

Governance and Deliberative Democracy: an Ongoing Debate

Pierre Hamel
Université de Montréal

Regional Governance
Conference, Vancouver

May 2011

Introduction

- Even though the issue of metropolitan governance seems no longer being on the political agenda, its political relevance remains strong
- As Paul Kantor underlines, the interaction between cities and suburbs relies on diverse « pluralist, associational and macropolitical varieties of political coordination » (2008: 111)
- Even if these solutions can overcome some of the coordination problems faced by local governments in metropolitan contexts, they often open the door to a reinforcement of an elitist vision of local politics
- Thus, to what extent can such a vision be challenged by introducing principles of deliberative democracy?

Introduction

- In order to answer this question, I would like to distinguish between, on the one hand, the theoretical expectations included in the model of deliberative democracy and, on the other hand, the effects of deliberation
- As we know, in many respects, the effects of deliberation are difficult to grasp
- This is due to the fact that these effects are for the most part intertwined with several contextual factors that also play an important role in democratizing public policies like those related to the capacity and political leadership of the local state

Introduction

- But this is also related to the specificity of the deliberative model as such, this model being oriented towards « the epistemic function of discourse and negotiation » rather than towards « rational choice or political ethos » (Habermas, 2006: 413)
- Consequently, what should we expect from deliberative democracy?
- Can we rely on its promises to overcome the favoritism or the 'exclusiveness' that often characterize governance networks?
- What are the conditions promoting an increase of its impact on democratization of public policies?

Introduction

- In order to assess the capacity of deliberative democracy to improve metropolitan governance, I divided my presentation in two points
- Firstly, I will outline the main principles of deliberative democracy
- Secondly, I will question whether these principles in their application can solve the shortcomings of metropolitan governance and under what conditions
- For that matter, I have in mind the recent example of the metropolitan reform in Montreal with its ambivalent impacts on governance

1. The deliberative model

- As promoted by Jurgen Habermas, the deliberative model is well known
- In order for a democratic process to generate legitimacy, three conditions are required:
 - 1) openness and transparency of the deliberative process;
 - 2) 'inclusion and equal opportunity for participation';
 - 3) 'justified presumption for reasonable outcomes'
- In order to be effective, the last presumption necessitates that 'institutionalized discourses' refer to « relevant topics and claims, promote the critical evaluation of contributions, and lead to a rationally motivated yes or no reaction » (Habermas, 2006: 413)

1. The deliberative model

- If these conditions can be met, they are not guaranteed at the onset
- In order to develop, the presence of a strong public sphere is needed
- It is the public sphere « that has the capacity to foster considered public opinions » (Habermas, 2006: 418), bringing in a legitimation process
- The public sphere is an « intermediary system of communication » where different categories of actors exchange arguments in a reflexive way
- If the public sphere relies mainly on the contributions by the *professionals of the media system* and *politicians* other actors also play a decisive role in many ways

1. The deliberative model

- Lobbyists, advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs, and intellectuals are all engaged in public discourse trying to influence public opinion of the rightfulness of their arguments
- But if we want the public sphere to be open to an increasing part of the population – with regards to the principle of inclusiveness – according to Claus Offe (2009), three kinds of '*subjective certainties*' need to be met
- Firstly, democratic institutions (parties, parliaments, governments) must be 'attentive' and responsive to what people say

1. The deliberative model

- Secondly, there should be a reasonable possibility that your point of view will be 'shared by others', through collective action for example
- Thirdly, to join a civil society organization in order to promote a point of view can be chosen as a means of expression only by individuals « who are confident in the persuasiveness, or deliberative superiority, of the point of view they wish to raise (...) to the outside world » (Offe, 2009: 14)
- In fact, these three certainties are 'thresholds' that can be seen as strategies for strengthening the public sphere, combatting 'privatization and depolitization'

1. The deliberative model

- For the deliberative model to be effective, the public sphere should encourage interactions between the public and elites
- In that respect, three features must prevail
- As an 'institutional setting', it should be 'freely accessible'
- Secondly, activities and communications should not be 'constrained by one dominant organizational purpose or mission'
- Finally, it should favor 'the active display and perception of difference' (lifestyle, opinion, cultural background)

2. Metropolitan governance

- In the literature – for example the OECD report of 2000 on metropolitan governance – the expectations about governance as an alternative to traditional municipal reform were very high
- Even though 'one ideal model of metropolitan governance' does not exist, a consensus prevails about the obstacles that must be overcome in order to facilitate its implementation
- These obstacles are : « 1) fragmentation of administrative jurisdictions, which result in a lack of correspondence between administrative and functional territories; 2) strain on the fiscal ability of local authorities; 3) lack of transparent, accountable decision-making processes » (OECD, 2000: 2)

2. Metropolitan governance

- However, governance defined as a way to improve the regulation of urban systems in complex situations does not prevent political and professional elites to maintain their hegemony
- The example of the city region of Montreal is striking in that respect
- In 2000 a large-scale merger of the 28 municipal units on the Island of Montreal had been decided by the provincial government in reference to governance
- In addition, a new tier of coordination and cooperation was implemented at the scale of the city region

2. Metropolitan governance

- Even though the promoters of the reform invoked the principles of governance, their approach turned out to be technocratic
- The cooperation envisioned by these reformers tended to marginalize civil society actors
- If we accept the idea that this could have been overcome by introducing the principles of deliberative democracy, who can guarantee their implementation?
- Are we not facing here the same gap between normative vision and empirical translation toward politics in the case of deliberative democracy as for governance?

2. Metropolitan governance

- The model of deliberative democracy has been criticized because it conveys an a-conflictual vision of democracy (Mouffe, 2003), but also for other reasons...
- Although these are valid criticisms, deliberative democracy can nevertheless contribute to changes in the civic culture of democracy for two reasons
- First, there are examples and situations where the procedures of deliberation help democratize the decision-making process
- Second, deliberative democracy, in theory and in practice, introduces new rules of legitimacy for decision-making in democratic contexts

2. Metropolitan governance

- The main issue remains the democratization of the decision-making process regarding public affairs
- But it is also the legitimacy of the public sphere – and how to strengthen it – that is at stake
- Beyond its limits, by promoting the principle of inclusiveness and the idea of communicative action, deliberative democracy can overcome some of the elitist bias that are frequent within governance mechanisms
- At the same time, deliberative democracy is not a panacea
- Nevertheless, it can lead to changes in the democratic civic culture.... But this is a long term project