

Research Group on Democratic Procedures (PROCEDEM)

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During the last decades a number of experiments in participatory democratic procedures have taken place. Some of these, such as citizens' juries or neighbourhood councils, have been quite new, while others, such as public consultations and public inquiries, have been more conventional. Some success notwithstanding, the record of these experiments has been mixed, and the fact that interest in such procedures remains low seems to confirm the prediction, voiced by their critics, that these processes often fall into the hands of minorities. This in turn suggests a renewal of interest in those more traditional procedures that have the capacity to involve a large number of citizens in public and political life. The most prominent example of this is election, but the regular use of referendums and the systematic use of random recruitment of citizens to public office also belong in this category. Each of these procedures refers to a different kind of democracy. Representative democracy, the historical source and symbol of which is the parliamentary organisation – including a protected legal opposition – is based on elections. The direct type of democracy is based on popular votes through referendums while the sortive type of democracy is characterised by the use of sortition or random selection in the choice of officials or representatives (this can operate at a local, regional or national level).

The research group intends to devote a large part of its work to an exploration of these democratic procedures. Their design, evolution, form and function will be studied in comparison with each other but consideration will also be given to how they can be creatively combined to serve particular democratic and political objectives. The feature common to them all is that they are not democratic in themselves, but have the capacity to become democratic provided some general conditions are met and certain rights guaranteed. We can include the rule of law, universal suffrage, freedom of political expression, the separation of powers and the existence of an impartial judicial system under these headings. A referendum, for example, can only work successfully when coupled with a truly representative democracy operating under the rule of law. In the absence of these conditions it can be

subject to manipulation by uncontrolled leaders or parties. The research group will seek to define these general preconditions in greater detail and explore how they operate.

In addition the group's interest in these procedures does not only lie in their potential impact on the development of democracy, but also in how they might enhance the general effectiveness of the political systems in which they might be used. Random recruitment, for instance, effectively fights against corruption by limiting the power of appointment; the referendum, especially where it derives from a popular initiative, may serve to increase confidence in the institutions and performance of political systems. This is well illustrated by the Swiss example.

Ultimately the aim of the group is to provide theoretical frameworks and empirical analysis that can feed directly into social and political practice. We are committed to providing the tools with which current political problems can be understood and addressed. At the same time we see ourselves as generating and developing new ideas for the future.