The potentials and pitfalls of democratic deliberation: interdisciplinary perspectives

Programme and abstracts

PROGRAMME

10:00 – 10:15   Introduction to workshop

10:15 – 11:00   Karen Celis (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Sarah Childs (Royal Holloway, University of London): *Designing Feminist Democracies. Mixing and Matching Principles and Practices.*

Coffee break

11:15 – 12:00   Hein Duijf (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): *Does Majority Voting Favour the Majority?*

Lunch break

13:00 – 13:45   Ines Lindner (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): *Naïve Learning in Social Networks with Random Communication*

Coffee break

14:00 – 14:45   John Parkinson (Maastricht University): *Title TBA*

Coffee break

15:00 – 16:00   Roundtable discussion

16:00 – 16:30   Informal discussion

ABSTRACTS

Designing Feminist Democracies. Mixing and Matching Principles and Practices.

Karen Celis (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Sarah Childs (Royal Holloway, University of London)

'Those who wish to undermine injustice cannot turn their backs on state institutions as tools for that end' (Young 2002, 8). Witnessing feminist protests worldwide addressing the formal institutions of democracies twenty years later, Young's claim still stands. Representative democracies are part of the problem, and therefore cannot but be part of the solution. Moreover, gender inequality is found to be the Achilles heel of many alternatives to representative democracy (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Wojciechowska 2019) and feminists remain to be persuaded of their reliability for fair and just decision-making in contexts of intersectional gender inequality pervasive in democratic polities across the globe. That said, some practices and effects of extra-parliamentary alternatives – most importantly prioritizing deliberation – are, in principle, promising for solving some key issues of women's poverty of representation. To end the latter, in our new book *Feminist Democratic Representation* we adopt a problem-based, feminist democratic design approach. (Saward 2021; Warren 2017) We ask, what principles of design are best placed to bring into being women's good political representation, regardless of the democratic model they are embedded in? We reconsider what we might take from their various menus, and mix and match principles and practices from participatory, deliberative and post-representative democratic models with representative democratic ones that bring in the benefits of visibility, indirectness and accountability. Specifically we focus on designing institutional augmentations to parliaments that enact feminist principles in representative process, that is, moments of women's group advocacy, just and fair deliberation and decision making, and strong accountability.

Does Majority Voting Favour the Majority?

Hein Duijf (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

It would be surprising if majority voting in a community would not succeed in selecting policies that are in the interest of the majority of that community. People are often influenced by others when reaching their voting decision. To explore the impact of social influence on majority voting, I use agent-based models where agents are situated on an influence network. First, I compare segregated with random influence networks and demonstrate that in these cases majority voting is equally likely to select policies that are in the interest of the majority. Second, it is surprising that some factors play only a minor role in determining the outcome of the majority vote: the relative sizes of the majority and minority, the total influence of the majority and the minority, and the density of the network. In contrast, some factors play a major role: the competences of the minority and the majority and the proportional influence of the minority versus the majority. The morale is that social influence and deliberation can have unexpected

(and perhaps even undesirable) consequences if certain opinions are amplified disproportionately more than others.

Naïve Learning in Social Networks with Random Communication

Ines Lindner (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), based on joint work with Jia Ping Huang (Shenzhen University) and Bernd Heidergott (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

We study social learning in a social network setting where agents receive independent noisy signals about the truth. Agents naïvely update beliefs by repeatedly taking weighted averages of neighbors' opinions. The weights are fixed in the sense of representing average frequency and intensity of social interaction. However, the way people communicate is random such that agents do not update their belief in exactly the same way at every point in time. Our findings, based on Theorem 1, Corollary 1 and simulated examples, suggest the following. Even if the social network does not privilege any agent in terms of influence, a large society almost always fails to converge to the truth. We conclude that wisdom of crowds seems an illusive concept and bares the danger of mistaking consensus for truth.

Challenges to deliberative democracy, or, with friends like these…?

John Parkinson (Maastricht University)

It might not seem so in a time of seemingly-widespread experimentation, but deliberative democracy is now a middle-aged theory. It was new and exciting more than 30 years ago; it became a major thread in empirical democratic scholarship more than 20 years ago. And while a new wave of deliberative experimentation seems to be sweeping the globe, it is far from the first such wave.

In all that time, we have learned a lot about deliberative theory and practice, but competitors never went away, contradictions and pressures have built up, and new models and practices are being developed, often in complete isolation from deliberative theory.

This paper considers some of those challenges from an interdisciplinary perspective, from outside the deliberative bubble. It is far from an exhaustive list, but includes fundamental questions about power relations, communication, governance, agenda power and conflict resolution, drawing on wide range of critical resources from outside the usual disciplinary bubbles. It then turns to future challenges that are barely on our radar: theoretical, methodological, technological and social. It reflects on why we might find it difficult to address those challenges, and what we can do to overcome those difficulties.