Pharr, 2000, 13)

Political actors and scholars are therefore led to reflect on the democratic arrangements of traditional representative institutions and fill this apparent gap between an ideal democracy and its current practice. This preoccupation is thus shown through the multiplication of working groups, public consultations and formal proposals within democratic institutions (see useful informations a).

Despite this recognition, there is much uncertainty about what ought to be done. The political elite recognizes citizen discontent with representative democracy, but is struggling to find a way of improving matters. The objective of this research is thus to contribute to understanding the impact of participatory mechanisms on citizen perceptions of and relations with representative institutions. It will analyze the arrangements developed to strengthen democracy through their effect on citizen expressions of discontent with representative institutions.

This paper is structured in four sections. The first provides a brief discussion of the concept of representation. The second examines the integration of participatory mechanisms into the functioning of representative institutions. The third looks at the instrumentalization of participation in the exercise of democracy. The final section presents a quantitative analysis of data from 46 countries on the influence specific participation mechanisms have on citizen trust in parliament.

THE QUESTIONING OF REPRESENTATION

Despite some critics inspired by Rousseau's idea of representation as contradictory to democracy, democratic theorists — even those advocating greater citizen participation — recognize the contribution of representation to the functioning of democracy in contemporary settings. However, representation was not originally associated with democracy. As Dahl points out, the current articulation of the concept evolved from practices dating back to medieval monarchies and aristocratic governments (Dahl 1989, 29). Hobbes, for example, saw representation as essentially an authorization process (Birch 2007, 138). Only after the English Civil War and the subsequent democratic revolutions did democracy become associated with representation (Pitkin 2004, 338).

Representation refers minimally to the vague idea that "someone or something is missing, however symbolically present" (Pitkin 2004, 338). As it transformed into a central component of democratic institutions, a new conception of popular sovereignty emerged: "The process of representation puts an end to the

sovereign as an ontological entity that proclaims its will [...] and makes room for sovereignty as an inherently plural unifying process."(Urbinati 2011, 45) The expression of individual sovereignty is therefore reduced in favour of a representative who is the bearer of a collective 'One'. Aggregation is thus at the heart of the classical conception of representation.

Citizens in a circumscribed territory became, through universal suffrage, engaged in a process of selecting an individual whose actions represent the interests of constituents (Urbinati 2008, 389). Hence, representation involves two components: 1) authorization of the representative by the represented, and 2) accountability of the representative to the represented (Urbinati 2008, 396). Consequently, the right to vote and, with a few exceptions, belonging to a given territory correspond to the conceptual basis of the represented (Rehfeld 2005).

In defining the representative, Pitkin developed a continuum ranging from a fairly restrictive to a much broader conception. At the restrictive end, the representative is bound to his constituents and their will: "A highly restrictive mandate theorist might maintain a true representation of the representatives of his constituents, that any exercise of discretion is a deviation from this ideal." (Pitkin 1967, 146) The broader conception finds notable expression in the following statement by former British MP Edmund Burke: "At the other extreme is the idea of complete independence, that constituents have no right even to exact campaign promises; once a man is elected he must be completely free to use his own judgement." (Pitkin 1967, 146)

Mansbridge categorizes the role of the representative in three distinct ways. Anticipatory representation echoes the idea of retrospective voting, where representatives act in anticipation of a reaction from their constituents. Gyroscopic representation involves actions, principles or interests drawing on the representative's personal journey. Finally, replacement representation corresponds to the action of a representative outside his or her constituency (Mansbridge 2003, 515).

Moreover, political parties also have a significant impact on the representative's role. Their influence is twofold: 1) the representative must act on a program formed by the party, and 2) the political party acts as an intermediary by aggregating local interests into a national program (Pitkin 1967, 148). Consequently, the representative is linked to the party, but also to constituents through the party's program. Defining the representative thus poses a conceptual challenge that we might approach using definitions developed by Pitkin and Mansbridge, along with additional insight into the contribution of political parties.

Representation rests on the idea of delegating power to a third party and, as a system, poses a challenge. Verba, Nie and Kim maintain that there is inevitably

a distance between a representative government and the represented. Consequently, representation carries the risk of increasing this distance to the point that it becomes difficult even to recognize it as democracy (Verba 1978, 2). Distance makes the representative system "structurally disappointing" (Jallon 2011, 18). Moreover, representation itself can also create socio-demographic distance. The question of social representation forces us to reflect on the composition of democratic institutions: "[...] there is probably no parliament in the world that has not been criticized for the 'overrepresentation' of middle-aged males, university graduates, certain occupational backgrounds such as the legal profession or the public sector, a specific ethnic group, etc." (Andeweg 2003, 148)

Tension around representativeness leads political actors and citizens to look for democratic renewal through institutional reform: "Because these are dissatisfied democrats, the predominant response is not a withdrawal from democratic politics but a search for new democratic choices." (Dalton 2004, 202) Representation is thus more than a static mechanism and refers to a multidimensional relationship between the representative and the represented (Saward 2011, 75). It underlies the construction of democratic delegation to a third party and the aggregation of a plurality of interests, but also growing concern for social representativeness.

INTEGRATING PARTICIPATION

The shortcomings of the representative system and the discontent it produces are palpable: "Low control over represented once they are elected. Rare opportunities to engage with elected officials, apart from a few electoral moments. There is thus a never accomplished mourning of direct participation by citizens" (Gaudin 2007, 13) [our translation]. In this context, the direct participation of citizens tends to appear as a road to salvation and is integrated into the political rhetoric where its transformative potential is celebrated. Hence, participation is perceived as a way of "revisiting and revitalizing" (Albertini 2014, 2) representative institutions.

Democracies have therefore come to integrate, alongside traditional practices such as voting and political party activism, new participatory mechanisms (Dalton 2004, 127). Institutions are implementing measures designed by theorists of deliberative democracy such as citizen panels or deliberative forums (Urbainati & Warren 2008, 403). One notable example is the Citizens' Assembly developed in British Columbia to propose a new method of voting. Such recent developments are appearing alongside a deepening of more conventional methods such as public consultations (Gaudin 2007, 9).

Participation has three dimensions (Salisbury 1975, 326-327). First, it can be seen as an act of legitimation. Through elections or other forms of expression,

citizens provide legitimacy to those making decisions and to the decisions themselves. However, in a context where elections no longer provide *a priori* legitimation, alternative participatory mechanisms can legitimate specific proposals. A second dimension describes participation from an instrumental perspective. Participation becomes a tool to confer advantages on a particular individual or group by directing the allocation of resources to their cause. The third dimension sees participation used to resolve social conflict through dialogue.

The integration of participation is "symptomatic of a new conception of democratic legitimacy" (Bherer 2005, 82) [our translation]. Therefore, the "democracy of decisions" based on authorization derived from the electoral structure cohabits alongside a "democracy of exercise" which imposes an imperative to consider all citizens (Rosanvallon 2008, 30). In this context, Salisbury's legitimacy dimension helps to explain the motivation behind participation. This paradigm shift alters the relationship between citizens and institutions. A new division of political tasks is emerging where citizens become recurring interlocutors in the development of public decisions (Bherer 2005, 83). These mechanisms enable representative institutions to maintain a degree of democratic legitimacy via the development of channels that they are in a position to control.

Participation also responds to a desire to overcome citizen discontent with democratic institutions, and representative institutions are providing citizens a "degree of influence", but in return expect a "degree of mobilization through them" (Godbout 1983, 35). Consequently, this form of participation, while providing benefits for those near the "point of action", prevents a direct challenge to representative structures (Fung & Wright 2003, 25). Lowndes et al. point out that the integration of participation improves public policies by placing greater emphasis on citizen input (Lowndes 2001, 211). From the perspective of the represented, such mechanisms can bring a combination of financial gain, knowledge, and ability, while also increasing self-esteem (Rosenstone 1993, 12). Participation is also seen as playing an educational role that contributes to the development of an enlightened citizenry (Pateman 1970, 42).

While there are a number of challenges to ensuring an efficient utilization of participatory mechanisms, they appear to have positive effects on both citizens and institutions. Dyck and Edward nuance this conclusion, arguing that findings of studies in this area are contradictory and results are often inconclusive (Dyck 2009, 422). Since institutional structures are influenced by a variety of postulates, Smith stresses that no mechanisms could correspond to the set of theoretical premises that are *prima facie* associated with them (Smith 2009, 10). In order to examine the impact of these mechanisms on the relationship between citizens and institutions, the next section will look at their integration into institutional practice, and their appropriation by institutional actors.

INSTRUMENTAL USE OF PARTICIPATION

The process of integrating participatory mechanisms makes them a salient dimension of representative democratic institutions, while also illustrating the adaptability of these institutions and their capacity to preserve key institutional arrangements:

It is thus as if the representative system had the capacity to absorb and neutralize participatory innovations in its own logic. Injecting participatory approaches into a representative system thus seems to be a way of continuing representation through other means. (Blatrix 2009, 115) [our translation].

Representative institutions instrumentalize participatory mechanisms by imposing rules and procedures to ensure their proper functioning: "spontaneity gives way to an implementing order" (Gaudin 2007, 15) [our translation]. One illustration of this control is what Bherer calls the "citizen qualification" and involves the attribution by institutional actors of a representative claim to a group or individual by inviting them to participate in deliberative spaces or other mechanisms (Bherer 2006, 26). Consequently, they duplicate the representative logic by authorizing specific entities to interact in the name of the citizenry. Control is also exerted through other aspects of participatory mechanisms, such as the time allotted for each presentation, the resources at the disposal of participants, and the information provided. In such ways, institutions control the mechanics of citizen participation (Gourgues 2015, 44). In this context, participation is thus understood not as the result of citizen demand, but rather as an "offer" from the organization (Godbout 1983, 155).

Some scholars describe this instrumentalization as a result of the incompatibility between pure representative institutions and pure participatory mechanisms, echoing the theoretical debate between representation and participation. In this perspective, instrumentalization is possible because of the hierarchical relationship between the two concepts through which representation allows a degree of participation:

Since it fills the lacunar space left to it by the parliamentary game, it remains symbolically relegated to a lower rank than representative democracy. Therefore, it can easily be accused of serving to depoliticize discussions or appear as a populist stratagem. (Gaudin 2007, 121) [our translation]

For Gaudin then, participatory mechanisms serve a different purpose within the

parliamentary system. By applying Salisbury's second dimension — the instrumental interpretation — institutional actors thus have the capacity to develop opportunities for participation more similar to plebiscitary mechanisms (Dalton 2011, 151). A transaction then occurs whereby, in exchange for participation by citizens, institutions agree to a degree of direct participation (Gaudin 2007, 17). Consequently, these participatory mechanisms encourage a form of participation that is channelled through the institution.

Nevertheless, this instrumentalization doesn't guarantee a specific outcome. Indeed, Scarrow shows that measures put in place to discourage the efficient use of participatory mechanisms tend, over the long term, to fade, leaving room for their appropriation by citizens and making them more accessible than initially intended (Scarrow 2001, 654). Hence, while restrictive rules or access thresholds undermine the potential of these mechanisms, in the long run, their appropriation by citizens has the potential to make them genuine tools of participation and mitigate their instrumentalization.

Alongside concerns with instrumentalization by institutional actors, concerns have also been raised with regard to external actors. Fung and Wright underline the ability of well-organized groups with substantial resources to alter the result of a consultation or collective decision, (Fung & Wright 2003, 33) while Smith highlights the disruptive potential of external actors on direct democracy mechanisms such as referendums (Smith 2009, 168). Moreover, instrumentalization also has a rhetorical dimension. Blondiaux emphasizes the paradox between political actors' rhetoric about greater public participation and inclusive tools, and the paucity of resources institutions allocate to developing efficient mechanisms (Blondiaux 2015, 124). Consequently, the integration of participation within the democratic process poses concerns regarding the uses to which it is put and also its instrumentalization within the political discourse.

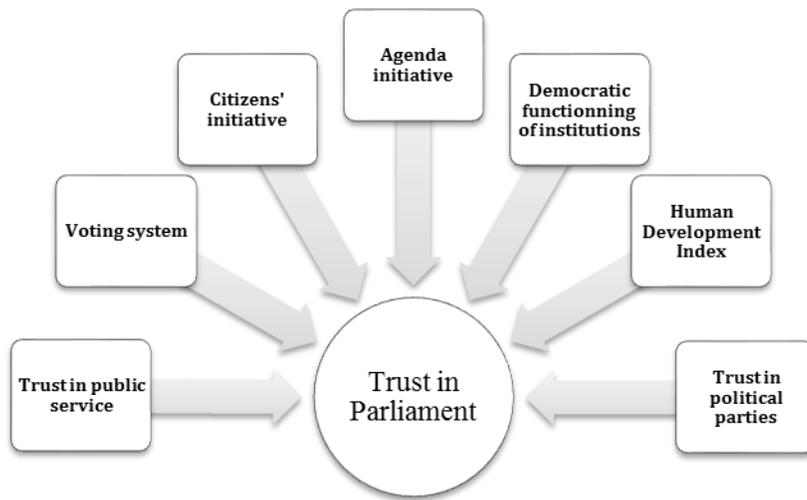
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Past sections expose the intrinsic shortcomings of representative bodies, the integration of compensatory participatory mechanisms, and the instrumentalization of these mechanisms, while also exploring the benefits accrued by particular actors, whether citizens or institutions. This brings us to the objective of this research, which is to assess the impact of participatory mechanisms on the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions. The analysis looks at data on participatory mechanisms in 46 countries to measure the degree of trust citizens express toward a symbolic figure of democratic institutions: parliament.

This quantitative study explores the hypothesis that a democratic society has a higher level of trust in parliament if its electoral system includes a proportional component, and incorporates participatory mechanisms. As seen in Figure 1, trust in parliament is the dependent variable in this study, while the voting

system and two specific mechanisms - the agenda initiative and citizen initiatives - are independent variables. Trust in the civil service and political parties, as well as the Human Development Index (HDI) and an evaluation of how democratically institutions are governed serve as control variables.

Figure 1- Causal schema (see useful informations b)



Our dependent variable, trust in parliament, is measured on a scale from 1 (a low level of trust) to 4 (a high level). By aggregating data from the fifth and sixth wave of the World Value Survey, we have, as shown in Figure 2, identified a measure of trust that corresponds to the country average. The map below shows a high level of trust in the Nordic countries, India and South Africa, and a low level in countries of the Americas. The lowest level observed corresponds to 1.42 on 4, while the highest is 2.79 on 4.

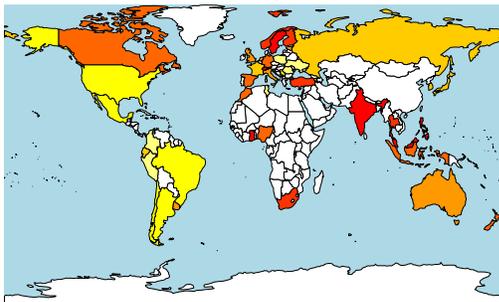


Figure 2 – Level of trust

The first three independent variables relate to institutional parameters, which according to our hypothesis should have a positive impact on the dependant variable. These data comes from the International IDEA database and concerns voting methods, the citizen agenda and citizen initiatives.



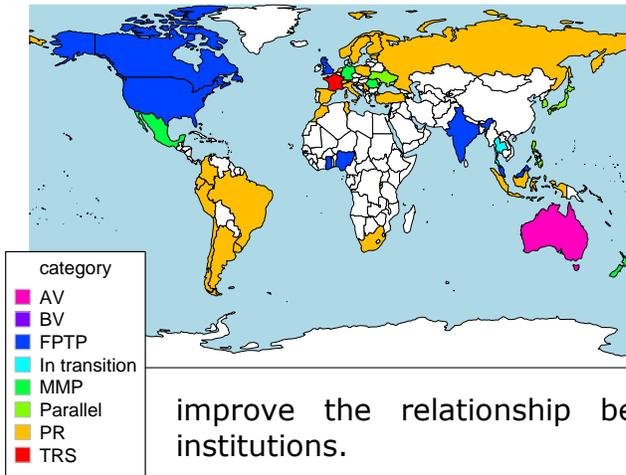


Figure 3- Methods of voting

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the different voting methods in our sample. For this research, we will focus on the system using a proportional dimension. This choice was made in light of growing attention to proportional representation, particularly in Canada. Political actors tend to portray this system as a way to

improve the relationship between citizens and representative institutions.

Consequently, mixed and parallel systems — shown in green in Figure 3 — and proportional voting systems — in orange — are considered as one group. Thus, of the 46 countries in our study, 37 employ a voting method that encompasses a degree of proportionality. The two other measures are related to institutional practices and aim for direct citizen participation in setting the policy agenda and in decision-making.

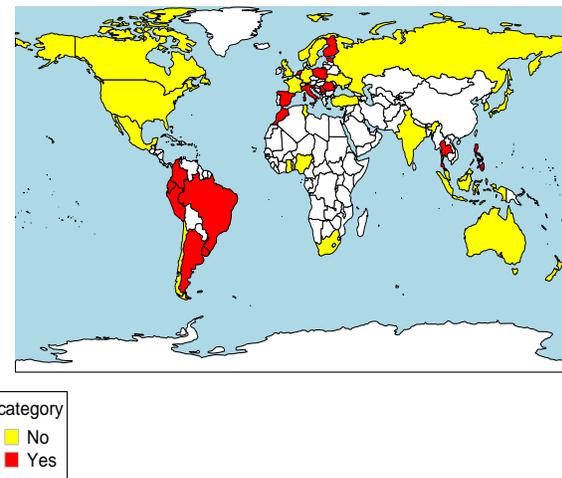
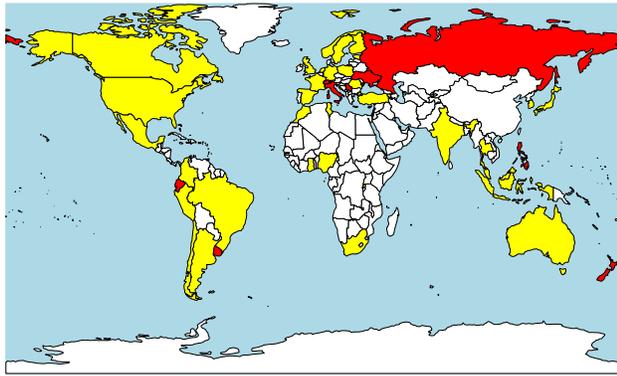


Figure 4 - Agenda initiative

First, agenda initiatives (see Figure 4) are "procedures by which citizens can place a particular issue on the agenda of parliament or legislative body." (International IDEA 2008, 4) In other words, they offer an alternative method of submitting legislative proposals and thus offer citizens a more direct way to influence the legislative agenda. Legislative actors will then study the proposal, and there will be no popular vote at the end of this procedure. Of the countries surveyed, 18 permit such procedure while 28 do not.



category
■ No
■ Yes

Figure 5- Citizen’s initiative

The last mechanism, the citizen’s initiative, "allows the electorate to vote on a political, constitutional or legislative measure proposed by a number of citizens and not by a government, legislature or other political authority" (International IDEA 2008, 5). It corresponds to a procedure stemming from a citizen's proposal. Figure 5 shows that only nine countries (≈20%) have such mechanisms at the national level. These three independent variables thus correspond to the main components of the study.

A bivariate analysis between the nature of the voting system and trust in parliament demonstrates a medium effect of the former on the latter. However, this relationship is not statistically significant because it is below the 95% confidence level 19 times out of 20, and may be due to chance alone. As for the two measures of direct democracy, the effect on our dependent variable of the citizens' initiative is trivial, while the agenda initiative has a medium effect with a confidence level of 95% 19 times out of 20.

These bivariate analyses demonstrate that a participatory mechanism alone has only a limited impact on the relationship citizens have with the democratic institution of parliament: "The combination of democratic innovations is compelling since it can realise goods in ways that are not possible when individual innovations are used in isolation." (Smith 2009, 189) Therefore, attention should be paid to the complementarity of various mechanisms. To pursue this finding, a multiple linear regression was performed to see if the combination of these measures positively influences trust in parliament.

Table 1 - Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| Trust in political parties | 0.46 (0.27) ** |
| Trust in the public service | 0.42 (0.14) *** |
| Proportional representation | 0.00 (0.06) |
| Citizen’s initiative | 0.03 (0.05) |
| Agenda initiative | 0.02 (0.05) |
| Human Development Index | -0.09 (0.21) |
| Evaluation of democratic functioning | 0.08 (0.03) ** |
| Explained variation (adjusted R ²) | 82% |
| Countries (N) | 46 |

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Our model explains 82% of the dependent variable's variation, which indicates a strong relationship, even for aggregated data. The voting system, citizens' initiative, and agenda initiative have a minimal positive impact on variation in the trust in parliament variable. However, this finding is of limited value because none of these variables reach the 95% confidence level 19 times out of 20.

To complete the analysis, a few simulations were undertaken. When we compare a country X that uses a proportional system along with the two tools of direct democracy, against a country Y without these features, we find that they have similar levels of trust in parliament. This result shows the nil or almost nil impact of these variables. Consequently, though the model is attractive because of its explained variation, our hypothesis is invalidated. Proportionality and mechanisms of direct democracy, all other things being equal, do not have a significant impact on the degree of trust citizens have in parliament.

We may conclude from this analysis that a mechanical approach to addressing citizen discontent, by implementing distinct mechanisms, has limited impact on the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions. Echoing this conclusion, Dalton maintains that focusing on institutional parameters may not be sufficient to overcome citizen disaffection with democratic institutions (Dalton 2004, 204). This quantitative study opens the door to a deeper qualitative investigation, which may improve our understanding of the perception citizens and institutional actors have of their relationship and of democratic parameters.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of representative institutions and, consequently, of the relationship between representative and represented is notable. Democratic institutions are multiplying initiatives to review structures and enable a greater integration of citizens in response to a growing gap between representatives and represented. For Fuchs and Klingermann, this institutional process results in a "greater responsiveness on the part of the major political actors towards the demands of the citizens", and citizens more active and "more effective in the political process" (Fuchs & Klingermann 1995, 437). This democratic transformation is also reflected in the decision-making process. This democratization of executive and administrative spheres is complementary to the changes seen in representative components and ensures a piecemeal legitimacy (Mark E. 2009, 3). Rosanvallon describes this process as central to the democratic control of society: "In the era of the executive power's predominance, the key to democracy lies in the conditions of a democratic control of society. It is, therefore, the governed-governing relationship that becomes the major issue." (Rosanvallon 2015, 20) It contributes to mitigating one of the shortcomings of participation: the sentiment that citizens do not have a sufficient impact on the decision-making process.

Nevertheless, despite the integration of participatory mechanisms and their positive effects on particular actors, the scope of the renewal of the relationship between represented and representative remains restricted. Institutional reforms thus do not guarantee a greater level of trust in one of democracy's flagship institutions: parliament. Consequently, it seems misleading to conclude by referring to an institutional deficit. The current articulation of democracy seems more impacted by a deficit in the exercise of democracy itself. This raises questions about the value of these reforms and echoes Irvin and Stansbury's question: "do citizens care enough to actively participate in policy making or would resources devoted to participatory processes be better directed toward implementation?" (Irvin & Stansbury 2004, 62)

Answering this question in the negative recognizes that the apparent disillusionment affects not just democratic institutions, but the very idea of democracy. It begs not only a questioning of process and political structures, but also of practice and culture. Institutional changes should therefore seek to respond to the axiological gap underlined by Dahl's democratic paradox (Dahl 2000, 31). The mechanical developments that characterize institutional reforms should emphasize democratic values and principles, and infuse life into the relationship between representative and represented.

Bibliographical references and useful informations

- a. For example, the Swedish Parliament recommended in 2000 the development of participatory democracy to deepened the citizens' influence. The French National Assembly published a report in 2015 that support the need to enhance citizen's participation for overcoming the fragility of democratic institutions. And in Canada, within both the provincial and federal level, there is an ongoing debate on the representativeness of democratic institutions and their design.
- b. Figure 1 corresponds to the construction of our causal schema. The independent variables used in this quantitative analysis will be presented separately.

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