

INTRODUCTION

Introducing the trajectories of democratic innovations

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Abstract

Introduction to the Special Issue ‘Trajectories of Democratic Innovations’.

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Worldwide, the growth of citizen distrust towards political institutions presents unprecedented challenges to representative democracy (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer 2020; Vasilopolou et al. 2026; Wood 2022). In recent decades, increasing disenfranchisement with standard avenues of political participation has prompted decision-makers and civil society organisations to experiment with new democratic practices aimed at empowering citizens in democratic policy and decision-making (Fung and Wright 2003). Guided by theories of participatory and deliberative democracy, different countries, regions, and cities across the globe have developed innovative approaches, offering multiple channels of direct and indirect dialogue with elected representatives. The production of knowledge around such practices in different political contexts has gained significant traction over the last few years, and the multiplication of research outputs has certainly helped advance our understanding of democratic innovations (DIs hereafter).

The concept of DIs seeks to capture and make sense of participatory and deliberative practices that have spread significantly in Europe and beyond. As Saward (2000) early put it: ‘The phrase ‘democratic innovation’ expresses a critical commitment to democratic values of popular participation and political equality, allied to an urgent imperative for theorists to articulate and analyse new solutions to the problems of democracy’ (ibid.: 4). By offering a broad interpretation of innovation, Saward (2000) invites us to examine novel perspectives of politics and democracy. Rather than a fixed set of practices, emphasis was put on the ongoing effort to develop both the theoretical ideals and practical forms of democracy. Innovative forms of deliberation, representation, and association should therefore facilitate the expansion of democracy in response to current challenges. In an attempt to cement the concept through knowledge of real-life experiments, Smith (2009) defined DIs as the ‘institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process’ (ibid.: 1). By doing so, DIs emphasise the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes related to policy and law-making, through mechanisms such as popular assemblies, mini-publics, participatory budgeting, direct legislation, and e-democracy.

From Smith’s contribution onwards, the scholarly debate on DIs has expanded considerably. Researchers have interrogated the assumption that DIs enhance the quality of democracy,

emphasising the need to evaluate their impact in terms of legitimacy, democratic process, effectiveness, and civic education (Geissel and Newton 2012). Warren's (2014) notion of 'governance-driven democratisation' similarly explored the implications of institutional innovations addressing the current deficits of democracy (see also Warren 2025). In a slightly different vein, Wright (2010) put the emphasis on the transformative potential disclosed by DIs in altering power relations and enabling confrontation with the injustices perpetrated by capitalism, thus empowering communities through equitable access to collective decision-making. The deepening and broadening of democracy towards the realisation of 'real utopias' places citizens centre stage, an argument that resonates with the role that grassroots groups and progressive movements can play in democratising our society (della Porta and Felicetti, 2022). In fact, different forms of bottom-up insertions of civil society within DIs have been discussed by scholars, with a view to making sense of the reshaping of participatory and deliberative practices towards democracy-driven governance (Bua and Bussu 2021).

The *Handbook of Democratic Innovations and Governance* edited by Elstub and Escobar (2019) has documented the growing scholarly interest around a wide array of DIs, confirming this field of study as an asset of social and political sciences. DIs are defined by the authors as both processes and institutions for governance, aimed at enhancing citizen involvement. By expanding the scope of DIs beyond political decision-making, the authors highlight a wide range of experiments, including referenda, collaborative governance, citizen initiatives, and digital participation, next to mini-publics and participatory budgeting. Today, the growing hybridisation among DIs increasingly compels scholars to update our understanding and question whether real-world practices can be easily encapsulated by existing categories. Veri (2022) developed a bottom-up typology of DIs that distinguishes between participatory democracy – including collaborative governance and direct democracy – and deliberative democracy, encompassing deliberative forums and community empowerment. With a similar intent, Asenbaum (2022, 2023) proposed broadening the theoretical field by conceptualising DIs through deliberative, participatory, agonistic, and transformative approaches that temporarily disrupt hegemonic orders. On the empirical side, Pogrebinschi (2023) fuelled the debate by building on DIs' definition as institutions and processes, adding mechanisms across the policy cycle aimed at enhancing democratic accountability, responsiveness, the rule of law, social equality, and political inclusion.

The rich academic discussion on DIs necessarily relies on multiplying perspectives on the never-ending changing forms of interaction between civil society and political decision-makers (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). However, whilst acknowledgement of structural characteristics influencing the adoption of DIs has become central, little effort has been made to offer longitudinal cross-case studies across established records in Europe and beyond (Pradeau 2021). In fact, little attention has been paid thus far to the trajectories of DIs in space and time, and we still lack a country-level perspective on the evolution and dissemination of DIs, with a view to leveraging more robust cross-national comparison. Such an endeavour not only can offer a novel and original perspective on the ways in which DIs have disseminated in multiple contexts under different circumstances, but also opens new questions around their character of innovation within specific electoral-representative decision-making systems at all levels of government.

Our knowledge of historical milestones of diffusion from the aftermath of the Second World War, especially in western democracies, tends to acknowledge initial forms of community engagement in urban governance, planning, and renewal, alongside the rise of student and worker movements reclaiming stronger democratic participation during the 1960s and 1970s. Arnstein (1969), Pateman (1970), and Barber (1984) were early advocates for the participation of marginalised voices in mainstream political and economic decision-making and against the reduction of democracy to procedural mechanisms that serve to legitimise elites. The initiation and consolidation of the late 1980s' participatory budgeting in Brazil, disseminated globally in the following years, marked another significant moment in history. By aiming at realising egalitarian principles of democratic inclusion, participatory budgeting has become one of the most

recognisable DIs, offering an original glance at the diversity in which its elements have been combined differently throughout (Ganuza and Baiocchi 2012). In parallel, the consolidation of deliberative ‘mini-publics’ has contributed significantly to the debate on the conditions for reflexive discussion and collective action in participatory settings, as opposed to merely aggregative democratic methods (Dryzek 2002). Practices like deliberative opinion polls, citizens’ assemblies, juries, consensus conferences, and planning cells have placed ideals of coercion-free communication rooted in equality, inclusivity, and mutual respect centre stage (Habermas 1992).

Against this backdrop, the Special Issue *Trajectories of Democratic Innovations* illustrates diverse theoretical and methodological approaches to multiple roots and contingencies, as well as emerging disruptions and patterns of DIs. In fact, this Special Issue does not intend to bring order to the often messy patchwork of participatory and deliberative practices, but rather to embrace it and offer the readers a journey across different (hi)stories of democracy reinventing itself at different latitudes. Therefore, by piecing together DI developments in Europe, Latin America, and Australia, this Special Issue aims to shed light on the frequently limited and dispersed information about DIs, and counter – or, at least, provide an alternative to – the predominance of single-case studies that might hinder the formation of a broader picture (Jacquet, Ryan and van der Does 2023).

Therefore, the macro-perspective offered by the papers is inherently contextual, with each contribution focusing on key developments in specific geographical areas along specific time-frames. Given the fragmented landscape of documented DIs, most articles base their inquiries on reviewing empirical data and relevant scientific literature, with an attempt to frame DIs within political and legal settings. Based on the main scholarly literature, contributions identify and situate DIs within the more extended field of participatory and deliberative practices, as well as changing sociopolitical conditions. Contributions also reflect – albeit to varying degrees – on the scales at which these innovations have been implemented, illuminating opportunities and trade-offs that have emerged throughout. In some papers, authors adopt a chronological discourse, while others structure the papers around foundational and often open questions surrounding DIs, thus adopting specific conceptual analytical lenses. We believe that the examination of the historical landscape of DIs in multiple countries can be an especially relevant contribution to moving forward in this field. By offering first-hand insights into trajectories of DIs, the papers gathered in this Special Issue make a timely and innovative contribution to the current scholarly debate, as is perceivable from the overview that follows.

For Australia, ‘*The trajectory of democratic innovations in Australia: Between democratic creativity and institutional stubbornness*’ clarifies that democratic innovations lie on multiple interfaces that bring citizens into direct or indirect contact with their governmental representatives. As an early pioneer of modern electoral democracy, Australia has experimented with deliberative innovations that have met some resistance regarding the formal inclusion of certain minority groups, along with voting reforms that aimed to improve aggregative mechanisms, as Webb, Parry, Ercan *et al.* (2026) contend. They elucidate two main reasons: the Westminster-inspired system of majoritarian government that favours adversarial over consensus-building politics, and the settler-colonial history. The rejection of ‘The Indigenous Voice to Parliament’, which sought to bring the voices of Indigenous Peoples to the fore and enhance inclusive policy development, is a case in point of the institutional stubbornness of the political establishment and parliamentary architecture that reproduces persistent asymmetries of power between Indigenous communities and the settler-colonial state apparatus.

For Finland, ‘*Historical trajectories of democratic innovations in Finland*’ offers a comprehensive look at the development of direct democratic instruments, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini-publics against strong institutional and political forces in the country, such as corporatism and consensus politics. Lindell, Jäske and Kulha (2026) highlight how the three ‘families’ have enhanced inclusion, citizen voice, and transparency by often drawing inspiration from neighbouring Nordic countries, especially as regards national legislation, alongside mutual

learning across proximal municipalities. Yet, while legislation is considered an important factor for institutionalised practices and the authors pinpoint five legislative milestones, plus a more recent national Act on wellbeing, that encapsulate efforts to adopt democratic innovations in Finland, they argue that this is not a necessary condition. Collaboration between government and civil society actors proves to be a strong predictor for some innovations, such as the more recent diffusion of deliberative mini-publics.

For Germany, *'Trajectories of democratic innovations in Germany – citizens' opportunities on the move'* undertakes an in-depth analysis of three of the most prominent innovations in the country: direct democratic instruments, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini-publics. By collecting data from multiple sources – including the mini-publics' database Bürgerräte – within the frame of 1990–2024, Marx, Geissel and Sack (2026) acknowledge key developments after the reunification of Germany. In particular, the authors emphasise the importance of electoral reforms, the increase of direct democratic instruments, and the proliferation of dialogue-oriented participation introduced within the considered period. Understanding the extent to which empowered participation has developed in space and time reveals uneven diffusion of direct democratic instruments, locally confined diffusion of participatory budgeting centred on transparency, and that the offer of inclusive and dialogue-oriented participation in mini-publics has been limited to small numbers of people.

For Italy, *'A bottom-up perspective on democratic innovations in Italy'* develops a thorough examination of democratic innovations at multiple state levels, critically addressing the capacity to join institutional and non-institutional actors together across different uses (and misuses) by governments. Focusing on grassroots actors, della Porta and Felicetti (2026) take us across national, regional and local attempts to innovate democracy in Italy, and, in particular, discuss the 'Osservatorio TorinoLione' – a participatory forum designed for the Lyon-Turin high-speed train line – that brought multiple actors together, thus disclosing new potential synergies between movements and institutions. Pitfalls, however, show emerging mismatches among interests that eventually fall short of connecting local and national initiatives. As the authors claim, the Italian state has largely ignored or deflected democratic innovations, thus reducing opportunities and fuelling scepticism among grassroots carriers of deliberative and participatory qualities.

For Latin America, *'Latin America's democratic innovations at scale: Bridging deliberation and participation'* advances knowledge on three design features – open participation, sequential deliberation, and institutionalised collaboration – that constitute the analytical framework through which Pogrebinschi (2026) discusses democratic innovations. The author builds on data retrieved from the LATINNO dataset covering 18 countries and focuses on two types of innovations that have enabled large numbers of citizens and CSOs to enter deliberative processes: multilevel policymaking, such as Brazil's National Public Policy Conferences and Bolivia's dialogues; and participatory planning, such as Chile's long-term Energy Policy planning process, Santa Tecla's Participatory Strategic Planning in El Salvador, and participatory planning in Costa Rica. The former do not concentrate deliberation in one place at one time and do not rely on any single selection rule to secure representativeness. The latter have shaped long-term decisions through multichannel designs that function as governance devices towards shared objectives through iteration and cross-exposure.

For Portugal, *'Children of the revolution? Democratic innovations during the first 50 years of democracy in Portugal'* unfolds – inspired by Bourdieu's genetic approach – an in-depth examination of the changing state-society relation from the fall of the dictatorship in the mid-1970s to today. Falanga (2026) sheds light on different patterns of participation and related key democratic innovations by questioning whether the Carnation Revolution should be considered as the sole reference in this field. His main argument builds on the longitudinal analysis of changing times that have been learned from the past, while being receptive to multiple forces redefining participation throughout. In fact, democratic innovations are historically and contextually situated within three main historical stages: the Revolutionary Ongoing Process fomenting popular

participation, as exemplified by the Local Ambulatory Support Service; the democratic consolidation and integration into the European Union with the leading role of social welfare entities and civil society organisations, as exemplified by the Local Agendas 21; and the current expansion of democracy with a diversified set of innovations across urban regeneration, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini-publics.

For Spain, *‘Democratic innovations as a field: The struggle for the voice and the representation of the people’* covers the history of multiple innovations in Spain from a theoretical angle that contests functionalist explanations of global dissemination and embraces contextual differences, through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of field. The institutional participatory field has given stage to multiple organised and non-organised actors within the broader state field of power. Ganuza and Ramos (2026) discuss how representative and epistemic features exerted by multiple actors have evolved in Spain, by pointing out the role played by civil society organisations and advisory councils at the first stage of democratisation and the emergence of non-organised actors through participatory budgeting and deliberative mini-publics over the last few decades. In particular, the authors address the ways in which the trajectory of democratic innovations has shown the often-opaque dynamics that characterise the field of power, and their effects on the constitution of institutional participatory frameworks.

For Switzerland, *‘Institutional configurations and deliberative innovation: A comparative analysis of mini-public adoption across advanced democracies’* expands the reflection on institutional configurations that explain cross-national variation in mini-public adoption. Veri and Stojanović (2026) build their study upon evidence regarding the adoption of direct democratic instruments and deliberative innovations according to different patterns of democracy. Degrees of unpredictability in this domain convince the authors to analyse the adoption of deliberative mini-publics based on the relation between consensus democracy, federalism, and direct democracy, with Switzerland being a latecomer compared to other Western democracies. Cross-validation of findings demonstrates that the complex power-sharing systems and extensive use of direct democratic instruments as a means to enhance accountability and citizen engagement might have reduced the perceived need for deliberative mini-publics in the country.

Finally, for the United Kingdom, *‘Democratic innovations in the UK: Reflections on historical trajectories across space and time’* unfolds an historical analysis of four families of innovations encompassing participatory and deliberative processes across different policy areas and levels of governance: referendums, deliberative mini-publics, collaborative governance, and participatory budgeting. Elstub and Escobar (2026) start by presenting the sociopolitical features that have emerged over the last few decades from power decentralisation and devolution in a period of democratic backsliding. Against this backdrop, democratic innovations have been propelled by different degrees of institutionalisation and reflect both asymmetries and crossbreeding trends across the UK’s four nations. From the first referendums in the 1970s, through the diverse range of mini-publics – with the more recent dissemination of climate assemblies – the authors also touch upon the strong tradition of local partnerships aimed at setting up public-private collaboration in the pursuit of public or common goods, and the impetus given by participatory budgeting to support social justice and democratic renewal.

In sum, the nine contributions analyse a diverse array of examples from countries across Europe, Latin America, and Australia, offering the first in-depth characterisation of the context-specific trajectories of DIs. By acknowledging the historical dimensions, these contributions open important avenues for future research. They invite reflection on the diversity, applicability, and transformative potential of DIs, as well as their susceptibility to co-option by dominant institutional and political powers.

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