

Essay on democracy

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



In contemporary Western democracies the role of government is not what it used to be. In the public discourse some authors claim to observe a 'relocation of politics', while others speak of a 'democratic deficit' in general. In this essay the relationship between democracy and governance is explored on a macro-level. The argument is that performance in the public domain and the decisions underlying it no longer in a direct way can be traced down to expressions of societal demands. This is because both the relationships between society and democracy and between politics and performance have become looser.

In particular, the hierarchical relation between democracy and government has been replaced by a more horizontal pairing of democracy and governance. As the latter has multiple dimensions, entailing a range of activities performed at various spots by a variety of actors, it appears that democracy, as well, cannot appropriately get substance and form in a singular way anymore. Enhancing the visibility of who is involved in the processes leading to public decisions, combined with enlarging possibilities for accountability, 'multilocalisation' provides a conceptual perspective for rethinking contemporary democracy.

Introduction

There once was a time in which the representative organs of democracy were seen as firmly anchored in society. In and around these organs, politics functioned as the intermediary process between society and government. The realisation of the collective goals agreed upon was taken care of by political authorities guiding public administration. Of course this has always been a fairytale. Now, as a mirror image rather a horror scenario sets the

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tone. In many Western democracies the voting turn out has declined more or less dramatically (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002).

Politics is said to be in crisis. The traditional political institutions lack the societal support they used to have. In the news media the leadership qualities of modern statesmen are criticised. According to contemporary observers the state itself has become ‘virtual’ (Rosecrance, 1996; Frissen, 1996, 1999a) or even ‘empty’ (Frissen, 1999b). In this context one of the great issues in the present Western world is what is circumscribed as the ‘democratic deficit’. At a general level this notion seems to refer to a shortage of legitimacy in society for what the Executive Power is doing.

But in more concrete terms it largely remains unclear what is the nature of the problem. Solutions propagated to address the deficit, such as referendums, therefore particularly seem to be political claims. Objective of this essay is twofold: assessing the characteristics of the perceived democratic deficit and, after that, identifying some principles that may be helpful to address that deficit. In the second section developments related to the perceived problem are explored. Next, the relocation of power and some ways addressing that phenomenon are exposed (third section).

In the fourth section the problem of the democratic deficit is restated; accordingly a few principles are identified from which the restated problem can be addressed. Finally conclusions are drawn (fifth section).

2. Postmodernity and beyond When one wants to position the perception of the problem of a democratic deficit as well as its backgrounds, it seems sensible to make observations beyond election results and voting turnouts. Contemporary observers have been trying to capture the Zeitgeist around

the beginning of the third millennium in various catchy concepts, if possible turning them in best-selling monographies.

Looking at the literature produces the sight of a range of publications with a varying background: social science, journalism, and novel writing. Without a claim of presenting an exhaustive overview here, a distinction between economical, managerial, sociological, and politics and state focused arguments can be made. A special category is the metatrends. The globalisation of markets of products and capital flows is the generally accepted notion stemming from economically oriented essays on contemporary developments. 3 Goods move all over the world, while money is transferred from behind a computer screen.

Observing global financial integration makes O'Brien (1992) speak of 'the end of geography'. In the traditional division of economic sectors the commercial delivery of information-related services has been booming. The number of sorts of communication media has grown, while their impact on the lives of the mass public has become almost unlimited (Gitlin, 2002). The continuous supply of fun and events via such media and of entertainment in general, has become an industry. It makes people behave like actors in the film of their own lives, or even as the directors of it (Gabler, 1998).

Thus an entire 'entertainment economy' has arisen (Wolf, 1999). The first to discover the meaning of image in modern society was Daniel Boorstin (1962). It was him and Marshall McLuhan (1962) stating that the medium was the message who, in fact, conceptualised the possibilities of the commercial use of communications technology. Later, Ritzer with his notion of the 'McDonaldization of society' (19PM) showed the functionality of a <https://assignbuster.com/essay-on-democracy/>

modular organisational design as a management tool. A specific category of exposes about contemporary developments is the one focusing at the meta-level of trends with a trans-global range.

The notion of the ‘ global village’ (McLuhan, 1962? ; Bauman, 1998) is one of the relatively oldest. The so-called electronic highway, nowadays called the Internet, has literally connected the lives of people to people living at the other side of the world. Frissen (1999a) distinguishes ‘ transformations’ that can be observed on a world scale: horizontalisation, autonomisation, deterritorialisation, and virtualisation. Earlier, Naisbitt and Aburdene presented ten ‘ mega-trends’ visible with an universal scope (1990).

They mentioned the changes from an industrial towards an information society; from imposed technology towards technology processing; from a national economy towards a global economy; from a short term orientation towards a long term orientation; from centralisation towards power sharing; from assistance towards self help; from representative democracy towards direct democracy; from hierarchies towards networks; from north towards south; and from limited choice towards multiple choices (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1990).

While surfing on the world wide web and permanently connected with their mobile phones especially younger people have got used to make many choices in a short time and select what they think is useful for the moment. At school the ‘ Googlification of education’ may lead to the ‘ Googlification of knowledge’ (Vanheste, 2004). This eclectic kind of behaviour can be observed in other domains of life as well. In the category of broad views with

a sociological character the notion of a 'network society' in the 'information age' has been widespread (Castells, 1998).

Traditional social bonds have lost much of their relevance. Modern citizens act primarily as consumers of goods and services on a market and are addressed correspondingly. The hierarchical influence of Great Institutions as the state, the church, and the father has diminished. Especially the younger generations are seen as having a more cynical attitude towards life: not only goods but also social relations are consummated in a random way (see Douglas Copland's Generation X, 19PM).

The habitus of shopping has becoming a general way of approaching one's existence (Fortuin, 2000). Particularly younger people are zapping themselves through life. The 'copy-paste generation', born after 1985, has been raised in a world stuffed with electronics and is used to copying, deleting and replying. Younger people select what they prefer and thus compose not only their own outfit and compact discs but their entire lives (Van der Velden, 2004). Also the older generations, however, are not what they used to be.

Continuous economic growth after the Second World War has resulted in a higher general level of prosperity, a higher general level of education, a better health and a longer life expectation for many. The number of well to do 'senior citizens' with a good pension and much leisure time has risen, enhancing an entire categorical entertainment industry with a huge marketing potential. In the age segment below that, people in their early fifties, 'self-actualisation is what educated existence is all about' (Brooks, 2000, p. 18).

‘ Bourgeois bohemians’ combine the material wealth they enjoy with the Romantic ideal of artistic self-expression: in their Sports Utility Vehicle they drive to their yoga lessons. As such they can be seen as the new upper class (Brooks, 2000). They, but they not only, enjoy a relatively stable existence that produces a limited sets of excitements and accordingly a chronic, slumbering feeling of discontentment. Therefore constantly new thrills are sought, though within a controlled setting. Boutellier (2002) speaks of the ‘ culture of the bungee jumper’, seeking a utopia of safety.

Seemingly more directly related to the democratic deficit are the treatises about the contemporary state of politics and the politics of the contemporary state. After the fall of the Berlin Wall Fukuyama (1992) could write about the perceived ideological victory of liberal democracy. Guehenno (1993, p. 8) stated: ‘ The year 1989 marks the end of the are of the nation-states’ (see also Ohmae, 1995). In this postmodern condition not only the end of history could be proclaimed, but the *raison d’etat* literally had ceased to exist, it seemed.

The state was said to be ‘ virtual’ or even ‘ empty’ and could afford it merely to be so (Rosecrance, 1996; Frissen, 1999a, 1999b). But, again, the times were changing soon already. Creveld (1996), military historian, warned that the claim of the state for it’s monopoly of the use of violence was contested by small, radical groups and this would be more so in the near future. Though far from comprehensive, this overview of arguments about ‘ universal’ trends provides a background for our focussing on the democratic deficit. At stake in these arguments are various ways of *Zeitgeist*-watching.

Most of the contributions are eye opening, often well written and certainly inviting for reflection. Sometimes they are based on data, but not always is explicitly made clear in which way these data are used as evidence and empirical basis for the argument. Catching the broad lines about phenomena perceived as contemporary trends seems what authors here are aiming at, rather than, for instance, middle-range theory formation and the *ceteris paribus* testing of hypotheses. In some cases this means that, obviously, at least the evidence is contradictory.

On a world scale, the proclaimed end of the nation-state, for instance, rather seems a political claim than that it is unambiguously proved on the basis of empirical evidence. The importance of regional economies, opposite of ‘globalisation’, and the pushing power of certain nation states behind it makes Weiss on the basis of empirical research speak of the ‘myth of the powerless state’ (Weiss, 1998). Another idea, generally accepted in certain member-countries of the European Union, is that ‘Brussels’ produces many new rules and regulations for the nation states.

Both De Jong and Herweijer (2004) and Bovens and Yesilkagit (2004) prove empirically that the influence of the EU administration on the level of regulations is less than usually expected. Though the findings of these two researches about the 5 number of new rules and regulations in a country like The Netherlands stemming from policy decisions in the European Union differ, they underline the ambiguity of data on the idea of great “Brussels’ influence”. It is this ambiguity that makes Van Schendelen (2004) warn for replacing one myth by another.

Yet, even a fiction may fulfil functions. Therefore it particularly is worthwhile to explore the idea that power has fled away from national government more in detail, as well as some remedies presented for that ‘relocation of power’.

3. The empty looks of the centre The relocation of politics (Bovens et al. , 1995) In 1995 the think tank of the Dutch Labour Party published a 61 pages report called ‘The relocation of politics’. In this ‘pamphlet’ (p. 11) Mark Bovens and four coauthors wanted to give a description of the contemporary problems of democracy.

They argue that there still is a democratic deficit, but not as much in ‘The Hague’: political power and political struggle partly have moved to elsewhere. ‘More than ever the debate and decision making about important developments in society take place outside the traditional arenas: in the main offices of large international corporations; within consultation organs and during negotiations between civil servants; in the corridors of European and other supra-national organizations; in the national and international courts; in research departments, hospitals, and laboratories’ (p. 13 – translation PH).

The authors identify six directions of the relocation of politics away from Westminster or the Binnenhof. Internationalisation means that many decision-making and rule making has been relocated towards the European Union. ‘The relocation of political power, as far as Europe is concerned, not yet has led to a proportional relocation of political accountability and control’ (p. 14). Regionalism implies an ongoing decentralisation of tasks towards local government.

Bureaucratisation means that Cabinet members more and more come into play in the end stage of the political process: a relocation towards intra-civil service committees has taken place. Growing technocracy, a relocation of power towards organisations in society, implies, for instance, that actors without an explicit mandate and on grounds that are unclear often make decisions about environmental and safety risks. Individualisation refers to the emancipation of citizens in their relations with institutions: the relocation towards the private domain.

Expanding juridicracy, finally, means the relocation of politics towards the Judicial Power. Bovens et al. observe a loss of relevance of the traditional, representative organs, which may even lead to an undermining of the democratic Rechtsstaat. They confront these developments with two normative principles that they call social-democratic. The first one is that the exercise of power has to go along with accountability.

The second principle is that the exercise of power should not be restricted to a social elite. Power sharing and the protection of those without social power therefore are seen as an essential element of the social character of the Rechtsstaat. Confronting reality with the latter two normative principles produces a problem then, because 'the relocation of politics in many cases particularly entails a relocation of societal power; rather than, or not yet, a relocation of democratic control' (p. 21).