Newcastle University ePrints

Davoudi S. [On Democracy, Representation beyond the ballot box.](#)

disP, The Planning Review 2013, 49(3), 4-5.

Copyright:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *disP, The Planning Review* on 15th January 2014 available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02513625.2013.858997>

Date deposited: 28th May 2014 [made available 15th July 2015]

Version of file: Author final

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](#)

ePrints – Newcastle University ePrints

<http://eprint.ncl.ac.uk>

On Democracy: representation beyond the ballot-box

Simin Davoudi

When is a political authority legitimate?ⁱ This is one of the fundamental questions of political philosophy and one that planners are often confronted with. Is a planning decision legitimate because those who took the decision have the consent of the voters? Is it because the procedure through which the decision was made was democratic? Or, is it because the outcome from the decision was equitable?

The *consent* perspective has been debated since the 17th century when John Locke placed it at the centre of his 'social contract' theory, referring to the transfer of political authority from 'free and equal' individuals to the state. Since then, it has often been criticised for masquerading structures of subordination. The *procedural* view of legitimacy implies that people will accept a democratic decision even if they disagree with its outcome. So, if the procedure is democratic the outcome itself is deemed legitimate and those who disagree are obliged to go along with it. However, not everyone agrees that democracy (or fair procedure) is necessary for political legitimacy. For example, in objection to Locke's consent theory, David Hume famously argued that we should look for 'beneficial consequences' as a source of political legitimacy. His *substantive* view of legitimacy implies that, what makes political institutions legitimate is the quality of their outcomes irrespective of the procedures by which they are generated. If the outcomes are beneficial, the institutions are justified to rule and their rules ought to be obeyed. In practice, it is difficult to draw a sharp line between the quality of outcome and the quality of procedure and to substitute one with the other. In this column, however, I will limit my attention to procedural legitimacy and the question of representation which is at its heart.

The conventional accounts of representation conceptualise it as primarily a principal-agent relationship whereby the principals elect agents to speak and act on their behalf. This is the basis of all representative democracies in which the most critical relations are those of authorisation and accountability. Representative democracy was highly criticised by Jean Jacques Rousseau for giving people only a 'brief moment of liberty' at the election time after which they return to 'slavery'. For him, only direct self-government could be considered as democratic and politically legitimate. Contemporary deliberative democrats consider representative democracy as an incomplete form of procedural legitimacy because it confines the political role of citizens to periodic voting at elections plus some forms of intermittent practices when their particular interests are at stake. Opposition to

unwanted planning proposals is a good example of such intermittent political practices. It is argued that in representative democracies people become passive observers who have periodic capacity to vote and select but, with no permanent voice over collective decisions that affect them. One of the most influential advocates of deliberative democracy is Jorgen Habermas whose influence on communicative and collaborative planning theories is well documented, as is the critiques of his 'ideal speech theory'. However, what is less known is his contribution to the conceptualisation of democracy which goes beyond the representation - participation binary and considers the latter as a complement to the former. As David Plotke (a democratic theorist) reminds us representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy (suggested by Rousseau and pursued by deliberative democrats) and the messy realities of modern politics. It is indeed crucial in constituting democratic practices.

But, is representation limited to the conventional, formalistic representation that is defined by periodic election at the ballot box? The answer is no because, firstly, in the current political realities international, local and non-governmental actors (who are not necessarily elected by their constituents) play an increasingly significant role in polity. Secondly, contemporary associational life that is manifested in interest groups, civic associations and action groups are crucial for the survival of democracy. In today's complex and broadly democratic societies, representation is the subject of competing claims. Given the fluidity of the relationship between represented and representative, it is naïve to think about democratic representation as a monolithic concept based on formal relations of authorisation and accountability.

In order to understand the meaning of representation we need to know the context in which representation is situated. It was this recognition that grounded Hanna Pitkin's pioneering and highly influential paper written almost fifty years ago. She argued that in addition to the conventional, formalistic representation, there are at least three other ways in which the concept of representation is invoked. These are: substantive, symbolic, and descriptive representations. Substantive representation refers to the outcome and action of representatives and the extent to which they serve the interests and preferences of the represented. Symbolic representation relates to the meaning that representatives have for the represented and the extent to which they are accepted by them. Descriptive representation is about how far the representatives resemble those being represented by sharing common interests, identities, and experiences with them. These are summarised in the table below.

Forms of representation	Strategic question
Formalistic	Do they <i>speak</i> for the represented?
Symbolic	Do they <i>stand</i> for the represented?
Descriptive	Do they <i>resemble</i> the represented?
Substantive	Do they <i>act for</i> represented?

There is not enough space here to further elaborate these multiple forms of representation and their potential rewards and pitfalls. Suffice to say that they show the difficulty of drawing a line between procedural and substantive legitimacy, formal and informal representation, and representation and participation. They act as a reminder of David Miller's suggestion that, democracy is not an-all-or-nothing matter but, a continuous struggle to give people as a whole the final authority over the government's affairs.

ⁱ This column draws on a joint paper with my colleague, Paul Cowie, for the ACSP-AESOP joint conference in July 2013 in Dublin.