Beyond Participation and Accountability: Theorizing Representation in Local Democracy

HARRY W. FISCHER[*]

[a] *Indian School of Business, Hyderabad, India*
[b] *Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network (RRAN), New Delhi, India*

Summary. — Recent decades have seen growing emphasis on enhancing public participation and accountability in governance processes. Yet the valence of these discussions has focused almost entirely on the character of citizen engagement itself, with little attention to the ways in which citizens' agency is constituted in relation to changing forms of public authority. In this paper, I advance a theoretical account of political representation, a concept that is central to analysis of democracy, but which has seen only limited attention in the scholarship on democratic decentralization. I draw on two contrasting models—selection and sanction—to elaborate an understanding of representation that recognizes both mechanisms that enable citizens to hold their leaders to account as well as the character of leaders' own intrinsic motivations. Through a qualitative account of three decades' political change from a locality in the Indian Himalayas, I document a gradual process of institutional and social change that has enabled a new generation of more diverse elected leaders to ascend to positions of elected authority, including many from historically marginalized sections of society. By examining the experiences of three such individuals in detail, I demonstrate the importance of understanding who leaders are and what they do—their skills and aspirations, their identity and affiliations, and the kinds of representative relationships that they embody. Placing the selection and sanction models in dialog reveals new and productive avenues to explore the interplay between external incentive structures and leaders' intrinsic motivations in shaping broader process of political change.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of representation is one of the core concepts within scholarship of political science and political philosophy, both contemporary and historical. Yet, it has received only limited attention in the literature on democratic decentralization. Perhaps this is not surprising. Historically, decentralization emerged as a response to the increasing awareness of the limitations of central planning, which coincided with a growing celebration of civil society as a necessary vehicle for good governance within fledgling democracies—a history that scholars have discussed at length (Harriss, Stokke, & Tornquist, 2004; Manor, 1999; Mohan & Stokke, 2008; Robins, Cornwall, & von Lieres, 2008). Strengthening channels of citizen engagement has been seen as a means to make state services more responsive to the poor; decentralization is just one of a larger array of policy efforts that have sought to incorporate citizens into the "core activities of the state" by expanding the scope of citizen oversight and accountability (Ackerman, 2004: 447, see also Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Fox, 2015; Goetz & Jenkins, 2005; Manor, 2004; Mohan, 2007). As Faguet (2014: 2) summarizes, "The strongest theoretical argument in favor of decentralization is that... it will improve the accountability and responsiveness of government by altering its structure so as to increase citizen voice and change the deep incentives that public officials face."

In principle, these accounts should address not only the agency of citizens to hold their representatives to account but also the capacity of representatives to creatively interpret and respond to citizens' mandates. Yet the valence of these discussions has almost always focused on the character of citizen engagement itself, with little attention to the forms of public authority that structure opportunities for political action. Given chronic elite capture in rural development, it is

certainly understandable that scholars and activists have sought to recover the agency of the poor to participate in defining local governance agendas. Yet the assumption that deficits in accountability can be corrected by a more engaged citizenry through more local and accessible government represents a fundamental misreading of the political landscape in many post-colonial contexts (Harriss, 2010; Robins *et al.*, 2008; Witsoe, 2012). In practice, unelected power brokers frequently exert significant influence on state services, while entrenched patterns of caste, class, and gender marginalization restrict voice in public decision-making processes—often even despite the very strategies designed to induce more active citizenship (Harriss, 2010; Sivaramakrishnan, 2000). To the extent that many decentralizations do not generate meaningful and equitable citizen participation, a big reason is that they fail to establish the institutional conditions that can lead to more substantive restructuring of social and political power (Fox, 2015; Mohan, 2007; Mosse, 2004; Ribot, Chhatre, & Lankina, 2008). In short, it is not just the distance to spheres of power that matter but the character of relationships that mediate access.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen a growing body of evidence that decentralization can incentivize greater responsiveness of elected authorities (Daftary, 2010; Faguet, 2014; Manor, 2010; Speer, 2012) and stimulate more robust local political participation—even leading to durable redistributions of local political power (Abraham, 2014; Chhatre, 2008; Heller, Harilal, & Chaudhuri, 2007; Singh & Sharma, 2007). While a number of scholars have focused on the role of social movements as means to galvanize more active political engagement (Chhatre & Saberwal, 2006; Fox, 1996; Goetz & Jenkins, 2005; Heller, 2000), much less is known about the

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slow endogenous changes in political practice that may emerge through the establishment of new centers of institutional power. By emphasizing the character of citizen engagement—however structured or spontaneous, superficial or enduring, encumbered or free—existing literature has given insufficient attention to the ways in which citizens' access and engagement with democratic institutions is structured by changing forms of power and authority.

This paper seeks to frame representation as a central concept for understanding the practice of local democracy. The concept of representation, I argue, provides a fuller view of local politics because it focuses on the character of public authority through which citizens' interests are translated into tangible outcomes. All democracy requires executive action, and local democracy is no exception. Local elected leaders play a lead role in anticipating needs, formulating responses, and negotiating bureaucratic procedures. To the extent that local decision-making processes are, always and by necessity, far more than the sum of citizen engagement, any account of local democracy without attention to the concept of representation is incomplete.

In the coming pages, I elaborate two models—selection and sanction—to develop an understanding of representation that recognizes both mechanisms that enable citizens to hold their leaders to account as well as the character of leaders' own intrinsic motivations. Thereafter, I use these models to interpret patterns of political change in two villages of the Indian Himalayas over the past three decades. In conclusion, I use this material to discuss how selection and sanction may work together to shape the prospects for democratic deepening within long-term trajectories of political and institutional change.

(a) Theorizing representation in post-colonial democracy

Scholarship in political science and political philosophy has seen a resurgent interest in the concept of representation in recent years, which has offered new and exciting prospects for analysis (for an overview, see Dovi, 2011; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). As a starting point, I begin with the definition advanced in Pitkin's (1967) seminal work on the concept. Representation, she suggests, is to "act in the interest of the governed in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967: 209). Importantly, this definition emphasizes substantive acts—a position that is often counterposed against descriptive aspects of the concept (see Dovi, 2011). By embracing a substantive definition of the concept, I am ultimately more interested in the ways the leaders act rather than their identity per se.

While there has been a long historical tendency among democratic theorists to view representative democracy "as an instrumental substitute for stronger forms of [direct] democracy" (Urbinati & Warren, 2008: 388), theorists have increasingly come to see participation and representation as complementary aspects of democratic practice. As Plotke (1997, quoted in Urbinati & Warren, 2008: 388) has suggested, "the opposite of representation is not participation. The opposite of representation is exclusion... Representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy modern realities. Representation is crucial in constituting democratic practices." This literature, in turn, anticipates a second and related move: by seeing representation and participation as mutually constituted and tightly interwoven, it becomes possible to examine how these relationships emerge, not just as an effect of formal institutional positions, but in the social landscapes they inhabit—mediated by shared experiences of trust, duty, and reciprocity on the one hand, and exclusion, neglect, and disengagement on the other (see

Dovi, 2011; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Framed this way, we can begin to ask how different constituencies coalesce in particular moments and in relation to particular authorities. Representation as a concept is important precisely because it allows us to understand how and through what channels spaces of engagement open up and become institutionalized as a routine part of political practice.

To the extent that this work directs us to probe the undercurrent of socially and culturally defined relationships that shape prospects of representation, it aligns with a parallel body of scholarship that explores the contradictions and variegated experiences of citizenship in post-colonial democracy (see Gupta, 1998; Chatterjee, 2004; Brockington, 2008; Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, & Veron, 2005; Robins et al., 2008; Witsoe, 2011). In India, for example, the vibrancy of electoral politics is striking for a country once thought to be too rural, too poor, and too uneducated for modern democracy (Kohli, 2001). Yet at the local level, access to state institutions remains highly uneven (Corbridge et al., 2005). Political parties and bureaucratic actors have long relied on local power brokers both to galvanize votes for the party and to navigate complex village contexts in the implementation of government schemes; citizens, likewise, have relied heavily on such brokers to access state resources, which they often lack the skills and knowledge to claim.[1] In principle, such brokers may be motivated for the good of the community—even a channel for the democratization of access to state resources and programs (Chhatre & Saberwal, 2006; Krishna, 2002; Manor, 2000)—yet, in practice, many brokers use their ability to mediate access to the state as a means to maintain local political dominance through patronage relationships, reproducing patterns of social and political exclusion in the process (Gupta, 1998; Witsoe, 2012). Indeed, by embedding access to state resources within extra-constitutional forms of local power and authority, these relationships undermine both the "impartiality and the autonomy of the state. Not only are resources distributed according to political calculations, the strength of social networks or the ability to pay [bribes]... *the state is approached in a way that is shaped by local power, not individual citizenship*" (Witsoe, 2012: 54, emphasis added).

In this sense, uneven access to state resources is neither arbitrary nor an enduring effect of a "traditional" status hierarchy bound to dissolve through the further entrenchment of democratic practices. It is, rather, deeply embedded in the very ways in which the post-colonial state has come into being (Chatterjee, 2004; Witsoe, 2011). Yet even if state institutions and resources have always been implicated in local power structures, it is still possible to envision interventions that can alter these dynamics to establish more inclusive spaces of engagement (Fox, 2015; Ribot et al., 2008). In the following section, I elaborate two theoretical models of representation which provide a conceptual basis to explore how longer trajectories of social and institutional change may support more responsive political authority.

(b) Toward a theoretical understanding of representation in decentralization

If the ability to dominate access to state resources has often fueled the unelected authority of existing elites, what happens when state powers are transferred to formal elected bodies and become securely under the command of popularly elected leaders? Despite decades of reforms for decentralization, governments around the world have often been reluctant to devolve substantive discretionary powers to local elected bodies (Chaudhuri, 2006; Manor, 2010; Ribot, 2003). Yet, as