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# The Quality of Democracies in Europe. A research report

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, while democracy was spreading around the globe, scholars and practitioners engaged in a deeper scrutiny of the mechanisms responsible for building and consolidating democratic regimes. Among those mechanisms, it is widely held that the policies enacted by domestic and international actors have played a distinctive role. In some cases, external interventions do not aim at installing a democratic regime, but rather they aim at improving the quality of a democracy already in place. This task is accomplished by means of several different instruments, such as monitoring, offering inventories of best practices, etc..

In order to improve the quality of a democratic institutional setting, experts are greatly in need of an analytical grid and of instruments to assess the overall "quality" of democracy as well as the specific, localized barriers to the improvement of the quality itself. Knowledge is of paramount importance in this policy field.

It is then not by coincidence that in the last decades, the scholarship that developed on the issue of how democratic quality can be detected and assessed has expanded considerably. This scholarship focuses on nascent democracies and on consolidated democracies. For this reason, it is the most exposed to the challenge of understanding and assessing a democracy without knowing or pretending to know the "one size fits all" response to the shortcomings and barriers that prevent a democratic regime from reaching a better quality.

However, the concept of "quality" calls for an evaluative perspective. Consequently, addressing the democratic quality (QD) of a country one can easily run the risk of launching into a value-laden discourse, a risk that is more likely because the concept of democracy itself may also be thought as a value-laden concept. Notwithstanding, empirical analysis carried on QD shows that an evidence-based approach to the assessment of QD is possible, despite it being a complex task. Several efforts have been made by scholars, having as their final aim the development of an analytical grid to assess the quality of democratizing regimes (Morlino, 2003; Diamond and Morlino, 2005; Hagopian, 2005; Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005), of consolidated democracies (Lijphart, 1999; Altman and Perez-Linan, 2001; Beetham, 2004), and of democracies created or consolidated under the influence of external actors (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2005; Ekiert, 2006).

The research project "The Quality of Democracies in Europe", led by the Institute of Human Sciences of Florence in partnership with the University of Bologna, the University of Cagliari, and the University of Milan, is framed in this vast literature. It is a comprehensive, far reaching and innovative attempt to provide scholars with a multi-dimensional grid to assess the quality of a democracy. The project, whose research design is based on a "small n" approach, combines qualitative and quantitative methods and aims at reaching far beyond the current status quo of the quantitative scholarship in that field.

The project wants to make an ambitious leap forward in the understanding of the democratic quality of the European member States by considering the national, the sub-national and the supranational level of institutions and policies.

## The dimensions of QD

In the project the following types of quality are considered:

- the quality of the procedure;
- the quality of the product;
- the quality of the content.

Each of these types has different implications for the empirical analysis of the QD. The research program "The Quality of Democracies in Europe" does not neglect the normative questions, like "What is a good democracy?" and "What should a good democracy look like?", but it rephrases those questions in terms which are more attentive to the empirical rather than to the normative side of the issue. Moreover, instead of pretending to answer to that question with a "one size fits all" answer, a context-based approach is adopted. Whereas a common analytical grid is used for all countries, there is a country-specific assessment of how each type of quality may contribute to the overall QD.

### 1) Quality in terms of procedure

The research program distinguishes and analyzes five dimensions associated with the quality in terms of procedure: rule of law, inter-institutional and electoral accountability, participation, competition. Rule of law refers to the primacy of the law and entails that political authorities respect the law. Furthermore, it means that legal norms are not reactive, they should be known by citizens, and should be universal, stable and clear. Accountability refers to the obligation of political leaders to be held responsible for their decision to the public or to a constitutional authority. We will take into account the thesis of Schedler (1999), according to whom accountability encompasses three aspects: information, justification and reward/sanction. These aspects entail that the public debate respects a standard of pluralism and independence. It also requires the participation of citizens and of civil society organizations. We consider the effects of the strategies enacted by the government when it tries to influence the media. This is a crucial aspect of accountability (Maravall 1999).

For this dimension, the case-studies will also cover the phenomenon of the personalization of politics, which is more and more encouraged by media, as one of the intervenient variables in the process of electoral accountability. This phenomenon heavily influences the quality of our democracies. Indeed, as observed by Stuckey (1991, 137), "if the accountability is separate from political action, the substance of the representative politics is missed". The dimension of participation features a continuous evolution: as a matter of fact, the impact of the new ICTs and the changes occurred in the media used by the political communication play a central role, by determining the channels and forms of the political participation. As a consequence, the research program will not only focus (in each of its units) on the quantity of information provided by media to citizens, nor only on the number of political actions citizens accomplish to participate to politics; it also will look at the character of the information and at the nature of the participation.

### 2) Quality in terms of the product

Then, the research program will address quality in terms of the product. In this respect, it will analyze responsiveness. In the analysis of democratic quality scholars use to refer to the responsiveness of the government, which is its capacity to give an adequate answer to citizens by implementing the public policies that correspond to their needs. This kind of quality is analytically linked with the accountability. Indeed, the evaluation that citizens give on rulers' responsibility involves a relationship between the demands of policies and the political answer given by rulers to these demands. The project will thus analyze the responsiveness in relationship with the accountability. It will also seriously consider the fact that responsiveness is strongly influenced by the communicative processes, which intervene in the construction of consensus (Meyer 2002, 50). This intervention is particularly important for the understanding of the democratic processes today.

Indeed it is related to the recent overlapping between "political logic" and the "media logic". The latter has become dominant in defining the political objective, since the maximization of the audience is an objective that the media pursue, even (and sometimes particularly) when they deal with political issues (Altheide e Snow, 1979). The research program aims at analyzing the relationship that exists between media and politics and how this relationship impacts upon the creation (or the deconstruction) of consensus.

### **3) Quality in terms of content**

Freedom and equality (formal and substantial) are the most important principled ideas of democracy. Therefore, they will be crucial for the definition of the democratic quality. Dahl (1971), Marshall (1976) and several other scholars have elaborated many different positions regarding how fundamental rights should be promoted in democracies. Many legal systems adopted in democratic countries also include a catalogue of civil rights.

The research program will attentively consider the potential trade off that exists between the protection of civil rights and of formal equality and the effective creation of conditions of substantial equality. In particular, the equality of access is assessed with a strong attention to the interdependence effects of the three levels of governance (local, national and supranational).

## **Dimensions and hypotheses**

An extensive scholarship which has developed since the 1950's has taken the position that the quality of democracy can be reduced to the quality of rules. According to Robert Dahl, championing a minimal or a procedural type of democracy, the first condition that should be fulfilled in order to have a good democracy is to put in place a set of rules ensuring the fairness, the openness and the competitive nature of the political game. Behind this idea, there is a precise conception of how political systems work, how they interact with society, how they answer the demands of citizens and how they elaborate policies and deliver public goods. On the basis of these premises, some years later, Lijphart stated that consensual democracies perform better than majoritarian democracies in delivering public goods and answering to the demands of citizens and stakeholders.

The research program will deal critically this scholarship. First of all, it starts from the assumption that we are unable to establish a single best model of democratic quality. It is more realistic to find many different solutions to the problem of ensuring the QD given the interdependence of the three types of quality (and the seven dimensions they comprise). It is also argued that participation and competition – which are strongly emphasized by Dahl in his analysis of the polyarchies – are not sufficient conditions to ensure citizens about the quality of rulers and the policies these rulers deliver. Against a minimal conception of democracy, our project proposes three critical remarks.

First of all, the procedural dimensions – rule of law, accountability, participation and competition – are not per se conditions sufficient for establishing the level of democratic quality. Indeed, any procedure per se is not able to determine the contents of the policies. The contents indeed depend on the rights actually enforced, the conditions of equality and solidarity actually ensured to citizens. Therefore, the procedural dimensions give us information about the necessary conditions that should be fulfilled in order to have a good democracy, but they are not enough.

Second, the project is based on the assumption that even among the procedural dimensions, it is not possible to make a simple aggregation of their effects. Put in different terms, procedural dimensions interact with one another. Their interaction, then, should be taken into consideration. For instance, there are relationships of conditionality – this can be the case with the rule of law, which can be seen as a condition for the other dimensions – or relationships of trade off – for instance, if we choose to enhance the competition of political institutions this might entail restrictions on the spectrum of participation.

Thirdly, in democracies that feature a low degree of diffuse legitimation – weak rule of law, low participation – it must be possible to observe – ceteris paribus – a decrease of the quality of public policies, with regard to their responsiveness and their capacities to create conditions of equality and solidarity.

With regard to both considerations, we would like to control the following relationships:

1) when the rule of law is weakly respected, the other procedural dimensions are also weakened. This holds true regardless of the organization of the political system. It means that if the rule of law is weakened, we can also expect a weakening of the mechanisms of inter-institutional and electoral accountability, because the rules of the game become less transparent.

2) when we observe a high degree of political participation, we should also expect an increasing need for institutions that collect, aggregate, and integrate political demands. This also holds true for the period of the electoral mandate. This is indeed the only manner in which it may be possible for representatives to remain responsive to the intensive flow of demands for policies and collective goods that comes from citizens.

3) in only a few cases can a weak procedural dimension be counter-balanced by fostering the other dimensions. For instance, the problems that may result from an ineffective inter-institutional accountability, can only be partially solved by enhancing the electoral accountability. The pressure exercised by the inputs addressed to the political system should – in our view – be counter-balanced by a set of institutional instruments that simplify, select and aggregate these inputs. The electoral system plays a crucial role, even if any electoral reform should be assessed together with the party system where it is implemented.

We will study in depth two factors that influence the quality of our democracies today. The first one consists of the pressures exercised by the supranational level of governance. Even if European studies have largely considered the issue of the democratization of the European Union, a sound and rigorous analytic grid that allows us to evaluate on a common basis the impact that the processes of European integration have on national European democracies is still missing. Our program starts from the premise that each dimension of the democratic quality is influenced by the supranational level of governance, in particular by the European level, but that it is also influenced by the international political regimes which emerged in the field of human rights' enforcement, environmental governance, external trade, etc.

Researchers engaged in the research project expect to verify two main changes brought about by the existence of an array of external sources of norms and political inputs:

- 1) the fragmentation of the mechanisms of inter-institutional accountability;
- 2) a weaker decisional capacity in the national systems. This might cause an increasing demand of policies addressed directly by citizens toward the external institutions.

Finally, the program will consider the relationship that exists between the political institutions and the social system. In other words, we would like to analyze some critical and particularly telling cases of local governance, where the presence of a high level of social capital and a high legacy of public-private partnership ensure the quality of the public policies delivered to citizens.

## **Deliverables, Timing, and Potential Follow Up**

Grouping the aforementioned dimensions into procedural dimensions, dimensions referring to content, and dimensions referring to product, the research program will be carried out according to a fairly equally distributed division of labor among the units: Bologna, Florence-SUM, Milan, Cagliari. Scholars working on this research program will consider the following European countries: Italy, France, Great Britain, Germany, Spain, and Poland. In the case of Italy, a sub-project has been devised – under the supervision of Francesco Raniolo and Francesca Gelli – in order to explore the relationship that links the politics, polity and policy processes at the local level of governance.

The entire research is directed by Leonardo Morlino. The overall team includes: Donatella Campus, Cristina Dallara, Carlo Guarnieri, Gianfranco Pasquino, and Daniela Piana from the University of Bologna; Francesco Raniolo and Maurizio Cerruto from the University of Calabria; Vincenzo Memoli from the University of Siena; Stefano Sacchi from the University of Milan; Mauro Tebaldi from the University of Sassari; Elena Baracani and Claudius Wagemann from the Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane of Florence; Fulvio Venturino, Roberto Di Quirico, and Alina Stanculescu from the University of Cagliari.

After the first year of activity, a final codebook comprising all indicators for the eight above mentioned

dimensions will be finalized. Then, the first round of data collection will begin. The data will be available for the whole research team on an intranet database located on the portal [www.sumitalia.it](http://www.sumitalia.it). During the second year, a comparative and cross-national analysis will be made. Intermediate outputs – in the form of working papers and papers – will be discussed and presented in the main international conferences, such as those of IPSA, Law and Society Association, APSA, ECPR, SISP, AFSP.

In strict relationship with the main track of the project, a parallel analysis will be carried out regarding the quality of local democracy. This part of the project will involve the collaboration of young researchers and PhD students and will provide an innovative, sound, and cohesive insight on possible interactions between politics, policy, and polity at the municipal level of governance.

The research program "The Quality of Democracies in Europe" has been imagined as a first step toward the establishment of a permanent Observatory on QD. The Observatory, which will be probably located in the SUM of Florence, is an attempt to combine qualitative and quantitative assessment of QD. Whereas the mainstream scholarship developed by international organizations and think tanks (e.g. World Bank, IDEA, etc.) conspicuously stresses the quantitative aspect of the QD and aims at ranking democracies on the basis of a cluster of indicators, the Observatory anticipated by this research program will be a new voice in the QD assessment. First, a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments will be provided. Next, democracies will be analysed with an integrated, holistic approach, which contends that single recipes for good institutions are not sustainable without framing each country in its own system of governance, considering all of the dimensions.

Presently, the first results are in the process of being elaborated. We have started to collect all the data for all the countries and we have already planned to present some of them at the International Political Science Association Conference, to be held in Santiago Chile (July 2009) and at the General Session of the European Consortium of Political Research that will be hosted in Potsdam in September 2009. The team has put forth two panels – both accepted – that will represent two opportunities for discussing and developing ideas on the basis of the first round of data. The first panel on quality of democracy and judicial activism in Southern Europe will be in Potsdam and will be led by Daniela Piana and Ramona Coman (research assistant at the Université Libre de Bruxelles). The second panel on the quality of democracy and the quality of the State in Italy will be in Rome at the Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association, chaired by Marco Almagisti and Daniela Piana.

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