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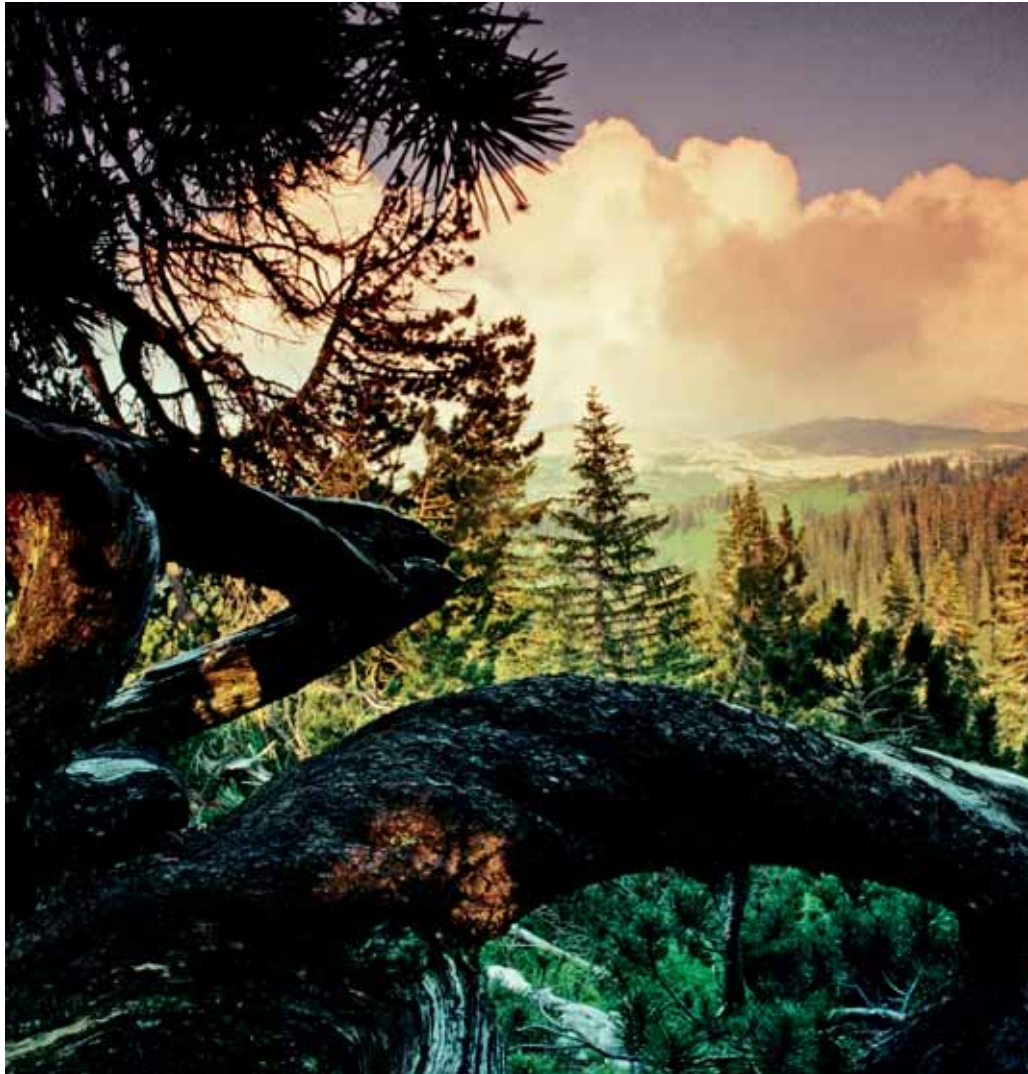
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Becoming More Resilient in Crisis Situations

Innovations for Democratic Systems

Peter Biegelbauer

The world currently faces a series of economic, political, social and environmental crises, which are a major cause for citizens' declining levels of trust in the respective political systems. Yet democracies can increase their resilience against crisis situations by introducing innovations.



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During the last decades the political systems of OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries had to face a number of developments altering the framework conditions under which they have operated. New social movements such as environmentalism and feminism have come up in many countries, and the creation of citizens' initiatives has been motivated by concerns around the sustainability of our way of life. Whilst democratic systems have dealt with these developments more or less successfully using various strategies, some phenomena seem to be universal: opinion polls show a declining level of trust in politicians and current democratic systems,

voter turnout rates are declining (Crouch 2004, Mair 2008). Since 2008, these trends have been exacerbated by the financial as well as the subsequent economic and political crises.

These developments endanger democracies as they alienate voters, strengthen political extremism and make it difficult for political systems to solve pressing problems. What can be done to increase the trust of citizens in political systems, raise the problem-solving capacities of democracies and, in general, make them more resilient to crises situations?

Gaining Trust through Legitimation

In democratic theory the notion of trust is debated in connection with two forms of legitimation: input legitimation through the inclusion of, e.g., stakeholders and citizens in political processes, and output legitimation through the development of effective and efficient solutions for political problems. Input legitimation can be enlarged, e.g., by finding ways to open up and have citizens participate directly in decision-making processes. Output legitimation can be increased by developing instruments helping politicians and civil servants to learn from past experiences in policy-making amongst others (Dahl 1998, Scharpf 1999).

One of the advantages of democracies is that they innovate. To retain their viability, democratic systems have to react to societal, economic and political changes, and this is indeed what they normally do: from a historic perspective they are a success model, with an ever-increasing number of states turning to democracies (Huntington 1991, Mair 2008). However, with an increasing rate of change in the environment of democracies and in the midst of a series of crises it is unclear if democracies are innovative enough to raise the level of trust of citizens. Efforts to institutionalise procedural innovations are ongoing through the reform of parliaments, e.g., by granting minority rights or by including direct democratic elements, e.g., by granting citizens the right to call a referendum on local, national and EU levels. Experiments with deliberative and participative instruments as planning cells, consensus conferences and debates utilising social media have been popularised (Geissel 2009).

Technology Assessment and Decision-Making

Yet, democratic innovations are not effective per se. A research field with ample experience questioning existing solutions in policy-making is science, technology and society studies (STS). Since its inception

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as a discipline in the 1970s STS has been ripe with debates on ways of decision-making, focusing, e. g., on the acceptability of risks occurred by new scientific and technological breakthroughs in terms of their ethical, legal and social implications (Hansen 2010).

Over time, a number of instruments supporting policy-making were put forward by STS scholars, with some geared towards short, others towards long time horizons, some requiring the involvement of experts, others of decision-makers themselves (Biegelbauer and Loeber 2010). Beginning in the 1990s, a number of instruments were developed that emphasised the importance of including broader stakeholder groups and citizens, amongst them foresight exercises, participatory technology assessment and consensus conferences (Fischer 2003, Abels and Bora 2004).

Inclusion of Stakeholders

There are two rationales for the inclusion of actors in participatory instruments. The first is an increase in legitimation and, potentially, also of the acceptance of planned measures. In terms of democratic theory, this corresponds with the notion of input legitimation. The second is a furthering of problem-solving capacities and the hope to produce innovative solutions through the incorporation of new forms of knowledge and new views on problems, i. e., output legitimation.

What participatory instruments supporting decision-making share with the broader array of participatory instruments existing in democratic systems, with the prominent exception of referenda, is that sometimes they have a limited impact on political decisions. In the case of participatory instruments geared towards science and technological development, it turned out that several issues have the potential to seriously hamper their impact. Amongst these is the issue of narrow scientific framing, which more or less renders stakeholder and citizen involvement useless, since normally only scientific experts are interested in directly addressing scientific questions. Another important factor is that decision-making often happens in the framework of closed networks of civil servants

and experts, with stakeholders, but especially citizens, often learning about decision-making processes when they are already finished (Griessler 2010).

Perhaps the most detrimental factor for the impact of participatory instruments is that they mostly do not fit into the institutional logics of representative democracies. Politicians and civil servants, but also activists of non-governmental organisations, have difficulty understanding how to filter in the results of a participatory exercise into established representative democratic institutions such as parliaments.

Representative vs. Participatory Instruments

A major reason for these perceived incompatibilities are the rationales behind representative and participatory democratic institutions respectively. Whilst representative democratic institutions are mostly based on indirectly representing interests of voters, participatory institutions provide a shortcut and wish to engage citizens directly into politics. However, key questions for representative democratic institutions and instruments centre on the representativeness of politicians, on transparency and accountability and participatory democratic institutions. Also, instruments are focusing on the question of giving all legitimate interests a voice, on the open-endedness of political processes and the willingness of decision-makers to engage into argumentative processes (Biegelbauer and Hansen 2011).

Therefore, if politicians in a representative democratic system are confronted with participatory democratic instruments they will typically ask themselves questions such as: What kind of interests are represented here? How many voters are represented? How much political clout is involved?

Framing Participatory Processes

Some of the key problems of participatory instruments described here may be solved, or at least ameliorated, by providing addressees for the political messages produced through the usage of participatory instruments. This might be accomplished by involving representative democratic institutions or members of these institutions in

participatory processes. That has happened more frequently in local politics, when representatives were invited into participatory processes or when citizens' initiatives have formed parties and subsequently ran for office.

Nevertheless, participatory instruments can enhance input legitimation, but this still has no guarantee for obtaining better results through newly developed policies. Legitimation can be obtained through innovations oriented at the substance of policy-making: policies. They can be improved by policy-learning, i. e., by learning from past policies of oneself or past or present policies of other actors in other policy fields and countries (Biegelbauer 2013).

During the last 20 years, researchers concentrated on policy-learning (Bandelow 2003, Biegelbauer 2007, Dunlop and Radaelli forthcoming), with the term being used as an analytical concept to better understand policy-making (Hall 1993, Sabatier 2007) and to suggest ways how to actually utilise learning for improving policy-making (Rose 2005). The central mechanism of policy-learning is a feedback loop which allows for the reflection of policies, their planning, development and deployment. Participatory instruments with the emphasis on the scrutiny of problems and debates on scenarios and various solutions, e. g., in the form of foresight exercises (Giesecke 2009, Weber 2012), are ideal for extensive content rich feedback.

Moreover, policy-learning is dependent on structural diversity and a plurality of perspectives, which foster a multifaceted reflection of problems and creative learning processes alike (Loeber et al. 2007, Biegelbauer 2013) – a diversity which may be fostered by the sustained introduction of participatory instruments into representative democratic systems.

Outlook

A solution for the problems democratic political systems currently have to face might orient itself on innovations in the form of participatory instruments and policy-learning. A variety of policy instruments and institutions, openness towards stakeholders and citizens, transparency, time to reflect contentious issues all would render dem-

ocratic political systems more resilient against natural, political, social and economic perturbations. These prescriptions certainly are ambitious, but it is difficult to see how representative democracies, which were developed on the basis of political ideas formed in the 18th and 19th century, could cope with challenges of the 21st century without incorporating new instruments and institutions. And let us remember: the ability to innovate and to adapt to changing environments is something democracies are known for.

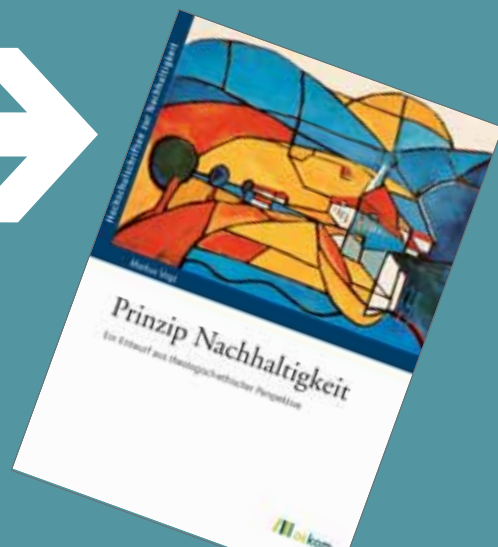
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