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Time to participate !

Democracy equals participation, sharing of power. It concerns the process of reaching an informed common opinion in a group. The word "common" here lies in the democratic focus, everybody who wants to must have the chance to be heard.

There are many ways in which "everybody", you and I, can give our opinion. I can take personal part in every decision, or I can define a representative scheme, where "someone" in certain cases speaks on my behalf: a person, a group of persons, a computer program etc. The shorter distance there is between everybody who wants to take part in the decision making, and the decision making process itself, the democratic focus, the better the democracy. If even one person is placed at a decision distance, we have a democratic imperfection.

Can we measure such democratic efficiency? We might try to sum up the distances of all participators, and then minimize the sum, knowing that there are a number of unknowns: access to relevant knowledge, ability to express oneself, available channels etc. And then the challenge is to increase this efficiency through organizational or technological measures, looking at one variable at a time. Group sizes, language, speed etc. There is much to do.

We might also discuss the number of contacts needed to let everybody be heard before taking a decision.

In the perfect democracy, everyone is first heard on every decision to be taken. In a group of n persons that are present (in a physical or an electronic community), there can be $n(n - 1)/2$ unordered pairs. If every person in this group wants to discuss with, and hear the opinion of, every other person on a matter for discussion before deciding on a decision, then the number of contacts thus increases parabolically with the group size. This is the perfect democratic situation, where everybody will be in contact with (and will "hear") everybody else. Then everybody's proposal for group decision then is presented to everybody else. Then the proposals are added. If no decision with required majority is reached in this first round, a new round might be needed etc. Different computerized models can be used to make all this simpler.

This is decision making analysis. Models exist for the calculation of number of contacts that are needed in a group that wants to live up to the will of its participants. In a group of, say, thousands of participants, millions of contacts are needed for every decision. And we have larger groups than that in our societies. And we certainly have more than one decision to take.

These contact quantities suggest discussion about some form of rationalizing. There is also ideology here. "We don't want anarchy", "Representativity is necessary", it is said by those who like to represent others. The numbers of contacts needed otherwise simply will be too large. "Efficiency" is needed And we don't want instant decision making, the risk for the emotional influence would increase.

Time for reflection is always good for the quality of the decisions to be taken. We should not rush into the decision making process. Of course. But also, too low speed, spending much time means bureaucracy, which generates slack in the system, and leads to decreased decision sharpness.

Reasonable time for reflection and afterthought surely ought to be available in all models for decision making. But this need not be related to the degree of participation.

Even in a representative situation, the number of democratic contacts for decision making increases fast with group size. Each representant at least ought to stay in frequent contact with those she or he represents, who elected her or him. This number of contacts should turn out to be big enough, if we look at usual community sizes. Support systems can help.

To sum up, the number of contacts needed to take a decision increases rapidly with group size both in the more direct model and in a less direct, and more representative, situation.

But then, does every person really want to participate directly in the many decisions? How often would it be enough for me to become informed, and to have the chance to participate, taken for granted that the decision of participating or not must be taken by me alone, and by noone else? Probably quite often. But in what way could I then make known that "this week I want to participate in this, and not that, decision"? And how much knowledge do I need for such a decision?

Practical experiences of political participation from, for instance, Switzerland (where direct political influence is comparatively large), show that there are limits to the degree the citizens want to take part in the political decision making. But many, many want to have the chance to be participators, have the practical possibility to participate.

Here is a challenge. We ought to create systems that can handle dynamic participation. It should be possible to express the desire to participate in certain, but not all, discussions and decision making processes. And this should be a dynamic decision possibility. It should be possible to take a sudden decision to participate, because of fresh background information that has been presented lately.

Participation really could generate contact network traffic. Today's telecommunications networks sure can handle this traffic. They long for it. Telecom operators must like this. It means profit for them. Trials with types of democratic decision making systems therefore must be of high priority. Traffic will be generated, and the more direct the model, the more traffic. The more democratic understanding, the more need for contacts.

Inside all democratic activities lies the need for every participant in the democratic process to make herself or himself informed about the topic to be discussed and decided on. Providing new means for increased access to taken public decisions is the center of project activities in many countries in the 1990s. Many work with computerized systems for public knowledge dissemination, for background information. The next step is to look at the feedback. For what types of online information is there a demand? Here, some, but few countries so far are on the way.

In the private sector, market contacts are expanding fast. The dialogue between the customer and the producer really is supported by sharper form.

Some people don't feel tempted by higher degree of participation at all. They want "discussions" and "meetings". They talk about "button-pushing democracy", and they want "democratic quality instead of quantity".

Here we can remember that the difference between these two is not distinct. There always was a continuum between quantity and quality. Also discussions contain analytic methods that, when applied, lead to common opinion.

All types of democracy contain more or less of active citizenship, more or less of direct participation (or more or less representation, if this word is preferred). Even if an active citizenship does not use counting of numbers of opinion proponents explicitly (counting of heads, or hands), it often does so implicitly. In order to reach a conclusion about the common will of a group of people, it is simply necessary to find some way to add up the opinions of the group participants - somehow. Usually this is done by the chairperson: "OK, so I take it we have reached the conclusion that we want this project to start tomorrow I see noone who disagrees with this". What is done in the head (or heart) of this chairperson, is a direct counterpart to the more or less automated summing up of votes in the more quantitative process. Perhaps it is somewhat more multidimensional, but still some kind of integration takes place. The democratic integration, collecting of opinions or votes to reach a common conclusion in a group is done explicitly or implicitly.

The difference between the direct and indirect representation can be seen as to some degree linear, it refers to finding a point along a continuous scale of representation. Even the most indirect system is direct to some degree. This is so even if the direct influence only means defining a representative person who then for the defined slot of time will express the opinion of the participants. This choice of a representative is a direct process, although close to the lowest degree possible.

Cooperation, reaching common decisions, is of increasing importance in today's society. In the public debate, it is often discussed the distance between citizens ("you and I") and politicians ("those crooks"). Trials with different methods to overcome such unnecessary distances become more and more important. This naturally includes methods for deliberative polling.

But does the common group opinion really reflect the true will of all those present in the process? This is a semantic problem. It is a problem whose nature is perpendicular to the more rational reaching of a common conclusion, discussed above, which is syntactic in type. The semantics of the decision making is another story.