

## Chapter 73

# When Democratic Innovations Integrate Multiple and Diverse Channels of Social Dialogue: Opportunities and Challenges

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the opportunities, limitations, and risks of integrating multiple channels of citizen engagement within a democratic innovation. Using examples and case studies of recent face-to-face and online multichannel democratic innovations, the authors challenge the emerging consensus that redundancy and diversification of venues of participation are always positively correlated with the success of democratic innovations. Applying their concrete experience in areas of the world in which a systemic organization of different channels of citizen participation exists, the authors provide guidelines for achieving better integration of multiple channels of social dialogue.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In June 2017, the annual edition of the general Conference of the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy (IOPD), held in Montreal, dedicated an important space to participatory and consultation experiences “using a number of different channels simultaneously”<sup>1</sup> (p. 14). The topic, which also became the Centre of a special working group of IODP members on a permanent basis, inspired a wide survey carried on among the IODP cities by the “*Empatia*” project group<sup>2</sup> at the University of Coimbra (Portugal). Answering to the survey on the connections created between different channels of citizens

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involvement in their territories, 104 cities displayed the existence of a more or less developed “system” that tries to coordinate and make interact different Democratic Innovations happening simultaneously or in temporal sequences within their administrative borders.

What above-mentioned photographs an interesting transformation taking place at the same time in different continents, which is giving a growing space to conceptualize and shape “systems” of Democratic Innovations, that previously often co-existed but rarely were coordinated, and somehow also need to be related to other forms of citizens engagements that develop bottom-up not only in the form of “participatory practices by invitation”, but also in the form of “*practices of irruption*” (Blas & Ibarra, 2006) through which citizens and social movements struggle to conquer spaces where their voice could be heard. In this perspective, it seems that a new awareness has been growing global in last decade, that genuine “democratic innovations” – i.e. those capable of developing “democratic common goods” in a creative way – must be read as part of larger ecosystems of patterns of civic engagement in polity matters. According to this new wide-spreading approach, the same definition of Democratic Innovation seems to be slightly evolving, so that today they can be defined as experiences related to facilitation and increase of the access and the substantive participation, both through “institutions specifically designed to increase citizens’ participation” (Smith, 2009) and also “through bottom-up experiences able to connect with institutional practices in the processes of policy-making and political decision-making” (Sorice, 2019).

Under this perspective, Democratic Innovations could be seen both as a large family of participatory practices by “invitation”, including different tools that must be tailored to diverse contexts, and also a series of tensions with other forms of expression of citizen engagement, which develop independently from (of even in reaction to) those more formalized and institutionalized experiments. A similar vision must still be further elaborated and accepted, being that is not so obvious – as demonstrated by many cases in which public institutions tend to deny legitimacy (or even criminalize, sometimes) to all forms of citizens mobilizations that do not happen in a controllable framework or space pre-accepted by those institutions themselves.

In view of such varied panorama of interpretations (which is still not uniquely accepting to enlarge the domain of Democratic Innovations to a coexistent mix of top-down and bottom-up practices of civic engagement), in the next paragraphs we will continue to use the concept of Democratic Innovations to depict those processes and institutions “designed specifically to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making” (Smith, 2009), which are become an increasingly common feature of policymaking and governance building. In doing so, we declaredly would like to preserve the vision well expressed by the founding team of “Participedia”, a global network of scholars that maps democratic innovations using a variety of new crowdsourcing methods: i.e. the conviction that the fast diffusion of democratic innovations represents “a transformation of democracy—one possibly as revolutionary as the development of the representative, party-based form of democracy that evolved out of the universal franchise.”<sup>3</sup>

It is worth to underline, here, that some democratic innovations are very simple and involve a single public in a set of tasks. Examples of single channel democratic innovations could be the Town hall meetings (Bryan, 2003), many mini-publics (Smith & Ryan, 2014), issue-reporting digital platforms (Sjoberg, Mellon, & Peixoto, 2015) or participatory monitoring processes (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2007). Other democratic innovations, instead, are more complex and can be better understood as a system that integrates multiple channels of engagement, i.e., multiple online and/or offline spaces designed to promote the participation of a specific segment of the population. The most complex of these systems engage more than a million people (Aggio, & Sampaio, 2013). It is also important to stress that - while the existing

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