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Willem E. Saris

New possibilities for political participation: Tele-democracy

Direct influence of the public on political decision making has not been very popular among politicians. For a long time it was not feasible, but with the advances of modern technology it is no longer impossible. The question is raised whether such systems should be used for this purpose, and whether there would be enough participation in the long run for them to be a substitute for elections and referenda.

This paper does not suggest that the new media will bring new light to the functioning of democracies. However, modern technology can provide possibilities which did not previously exist or were too difficult to use. They can improve communication from the general public to the politicians. The final evaluation of the new facilities depends, as always, very heavily on the use the politicians make of them.

L'influence directe du public sur la prise de décision politique n'a pas eu la cote auprès des politiciens. Pendant longtemps, elle ne pouvait guère être exercée, mais, avec les progrès de la technologie moderne, elle n'est plus impossible. La question est de savoir si de tels systèmes devraient être employés à cette fin et si, à la longue, il y aurait une participation suffisante pour qu'ils en soient un remplacement pour des élections et référendums.

Cette communication ne prétend pas que les nouveaux médias éclairciront le fonctionnement des démocraties. Pourtant, la technologie nouvelle peut fournir des possibilités qui n'existaient pas auparavant ou qui étaient trop difficiles à employer. Elles peuvent améliorer la communication entre le grand public et les politiciens. Comme toujours, l'évaluation finale de facilités nouvelles dépend largement de l'emploi qu'en feront les politiciens.

Direkter Einfluss der Öffentlichkeit auf politische Entscheidungsprozesse war nicht sehr beliebt unter Politikern. Lange Zeit war er nicht möglich, aber mit dem Fortschritt moderner Technologie ist er nicht mehr undenkbar. Die Frage stellt sich, ob solche technische Systeme zu diesem Zweck gebraucht werden sollten, und ob sie langfristig genügend Partizipation mobilisieren, um als Ersatz für Wahlen und Referenden anerkannt zu werden.

Dieses Papier behauptet nicht, dass die neuen Medien ein neues Licht auf das Funktionieren der Demokratien werfen. Die moderne Technologie bietet in diesem Zusammenhang jedoch Möglichkeiten, die früher nicht existierten oder deren Gebrauch zu kompliziert war. Sie können die Kommunikation zwischen der breiten Öffentlichkeit und den Politikern verbessern. Die endgültige Einschätzung der neuen Möglichkeiten hängt wie immer sehr stark vom Gebrauch ab, den die Politiker davon machen werden.

I. Introduction

Before I address the real issue of my paper, I would like to comment on the background from which it has been written. Being from the Netherlands, I am in a completely different position than the Swiss. While in Switzerland the discussion on referenda is about the problems with respect to the low participation rate, in the Netherlands the problem is that there are very few possibilities, besides voting, for the public to exert any influence on political decisions. This does not mean that the need to do so does not exist. The recent debate on nuclear energy, in which 40000 people participated (1984), the two demonstrations against the deployment of cruise missiles in the Netherlands where, respectively, 200000 and 50000 people participated and the 3,7 million signatures collected in 1985 against the deployment of these missiles are illustrations to the contrary.

Not only do the politicians in the Netherlands normally deny the general population any influence, they even ignore public opinion completely on those occasions when opinions have been sought. For example the Energy debate in 1982 and 1983 clearly showed that the Dutch population did not want additional nuclear plants in the country.¹ Nevertheless the government decided in 1985 that two new nuclear power plants should be built. It is only because of the Chernobyl catastrophe that the government has not continued this line of policy.

In another instance, a government commission recommended that referenda should be introduced in the Netherlands, but its report did not survive a political debate of more than a week. Only recently, after very low participation rates in local elections in 1989, the local governments in several cities were sufficiently concerned about the problem to decide that referenda should be held in order to increase the political interest of the voters. Even though the participation rates in countries which hold referenda do not support the high expectations in this regard, many people, including the author, consider the organization of referenda to be a positive development since they force politicians to take public opinion seriously. Unfortunately, this issue is already under debate again in the few towns in the Netherlands, where experiments with referenda have been held.

Starting from this background, I would like to discuss different procedures for public participation in the policy decisions of the government. This does not mean that I am convinced that public participation by direct democratic procedures in political decision making is necessary. I will try to show here that there are other means by which the politicians can become aware of the preferences of the general population, should they want to take these opinions seriously. Let us first consider some ideas with respect to direct democratic procedures.

Direct democracy by referendum has only been institutionalised in Switzerland and some states of the United States. Swiss and American supporters of direct

¹ Stuurgroep 1984.

democracy² believe in the influence of free individuals and are afraid that intermediary organizations misrepresent the preferences of the people, to say the least. Direct democracy can deal with all issues no matter how conflictive; the decisions are brought closer to the people, and are made publically, not in hidden processes where a lot of exchanges of benefits can occur. The sum of the individual opinions represents the «popular will». Alienation of government is reduced. The public interest is served and not the special interest of intermediary organizations; the citizens are able to use their potential influence to the maximum.

These idealistic views have not found wide acceptance. Regarding the two cases in question, Sharp has observed that «both, in Switzerland and the United States, the whole body of citizens were from the earliest times accustomed to exercise all the functions of government for themselves in open assembly. This direct control over the affairs of State was never entirely surrendered, and when the assemblies of all citizens became impracticable and more and more powers had to be delegated to representative councils, the referendum came into being gradually, and naturally, not as an accession of popular power, but as a mere retention by the sovereign people of certain important powers in their own hands».³ This argument seems to suggest that population size prevents the possibility of direct assembly democracy and therefore, these two countries have chosen for the referendum. In this paper I shall indicate that technical problems can no longer be an argument to reject very intensive forms of direct participation. There are several alternatives for organizing direct democracy which already exist, als I will show below.

But the technical problems are not the only reasons why politicians have rejected various forms of direct democracy. In most other countries the arguments against referenda in particular outweighed the arguments in their favour. The arguments against were summarized by Butler and Ranney (1972):⁴

- the weakening of the position of the elected authority
- inability of the ordinary citizen to make wise decisions
- the intensity of beliefs is not taken into account
- no effort is made to reach consensus; a forced decision is made
- the preferences of minorities are not protected.

The first argument is certainly weak, being mainly a defense of their own position by the politicians. The other arguments need to be taken more seriously. It is indeed an open question whether citizens (probably including politicians) can make wise decisions. The politicians claim that ordinary citizens do not have the

2 For see Swiss case, see, for example, Deploige S., (1898) *The referendum in Switzerland*, London King, and Bonjour F. (1920), *Real democracy in operation*, New York, Stokes. In the United States, direct democracy was been defended by the progressive movement, to see, for example, Hofstadter R. (1955), *The age of reform*, New York, Random House, Gould L.L. (1974), *The progressive era*. Syracuse, University press.

3 Sharp, C.D. (1911), *The case against the referendum. Fabian tract no 155*. London, The Fabian Society.

4 Butler, D. and A. Ranney (1978), *Referendums: A comparative study of practice and theory*. American Enterprise for Public Policy Research.

information at their disposal that they have. The third argument is also important. It is certainly true that many nuances are lost in such a rough procedure as a referendum. The fourth argument is less clear. That no effort is made to reach a consensus is due to the characteristics of the problem: referenda are normally held in situations where there is no consensus. If there were consensus the referendum would not be necessary. Besides, in many political decisions no effort is made to reach a consensus because of the impossibility to do so.⁵ Finally, the protection of minorities is an obligation of politicians, not of the citizens who participate in a referendum.

The most serious arguments against referenda are probably the quality of the decisions made by the citizens and the limited information which is available to them. In this paper I want to discuss alternatives which improve these aspects. But, first, I would like to mention another criticism of referenda. The organization of a referendum is in general very expensive and requires so much time that a maximum of a few referenda a year would be feasible. The reason for these high costs is the need to mobilize the whole population. Despite these high costs and extensive efforts, only a relatively small part of the population participates. In Switzerland it is not unusual for participation to be less than 40%. In that case, can these participants decide for the whole population? Survey methodologists can easily suggest ways to acquire information about the opinion of the population which give more details than referenda and at lower cost.

I shall discuss three very different approaches to collecting information on public opinion. The first approach is based on new procedures which allow people to participate through direct democracy in practically all decisions which have to be made. These new means will be called «tele democracy». A second set of procedures is more in line with the referendum. They collect information from the whole population on special issues and only occasionally. The third set of procedures is based on collecting information from a sample of the population as in survey research. In this paper, I make a comparison between these three different forms of organizing participation of the population in the decision making process and of collecting information on public opinion. The criteria which have been selected to compare these approaches are:

1. the correctness of the information
2. the precision of the information
3. the quality of the decisions (use of necessary information)
4. the representativeness of the participants for the population
5. the level of participation
6. the costs

I shall now evaluate the different procedures on the basis of the above given criteria.

⁵ Gallhofer, I.N. (1990), *Collective decisions in the council of ministers*. Amsterdam, SRF (forthcoming).

II. Procedures for Tele-democracy

As I have mentioned in the introduction to this paper, direct democracy is no longer impossible. There are technical devices available which allow participation of the whole population on a daily basis. Let us start with a few words on the technology. There are at the moment three systems which seem most suitable for this purpose.

The first is the type of videotex system which is used in France (Minitel). This is a little terminal which is provided on a large scale to households as a substitute for the telephone directory. Via the terminal the respondents can connect with a central computer and obtain the information they require by answering simple questions which become increasingly specific. This system has been used for many other purposes besides looking up telephone numbers. It can also be used to collect information on public opinion on a daily basis. We are not aware of any use of this system for political purposes, but it is certainly possible.

A second possibility requires no new equipment but only a TV with Teletext (or Bildschirm text) and a touch tone telephone. For households with this equipment, and there are already many in western countries, it is possible to go to a specific page in teletext and phone the number mentioned there. In this way contact is made with a computer which can ask people questions. The questions are presented on the screen of the TV and the answers can be given on the telephone. This is probably the cheapest procedure for collecting the opinion of people on a daily basis. This system has been used in Amsterdam for political debates on various topics during the last year.

The third possibility is the use of interactive cable television, which now exists in many areas. With such a facility, questions which appear on the screen can be answered by pressing buttons on a remote control. The disadvantage of this system is that it requires a substantial investment in hardware for the government. This system has been used for collecting information about the opinions of the public.⁶

All these systems have potential use for direct democracy. Evaluating them on the specified criteria, we find that the systems allow a correct registration of public opinion. The registration can be very precise, the intensity of the feelings can also be determined and in combination with televised information these systems would provide a good opportunity for the collection of a well informed opinion. As participation is open to all citizens, this can be seen as a very democratic possibility. Nevertheless, I have my doubts about whether these systems should be used for such purposes. As far as information exists on the participation in such activities, even on an incidental basis, the results are not very encouraging in the sense that the participants are in no way representative of the population. Too many highly educated people participate. But participation itself is also very low. This might be due to the fact that the procedures are only tried out on an incidental basis. If they were used on a regular basis, there would be more public awareness of them and probably more participation, at least in the beginning. However, participation

⁶ Elstain, J.B., 1982, *Democracy and the Tube*, The Nation, pp. 108–110.

would probably drop quite rapidly because there is only a limited group so interested in politics that it would participate on a continuous basis.

It is also questionable whether one should aim at full public participation in decision making at all times. Survey research indicates that approximately 30 to 40 percent of people are not very interested in these matters.⁷ Most people would probably be satisfied with a society where the distribution of benefits is fair without them being involved in the system. If this is the case, they would be willing to leave the decision making to specialists. There is only a limited group of people interested in participation in political decision making per se. Participation is only necessary for most citizens when the distribution of benefits is unfair or decisions are made which they consider unacceptable. However, if they are given the opportunity to participate in the decision making process, their opinion should also be taken into account. Otherwise participation will drop very rapidly to a low level. This is what happened in the Netherlands after the National debate on energy which has been mentioned earlier.

Given the lack of interest of the general public in politics and the inefficiency of allowing participation in all decisions, one should aim at a lower level of participation. This can be realized by reducing the amount of time required to participate, as in the case of referenda, or by reducing the number of people who should participate each time, as in opinion research. In the following sections these two possibilities are discussed.

III. Referenda

Referenda, as the procedures described so far, attempt to involve the whole population in the decision making process. However, for referenda, this is tried only occasionally. The classical approach to referenda is very similar to election procedures: first, a lot of information is provided by the different parties and the population can, then, make a choice on the basis of this information in the usual way. It is normally a choice between two alternatives. Scientific experiments with other registration or voting procedures have also been done using «call in» and «mail back ballot» procedures.

The first procedure was used by Sanoff⁸ for political purposes and by many others for TV shows. The procedure is as follows: the viewers of a TV program are confronted with a statement and those who agree with it can call one number (no dialogue is needed, the telephone should only ring a couple of times) while those who are against it call another number. The results of such «call in» procedures can immediately be registered and presented. Such procedures are very simple but are more appropriate for entertainment purposes than as serious methods for referen-

7 Huijnen, H., 1988, *Some models for the prediction of vote preference*. Unpublished Thesis at the University of Amsterdam.

8 Sanoff, A.P., 1984, *ABC's phonein polling: Does it put credibility on the line?*, Washington Journalism Review, pp. 48-49.

da. The second option is to print ballot sheets in the newspapers and ask people to send in their answers to the questions. By tallying the answers one can determine the result of the referendum.⁹ It should be clear that this procedure allows the participants to give much more detailed information than the classical procedures where only a yes or no could be given.

The procedures which have been mentioned in the previous section under the heading of teledemocracy can also be used for these purposes and have the same advantages as mentioned before. They can provide detailed information and are relatively easy to use. So far, the participation level has not been higher than in local elections; in most cases participation was even considerably lower.¹⁰

An advantage of the traditional method is that there is complete control over the people who are participating, which is not the case in the newer methods. Respondents can only be stopped from answering more than once by complex procedures. On the other hand the classical method lacks detailed information as respondents only provide a yes or no. It is also not possible to provide opinions of subgroups.

Given the low participation rates, it is to be expected that systematic biases will occur. In general only highly motivated people will participate. The motivation can be due to an extreme opinion or a feeling that it is a citizen's duty to participate. But there is a risk that some societal groups will not participate at all. We have also mentioned before the critique of the classical referendum that one does not know whether people have made their choices on the basis of the necessary information. Even if a long campaign has been conducted, this does not necessarily imply that the public has followed this campaign.

Given these characteristics of the referendum, it does not seem to be a very attractive option. The referendum is, nevertheless, rather popular as it is a relatively easy way to legitimize decisions. The argument in such cases is that all people who want to give their opinion can do so and if they do not, it is their choice and the majority of participants, however small this group may be, will determine which choice is made. Although this argument is clear, there are other ways to organize participation of citizens in the decision making process. Opinion research is an alternative.

IV. Opinion research

In opinion research, information is also sought about the opinion of a population but not all the members are asked to express their opinion. On the basis of sampling theory, the study of a probability sample of the population is sufficient. If such a sample is drawn properly and its members are willing to cooperate, the

9 Orton, B.M., 1980, *Media based issue balloting for regional planning*. Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University.

10 Arterton, F.C., 1987, *Teledemocracy: Can technology protect democracy?*, Beverly Hills, Sage.

opinion of the population can be determined with a level of precision that depends on the sample size and thus the amount of money available for the study. Only in very tight decisions will the uncertainty due to sampling be a serious problem. In general, the percentages of pros and cons will be sufficiently different that the sampling uncertainty will not lead to any problems.

This argument seems to suggest that a referendum is only necessary where the percentages of supporters and opponents are very close. In most cases, this situation can be detected long before the final date of the opinion poll. It is then necessary to increase the sample size in order to get the required precision or, alternatively, to hold a referendum to be completely sure.

Can we thus decide that referenda are only occasionally needed and that opinion polls can be used most of the time as a much cheaper alternative which also gives more information? The only problem with this argument, in my view, is that a public debate could introduce new arguments which could cause changes in opinions. In elections the changes which can be produced for each party are often not more than a few percentage points compared with the predictions of opinion polls, even when a lot of effort has been made to change the opinions. Nevertheless, opinion research cannot predict what will happen if people are not provided with the necessary information about a decision problem. An opinion poll provides the opinion of the population as it is at a specific moment, no more and no less. Thus, the only two serious disadvantages of these procedures seem to be: the possible lack of information available to the participant and the lack of legitimation which is given to sample surveys.

With respect to the first point, efforts have been made to overcome this problem. In an elaborate study, several authors¹¹ have developed and reported an alternative to the simple opinion poll. They have called their procedure the «Choice questionnaire». The novel aspect of this approach is that participants are provided with the available information which is necessary to make an informed choice. This information consists of statements on the possible consequences and the probability of the occurrence of the consequences for the different alternatives. In their research, it was shown that evaluation of these statements by the respondents, and summation of these evaluations of the consequences for each decision alternative, were very effective in the process of reaching well considered decisions. Neijens has shown that during the energy debate in the Netherlands nearly 70% of the sample made a choice which was in agreement with their evaluations of all consequences.¹² This suggests that the participants used the information provided. In such cases, it is difficult to argue that a decision is of low quality. This adjusted opinion poll was presented to a sample of the population which deviated only minimally from the total population with respect to background statistics. The information was very detailed and the opinions of different groups could easily be indicated. Although

11 Saris, W.E., P. Neijens, J. de Ridder *Kernenergie Ja of Nee?*, Amsterdam, SSO.

12 Neijens, P., 1987, *The choice questionnaire: Design and evaluation of an instrument for collecting informed opinions of a population*, Amsterdam, Free University Press.

this procedure is a bit more expensive than normal opinion research, the costs are still much lower than those for referenda. This form of survey research can give a better prediction of the result of a public debate because the arguments of both sides are represented in such an approach. Although this procedure is not without problems, it is a feasible alternative as the study of Neijens has shown.

In the context of opinion research, I would like to introduce a third approach, called «Tele-panel». In this approach the households are provided with a computer and a modem. These two tools and a software package make it possible to send interviews to the households. The households can answer the questions and, when they have finished, the answers are automatically returned to the central computer. This system, developed by the Sociometric Research Foundation in Amsterdam¹³ has been used for panel research during the last 5 years by the Dutch Gallup organization (NIPO). It provides possibilities for normal incidental opinion research and choice questionnaires on a representative sample of the population¹⁴, but also has many more facilities. If, for example, the computer is situated for a year in a household before it is moved to a subsequent household in the next sample, one could acquire much information from these citizens. For example, it has been suggested that one could acquire information on¹⁵:

1. the problems which the public experience;
2. the use of the services provided by the state or local government to solve these problems;
3. whether the information about these possibilities reaches the proper people;
4. what the public thinks about the existing solutions to certain problems;
5. what the public thinks about possible new solutions to problems;

The public could also be asked to suggest solutions. Normal choice questionnaires can also be done on the computer as well as choice questionnaires, where the information about the possible consequences is provided on the TV, eventually even with a debate about the possible alternatives. The tele-panel can provide this information in great detail, with intensities, and can be selected to represent the population of interest as well as specific subgroups of interest. This information can be provided rapidly after the data have been collected because they are already in computer readable form and can immediately be analyzed.

All these possible applications provide the authorities with valuable information which can be used to formulate policies to give support to those groups in society for which they are developed. Whether this happens is, of course, a political decision, but these decisions can at least be based on the necessary information.

13 Pijper, W.M., and W.E. Saris, 1986, *Computer assisted interviewing using homecomputers*, European Research, 14, pp. 144–150.

14 Doorn, L. van, 1988, *Het gebruik van microcomputers in panelonderzoek*. In Bronner e.a. (Eds) *Recente ontwikkelingen in het marktonderzoek*, pp. 9–23.

15 Saris, W.E., 1987, *Telematica systemen voor burgers-bestuur relaties*. Nota voor de Gemeente Amsterdam (unpublished).

V. Evaluation

The discussion in the previous sections suggests that direct democracy involving the whole population on a regular basis is possible with today's technology, but that does not imply that one should use this technology for this purpose. It seems quite likely that a situation would rapidly develop where only very few people would participate and that the decisions would therefore have very little legitimation.

Referenda are a reasonable alternative because they allow all citizens to participate in the decision-making process on a limited number of occasions. We have indicated that, according to statistical theory, it would not always be necessary to ask the whole population in order to get information about the opinion. One can get the same information by asking a small sample of the population. This is much cheaper than organizing a referendum and opinion research will even provide more detailed information. We have also indicated that the only reason why there might be a reluctance to give an important status to opinion research in decision making is because people might not have the necessary information available for the choice they have to make. (This point also applies in the case of a referendum.) The Choice questionnaire could be a solution to this problem, because in this procedure the necessary information is provided to the people who have to make the choice.

Using a tele-panel, one would get all the information which is necessary to adjust the system to the preferences of the population in as much as they are acceptable and reasonable. With such a system, people could be asked to participate for a year in the decision making of the government. After that year other representatives of the population would be asked. In this way they would participate in many more questions than those which they are normally allowed influence. Normally this is only the voting or a representative or the choice out of a few options. They could also comment on the functioning of the bureaucracy, the information provided, the solutions to the problems proposed or even the problems which should be solved.

Referenda and opinion polls have the advantage that they do not require much effort from the citizens and participation will therefore not fall below an acceptable level. It is also possible that these procedures would increase public interest in political decision making but this would also depend for a large part on the way the results of such participation procedures are interpreted by the politicians. If public preferences are not taken seriously, political disinterest is more likely. Finally, why should a referendum have a higher political status than a well designed opinion poll? There is no fundamental difference between referenda and opinion research which makes the one more preferable than the other.