

BOOK REVIEW

Challenges of Democracy in the 21st Century. Concepts, Methods, Causality and the Quality of Democracy

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Challenges of Democracy in the 21st Century. Concepts, Methods, Causality and the Quality of Democracy is a timely effort to systematize the current challenges to democracy and to provide key conceptual and methodological guidelines for tackling them. The contributors adopt the Quality of Democracy perspective, with the aim to advance its analysis, while reflecting on the democratic transformations that have taken place in the last decade. The editors, Luca Tomini and Giulia Sandri, together with the selected contributing authors, among which are such prominent names as Leonardo Morlino and Philippe Schmitter, draw the lines of a renewed academic agenda, which is meant to provide a relevant and adequate response to the current challenges. This debate has important consequences for the future democratic developments and for the definition of meaningful policy-making paths for tackling the democratic crises, which define the political landscape in both consolidated democracies and hybrid regimes.

The main goal of the book consists of the conscious effort to advance a case-oriented methodological approach, which sheds light on the causal mechanisms that bridge the different phases of democratization – transition, installation, consolidation and crisis. For this purpose, a dynamic perspective towards political change is promoted, as the second important contribution of the book. The first two chapters of the book provide an insightful conceptual discussion of the research on the Quality of Democracy in the last decade. Philippe Schmitter critically reflects on the possibility to assess the Quality of Democracy and suggests potential research strategies that can provide relevant insight based on aggregation of similar groups of countries. He also argues that democracy is not in decline, but in deep transformation towards a post-liberal model. Dirk Berg Schosser supports and illustrates the use of fuzzy-sets for better aggregation and calibration of a more context-oriented research.


The dynamic case-oriented methodological and conceptual choices are supported by several chapters that present in-depth analysis of specific countries or regions. For instance, Luca Tomini analyses the process of learning of the Polish and Hungarian elites and explains the different behaviour of social actors in the same institutional context. A detailed study of the constitution and policy-making in these two countries reveals that the trade-off between effective and legitimate institutions is the key dilemma that guides the political transformations in the last few decades in the two Central European States. While the analysis focuses mainly on the accountability mechanisms, it is worth exploring in what way the study of the substantial dimensions of democracy – freedom and equality, as well as the perceived responsiveness of the institutions – could provide relevant explanations for the outcomes of the institutional framework and the challenges that the democratic institutions face in these countries.

The complementarity between the different dimensions of the Quality of Democracy and their specific role in the process of democratic crisis as a consequence of economic hardships is systematically developed by Leonardo Morlino. The expected impact of economic crises on all the democratic qualities as well as their interdependence is illustrated with clear empirical examples from Southern Europe. This chapter establishes relevant and interesting suggestions for the future development of the Quality of Democracy research. On the other side, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Noah Smith contribute with a statistical analysis of the democratic qualities. In addition, this chapter presents the quality of democracy as an explanatory variable, which provides insight into the prospect for democratic stability and breakdown. The statistically significant results confirm the interdependence between the dimensions of horizontal accountability – competition and participation.

The last two chapters of the book make the third significant contribution to the research of the Quality of Democracy, as they add the subnational and international (EU) levels of policy-making to this research perspective. The authors of these chapters also specify what might be the concrete contributions of these political layers for weakening or strengthening the quality of democracy. Regis Dandoy and Giulia Sandri consider the positive contributions of Lijphart's model for the study of the strengths and positive impact of the regional dimension on public policy achievements. Given the potential for development of such analysis, it is suggested to consider the inclusion of the inputs of regional policy-making for greater responsiveness of the political systems.

Ramona Coman, on the other hand, focuses on the membership of the European Union (EU) as an innovative field of research, due to its capacity to influence the quality of democracy through values-based discourse and policies. The EU has potential to strengthen the compliance to democratic principles and to guarantee the provision of effective Rule of Law mechanisms at the national level. Her study of the way democratic values are called into use by the EU institutions (Commission, Council and Parliament) and member states, however, illustrates their different discursive nature and objectives. Such analysis effectively opens new horizons for academic research and for the political development of innovative instruments that could counter the negative externalities of the democratic deficit of the EU.

In conclusion, the book provides different and complementing conceptual and methodological perspectives on the future research agenda of the Quality of Democracy. The relevance of its analysis is based on the in-depth exploration of the current challenges to the nation-state and democracy. Given the diversity of the contributions, a concluding chapter could have better underlined the connections between the different contributions in order to reinforce the potential paths towards the future development of the research agenda of the Quality of Democracy. The varied perspectives of the contributors and their deep theoretical and empirical understanding guarantee a very interesting and insightful analysis that will be appreciated by advanced researchers and University students.

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