

Re-presenting Representation

Philippe C. Schmitter

European University Institute & Central European University

‘Real-existing Democracies’ seem to be in trouble.¹ Academics and practitioners tend to agree on this and both can produce long lists of “morbidity symptoms” to illustrate it. Most of these lists would include items such as decline in electoral turnout, falling party membership and identification, greater volatility in voter preferences and, hence, electoral outcomes, greater difficulty in obtaining and sustaining majority support for governments, decrease in trust in politicians, parties and political institutions, declining centrality of parliament, and increased devolution of authority to administrative bodies.

The one thread that connects all of these symptoms is representation and, even more specifically, representation through political parties competing in elections. Could it be that what are no longer working as they used to and, therefore, generating most of the disaffection among citizens are the partisan channels for aggregating, deliberating and deciding among their interests and passions? If so, the crisis would not be of democracy itself, but of a set of institutions that have come to be closely identified with it. And the solution, therefore, is to be found not in getting rid of this type of regime, but in transforming or re-dimensioning the role played in it by political parties and elections.²

Government & Opposition has generously put at my disposition a number of recent books that deal in quite different ways with representation. Not surprisingly, most of them presume that political parties are the primary, if not exclusive, channel through which citizens are represented; regular, free and fair elections between these competing parties provide the most important mechanism for holding rulers accountable; and, together, parties and elections determine the legitimacy of the political process as a whole.

The following is not so much an orthodox review of the books listed above, as a selective assessment of what they have to contribute to an understanding of whether or not representation lies at the source of the present crisis in REDs and whether or not political parties and elections are responsible for the crisis in representation. Needless to say, they make important contributions to knowledge about many other topics.

1. Maurizio Cotta and Heinrich Best’s Democratic Representation in Europe is by far the most “substantial” book in our collection. It is the product of a major collaborative effort covering the social and political backgrounds of parliamentary deputies in some ten or more countries for almost 150 years. Its data-base (DATACUBE) is unparalleled in scope and detail and destined to remain an essential source for tracing the historical development of liberal, representative democracy in Europe for many years to come. In an earlier

volume the data was analyzed country-by-country.³ In this one, some twenty-one authors explore comparatively “dimensions of variation,” “variations across party families” and comprehensive topics such as cleavage patterns and elite transformations.

The conception of “democratic representation” is conventional, i.e. it focuses exclusively on persons who win competitive elections for positions in parliament. Presumably, the authors would accept the caveat that it would have been apposite to include those persons who lost in those elections and even those who unsuccessfully placed themselves in nomination since the democratic legitimacy of the winners rested on the presence of these other components of “free and fair” competition. In other words, the “losers” and not just the “winners” formed part of the emerging political class and contributed to the eventual success of democracy within the region. Presumably, the enormous data-gathering demands precluded such an effort.

What is deliberately excluded from this vast panorama of emerging and evolving democracy in Europe, however, is representation by persons elected not by political parties to non-legislative positions and, even more, representation by persons selected either by themselves or by specialized publics. This includes virtually all of the institutions of civil society. Maurizio Cotta in his conclusion seems to concede this when he alludes to the “almost invisible political dyad” that has surrounded political parties and representative democracy (p. 474). If, as some public opinion surveys seem to indicate, the representatives chosen by this “selectorate” are more trusted (and, perhaps, more relied upon) than the politicians chosen by the “electorate,” then, we may well question whether the “deeply innovative” and “increasingly (inclusive)” historical role of the latter will persist into the future.

The editors signal an awareness of “the spreading of feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust vis-à-vis the representative institutions and the men and women embodying them” (p. 4) and suggest that this makes a retrospective assessment of their role all the more worthy. But this hint of a contemporary crisis in representation gets overwhelmed by the enormous richness of data and complexity of substance in the rest of the book. To the extent that a subliminal message can be detected, it is a comforting one: partisan and legislative representation has successfully adjusted to changes in the scope of the electorate and the scale of the government. The social background of deputies has changed; the process has been (largely) incremental; and even when disruptions have occurred, the in-coming representatives have been rapidly socialized by the incumbent ones. So, even if there are some contentious issues surrounding today’s parties and parliaments, the competitive electoral process will resolve them without any need to re-design, much less to radically transform, the institutions involved.

Here and there, however, some less optimistic findings emerge in Cotta's conclusion. The most alarming is the growing evidence of "party based professionalism," the failure to move beyond "the confines of an educated middle class," and the return of "public employment as the leading occupation" of deputies (pp. 476-78). All of these suggest an expansion of social and cultural distance between the elected and their electors and a concomitant contraction in the authenticity of representation. What if, as Cotta casually remarks, "politicians have become a more self-referential group" (p. 479)? Can one still be so confident that the nexus of parties and elections in the future will be as self-correcting as it has in the past?

- 2.
- 3.
4. Robert E. Goodwin's Innovating Democracy is less useful for the purposes of this essay. He has nothing to say about any imagined crisis of representation in 'real-existing' democracies. The term, crisis, does not even figure in his index. And the reason for this can be deduced from the sub-title of his book: Democratic Theory and Practice after the Deliberative Turn. Goodwin is more interested in exploring (and extolling) the benefits of deliberation than in resolving any crisis in the practice of REDs. He focuses on the intrinsically democratic benefits of "making use of mini-publics" and consciously avoids any reference to potential innovations in institutions that have what he calls "constitutional power or statutory authority to determine outcomes" (p. 15). Subsequently, he expands his purview to include mechanisms of accountability wielded by discursive deliberation on a larger scale prior to decision-making and sequenced intervention by complex networks of civil society organizations. Throughout, he seems to assume that introducing such innovations will supplement rather than displace or transform the more classic institutions of representative democracy.

The interesting exception comes when Goodwin takes the highly innovative step of imagining what might happen to REDs if they became "Non-Party Democracies." Unfortunately, he does not specify how this might come about, since the process of abolition or demise would surely have some impact upon the subsequent outcome. Nevertheless, the thought experiment is a bold one. Just suppose each candidate nominated him or herself, campaigned alone and was elected to parliament with no prior commitment to coordinate his or her behavior with any other deputy. According to Goodwin, all of the effects would be negative: each representative would promote a "personality cult;" each would surround him or herself with a distinctive clientele; each would engage only in constituency service by providing patronage; each would focus on administration rather than politics or the public interest; each would appeal exclusively to identity groups rather than substantive interest groups; and,

finally, “what (would be) lacking is the ‘politics of ideas’, practiced in any systematic way” (p. 211).

Ironically, this list of negative features is almost an exact replica of the critiques that are made of existing political parties! Far from being what Goodwin calls “ideational facts” embodying a principled conception of the interest of the system as a whole and, therefore, capable of providing a convincing *ratio* for the measures they take, contemporary parties form a crucial part of a “self-referential” political class that colludes to protect its privileged interests, while opportunistically benefiting a surrounding set of favored patrons and clients. What is surprising is that Goodwin, a self-professed proponent of deliberative politics, denies the possibility that non-party elected representatives would make use of such devices within the legislature in order to form governments, control executive autonomy, discuss proposals of law, vote in shifting majorities and presumably be rewarded with re-election by their constituents for having acted in such an independent and responsible fashion.

I have been unfair to the authors of these works and I apologize to them for this. Not one of them set out to write about “the crisis of representation” – not even about “the crisis of political parties.” If you wish to explore these themes, I suggest reading one or all of the following:

¹ A ‘real-existing democracy’ (RED) has three only characteristics: (1) it is a regime that calls itself “democratic;” (2) it is accepted by other self-proclaimed REDs as one of them; and (3) most political scientists would agree that it meets or exceeds their minimal procedural standards for democracy. It is roughly equivalent to what Robert Dahl once tried to label as a “polyarchy.” Needless to say, the relationship between this regime and what classical theories designate as a democracy or what normative theories advocate for a democracy is fortuitous since REDs are historical compromises that mix different principles of liberalism, representation, centralization, technocracy, monarchism and populism with those of democracy.

² Reference to EES.

³ Parliamentary Representatives in Europe, 1848-2000. Legislative Recruitment and Careers in Eleven European Countries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).