Rebooting Democracy:

Democratic Innovation for the Information Age

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Which innovations in public participation restore and sustain democracy in turbulent times?

Despite continued support worldwide for democracy as a regime, democracy as a practice is suffering. Threats include declining trust in government and political parties, distorted digital communications, and rising populism and polarisation in politics.

In a positive response, governments, businesses, and charities are already reimagining democracy. They have designed inventive democratic services and devices that can help sustain democratic order. Some examples include participatory budgeting, randomly selected juries, and different forms of referendums. These social innovations are often supported by civic technologies, open data applications, citizen science, and behavioural nudges such as information cues that increase civic volunteering.

Yet we know little about what works beyond case studies – and we know that some of these interventions can increase disengagement, misinformation, and manipulation.

I have taken a leading role in the development of a comparative research agenda. A number of projects have begun to collect systematic data on how these devices improve democracy (or do not). Despite the abundance of information, research has yet to take advantage of the analytic potential of data science and new technologies. In the project, I bring together traditional survey data, and new forms of crowdsourced and real-time data to understand what interventions actually help to sustain rather than hinder democracy.

Matt is Lecturer in Governance and Public Policy at the University of Southampton.

His research focuses on democratic innovation and participation in politics, the policymaking process, and research methods. He chairs the research committee of the *Participedia.net Project*, a global network of scholars and practitioners dedicated to understanding participatory democratic innovations. His most recent publications appear in the *European Journal of Political Research, Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly,* and *Local Government Studies*, and his book *Why Participation Succeeds and Why it Fails* will be published with Bristol University Press in June 2020.

Phase One

Phase one will involve combining data from existing sites and surveys to determine conditions in the past that have led to increases in positive democratic behaviours. I will analyse the data to predict effective responses to public problems with innovative democratic consultations.

Available secondary data include comprehensive participatory budgeting surveys from the US, Spain, and Brazil, data on a variety of democratic innovations across Latin America and Africa, and data on local consultations and environmental impacts in the US and Germany.

These datasets have collected comparable data for over one thousand cases on issues, scope, costs, participants, decisions, outputs, and outcomes. I will use advanced set-theoretic methods and multi-level modelling to identify the conditions that predict different policy effects.

Phase Two

In a second phase, I will work with the University of Southampton's Research Software Group to engineer a dashboard that produces practical data aggregation to help the user make informed decisions.

Machine learning will draw on and integrate data streams from phase one as well as aggregating social media data. We will create an early warning system to inform governments, civil society groups, and citizens about what is happening and how issues are being talked about in the wider public sphere. Users will be able to decide better when and where certain kinds of public consultation will be beneficial.

We will harvest and link social science datasets to expand available comparative data such that it is sensitive to the operationalisation of established concepts in political theory – from voting to argumentation.

Phase Three

Phase three will run field trials using the research and tools developed in the project.

We will work with partners including City Councils, Involve, and the World Bank Digital Engagement Evaluation Unit, using the dashboard to make recommendations on when and how populations should be engaged with collective decisions.

We will deliver successive field experiments with agile design to test social interventions and feasibility of tools.

The ultimate aim of the project is to use advances in traditional and new forms of data analysis, to work in accordance with the best insights that democratic theory and empirical social science have to offer.

Partners

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RSG Research Software Group
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