10 IDEAS FOR DEMOCRACY

how to reform the liberal institutions of Europe in line with 21st Century objectives

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Introduction

Among the many beliefs that have become common today, there is one that we find most unacceptable: that liberal democracy is going extinct. To be precise, more than the statement itself, what we balk at is how, when expressed, it is most often accompanied a heavy, passive sigh. How could one just stand back and do nothing more than sigh about this? In the West, we have strived for centuries, for millennia, to be as free as we are today. Free to be in ways we desire, free to love whom we please, free to engage politically in the way we see fittest, free to sell our labour in ways that maximize our utility. However, democracy needs to be reshuffled to periodically re-legitimize itself. Today, progress – if it does occur – seems to the many to be slow, far removed, for the few. A dark cloud hangs over the West: the cloud of decline.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, China offers a rather different picture compared to the traditional political-institutional framework of the West. China's advantage lies in the rapidity and scale of policy implementation. The central planning apparatus has amended traditional failures with flexibility, capability to learn from mistakes, and crucial information gathered through both participatory mechanisms and markets signals.

While the West's decline in aggregate is factual, it is not inevitable. There are traditions — more recent in Estonia, more established in Switzerland, Canada, and Australia —that still carry the inspiration of the American and French Revolutions for grass-roots incisive participation in policy making. And there is plenty of creativity and commitment to the pursuit of sustainable growth in many Italian cities and towns. Yet, most of the West today seems to exhibit dysfunctional workings of democratic systems. To turn back the tide, to save democracy from itself, we need to propose new institutional modes that allow us to stop paying all the costs of democratic procedures — in terms of lengthy deliberation processes and diluted choices captured by lobbies — without enjoying the advantages that democracy used to provide in terms of better knowledge for informed policies.

Piece meal innovations and scattered literature are no longer enough. Radical modifications of the institutional arrangement of how power is organized need to be conceived. Democratic procedures need to be reconstructed so that they enable collective problem-solving, so vital for identifying solutions that improve the well-being of the largest number of citizens. And the reconstruction effort will be constant, given the pace at which technologies are evolving and changing how voters form their opinions and organize their participation.

Technologies don't only trigger the processes that pose the challenge, they also enable some of the solutions. In Estonia, electronic voting has proven feasible and reduced the costs of voting. Efficiency is key to such a redesign effort. While democracy is still worthwhile per se as the "universal value" for which Amartya Sen advocates (1999), it also needs to respond to a problem of widening gap between results delivered and expectations created. Democracy is a system that gathers dispersed information into collective intelligence. If efficiency is to be achieved, the "one

person, one vote" dogma might have to be partially reconsidered. As Rousseau (1762 in *The Social Contract*), Arrow (1963), and Dahl (1989) have shown, it is impossible in large modern societies espousing for there to be a true "government by the people." However, this is precisely what leads us to sustain that the best level at which experiments can take place are local communities: their size allows for greater exercises in smarter participation. On the other hand, large international organizations — like the European Union (EU) and the United Nations — also need to begin to build a legacy of grass-roots participation and processes.

1) Public deliberations should be reorganized around specific problems that do not divide citizens along pre-conceived lines.

Switzerland shows that broad discussions rather than general ones, on the merits and risks of specific decisions, are possible. On the other end, China has accomplished this entirely inside the CPC. Both countries are extreme examples of extensive, collective problem-solving methods, but only one is truly extendable to Western nations.

The Swiss model may provide best practices for direct and participatory democracy. Referenda may be useful to trigger change, especially if written in a manner that underscores the complexity of the issue by allow multiple choices and majorities for approval different from the ones prevailing today. Technologies successfully experimented in Estonia do make this form of consultation more feasible.

Impartial information is clearly key to the success of a similar practice. Methods that present voters with the costs and benefits of specific initiatives will need to be developed so that citizens rediscover a sense of responsibility and ownership for implemented policies.

Pragmatic, informed debates on societal issues will necessarily lead to urban, regional, and national innovation strategies. Scarcity of resources will call for creativity and communities will tend to become more aware of the opportunities to be pursued through innovation.

2) More frequent elections are possible, and they would transform a stop-and-go approach into one with continuous improvements.

Once public debate is organized around specific problems, elections may also take place more frequently, taking advantage of the reduction of transaction costs that solutions like electronic voting enable.

It may sound contradictory, but it is not. More frequent accountability exercises may well make institutions more stable and change less disruptive. Having evaluated whether campaign promises are being worked toward or achieved, citizens would then express their satisfaction (or lack thereof) at the polling place.

This iterative process would ensure policy makers are kept on track with citizens' demands. Keeping elections only every four years means favouring a stop-and-go approach, where newcomers do their best to undo as much as possible of what had been put in place by their predecessors. In between, voters' sentiments are inferred through quasi daily polls, which are not always reliable and are vulnerable to manipulation.

Having more frequent elections, on the other hand, would make States more accountable, much like corporations are on a daily basis to clients and markets.

3) Representative elections should allow citizens to provide more diversified assessments based on more manageable information.

One idea would be to experiment the elections (as opposed to the appointment) of policy makers in charge of specific agencies, of managers of organizations providing public services, and of regulators: the assessment of national governments would be unbundled into smaller, more manageable policy areas upon which politicians can be held accountable in a more direct way.

Today we elect the highest levels of representation only: prime ministers, governors, mayors, local councils, and so forth. They are necessary because the elected bodies may coordinate various policies in a coherent strategy.

Yet, we argue that the deepening of democracy and the expectations that technologies have triggered call for elections of those who are in charge holding administrative responsibility. It is thus not unconceivable that, in an effort to maintain institutional powers in check at the level of territorial communities, some or all of the following policy makers be elected by citizens:

a) administrators in charge of tourism, education or other policy sectors;
b) the management of organizations providing urban mobility and public transportation and other city services;
c) regulators who are to protect consumer rights; or even
d) some judges (as the ones at the local level in America)

The possibility for citizens to express opinions based on accounted-for performance is very important. Otherwise the choice of a Party or a person who is horizontally responsible for nearly everything, requires that, in theory, a citizen can calculate a complicated weighted average of multiple evaluations of results achieved in very different areas. In such cases, intelligent, fact-based opinions tend to be replaced by generic sentiments magnified by media and not necessarily bearing on the issues.

In addition, election mechanisms such as transferrable ranking (used in Australia), present voters with the possibility of expressing a more information-rich choice that could reduce the risk of extremists winning.

4) Qualifications of the right to vote need to be explored.

If the "one person, one vote" dogma must be challenged, we believe that the 21st Century requires mechanisms to differentiate the contribution that different individuals can or want to provide.

For example, we do not see as inconceivable that the right to vote is made conditional on fulfilling a duty towards the community, whereby the introduction of a mandatory period of civil service (like in Switzerland) may promote a sense of citizenship. Without this sense of commonality, democracy loses one of its pre-requisites.

Another proposal is to give parents the right to vote for their underage children. In a country like Italy where there is presently a strong bias against the future and investment in human capital,[1] this would be a sign of reversal of a self-destructive tendency.

These proposals, as others, certainly call for significant changes of Constitutional provisions and yet, as for our premise, courage is needed to think what was unthinkable few years ago. Many would agree that the status quo risks obsolescence and Western societies risk dangerous instability if solutions to problems are not anticipated.

After all, equality of votes never existed. Majoritarian rules meant to guarantee the objective of stability (which they did not reach), already formally alter such a principle. We suggest not limitations of uncompressible rights but nudges to adopt behaviours or approaches that modern institutions should welcome if they want to survive.

5) Qualification of the right to be elected needs to be considered.

Similarly, we believe that incentives should be provided to encourage the creation of legislative bodies whose composition is coherent with that body's institutional mission.
Again, this is not a compromise of universal passive suffrage and it is a measure that already exists in a country such as Italy, where electoral laws legitimately and rightly introduce quotas (such as "pink quotas") to guarantee that a certain percentage of MPs are women to facilitate a desired level of diversity.

At the EU level, there have been proposals to have European-wide constituencies at the time of the election of the next European Parliament and to count more the votes that a candidate of a certain nationality receives in other Member States, so that the creation of a European-wide transnational political platform of parties is encouraged. What we are proposing is along these lines: the possibility for each voter to choose to which electoral college to belong for each EU – and not national or lower than national – election.

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[1] Italy's debt-to-GDP ratio is one of the highest in the world, and the country spends four times on pensions what it does on K-12 education.

Much more controversial but to be discussed at some point is the requirement of minimum (linguistic? administrative?) skills that in a country like China are demanded for a candidate. Even in this case, the idea is not completely new considering that — in Italy and other countries — access to university and to most civil servant positions is conditional on passing an examination (*concorso*).

6) Flexible constituencies should be introduced to take on board new forms of citizenship.

Until the end of the 20th Century, power, elections, taxation, the creation of money, and citizenship were organized by vertical layers: cities, regions, states, and international organizations. Today, new technologies are impacting this kind of organization of the political space. The Internet and globalization have changed everything, yet constituencies have stayed the same. This has created huge inefficiencies and injustices, which the better utilization of certain technologies can help counter.

Somebody who spends their life travelling amongst different cities and countries fewer possibilities to be elected than somebody who has kept on living in the same province. This occurrence has created a global class who has knowledge but is politically insignificant (aside from those who act as advisors and experts) and a local political class which is, as the case of Italy demonstrates, very far from understanding the global phenomena shaping the world.

Nonetheless, Italian electoral law already allows for a transnational constituency (Italians residing abroad) as do many other electoral systems. But why isn't the same allowed for the European Parliament? Voters should be able to decide whether they want to continue to vote within a local constituency (default option) or to join national or European ones; the same possibility should be allowed to candidates. Europe can and should be the place where such experimentation takes place, if Europe wants to overcome the current crisis by reviving its original purpose.

7) Big data aided transparency to be transformed from an obligation to an active pursuit.

Transparency is fundamental for citizens to express information based on data. Most European administrations have the obligation to publish their performance data, so they might be accountable to their citizens. But this is not enough.

It is not enough to publish these data on some difficult-to-access webpage, in a language which many do not understand, and which is lost in huge amounts of other data. One crucial indicator of performance is to count how many of the citizens to whom an administration is relevant, do actually access and use those data. This will encourage governments to not only consider transparency as an obligation to be formally fulfilled, but a core objective to be pursued. Technological tools can be used to showcase the data in an accessible manner. States ought to

do so, anticipating times, before they are disintermediated by citizens getting information themselves from private and sometimes unreliable providers.

8) More reliable and accessible access to the judiciary should allow greater rule of law.

Another fundamental feature of democracy is the protection of the basic rights of citizens to feel safe about the opinions they express and to access the judiciary system against the abuse of public administrations or the political majority in power. While still in progress, the limit of the Chinese work on the "rule of laws" is that its interpretations ultimately depends on the will of the political leadership: should the quality of the ruling class deteriorate, as it is already the case in many peripheries of the "Middle Kingdom", the entire system would be exposed to a crisis. In Europe, and in Italy in particular, democratic institutions have implemented and interpreted the rule of law as an adherence to evermore formal procedures on the part of unelected bureaucracies. In the experience of citizens, laws have in time become disconnected from their rationale, while bureaucracies accountable to no one appear as simulacra of the State that was supposed to enforce those rules. Thus, bureaucracies' lack of accountability turns into mistrust of the law. The fight against nonsensical bureaucracy is for the West as vital as the battle against corruption and abuse of power is in China.

9) Social media are not for political debate. Europe could find a historic opportunity by addressing the need for a neutral public debate space.

American platforms have been the object of criminal charges in terms of unauthorized release of citizens' private data. China's choice to not allow its citizens' information to be appropriated by private, foreign companies upon which it does not have any control, seems to have been a wise one. However, the Chinese solution cannot be imported in countries where the power of the state is limited.

Europe could find a historic opportunity in promoting decentralized autonomous online organizations capable of overcoming the limits of both types of giant social networks: this space is to be public (or regulated by the public) just as the roads, the railways, and the squares that allowed for the exchange of the 19th Century Industrial Revolution goods. In this evolving context, under new regulations that are beginning to be discussed and proposed in the EU, positively-minded hackers may even become a tool to render transparent the system of news. Were this to happen, citizens would be able to access vetted information and participate in public debates with informed opinions. Only then could platforms contribute to fair political debates and more effective decision-making. Such platforms would be an essential component of a "checks and balances" liberal democracy that could correct the asymmetries creating distrust and may ultimately kill social media themselves.

10) The education imperative.

Most importantly democracy, and the efficiency and quality of all the mechanisms through which democracy lives, depend on citizens who have the skills to select and process information and actively participate. The survival of liberal democracies will ultimately depend on how much investments they are willing to make on the human capital which is necessary to survive and prosper in the robots' age, but also to join a collective problem-solving process. Italy is extreme in its spending on pensions, which is four times greater than what it spends on education (from kindergarten to universities). This is depressing Italy's long-term potential growth even more than it does currently. However, all other Western countries spend at least twice more in protection than in human capital. For the survival of democracy itself, this imbalance needs correcting. Not less drastic are the changes needed in the composition of the expenditure in education, beyond its absolute value.
A semester of study in another European country as a mandatory part of the curricula of students both at secondary and tertiary levels is necessary for Europe to firm up citizens' European identity, without which Europe fails.

Conclusion

In order to save democracy, we need to first overcome the inertia that blocks us from feeling a greater sense of community. This is the cornerstone on which to found new democratic mechanisms that give priority to knowledge. Through incremental steps, by pressing forward with faith, we can develop an intelligent and self-learning societal system, and ensure progress becomes diffused prosperity. Western countries must act as forcefully as they did in the post-World War II period, without losing control over the new technologies. The development of the "democracy of the future" will start with small wins, during which citizens "learn on the job" (as John Dewey would have recommended), so that consensus can be rebuilt.