

# **Should participatory opportunities be a component of democratic quality?**

## **The role of citizen views in resolving a conceptual controversy<sup>1</sup>**

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**Brigitte Geissel**

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Email: [geissel@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:geissel@soz.uni-frankfurt.de)

### **Abstract**

There is consensus in quality-of-democracy research on the role of electoral participation, but what about participatory opportunities beyond elections? Non-electoral participatory opportunities have been neglected in most measurements. Recent indices, however, include these opportunities as indicators of democratic quality. Should non-electoral participatory opportunities be considered an essential component of democratic quality? To answer this question and to address the controversy, I examined three established approaches. On the basis of this examination, it became clear that a novel approach was necessary. By applying the recently emerging debate on ‘democratizing’ the definition of democracy, I argue that the controversy among experts needs to be connected to citizens’ concepts. An approach that takes citizens’ concepts into account implies several conceptual as well as methodological challenges. The paper suggests some solutions.

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## **Introduction**

There is consensus in quality-of-democracy research on the role of elections, but what about non-electoral participatory opportunities (NEPOs)? Are they an indicator of democratic quality? Whereas most quality-of-democracy measurements neglect NEPOs (e.g. Vanhanen, 2000), they are included in a few indices (e.g. Varieties of Democracy Project, Coppedge et al., 2015). Obviously, there is confusion as well as controversy surrounding this question.

This paper will not argue for the inclusion or exclusion of NEPOs, but will suggest a novel approach adjudicating on the controversy. Applying the recently emerging debate on ‘democratizing’ quality-of-democracy measurements (Doorenspleet, 2015; Logan and Mattes, 2012; Shastri and Palshikar, 2010), I argue that the dispute needs to be connected to citizens’ concepts of democracy.

The first section of this paper examines three established approaches considering the role of NEPOs in quality-of-democracy research. The second section applies the novel debate, which suggests taking citizens’ concepts of democracy into account. Preliminary empirical evidence reveals several challenges for future empirical research and the paper suggests solutions. The conclusion summarizes the arguments and discusses the theoretical as well as ‘real life’ implications of the approach.

NEPOs<sup>1</sup> exist in many forms such as institutionalized opportunities, e.g. direct democratic instruments<sup>2</sup>, or as different types of contentious politics, e.g. protest and

demonstrations. Although important forms of participation, contentious forms are less formalized and difficult to measure (Geißel 2006). This paper focusses on direct democratic options, i.e. channels for citizens' direct legislative input, which are institutionalised in constitutions or laws. A wealth of data is available on these NEPOs.

### **Non-electoral opportunities in established quality-of-democracy measurements**

Quality-of-democracy indices assign different meanings to NEPOs. Three established approaches can be identified, which are based on different assumptions about the 'core' of democracy (Goertz, 2006: 27, 28).

1) Many quality-of-democracy indices define participation as rules and practices related to elections (e.g. Polity Project by Marshall et al., 2012; Vanhanen, 2000; see also Munck, 2016). In these indices, which are based on the minimalist, purely representative model of democracy, democracy is understood as a certain set of institutions providing the competition of candidates or parties and the selection of political representatives. In line with Schumpeter's (1956: 269ff.) famous quote, the core of democracy is defined as the method guaranteeing the functioning of political representation (see Schmitter and Karl, 1991: 76).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, NEPOs are by definition excluded.

2) Several indices include NEPOs involving associational rights and practices (e.g. Freedom House, 2015; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013). These indices are based on the liberal-pluralist model. They consider competitive elections alone as insufficient and

regard additional options for citizens to express their preferences between elections as indispensable. However, from this perspective, only NEPOs which refer to citizens' involvement in interest groups (and parties) are components of democratic quality.

3) NEPOs beyond the liberal-pluralist concept have recently been included as components of democratic quality. Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (2004: 23-24), for example, are convinced that democratic quality is high, when citizens are engaged in public policy issues via several avenues (see also Democratic Audit, Beetham et al., 2008). The Democracy Barometer, an index developed by a team of Swiss and German scholars, contains indicators measuring direct democratic provisions (Bühlmann et al., 2012). The Varieties of Democracy Project goes even further. Its index is based on different models of democracy, among others participatory and deliberative ones (Coppedge et al., 2015). Accordingly, a variety of NEPOs are included in the index.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, indices are based on different 'intrinsic cores of democracy', which imply consequentially and inevitably either the exclusion or the inclusion of (certain) NEPOs.

### **Non-electoral opportunities - citizens' perspectives**

Recently, scholars, mainly working on Latin America, Africa or Asia, question whether political scientists' concepts are the only game in town.<sup>5</sup> They criticise that '[e]xisting measurements have ignored peoples' views' and make a strong claim for 'democratising the measurements of democratic quality' (Doorenspleet, 2015: 477;

Shastri and Palshikar, 2010; Baviskar and Malone, 2004). According to this debate, quality-of-democracy research should also take into account what citizens regard as democracy.

In this paper I apply this debate and argue that the quality-of-democracy research would benefit by considering citizens' notions on the role of NEPOs and that existing models and frameworks must be completed – not replaced – with citizens' concepts.

Opponents might argue that democracy should be defined by experts on scientific standards. If citizens' concepts are taken into account, definitions would become unscientific, relativistic and fluid. However, democracy cannot be compared to phenomena such as gravity or evolution. In contrast to such laws of nature, democracy is conceptualized and shaped by human beings. The definition of democracy has been changed significantly during centuries and millenniums. For example, the classic Athenian concept of democracy, i.e. citizens making decisions on the market square, has little in common with Dahl's (1972) or Schumpeter's (1956) definitions. Today we are far away from having one generally accepted scientific definition of democracy, but have to cope with a variety of competing definitions and models. None of these definitions can be proved as 'true' and 'valid' like natural laws. In contrast, democracy must be defined by experts to guarantee coherent definitions, but should be expanded and completed with citizens' views.

An approach taking into account citizens' views is unusual within the research community on democracy, but an important step for at least three reasons. First, this approach is based on the assumption that democratic institutions should fit to the citizenries they govern (Bernauer et al., 2015: 2). Responsiveness to citizens' preferences is the main characteristic of democracy and refers not only to policy preferences but also to procedural preferences.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, congruence between democratic institutions and the concepts of democracy within a certain citizenry can be considered as an indicator of democratic quality ('procedural responsiveness') (see below, Table 1, and Appendix, Table 2).

Second, this approach will help to realize and comprehend existing varieties of democracy. The most recent quality-of-democracy index, the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge et al., 2015), has already recognized that a definite, universal definition or explication of democracy beyond its vague core ('rule of the people') is impossible and that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is no longer appropriate (also: Beetham et al., 2008). Citizens' conceptualisations are an essential source to fully understand current varieties. Third, learning about how citizens conceptualise democracy and democratic decision-making will 'inform both political science and democratic renewal initiatives' (Wessel, 2010a: 440).

*Citizens' concepts on the role of non-electoral opportunities within democracy*

What do citizens' think about NEPOs? Are NEPOs an indicator for the quality of democracy from citizens' perspectives? Empirical research on citizens' notions of democracy and the role of NEPOs is a rather novel phenomenon. With the study by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001), the topic started to get more attention.<sup>7</sup> Today, a variety of surveys provide data about whether citizens consider NEPOs as components of democratic quality and these surveys focus mainly on direct democratic options. The different barometers conducted around the world (Afrobarometer, Eurobarometer etc.), World Value Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP; particularly modules on citizenship 2004, 2014) or European Social Survey (Round 6, 2012) as well as surveys conducted on single countries include items on citizens' opinions of NEPOs. Future research is necessary to find out what citizens think about other participatory avenues such as contentious politics or dialog-oriented procedures like participatory budgeting or mediation processes.

Existing surveys reveal that citizens all over the world rank referenda as essential, indispensable characteristic of democracy – only free elections, gender equality and civil rights were valued as more important (Shin, 2015). According to World Value Survey (Wave 5), the majority of people consider the item 'people can change the laws in referenda' as an 'essential characteristic of democracy' (6-10 on a scale of 1 to 10). Almost 40 percent rank referenda as of main importance (10 on a scale of 1 to 10). According to European Social Survey (Round 6) Europeans assess direct democracy as

essential as free opposition, media freedom or minority rights. They regard direct democratic instruments as even more imperative for democracy than the item ‘parties offer alternatives’.<sup>8</sup>

Date implies that citizens might not agree with experts’ models of democracy limited to competition and selection of representatives (Vanhanen, 2000; Polity Projects by Marshall et al., 2012) or to civil rights and liberties (Freedom House, 2015).<sup>9</sup> Citizens do not only express ‘where the democratic shoe pinches’ (Logan and Mattes, 2012: 471), they also articulate preferences as to the process of shoe making. From the perspective of citizens, experts’ concepts miss an important aspect, which characterises democracy, i.e. citizens’ direct involvement in political decision making.

### **Considering citizens’ concepts – challenges and solutions**

Research on the quality of democracy, which takes citizens’ preferences into account, is confronted with a variety of challenges. The main challenges and potential solutions are elaborated in the remainder of this section.

*Combining citizens’ and elites’ concepts.* As brilliantly elaborated by Doorenspleet (2015: 484) and other scholars, the quality of democracy cannot be measured solely on the basis of citizens’ ideas. Rather, the combination of citizens’ and experts’ concepts is considered as ideal (e.g. Logan and Mattes, 2012: 489). Such a combination is without doubt complex and challenging. Doorenspleet (2015) suggests two different ways of



combining citizens' and experts' notions. 1) Citizens define democracy and experts develop respective indicators for measuring. 2.) Experts define democracy and develop respective indicators, examining citizens' views with regard to these indicators. In the first suggestion we find a dominant citizen definition and in the second a dominant expert definition.

Experts tend to exclude NEPOs and citizens tend to include NEPOs as indicator of democratic quality. Any kind of compromise or combination of these notions looks rather impossible. The Varieties of Democracy Project provides an elegant solution. It developed components covering six competing models of democracy and offers information for components of each model. The Project leaves it to scholars to exploit the variables, which fit to their respective models of democracy (Coppedge et al., 2015). Future research on how to combine citizens' and experts' concepts might start in a similar way. Accepting the coexistence of experts' and citizens' notions is a beginning. When sufficient data on differences as well as similarities are available, possible more refined combinations can be conceptualized and elaborated.

*Cross-national variance.* Cross-national quality-of-democracy research usually applies an a-priori decided framework of analysis in a 'one-size-fits-all' mode. When citizens' preferences enter the game, such a universal frame is no longer possible. Citizenries favor direct democratic options and other NEPOs to varying degrees influenced by the history and development of their country. Some citizenries consider NEPOs as cru-

cial, other citizenries regard them as less significant. According to the WVV (Wave 5), for example, around 60 percent of citizens in Switzerland describe referenda as an absolutely essential characteristic of democracy. This is also true for 55 percent of Cypriots. However, only 14 percent of Finns and 17 percent, respectively, of Dutch and UK citizens rank referenda as of top priority (see Appendix Table 2).<sup>10</sup>

An approach considering country-specific concepts of democracy might at first sight impede cross-national comparison. However, this is not an impediment. Democracies can be clustered into categories. Organizing data by clustering is a common procedure in political science. For example, Lijphart's (1999) distinction between consensus and majoritarian democracy was a successful attempt to cluster seemingly chaotic phenomena (see Table 1, below).

*Demand and supply.* Research on NEPOs enables an up to now neglected, but potentially instructive component of democratic quality: congruence between participatory demand and supply ('procedural responsiveness'). It is a basic assumption in political culture research that institutions should be set up in line with the society they serve and accordingly institutions should synchronize with the preferences of the respective citizenry.

However, potential discrepancies between citizens' demands for NEPOs and the actual supply can be interpreted from two epistemic perspectives. From a constructivist point of view, we need to deconstruct citizens' demands and to reveal the complex, dy-

namic and interactive processes of these constructions. Wessel (2010a/b), for example, referred to Charles Taylor's theory of 'social imaginary' and applied interpretative methods. She interpreted twenty semi-structured qualitative interviews with Dutch voters and deconstructed their statements about an ideal democracy. Analyzing their statements, she revealed contradictory preferences. Wessel (2010a: 445) identified these statements as 'a social imaginary' of democracy.<sup>11</sup> Stoker et al. (2014) chose the theoretical frame of 'folk theories' for the deconstruction of citizens' concepts of democracy. 'Folk theories' are defined as knowledge shared and reinforced by social exchange, which is not necessarily coherent. Based on interviews conducted with Australian citizens, they found out that a majority of respondents are satisfied with the stability and benefits Australian democracy delivers and at the same time demand more options for citizens' direct intervention in political decision-making. These statements demonstrate a shared, yet incoherent 'folk theory' of democracy.

From a positivist point of view, discrepancies and congruencies are measured via survey data (demand) and facts on respective provisions (supply). Considering the epistemological context as well as the cross-national perspective of the Special Issue, this article focuses on the positivist line. The following table clusters participatory demand and supply as over-average, average and under-average. This procedure makes it possible to detect congruencies (see Table 1; see for data Appendix, Table 2). Future research

will be necessary to refine this still rough assignment (see Shin, 2015; Canache, 2012; Baviskar and Malone, 2004).

**Table 1. First approach for measuring demand and supply (examples).**

	Demand: 'Referenda essential part of democracy'		
	Over-average	Average	Under-average
↓Supply: Direct democratic options ↓			
None	Cyprus, Germany	Chile, Norway	Netherlands, Finland
1	Argentina	Japan	Canada
2	-	Bulgaria	-
3	Switzerland, Uruguay	Hungary, Peru	-

Source: See Appendix, Table 2

Congruencies in demand and supply are indicated in Canada, Finland or the Netherlands, where less than 20 percent of the citizens consider referenda as an absolutely essential part of democracy (10 on a scale of 1 to 10) and just one or no direct democratic instruments are provided in these countries. Also in Switzerland and Uruguay demand and supply match. The majority of citizens in Switzerland (60 percent) and Uruguay (50 percent) see referenda as an essential part of democracy and both countries offer several direct democratic instruments. In contrast, in some countries there is a clear mismatch between participatory demand and support. The majority of citizens in Cyprus, Argentina or Germany, for example, rank referenda as an absolutely essential part of democracy (55 percent; 54 percent; 52 percent), but no direct democratic instrument is provided at the national level in Cyprus and Germany and only one in Argentina.

As a working hypothesis we might assume that congruence between institutional supply and citizens' demands is a sign for a high quality democracy. When demand and

supply match – i.e. when both are either above average (e.g. Switzerland), average, or below average (e.g. Canada, Finland) – democratic institutions are obviously in line with the societies they serve. In fact, the findings on Switzerland, Canada or Finland coincide with other results. These countries score high for their democratic quality in all quality-of-democracy indices. If demand and supply do not match (e.g. Argentina, Germany), the incongruences show that democratic institutions are built up without sufficient consideration of citizens' requests. This might be a sign for a democracy less oriented towards citizens' preferences, which could be interpreted as a democracy of lower quality. However, incongruence might not always be a sign of poor democratic quality and other components can make up for the shortcoming. It will be a task for future research to examine correlations between incongruence and other indicators of democratic quality.

It will also be a question of future research to scrutinise whether countries with congruencies turn out to be more stable or perform better than countries with a mismatch. It might turn out that discrepancies between participatory demand and supply play a different role in different countries. In some countries mismatch might lead to turmoil or bad democratic performance, in other countries mismatch might be bolstered by other components of high democratic quality. This field of research is new and many questions are still waiting to be answered.

*Intra-national differences.* Up to now, quality-of-democracy research has not studied intra-national differences. However, these differences emerge when quality-of-democracy research is no longer limited to the evaluation of institutions, but includes citizens' perspectives. Considering the current interest in social as well as political polarization in many democracies, intra-national differences will most likely be a topic of future studies. In the context of this paper, the empirical challenge refers to potentially heterogeneous conceptualizations of democracy within a given citizenry. For example, preferences might be spread unequally within a society with certain social strata being inclined towards representative democracy, while other strata tend towards participatory democracy. It is, however, a normative as well as empirical question whether such differences are to be considered as meaningful for the quality of democracy.

*Intra-concept interference.* Finally, the interconnectedness and mutual interference between conceptual components might be a matter of concern. NEPOs can influence other components of democratic quality, e.g. competition between political candidates or voter turnout. However, 'internal' causal relations among components within models of democratic quality are, in fact, common (Goertz, 2006: 54ff.). Many components of quality-of-democracy indices interact with each other, for example civil liberties, fair elections, voter turnout, and rule of law. Accordingly, there is no special theoretical problem for NEPOs being a component of the quality of democracy and at the same time interacting with other components such as competition or elections.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the debate about quality-of-democracy measurements, there is no consensus about the role of NEPOs. Some indices consider democracy as a set of institutions providing the selection of representatives and accordingly exclude any involvement beyond elections; other indices - based on a liberal-pluralist model - include options for involvement in interest groups, and most recent measurements consider an even broader variety of NEPOs. With the goal of coming to terms with the confusion about the role of NEPOs for the measurement of democratic quality, I took on the novel debate on ‘democratising’ quality-of-democracy research. Applying this debate, the inclusion or exclusion of NEPOs in quality-of-democracy measurements also depends on the preferences of respective citizenries.

At a theoretical level, this approach is partly in line with the most recent quality-of-democracy index, the Varieties of Democracy Project. Also the Varieties of Democracy Project has acknowledged that democracies have developed in different directions, which renders it increasingly impossible to evaluate all democracies from one definitive, universal model. However, my argument is not just to depart from different theories of democracy, as the Varieties of Democracy-Project does, but to additionally integrate and utilise citizens’ conceptualisations of democracy. In the context of NEPOs this

approach is especially important, because experts' and citizens' notions of democracy differ significantly on this aspect.

Several challenges have to be considered, when citizens' concepts—about whether to include NEPOs in quality-of-democracy research—are taken into account. This paper suggests preliminary solutions for the question of how to combine citizens' and elites' models of democracy. The paper also develops ideas about how to cope with the challenge of cross-national comparisons: Citizens' concepts of democracy differ between countries (see Table 1; Appendix Table 2) and accordingly 'one-size-fits-all' frameworks of analysis are no longer possible. The final challenge is how to examine and evaluate the (mis-)match between participatory demand and supply in a given democracy. Most conceptual and empirical challenges require additional research and the suggestions can serve as a first step for future studies.

If citizenries' concepts of democracy are considered, would this perspective change anything in the world of real politics? Based on arguments of plausibility, I would say, yes. First, congruence between citizenries' demands for NEPOs and actual supply would be put in the spotlight. Data shows that demand and supply do not fit in many democracies (see Table 1). Quality-of-democracy rankings will be rearranged in the light of (non-)existing congruence. Second, involved actors - i.e. political authorities and citizens – might think twice about their attitudes and actions. Political authorities will likely become more responsive to procedural preferences of their citizenries. Citi-



zens might deliberate more thoroughly about their own procedural preferences in the light of potential implementation – and might even change their preconceptions. And third, democracy-consolidating agencies might think twice about allocating the millions of dollars they spend every year and assign their money preferably to states, which are responsive to the democratic concepts of their citizenries. These implications are preliminary considerations and future research is necessary to confirm the assumptions.

#### **Notes**

1. NEPOs are not specific for democracies. Top-down referenda, for example, have been applied in non-democratic systems for decades.
2. They can be constitutionally required, initiated top-down (e.g. by parliament, city council, president, mayor) or bottom-up by citizens, and refer to an existing law(-proposal) or put issues on the political agenda.
3. There have always been doubts: Schmitter and Karl (1991: 81) recall that procedures for selecting representatives ‘do not define democracy’.
4. Another strand of research evaluates the impacts of participatory opportunities on the quality of democracy (e.g. Geissel and Newton, 2012).
5. Quality-of-democracy research on citizens’ opinions refers either to citizens’ satisfaction with democratic institutions or to citizens’ support for democracy (e.g. Bühlmann et al., 2012; Logan and Mattes, 2012: 470).

6. Experts and citizens often endorse different concepts of democracy (Logan and Mattes 2012: 483ff.). While some political scientists explain these differences with citizens' presumable ignorance (e.g. Shin, 2015: 17; Canache, 2012), other scholars consider different explanations (e.g. Diamond and Plattner, 2012; Dalton et al., 2007; Mattes and Bratton, 2007).
7. The study revealed, that American citizens express preferences about how procedures of political decision making should look like (for Germany: Gherghina and Geissel, 2015).
8. See for the respective questions European Social Survey 6, 2012.
9. Previous findings had shown that 'the popular appeal of democracy lies not in its procedures for elections and governance, but rather in the freedom and liberty that democracy provides' (Dalton et al., 2007: 152). However, recent results contradict these findings.
10. Future research might also examine whether some citizenries prefer direct democratic options to deliberative options or the other way round.
11. From this perspective, a discrepancy between citizens' participatory demands and actual supply can be a start for a deliberative meta-debate within a society.
12. This does not solve the general problem of potential multicollinearity, which cannot be discussed in this article.

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*Appendix*

**Table 2:** Demand for and supply of direct democratic opportunities (selected countries)

Country	Demand	Supply
	World Value Survey Wave 5. 2005-2009	Democracy Barometer 2012
	'Referenda are an essential part of democracy' <sup>a</sup>	Direct democratic instruments <sup>b</sup>
Argentina	53,80%	1 <sup>2</sup>
Australia	46,70%	1 <sup>1</sup>
Brazil	43%	1 <sup>2</sup>
Bulgaria	39,80%	2 <sup>2,4</sup>
Canada	19,50%	1 <sup>2</sup>
Chile	37,90%	0
Cyprus	55,10%	0
Finland	14,30%	0
France	24,60%	1 <sup>2</sup>
Germany	51,80%	0
Hungary	40,90%	3 <sup>2,3,4</sup>
Japan	30%	1 <sup>1</sup>
Mexico	19,10%	0
Netherlands	17,30%	0
Norway	31,70%	0
Peru	29,80%	3 <sup>1,3,4</sup>
Poland	42,90%	1 <sup>2</sup>
Romania	43%	1 <sup>1</sup>
Slovenia	39,60%	3 <sup>2,3,4</sup>
S. Africa	20,90%	0
S. Korea	34,30%	1 <sup>1</sup>
Spain	45,80%	0
Sweden	43%	0
Switzerland	59,60%	3 <sup>1,3,4</sup>
Turkey	45,30%	1 <sup>2</sup>
UK	17%	0
US	25,50%	0
Uruguay	50,40%	3 <sup>1,3,4</sup>

<sup>a</sup> 10 on scale 1-10 (World Values Survey Association, 2015: 348).

<sup>b</sup> Superscript numbers signal type of direct democratic instrument. One point for each of these direct democratic instruments: 1) Mandatory referendum; 2) veto-player referendum; 3) popular veto; 4) popular initiative. Referenda



that are not binding and only apply for specific questions are excluded. Types of direct democratic instruments may deviate from other indices due to different conceptualizations (Democracy Barometer, 2014; see also International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2015; Centre for Research on Direct Democracy; Initiative and Referendum Institute/s).

### **Authors biography**

Brigitte Geissel is Professor of Political Science and Political Sociology as well as Director of the Democratic Innovations Research Unit at the Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany.