

Can Democratic Innovations Reconcile Citizens with Representative Institutions?

Abstract: Can democratic innovations (DIs) offer a cure for the widespread loss of support for electoral institutions? This widely held assumption among advocates of DIs should be questioned more thoroughly. Insufficient attention has been paid so far to the impact of different types of DIs on electoral legitimacy, defined as the support for the principles grounding electoral representation. What is at stake is the compatibility and equilibrium between different parts of the new democratic systems that are developing in many political contexts. To address this issue, the article offers an innovative typology, distinguishing five types of DIs based on their relationship with traditional representative institutions. This allows to identify DIs that do have the potential to strengthen electoral legitimacy (initiative, recall, abrogative referendums, deliberative town-halls) from others overtly attacking it (lottocracy, liquid democracy) or potentially challenging it (citizen-initiated referendums and empowered citizens' assemblies). The article shows that it is not because an innovation is conceived as complementary to electoral representative institutions that it cannot challenge the latter's foundations. Finally, it identifies several issues on which empirical knowledge is lacking, opening perspectives for future research.

Keywords: democratic innovations; representation; legitimacy; sortition; direct democracy.

Introduction

It has become quite common, when looking for solutions to the contemporary challenges faced by traditional representative institutions – low trust in politicians, declining turnout to elections, partisan disaffiliation (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007; Mair 2013) – to consider democratic innovations (hereafter DIs) increasing citizens' participation beyond elections as a possible cure. It would be convenient if DIs had the potential to mitigate the loss of support for electoral institutions, given that low trust in elected politicians seems to be “the main driver of support for all forms of empowerment of citizens” (Bedock and Pilet 2020: 15). However, the empowerment of citizens may reconcile them with politics without by any means addressing the problem of decreasing trust in elected politicians and in electoral representation as a model.

Worse, increasing non-electoral means of participation or creating new forms of representation may further delegitimize electoral representation.

This would not be a problem if electoral representation were dispensable. And some people do indeed believe that it is, that a democracy without elections is not only conceivable, but would also be more desirable in many respects, given the oligarchic capture of electoral institutions (Bouricius 2013; Guerrero 2014; Landemore 2020). Most scholars, however, including most advocates of DIs, believe that elections are indispensable, that they offer goods such as civil peace, authorization, accountability, structured deliberation and responsiveness that alternative democratic systems would fail to deliver. Yet, indispensable does not mean sufficient. Many scholars also believe that representative institutions, which were built on very elitist (and actually anti-democratic) assumptions need to be updated and to make room for more citizen involvement. The interesting question is therefore how to update representative institutions and to empower citizens while maintaining a key role for electoral representation and preserving (or improving) its perceived legitimacy. It is the question of the *equilibrium* between different parts of the new, hybrid democratic systems that are being created in a diversity of political contexts and that could supplant traditional forms of representative government in the near future.

In this respect, this article follows the invitation made by the advocates of a “systemic” approach to deliberation to consider democratic innovations as parts of a larger system, and to study more closely their relation with other parts of the system (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Dryzek 2017; Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019: chap. 5). It departs, however, from an approach exclusively focused on deliberation, acknowledging that the overall value of democratic systems is not reducible to their deliberative value (Saward 2021: 22). And it focuses on one question that is relevant to systemic thinking yet seems to have been neglected so far: the impact that different DIs can have on electoral legitimacy, defined as the support for the principles grounding electoral representation. This is certainly not the only question that matters or the only basis on which DIs’ added value should be assessed. Yet it is meant to feed the discussion on their capacity to strengthen democratic systems, and hence a broader discussion on democratic design.

To feed this broader discussion, I suggest that it is useful to distinguish DIs based on their relationship with traditional representative institutions – whether they are meant to open, improve, bypass, or change them and how they are likely to affect support for them. By developing such typology, my ambition is to offer a framework for analyzing the issue, and to identify gaps in the empirical literature, with the hope to invite further research. The reflection

operates at a relatively high level of abstraction because it considers a problem that is relevant in a plurality of contexts: how to articulate electoral and non-electoral institutions or practices? The next step would be to consider how these different DI's "fit" in a particular context, with its specific institutions, practices, actors, needs, demands and other specificities (see Saward 2021: 112-118), which is not the question dealt with in this article, but which is essential for sound democratic design.

Several typologies of democratic innovations already exist, based on the degree of popular control (Arnstein 1969) or on design choices – such as the selection method, the mode of participation or communication, the mode of decision-making and the degree of institutionalization or empowerment (Fung 2003; Smith 2009; Escobar and Elstub 2019; Jäske 2019). They illuminate the wide diversity of means of involving citizens in deliberative and decision-making processes, as well as the hybrid character of many processes. However, none of them addresses (or helps us answering) the question of what DIs do to electoral representation in a perspective of systemic equilibrium. This will arguably depend on the degree of empowerment, influence or impact, considered in these other typologies. However, as we shall see, the effects of DIs on electoral legitimacy are not only a function of their empowerment. These effects also depend on their *nature* and *function*, which ground different possible relationships with traditional representative institutions. As a result of this distinct emphasis, the typology offered below differs significantly from existing ones, DIs being grouped not so much by family resemblance but by function in the democratic system and attitude towards electoral representation.

1. Conceptual clarifications

This article is thus concerned with the effects of the introduction and use of different types of *DIs* on *electoral legitimacy*. Following Smith (2009: 1) we can define DIs as institutions or practices (Smith focuses on institutions) other than elections “that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process”. Whether they are actually “new” or “old”, institutionalized or imagined, does not matter in this definition. The main reason for taking up the concept of DIs is that it has become common in the literature. Yet this does not impede from acknowledging the potentially misleading character of the term “innovation”. One way to interpret it in a useful way, is as

innovations compared to the traditional model of representative government analyzed by Manin (1997) and others, in which participation was restricted to elections and public debate¹.

Electoral legitimacy, then, refers to the perceived legitimacy of representation through elections, or more exactly the *popular support for the basic principles grounding electoral representation* (detailed below), from which derives a general willingness² to accept the representative claims made by elected representatives and the authority of decisions made through electoral representation. This is arguably a reductive – some might say “positivist” – understanding of legitimacy. However, although I acknowledge that *normative* legitimacy is much thicker than what I call legitimacy here, and that DIs should also be assessed on the basis of a richer, normative account of legitimacy, I believe that *perceived* legitimacy also matters from a normative perspective. Because if electoral representation has normative value (an assumption of this article), then its support among the citizenry has important instrumental value. Hence, the article is concerned with the support for electoral representation as a democratic model – a model differing from alternative models of democracy, such as assembly democracy for example (the model of ancient Athens or of the New-England town meetings, where citizens make decisions collectively in large face-to-face assemblies)

In practice, many democratic systems are not reducible to electoral representation. They include non-electoral means of participation such as mechanisms of initiative, referendums, participatory budgeting or mini-publics. In such contexts, electoral legitimacy is more specific than other categories such as regime legitimacy or “diffuse support” (Easton 1965), i.e. support for the political system taken as a whole. People may be satisfied with the regime they live in or manifest diffuse trust precisely because their democratic institutions are not limited to electoral representation. At the same time, electoral legitimacy is more abstract than “specific support”, i.e. support for the incumbent political leaders. One may dislike the politicians who are on the political stage without rejecting the basic principles of electoral representation.

What I will call here the basic *principles* (P) of electoral representation are the principles that are necessary and distinguish this model of democracy from other forms of representation

¹ Another alternative is to see them as innovative in a particular context, regardless of their uses elsewhere at other times (Geißel 2012: 164), but a practice can be innovative in a peculiar context without looking innovative to most people, hence this definition seems to include too much.

² People may accept the basic principles of electoral representation while seeing some particular representative claims or some decisions made by elected actors as illegitimate, for example because they believe that the representative process is distorted in some way.

or government³. They refer to a pure and classical model of representative democracy from which existing representative institutions have clearly evolved. The aim, here, is not to defend such minimal understanding of democratic representation. It is to appreciate the relationship between these core principles and the new institutions and practices that are meant to enrich contemporary democratic systems. These basic principles are the following:

P1: Collective decisions are made by representatives.

P2: These representatives are elected through universal suffrage in free and competitive elections.

P3: Elections are recurring to allow voters to sanction representatives and to incentivize them to respond to public opinion.

They should be distinguished from key *variables* (V) in the design of electoral institutions such as:

V1: The electoral rules prevailing in a given political context.

V2: The margin of independence of representatives.

V3: The importance of political parties⁴.

V4: The opportunities for participation beyond elections.

What matters for our purpose here is to see that people can reject or wish to change some of these variables without questioning the desirability of being represented by elected representatives. Nevertheless, their perception of electoral representation can be affected by their perception of one of these variables. If, for example, they strongly dislike parties and believe that high partyiness is unavoidable under electoral representation, it will affect their

³ This is a more restricted set of principles compared to Manin's (1997) principles of representative government. First, it is focused on elections, leaving aside the formation and role of public opinion and the deliberative dimension of democracy, which is not meant to deny their importance. Second, it is focused on unnegotiable characteristics of the model, thus excluding the independence of representatives, as electoral representation is conceivable (although possibly not attractive) with imperative mandates.

⁴ Countries vary in their degree of "partyiness" (Katz 1986), understood as the control exercised by parties over policy-making and the selection of (major) public officials. Whether or not parties are necessary for electoral democracy, a high degree of partyiness is certainly optional.

support for electoral representation. Thus, the distinction between basic principles and variables may be blurred in many people's mind.

The distinction matters, however, because it will help sorting DIs depending on their relationship to these principles and variables. As we shall see, most DIs are meant to modify the variables, without questioning its basic principles – like electoral reforms modify V1. Yet others, involving representation by lot or direct legislation by the people, do question the basic principles, at least to some extent.

2. DIs and electoral representation: a typology

Following Smith's definition laying the focus on citizens' involvement beyond elections, all DIs challenge the minimalist or elitist understanding of democracy as a political system in which citizens *merely* select their rulers in competitive elections. Beyond this common trait, DIs differ in their implicit conception of democracy, and more precisely in their relationship with electoral representation. While some of them preserve a prominent role for electoral representation or aim at improving it, others are meant to circumvent it or even to supplant it.

Hence, a typology of DIs based on their relationship with electoral representation is useful for the exercise of anticipating their likely effects on electoral legitimacy. It will allow us to better identify the DIs that are complementary to electoral institutions and those whose compatibility with elections is less evident and requires more attention. To offer a broad view and a more complete picture of the possible relationships with electoral representative institutions, the typology includes both innovations that have been tried in practice and others that have only been proposed by theorists. It is not meant to be exhaustive of the innovations that have been tried and imagined, but it seems to me to include the most frequently discussed.

Table 1, below, introduces five different relationships that DIs can maintain with electoral representation. The typology has been derived from previous collective work on representation and democratic innovations that aimed to identify the purposes of DIs and their different possible relationships with electoral institutions (Pilet, Bedock and Vandamme 2021). It seems to me that none of the DIs discussed in the academic literature aims at overcoming all forms of representation (and not just *electoral* representation), which would be the sixth type. A fully direct democracy is probably conceivable at the local level, with something like town-meeting assemblies open to all. Yet even one of the most ambitious proposals for democratic reforms in the direction of direct democracy, by Benjamin Barber (1984: 262), puts forward

institutions that “should complement and be compatible with the primary representative institutions of large-scale modern societies”.

Table 1: Typology of DIs

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5
Aims	Opening representation to citizens' input	Increasing citizens' control over elected representatives	Enhancing representation through sortition	Changing to a different form of representation	Bypassing representation (direct legislation)
Examples	Right of petition Right of initiative Crowdsourcing Deliberative town-halls	Abrogative or rejective referendum Recall Citizen audit	CA preparing elections CA with agenda-setting function CA with scrutinizing role	Multi-body sortition Open democracy Liquid democracy	Citizen-initiated referendums Participatory budgeting

In what follows, I examine these five types of DIs. I explain, first, how they relate to electoral representation's basic principles. Then, I make theoretical hypotheses about their effects on electoral legitimacy. And in cases where there is relevant empirical literature, I also consider whether these theoretical hypotheses find empirical support (or opposing indications). Overall, though, direct empirical study of the effects of DIs on what I call electoral legitimacy is lacking. There are indications of the effects of some of them on turnout, which seems to vary depending on the type of participatory mechanism (Peters 2016), but turnout is not a reliable proxy for electoral legitimacy⁵. Hence, it is one important contribution of this article to point out lacking empirical knowledge.

⁵ Declining turnout can be interpreted in many ways. It could be seen as a rejection of the basic principles of electoral representation. This would be the case, for example, if people did not vote because they did not accept to be represented at all (P1), or rejected the *elected* officials' representative claim (P2), or failed to see the value of electoral accountability (P3). However, abstention can also be explained by many other factors: dissatisfaction with the electoral system (V1); voters getting tired of voting when opportunities to vote increase (Voigt and Blume 2015; Kern and Hooghe 2018); lack of interest or faith in politics (resignation being different from a rejection of electoral representation). Besides, people may vote to influence the result while rejecting the mechanism (Abizadeh 2021), and an increase of turnout can be the result of many factors other than institutional changes (such as higher stakes, or an exciting candidate).

2.1. Opening electoral representation

If elections are the only *institutionalized* means by which citizens can convey their aspirations (V4), some of these are likely to remain ignored. This occurs because of the pivotal role played by parties in elections (V3): they have the power to filter out some citizen aspirations. Whether or not this is desirable all things considered, it can create citizens' frustration and reduce responsiveness. Based on such diagnosis, one might want to increase the *openness* of electoral representation to citizens' input. Several DIs allow this:

- The right of *petition*, allowing citizens, individually or collectively, to make a request to a public authority, with or without corresponding duty for the public authority to react.
- The right of citizen *initiative* (or “agenda initiative”), more ambitiously allowing citizens to initiate a law-making process, by forcing the Parliament to examine a proposal and justify its decision. This right is limited to agenda-setting, not decision-making. It should be distinguished from the citizen-initiated referendum (or “popular initiative”) which will be considered later. One example is the European Citizens' Initiative (initiatives being filtered by the EU Commission).
- *Crowdsourcing*, which consists in opening a law-making or even a constitution-writing process to citizens' input (initiators keeping the last word). The failed attempt at rewriting the Icelandic Constitution in 2011-2012 involved such procedure (Landemore 2015).
- Deliberative town-halls (Neblo, Esterling and Lazer 2018) allowing citizens to collectively discuss online with representatives of their constituency and to make suggestions or alert them about some issues they deem important.

All these practices can be interpreted as aiming to *improve* electoral representation by making it more open to citizens' input, and ultimately by making it more responsive to public opinion. As such, they do not challenge the principle of representation (P1) nor the electoral nature of representation (P2-3). However, they seem to assume that elections are *insufficient* to convey popular aspirations, that additional opportunities for citizen expression are necessary to compensate for the limitations of traditional electoral representation.

One could therefore expect that their implementation and use would increase electoral legitimacy, or at least not negatively affect it. They give citizens reasons to get more involved within the framework of electoral representation, potentially generating input legitimacy, and reasons to believe that the representative system could deliver what they expect, potentially generating output legitimacy. Their effect on perceived legitimacy, however, highly depends on the uptake of citizens' input. For the legitimacy-enhancing effect to play out, participation should be *empowered*; there should be some pressure on political actors to take initiatives seriously (Setälä and Schiller 2012). This is one of the lessons that come out of a study of the European Citizen Initiative mechanism by Gherghina and Miscoiu, who explain that because the EU Commission is not compelled to take any action (beyond justifying its choice), the tool “is not more than a petition in practice” (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2015: 134), which partly accounts for EU citizens' low enthusiasm about it. Considering this, we should probably not expect much effect for what regards the more modest yet right of petition. In addition to being little empowering, it may lack visibility and hence have no effect on non-participants' perception of input legitimacy.

Another important aspect for the legitimacy-enhancing effect of initiatives is that there should not be too many hurdles. If the threshold of signature is too high, the time to collect them too short, or if there are important restrictions on the types of issues that are eligible for initiatives, citizens will tend to neglect the tool (Setälä and Schiller 2012: 250-252).

In all those respects, the “directly representative” form of democracy that deliberative town-halls offer appears like a very promising way of restoring electoral legitimacy, the contact with elected representatives being direct and usually perceived as constructive. Indeed, in practice, this innovation has shown its capacity to increase trust in electoral institutions and to reconnect with them people unsatisfied with the traditional model of electoral representation (Neblo, Esterling and Lazer 2018: ch. 3 and 6).

In sum, unless they are perceived as useless (unlikely to have any impact) or as a form of elite manipulation, DIs opening electoral representation to citizens' input are unlikely to negatively affect electoral legitimacy. In the best cases (when the mechanisms are visible, used and perceived as useful), they could even improve it. This, however, should be confirmed by empirical research. In particular, data is lacking on citizens' appreciation of the right to set the agenda without making the final decision, and on their perception of the innovative practice of crowdsourcing.

2.2. Increasing citizens' control over elected representatives

The quality of electoral representation may also be judged insufficient for other reasons than its lack of openness. For example, one might consider that the reiteration of elections is not enough to secure effective accountability and responsiveness, or that elected representatives have too much freedom to deviate from the dominant opinion (V2). Based on such assessment, one could see value in the following DIs increasing citizens' opportunities to control the work of their elected representatives:

- The *recall*, allowing citizens to remove elected representatives from office before the end of their term, through a petition and a popular vote.
- The *abrogative (or rejective) referendum*, allowing citizens to cancel a law if a sufficient threshold of signatures and possibly a threshold of turnout to the referendum have been reached, and if a majority of citizens voted against the law.
- The *citizen audit*, usually a bottom-up initiative by citizens who want to control local public finances “to increase the responsiveness and accountability of decision-makers” (Bailly 2022).

These options can be interpreted as aiming to strengthen electoral representation by increasing popular control and, thereby, responsiveness. Again, these DIs do not challenge the principle of representation nor the electoral nature of representation. Yet they do increase citizens' opportunities for involvement – although mainly in a negative form, as a corrective for representative failures.

Although the recall serves the purpose of expressing dissatisfaction with elected representatives, it might turn out to improve the perception of electoral representation if it seen as reducing the risks of misrepresentation. It does not question the very idea of having representatives. Its function is rather to improve representation by making it more responsive to citizens' aspirations. With its availability, citizens might gain a sense of popular power and control over their representatives, potentially increasing trust in the ability of elections to deliver adequate representation (Vandamme 2020). A recent empirical study of French citizens' aspirations, for example, showed that increased opportunities to *control* elected representatives could be a response to dissatisfaction with the prevailing political system (Bedock 2020).

A way in which the recall could harm electoral legitimacy, however, is if citizens fail to appreciate the diversity of constraints faced by governments. If they systematically sanction their representatives for failures to deliver on some expectations that they simply cannot meet, the mechanism could then turn out to be detrimental to electoral legitimacy. Another is if

systematic instrumentalization of the recall for partisan purposes creates a vicious polarization dynamic, as seems to be the case in Peru or Columbia for example, where it is often used by sore losers to contest electoral results (Welp 2016; Welp and Milanese 2018) and where satisfaction with democracy is low. If that is the case, the perception of electoral legitimacy could end up being badly harmed.

Regarding the abrogative referendum, the same feeling of popular control might increase input legitimacy. Some have also suggested that it could generate more trust in representative institutions for minorities, because they would have an additional tool to protect themselves against undesirable majority decisions (Setälä 2006). Additionally, the tool has the potential to increase output legitimacy by reducing the likelihood of very unpopular policies. Yet, again, if it is systematically instrumentalized by sore losers to block legislation, harming legitimate opposition or creating political deadlock, the net effect on electoral legitimacy may not be positive.

The citizen audit does not seem to run the same risk of instrumentalization and polarization⁶. Its main limits, though, are its lack of visibility and its rather technical character. Most citizens will not be aware of the existence of such initiative, mostly practiced at the local level. One could nonetheless imagine it having legitimacy-enhancing effects if it were to be institutionalized and made visible: citizens would have more reasons to trust representatives' use of public money if they knew that this use were closely scrutinized by some fellow citizens. Yet a lot would hinge on the perception of representativeness or reliability of the citizen-auditors.

In sum, DIs increasing citizens' control within electoral representation could be expected to strengthen electoral legitimacy, at least from the input perspective, and possibly from an output perspective as well, unless their instrumentalization by political actors ends up harming the electoral process. The latter point holds, to a certain extent, for all DIs, but it is particularly the case here, because the abrogative referendum and the recall have a paralyzing and polarizing potential.

One aspect in which the abrogative referendum differs from the recall, however, lies in the fact that it does challenge P1, the quasi-monopoly⁷ over decision-making enjoyed by elected representatives. If their decisions can be rejected, it means that they do not decide alone. They

⁶ See nonetheless Bailly 2023 for an example of partly disappointing institutionalization in Madrid.

⁷ I will use the term "quasi-monopoly" instead of "monopoly" because in practice, in most countries, some political decisions are made by non-elected actors like courts, central banks, or even the administration.

keep the control over agenda-setting, but they do not necessarily have the final word. Nonetheless, in contrast with citizen-initiated referendums, discussed in section 2.5, the abrogative referendum maintains a certain primacy of electoral representation. Citizens cannot legislate directly; they can only intervene in cases of strong disagreement with a decision made by their representatives. It therefore seems plausible to expect that an occasional use of the abrogative referendum could improve the perception of the working of electoral representation. As is the case with the recall, citizens knowing that they can intervene if things go wrong would have more reasons to trust this representative system's capacity to meet their demands.

2.3. Enhancing representation through sortition

A third way of trying to improve representative institutions is by complementing elections with a different form of representation, that offered through (stratified) random selection. For long, representation has been associated with elections. In recent years, however, a kind of revolution has occurred within representation theory, making conceptual room for representation *beyond* elections (Saward 2009; 2010; Montanaro 2012; Landemore 2020) and leading to the analysis of representative claims within democratic innovations (Guasti and Geissel 2021). Here, the focus is on mini-publics or citizens' assemblies. They are frequently advocated as a way of increasing deliberation within the representative system (Goodin 2008; Felicetti, Niemeyer and Curato 2016; Gastil and Wright 2018), with a potential to improve it in terms of social inclusion, reflexivity and fairness, at least when they are sufficiently connected to the decision-making process. They can also be used for a variety of other purposes, including opening representation to citizens' input, if the mini-public has agenda-setting power, and strengthening accountability if it is tasked with a scrutinizing role (Setälä 2021). The difference with previous types of DIs, however, lies in their introduction of a new form of representation – without, here, questioning the existence or primacy of electoral representation. Examples include:

- *Citizens' assemblies preparing elections*, with a mission to “identify key legislation to aid voters in comparing candidate [or party] voting records”, to rate legislative decisions, or to “evaluate candidates for executive, judicial, and administrative offices” (Gastil 2000: 139).
- *Citizens' assemblies with an agenda-setting function*, as is the case with the Citizen Council linked to the Parliament of Eastern Belgium (Niessen and Reuchamps 2020).

- *Citizens' assemblies with a scrutinizing function* (Setälä 2021), exercising a deliberative check on law proposals, which could for example take the form of a randomly selected second chamber with a function of second reading and amendment (Vandamme and Verret-Hamelin 2017).
- *Citizens' assemblies with a decision-making function* within a hybrid bicameral system, where they have a power equal to the elected chamber (Gastil and Wright 2018) or where parties argue in the elected chamber while the citizens' assembly makes the decisions (Sutherland 2011).

None of these DIs challenges the principle of representation, and the former three do not challenge the primacy of electoral representation. Nevertheless, proposals involving the random selection of citizens for a political task carry with them the idea that *electoral* representation is insufficient, that another form of representation would be desirable – here, mainly as *complement* or *counterbalance* to electoral representation. Therefore, sortition-based DIs should be examined separately from others. The first two types (“Opening representation” and “Increasing citizens’ control”) in no way challenge the assumption that institutionalized representation⁸ should be secured through elections. They simply assume that representation, as such, is insufficient, and that some degree of complementary citizen involvement is necessary, or that representatives should be made more accountable. Yet citizens’ assemblies and other randomly selected bodies do challenge the electoral monopoly over institutionalized representation. They introduce a new form of representation that potentially challenges the very foundations of electoral legitimacy.

Arguably, because all forms of representation are “partial and incomplete” (Saward 2010: 140), there may be room for different forms of representation, and the acknowledgment of a new form of representation does not necessarily undermine electoral representation (see Saward 2010: ch. 4). Nevertheless, there is a potential tension in this case. While electoral democracy is a competition between candidates claiming to be better representatives than the others, singling out personalities who stand out from the mass by certain qualities (Manin 1997), sortition is the opposite of a competition supposed to single out the best representatives. Nobody must do anything to be selected. The basic premise of sortition is that every person over the age of majority is endowed with equal or sufficient capacity for political judgment. This

⁸ I say “institutionalized” representation because non-electoral forms of representation already exist within civil society. See Montanaro 2012.

assumption, however, calls into question the very logic of electoral democracy. If everyone is equally capable, or if capacity does not matter, why maintain a selection procedure (elections) that is supposed to bring out the most capable? Why would we continue to vote for others if we think we are as capable as they are of making good decisions? It cannot simply be for the purpose of delegating this power, for the sake of division of labor since random selection can serve the same function. Thus, to the extent that representatives are selected by lot to perform functions previously held by elected representatives, there might be an unacknowledged tension between the two modes of representation (Buge and Vandamme 2022).

If, however, sortition is used for different functions than elections – for example, to bring the deliberative input of a socially diversified body into the legislative process, not to legislate directly – the tension may be less salient. This should be the case with the *citizens' assemblies preparing elections* mentioned above, as this was not a function previously performed by elected representatives. Competition between two forms of representation would also likely be weak in *mixed* deliberative committees, as institutionalized in the Brussels Parliament, where randomly selected citizens and elected representatives cooperate in a parliamentary committee (Reuchamps 2020). This DI comes closer to type 1 (“Opening representation”), and in particular from deliberative town-halls, which also involve sortition, yet in a clear aim to improve electoral representation⁹. The cases of *agenda-setting citizens' assemblies* or *randomly selected second chambers* are less clear-cut. If the specificity of their mission is well perceived by citizens (a function of initiative on the one side; of second reading and amendment on the other, but neither a power of legislation nor veto), they would not necessarily undermine electoral legitimacy (and they might bring about other benefits). Yet, the more they will step on the previous prerogatives of electoral representatives, like citizens' assemblies with decision-making power, the more the two modes of representation are likely to be in competition, blurring the distinction between the types 3 (where sortition is meant to complement and enhance electoral representation) and 4 (where it is meant to replace electoral representation).

Relevant empirical evidence about the effects of sortition-based DIs on electoral legitimacy is lacking, notably because most mini-publics have been too detached from political decision-making to influence non-participants' perception. These innovations are increasingly gaining public visibility and macro-political impact, however, so there is room for interesting

⁹ There is also a way in which deliberative town-halls increase citizens' control (as in 2.2). Hence, they fit uneasily in the typology. Yet all typologies have grey zones.

empirical research in the future. In the meantime, there are already some clues available on the possible tensions between sortition and electoral legitimacy. First, one can unsurprisingly observe hostile reactions by elected representatives to the idea or use of citizens' assemblies¹⁰ (Jacquet, Niessen and Reuchamps 2020) and indications that they feel threatened in their legitimacy by the use of a competing form of representation (Rangoni, Bedock and Talukder 2021; Buge and Vandamme 2022). This fear could obviously be mistaken, but when looking at the citizen side of the issue, one also finds indications of a tension between the two forms of representation. Thus, it seems that "supporting sortition requires citizens to consider not only that politicians cannot be trusted, but also that election as an institutional mechanism is unable to produce meaningful change" (Bedock and Pilet 2020: 16). This should be confirmed by further research, but these various clues give plausibility to the hypothesis of a tension between two competing forms of representation. What should be checked, however, is whether this can be compensated by an increased belief that citizens are listened to by politicians and can influence the decision-making process when it includes citizens' assemblies (see Boulianne 2018; Jäske 2019; Pow, van Dijck and Marien 2020). And what should also be tested is whether and how the introduction of citizens' assemblies meant to *complement* electoral representation affects citizens' support for electoral representation, and to what extent the effects vary depending on the role or degree of empowerment of citizens' assemblies.

2.4. Changing representation

Although they have never been tried in practice in modern democracies, ambitious proposals exist to entirely replace elections in the process of selecting representatives of the people. These include:

- Bouricius' (2013) complex democratic system through *multi-body sortition*, with different citizens' assemblies respectively setting the agenda, drafting bills, reviewing them, voting on them, setting the rules of the process and enforcing them.

¹⁰ Interestingly, they seem more open to mixed assemblies, where they cooperate with randomly selected citizens (Jacquet, Niessen and Reuchamps 2020), which seems to confirm the fact that mixed assemblies belong more in type 1: Opening representation.

- Landemore’s *open democracy* model, with an “open mini-public” as the central legislative institution, connected to the larger population via crowdsourcing platforms and deliberative forums (Landemore 2020: 13).
- The idea of “*liquid*” democracy, enabling citizens, through the Internet, to either vote directly on collective decisions or delegate their vote to a “proxy” representative – a decision they can reverse at any time (Blum and Zuber 2016). Under such system, there would still be representation, assuming that many people would not have the time or the motivation to collect information about all possible collective decisions that ought to be made. Yet this representation would be very different from electoral representation (see Valsangiacomo 2021).

Here again, it is not necessarily the principle of representation that is challenged, but clearly its electoral nature. Liquid democracy goes a bit further, though, because it leaves it open for citizens who prefer so not to be represented at all.

These are clearly innovations that are unlikely to do any good to electoral legitimacy, as they deny the superiority of electoral representation over other forms of representation (sortition) or over other forms of collective decision making (liquid democracy).

It is unlikely, however, that a country will from one day to the other move from electoral representation to such a system. For this reason, the theorists who envision such radical models are often open to hybrid democratic systems combining traditional representative institutions with innovative ones. Thus, one might imagine introducing the seeds of very different political institutions in the existing ones (Gastil and Wright 2018; Junius et al. 2021). And this leads us back to the conclusion of the previous section: it is conceivable that injecting some aspects of these radical models in our representative systems would generate all sorts of benefits, including regime legitimacy. However, they could also carry with them a challenge to electoral legitimacy, which is certainly worth investigating, from a systemic perspective.

2.5. Bypassing electoral representation

A final set of DIs does not play one form of representation against another, but aims to bypass representation by providing avenues for direct legislation by the people. The thought, here, is not necessarily that representation is bad as such – some division of labor might be necessary or inescapable – but that it is clearly insufficient. The difference with opening representation in 2.1 is that citizens are not only allowed to start initiatives or bring their input

in the representative system; they can also make decisions by themselves, without intermediaries.

- The archetypal example is the *citizen-initiated* or “*popular*” *referendum*, where citizens formulate the question, put in on the agenda, and make a collective decision. I include here only referendums whose result is binding. Otherwise, they belong in the same category as pure initiatives, which do not bypass electoral representation but bring an input that representatives may choose to take up or to ignore.
- *Participatory budgeting* can also count in this category because the decision over the allocation of part of the collective budget is made directly by the citizens who decide to participate, without mediation (except maybe by the administration). It does not fit perfectly in this category, however, because it is still the elected representatives who decide the share of the budget that they submit to popular vote and the modalities of participation, usually also retaining a veto right (Smith 2009: 49-50). To a certain extent, therefore, it shares some traits with DIs opening representation. Nevertheless, seizing this opportunity is a way for citizens to bypass electoral representation.

These mechanisms challenge the quasi-monopoly that elected representatives usually enjoy over the decision-making process (P1). They directly *compete* with electoral representation (Altman 2011; Peters 2016) by conveying the message that citizens can make laws without mediation. Thus, although their function is to complement representation, not to overcome it, and although introducing them might improve the quality of representation (el-Wakil 2020), they do challenge the classical model of electoral representation.

This may be valuable, all things considered, but it is unlikely that questioning this quasi-monopoly will result in higher support for the basic principles of electoral representation. Citizens frustrated by elections may seize these new opportunities for participation and at the same time stop participating in elections – counting for example on popular initiatives and referendums to try to get their political preferences satisfied (Peters 2016). They may also decide to use both – elections and non-electoral means of participation – but there does not seem to be reasons to expect electoral enthusiasm to go upwards.

An alternative hypothesis is that involving citizens in the decision-making process could be interpreted by citizens as a signal that politicians and parties genuinely care about what they have to say (Van Dijk et al. 2020: 8), which could at least increase trust in politicians and parties. The question, however, is whether this trust gained by political actors who can claim

credit for the institutionalized innovations would spill over to the entire political class and increase popular support for electoral representation. This will likely depend on politicians' ability to maintain through time a convincing attitude of openness to citizens' input, which the "threat" of referendums can potentially incentivize (el-Wakil 2020).

Among the directly relevant empirical knowledge available, what we have is again clues rather than strong evidence. It has been found, for example, that citizen-led referendums could undermine the authority of elected representatives by constantly questioning it (Citrin 1996), by putting "citizens in an adversarial relationship with their governments" (Dyck 2009: 559), or by weakening elected representatives' legitimacy to decide on important issues (Gilens, Glaser and Mendelberg 2001). This negative effect seems to hold across contexts: based on a 94-country data set, Voigt and Blume (2015: 413) found that "institutional trust in parties and governments [was] negatively correlated with direct democracy". Nevertheless, trust in parties and government is more specific than electoral legitimacy, so it remains to be showed that the conclusion holds for the latter as well. Furthermore, what should be studied is to what extent the effects on electoral legitimacy vary depending on factors such as availability vs use (see Bauer and Fatke 2014), winners vs losers (see Marien and Kern 2018), frequency of referendums, who controls the process or even the degree of involvement of political parties in referendum campaigns.

There is even less evidence available about participatory budgeting. It is plausible to see it as less challenging for representative institutions: it does bypass electoral representation, but only for a slice of the budget, without staging major conflicts of preferences between the public and its representatives. Therefore, its challenging effects may be offset by the gains in political efficacy and a better understanding of the complexities of government (yet for participants only). This is at least what a set of interviews with participants in participatory budgeting in New York city councils suggests (Swaner 2017). More research would be needed here to see to what extent participatory budgeting is comparable to popular referendums and can be classified in type 5 ("Bypassing representation") rather than in type 1 ("Opening representation").

In sum, as was the case with sortition, there is an important degree of uncertainty here, with two countervailing forces: a legitimizing force stemming from openness to participation and potential responsiveness, and a delegitimizing force stemming from the bypassing of electoral representation and questioning of elected representatives' authority. The respective weight of these two forces might vary depending on various contextual factors.

3. Summary and discussion

Tables 2 and 3 below summarize the typology presented above. Table 2 recalls the distinction between electoral representation's basic principles and some of its key variables. Table 3 lists the different types of DIs, indicating whether they challenge some of the basic principles of electoral representation and which variables they deal with.

Table 2: Electoral representation's basic principles and key variables

Basic principles (P)	Key variables (V)
P1: Collective decisions are made by representatives.	V1: Electoral rules prevailing in a given political context.
P2: Representatives are elected through universal suffrage in free and competitive elections.	V2: Margin of independence of representatives.
P3: Elections are recurring to allow voters to sanction representatives and to incentivize them to respond to public opinion.	V3: Importance of political parties ("partyness").
	V4: Opportunities for participation beyond elections.

Table 3: DIs and electoral legitimacy

Types of DIs	Basic principles challenged	Variables dealt with	Expected effect on electoral legitimacy
1. Opening representation	None	V3 (parties) V4 (participation)	Positive
2. Increasing citizens' control	None	V2 (independence) V4 (participation)	Positive
3. Enhancing through sortition	P2-3 (elections)?	V3 (parties) V4 (participation)	Uncertain
4. Changing representation	P2-3 (elections)	N/A*	Negative
5. Bypassing representation	P1 (representation)?	V3 (parties) V4 (participation)	Uncertain

* The variables are tied to electoral representation, so if elections or representation are rejected, these variables are rejected as well, although some of them could be relevant, in a different form, in an alternative to electoral representation.

Drawing on this typology, it should be easier to identify the DIs that have the potential to cure electoral representation's deficit of popular support, and to distinguish them from other DIs that may offer solutions to problems generated by electoral representation yet without restoring popular support for electoral representation – those for which higher attention should be paid to the issue of equilibrium in institutional design.

Based on the theoretical framework developed in the previous section, DIs of type 1 (“Opening electoral representation”) and 2 (“Increasing citizens’ control over elected representatives”) do have the potential to strengthen electoral legitimacy and seem fully compatible with it.

In stark contrast with the first two, DIs of type 4 (“Changing representation”) overtly attack the electoral nature of representation and are therefore to be conceived as *competing alternatives* to electoral representation.

The most intriguing cases are type 3 (“Enhancing representation through sortition”) and type 5 (“Bypassing representation”). What makes their effects more uncertain is that they are meant to be compatible with electoral representation, and yet they contain the seeds of radical alternatives (respectively a democracy without elections, as in type 4, and one without representation or with downplayed representation). In that respect, they potentially *challenge* the basic principles of electoral representation. To be sure, “challenging” does not necessarily mean “discrediting”. Representative institutions and actors could respond positively to a challenge by adapting and trying to regain the public’s confidence. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to hypothesize that reforms carrying a challenge to electoral institutions are less likely to improve the latter’s perceived legitimacy. What they might do is increasing trust in the political system taken as a whole. Their implementation might also lead to an increased support for the politicians and parties that drove the reform. Yet from a theoretical point of view, it is not clear at all that we should expect long term benefits for the political class or the perceived legitimacy of elections from the introduction of such innovations. Therefore, the question of systemic equilibrium arises: are these DIs compatible with the continued existence or primacy of electoral representation, and are there ways to increase this compatibility?

The hypothesis that *DIs challenging either representation or its electoral nature are unlikely to increase electoral legitimacy* should be tested empirically. And it may not be confirmed for several reasons. Citizens may not perceive the tensions between different modes of representation or between representation and direct participation. Or the increased diffuse trust might have spill-over effects and increase the more specific trust in electoral representation as such.

It is worth emphasizing as well that the effects of DIs on electoral legitimacy will largely depend on the way they are used by different actors. On the one hand, their legitimacy-enhancing potential will be activated only if political actors show a genuine willingness to devolve some power to citizens, to take up their initiatives, and probably not if they merely instrumentalize DIs for pure strategic purposes. On the other hand, outputs widely perceived as undesirable and resulting from the use of a participatory mechanism (Brexit for example) may negatively affect popular support for this mechanism or even for citizen involvement in general (see Rojon and Rijken 2021).

In addition to this, the effects will also likely depend on contextual factors (such as the type of electoral system or the specific constellation of veto players) that had to be abstracted away in this article.

Finally, the visibility of these participatory mechanisms (Papadopoulos and Warin 2007; Rummens 2016) and the knowledge that non-participants have about them will likely be decisive as well. Therefore, the theoretical considerations offered in this article are but one insight into the possible consequences of different DIs – yet a neglected and important one.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was certainly not to argue against democratic innovations on the ground that they may weaken electoral legitimacy. First, only some of them threaten electoral legitimacy, and most of those that are usually implemented are of the non-threatening form. Second, the benefits of the challenging innovations may outweigh the cost in terms of electoral legitimacy. So, the aims of the article were positive rather than normative. Assuming that most DIs are likely to take place in political systems where electoral representation remains central, it seems interesting to question their compatibility. In the language of deliberative systems (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012), where democracies are conceived as complex systems composed of different parts performing distinct functions, we need to assess the equilibrium between different parts of the system.

The first aim was to understand to what extent DIs could mitigate the widespread loss of support for electoral representation. I have argued that they could compensate for some limitations of electoral representation, but that some of them are unlikely to strengthen electoral legitimacy. The second aim was to distinguish DIs with the potential to *strengthen* electoral legitimacy from others *attacking* it or potentially *challenging* it. The right of petition, citizen initiative, crowdsourcing, deliberative town-halls, the citizen audit, the recall and the abrogative

referendum were all theoretically expected to have the potential to strengthen support for electoral principles and institutions. In contrast, it is theoretically unclear that we can expect the same from citizen-initiated referendums, participatory budgeting, and sortition-based DIs (although different uses of the latter should be distinguished). In this respect, one important contribution of this article is to invite looking beyond the appearance of complementarity: it is not because an innovation is conceived or presented as complementary to electoral representative institutions that it does not challenge their foundations.

All these theoretical expectations should be tested empirically. There is already some empirical support for the hypotheses that citizen-initiated referendums on the one hand, and sortition on the other hand can be in a relation of competition with electoral representation. There is room, however, for further research looking into the effects of the availability and use of different DIs – and different ways of coupling them with electoral institutions (Hendriks 2016) – on the support for electoral representation.

Finally, although the main goals of the article were positive, the analysis has implications for normative debates as well. Those who believe that elections are the curse of democracy, or that they are intrinsically undemocratic can welcome challenges to electoral legitimacy carried by empowered sortition and instruments of direct participation. In contrast, those who believe that (some degree of) electoral representation is essential to any well-functioning democracy, or that elections would still have an important role to play even in a properly reformed hybrid democracy, should pay more attention to this compatibility issue. Those, for example, who see normative benefits in the combination of sortition and elections need to think about the uses of sortition that are genuinely complementary with elections, and they may also want to consider other complementary democratic innovations that do have the potential to improve electoral legitimacy. The key for them is to improve democratic systems while preserving or building a new equilibrium between their different parts.

Acknowledgments:

Many thanks to Caroline Close, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Sebastien Rojon, Kristof Steyvers, Wouter Vanbroekhoven and the reviewers who provided detailed comments on the whole manuscript. For more specific comments and suggestions, I also wish to thank Arthur Borriello, Dimitri Courant, John Gastil, Andrea Felicetti, Maaïke Geuens, Stefan Jung, Christoph Niessen, Sacha Rangoni, Jonathan Rinne, Claudia Ritzi, Isabelle Stadelman, David Talukder, Lisa Van Dijk, Emilie van Haute and Charlotte Wagenaar.

Conflict of interest statement:

The author states that there is no conflict of interest

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