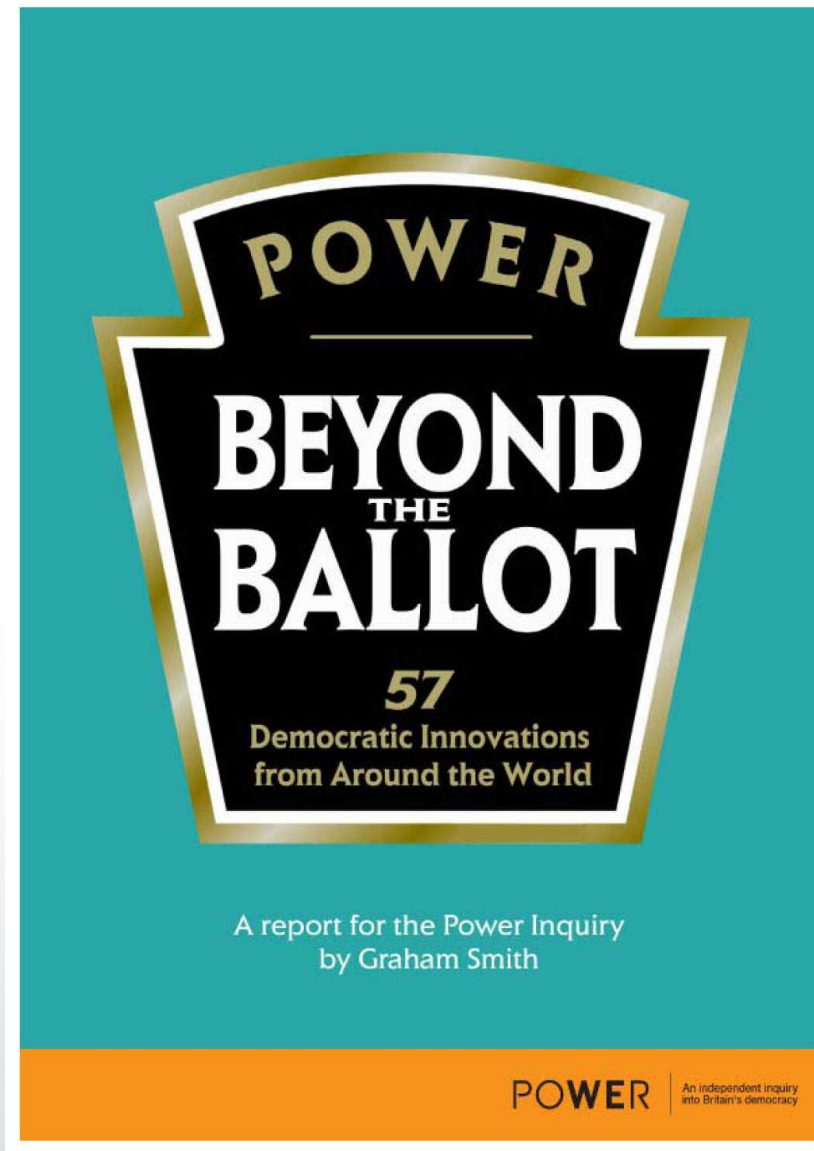


# Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation

Graham Smith

[gsmith@soton.ac.uk](mailto:gsmith@soton.ac.uk)



# Outline of presentation

- What is a ‘democratic innovation’?
- Why study democratic innovations?
- How to evaluate democratic innovations?
- Lessons from evaluation

# Defining ‘democratic innovations’

- Institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process
  - Directly engage *citizens* rather than representatives of organised interests
  - *Institutionalised* forms of participation at strategic level (policy, legislative or constitutional decision making)
  - Departure from traditional institutional architecture of advanced industrial democracies
  - Examples include participatory budgeting, mini-publics, direct legislation and possibly developments in e-democracy.

## Why study democratic innovations?

- Growing evidence of public disillusionment and disenchantment with the institutions of advanced industrial democracies
  - Decline in electoral turnout; low levels of trust and confidence in politicians and political institutions; decline in membership of traditional mobilising institutions; etc.
- Not a counsel of despair – evidence of strong commitment to democratic norms and values.
  - ‘The public’s democratic expectations place a priority on reforms that move beyond the traditional forms of representative democracy. Stronger parties, fairer elections, more representative electoral systems will improve the democratic process, but these reforms do not address expectations that the democratic process will expand to provide new opportunities for citizen input and control’ (Dalton 2004: 204).

# Why study democratic innovations?

- Increasing and deepening participation a consistent theme in contemporary democratic theory
  - Participatory democracy
  - Deliberative democracy
  - Direct democracy
  - Difference democracy
  - Cosmopolitan democracy, etc, etc...
- Do actually-existing ‘democratic innovations’ realise the theoretical and practical ambitions of these different theoretical enterprises?

## How to evaluate democratic innovations?

- Gap in the discipline?
  - ‘disciplinary divorce within the academic study of politics, between normative theory and empirical political analysis’ (Beetham 1999: 29).
  - ‘Normative and explanatory theories of democracy grow out of literatures that proceed, for the most part, on separate tracks, largely uninformed by one another. This is unfortunate, partly because speculation about what ought to be is likely to be more useful when informed by relevant knowledge of what is feasible, and partly because explanatory theory too easily becomes banal and method-driven when isolated from the pressing normative concerns that have fuelled worldwide interest in democracy in recent decades’ (Shapiro 2003: 2).

# Deductive approach

- Where theoretically-informed analysis takes place, *deductive* approach tends to dominate
  - search for institutions that best ‘fit’ existing theories or models of democracy.
  - direct democracy → initiative and referendum
  - deliberative democracy → citizens’ juries and deliberative opinion polls
  - difference democracy → quotas and group representation.



# Weakness of deductive approach

- Limits range of institutions that can reasonably be analysed
  - Only a few designs come close to passing strict theoretical tests.
  - Little comparison between different designs.
- Democratic theories / models are incomplete
  - New theoretical approaches emerge in response to perceived weaknesses in democratic practice or theory.
  - Significant elements of democratic practice can be overlooked.
- By not embracing one particular theoretical perspective, analysis of democratic innovations may allow for reflection on evaluative claims of different democratic theories.

# An analytical framework

- Comparison of innovations based on the manner and extent to which they realise desirable qualities or *goods* of democratic innovations
- Goods of democratic institutions (democratic and practical goods)
  - Inclusiveness (presence and voice)
  - Popular control (problem definition - option analysis – option selection - implementation)
  - Considered judgement (knowledge and empathy)
  - Transparency (internal and external)
  - Efficiency (burdens on citizens and institutions)
  - Transferability (scale, political context, issue)

# An analytical framework

- Arguably, the four democratic goods (inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency) would need to be considered in any reasonable theoretical account of democratic institutions.
- Two practical goods (efficiency and transferability) entail consideration of feasibility constraints.
- Direct engagement with critics and sceptics of participation
  - Unequal participation
  - Competence
  - Co-option
  - Costs
  - Scale

# Applying the analytical framework

- No single design can fully realise all six goods of democratic institutions
- A small number of impressive democratic innovations that realise quite different, but compelling, combinations of goods
  - Participatory Budgeting (Porto Alegre)
  - Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform (BC and Ontario)
  - Direct legislation (initiative and popular referendum)
  - Nascent e-democracy designs
- Creative possibilities in combining innovations
  - E.g. mini-publics and direct legislation (BCCA)
- Primarily a question of political will rather than design?

# Lessons for democratic theory

- Contribution to *institutional* theory of democracy.
- Reflective capacity – interrogate the claims and evaluative commitments of different democratic theories.
- Analysing democratic innovations forces democratic theorists to recognise trade-offs between goods that may not be so apparent at abstract level of analysis and deal with issues that have been overlooked within theoretical debates, e.g.
  - role of active facilitation/moderation
  - engagement with emerging network governance arrangements