Towards a deliberative democracy based on deliberative polling practices

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“How well the public sphere functions becomes a concrete manifestation of society’s democratic character and thus in a sense the most immediately visible indicator of our admittedly imperfect democracies” (Dahlgren 1991, p. 2).

From a representative to a deliberative democracy

There exists a broad interest among Political communication scholars focusing on studies that analyze the mass media role in the democracy building process. Based on the interaction of all the actors involved in the public sphere (politicians, consultants, journalists, intellectual, civil society, etc.) in modern democracies political communication developed by mass media is understood as the exchange of speeches between politicians, journalists and citizens (Canel, 1999, Del Rey, 1996, Wolton, 1995).

However, the gap between governments and society turns the concept of public communication into key for the modern democracy. With the increasing importance of representative institutions of liberal democracy (elections, parliaments, rule of law, and so on) for developing the public discussion about public issues, civil society is more and more out of the public sphere and the decision making process. Besides, the access inequality to the public discussion feeds the weight of institutions voice comparing to society voice, where social groups with less organizational level, with less economic and cultural capacity are in a disadvantage position regarding the participation in the public debate. In consequence, modern democracies are more and more a non-legitimate democracies rather than a real participative democracy (Entman, 1989; Wolin, 2008).
Jurgen Habermas speaks directly to this "crisis of liberal democracy." Habermas’ theory of the public sphere (1989), which he labels "deliberative democracy," relies on reasoned and inclusive public deliberation that is geared to reaching consensual decisions. His arguments foreground concerns about legitimacy and (universal) justice, concerns that he believes are ignored by poststructuralists at their peril. Habermas's vision, where political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and where citizens deliberate about their common affairs, is considered indispensable in terms of theorising democracy and also that contemporary public sphere theory (see Downey and Fenton 2003; Fraser 1996; Calhoun 1992; Curran 1991) applies these elements to a wide range of public sphere activity applicable to alternative media frameworks.

For example, following this line, in order to avoid this participation deficit, Fraser (1992) proposed the concept of “deliberative enclaves” as a promotion of a public superposed spheres plurality, as discursive arenas that can help social groups to be listened, so that, later on, their voices could have resonance in the decision making process.

A complementary concept related that deliberative enclaves is that of the “minipopulus” (Dahl, 1993): considered small citizens assemblies that, based on new technologies that facilitate the public participation, provide a critical mass of well informed and active citizens that take part on deliberative process about the policy making process, and could contribute to a better qualified democracy.

A major citizenship participation and a different way of doing and of understanding politic are demanded as new exit routes of the liberal representative democracy crisis. Most of the deliberative democracy scholars have taken again the liberal tradition to impulse the need of a higher citizen participation in the political and public debate, as the way of revitalizing modern democracy based on dialog, deliberation and argumentation as fair methods for the decision making process (Bessete, 1980; Beniabiü, 1994; Dryzek, 1990; Fishkin, 1995; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Nino, 1997).

The deliberative polling as a tool for encourage civic participation

In the public opinion field, some of the ideas of the sociologist John Zaller (1992) underline the mass media role of managing knowledge, shaping ideological opinions (or not), doing available certain information and, definitively, offering alternatives or opinions: the richer in information amount and plural mass media are, the easier public opinion will be able to have a solid opinion, more according to his knowledge and his ideological view; by contrast, the more slanted or reduced in media expositions, the fewer possibilities for the citizenship to have an own opinion.
From this perspective, the key problem is what happens when we only receive a dominant opinion about a topic. Zaller writes: "the manipulation decreases if some possibility of choosing is given to the public, that is, if the chance of choosing between alternative visions is allowed" (Zaller, 1992). And here is where the deliberative polling plays a crucial role, as a methodological procedure designed by James Fishkin on late eighties included in the qualitative public opinion research methods and the processes to restore citizenship voice in the public decision process. Unlike the conventional survey, the deliberative poll includes informative resources and public debates that can reach more solid and plural opinions.

What would we think about a concrete topic if you could be informed and debate the arguments on favour and against with a plural sample of citizens? The deliberative poll tries to response to this question across a process that starts with a public-opinion survey, which follows a deliberative forum where participants find the resources to be informed and to debate. A second survey to the same sample will allow us to observe how preferences could change as result of this experience.

In Spain, the use of deliberative polling for obtaining more informed, trustworthy and less stereotyped opinions are not enough often. In fact, there is a lack of mechanisms of democratic participation that strengthen the formation of citizenship. The first and unique experience in that sense took part in Córdoba (Andalusia), last march, 2006, and was organized and supervised by the Sociological Research Center (CIS) and the Advanced Social Studies Institute of Andalusia (IESA).

This first deliberative poll in Spain had two complementary phases: first one, in which 1.200 persons were answering to a survey on the topic of the consequences of so called “macrobotellon” (young people big meetings for alcoholics drinking in urban and public places, that are more and more often on weekends) ; later (six weeks after), 136 respondents were voluntary used as a representative sample to participate on a forum and listened to some experts' conferences from where they received information about that topic. Later, they answer back again to the first survey. The results showed that most answers changed enormously: after the deliberative forum, the participants rejected the idea of that the uncivic behaviours were generalized among young people who take part on these “macrobotellon” activities, and their responses were more supporting the preventive measures than repression measures, that were more extended in the first survey.

In the organizers words: "this experience demonstrates that when citizens have the opportunity to be informed and weigh the different positions that exists concerning a certain topic, an opinion
change takes place. The major information and the possibility of deliberation concerning a topic that the deliberative forum provides bring more variegated and cautious opinions that go far from prejudices and established stereotypes”.

Nowadays, the Communication Faculty of the Catholic University San Antonio of Murcia (Spain) will develop a new experience of deliberative polling on the water management and drought problems in Spain that will be supervised by James Fiskin, from Stanford University (USA),

References


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