Civic Driven Change and the Political Interface

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The world is full of instances where citizens’ aspirations to be better governed are thwarted. Such cases are complemented by increasing examples of erosion in past gains where polities are becoming less able to exert effective control over those exercising authority in their name. In both cases, the result is actual or impending crises of governance which fails in its promise, probity or performance. A critical, but relatively neglected, mediating factor in such processes are how citizen’s and civil society interact with a political society of regimes, parties and political systems. This panel is dedicated to exploring how this interface operates: in what ways, in whose favour and why.

The panel will comprise three papers. Drawing on cases in Central America, one author examines processes through which people self-organised in social movements to gain access to political processes while avoiding ‘capture’ by existing political elites. The paper by another author examines the way in communication forms a site of contestation between civic and political society and strategies employed by citizens to expand information in the public domain. Applying theories of complexity and polycentric governance, the paper by a third author will contribute an international comparative perspective provided by some twenty case studies of micro to macro level civic action presented at a conference in June 2009.

With a slant towards citizen’s experiencing marginalisation and exclusion, panel papers will provide opportunities to contrast and compare civic-political interfaces through a variety of empirical and theoretical lenses across an international spectrum. The panellists anticipate and aim to prompt critical discussion around an array of factors mediating across the civic-political interface including, but not limited to: gender; belief and faith; transnational forums, networks and connections; and public works that exercise both civic rights and fulfil civic obligations.
Abstract

This paper explores the link between collective civic action and political participation by examining and analyzing ways in which social movements operate within ‘political society’. That is, in the realm in which political parties are operating too and where citizen’s demands are debated and processed into political decision-making. By mobilizing citizens on particular issues, social movements are often the central actors in articulating demands towards political society, whether at the level of the municipality or at the global level. This process is central to exercising citizenship by groups or individual citizens who are normally marginalized or excluded from the political process.

This political dimension of civic action has become more relevant given the process of decreasing legitimacy of political parties. Citizens, whether organized or acting on an individual basis, increasingly feel unrepresented by (traditional) political parties, something which is visible in a longer term decline of voter participation, cynicism and political opportunism (Ferguson, 1990). Even parties originating from social movements (such as in Brazil and Nicaragua) gradually have lost their legitimacy. Therefore, the question addressed in the paper is how social movements counter this political cynicism and to what extent they have managed to really influence political agendas. Is collective civic action able to shift power balances, even if this is only temporary? How do these movements bypass political parties and how do these parties react to collective civic action? Is this type of citizen-initiated change challenging existing views on political parties and political society?

These questions will be addressed within the framework of two theoretical approaches. One is the framework of ‘civic-driven change’ in which the role of citizen’s action is analysed against the background of transformative social change processes (Biekart & Fowler, 2009; Fowler & Biekart, 2008). This framework will be linked to theories of social movements and collective social action, in particular those approaches looking at citizen’s mobilization within a particular space and place (Leach and Scoones, 2007). The paper will explore these issues by comparing three recent political interventions by social movements in Latin America. The first example of collective civic action comes from Nicaragua, where the women’s movement has rallied against laws prohibiting therapeutic abortion. These initiatives broadened to other oppositional circles which then challenged the bi-partisan pact that kept the political arena closed since the late 1990s. A second case examines the movement against free trade during the 2007 Costa Rican referendum against the North American ‘Free Trade Agreement’ (TLC in Spanish), and the third case looks at the movement for sexual diversity rights (the so-called Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transsexual, or LGBT movement), with special attention for Peru.

Preliminary research findings suggest that these movements at certain moments in their political evolution have been capable of bypassing established channels for political articulation in a quite successful way. The extent to which this type of collective civic action is actually changing structural power balances will be part of the central analysis of the paper. A critical assessment will be made of the assumption put forward in Biekart and Fowler (2009: 11) that “democracy as currently practiced is being eroded from within. Local citizen action is a critical starting point for reform to happen”.

References:


Title: Civil Society, Political Participation and the Right to Communicate

Abstract

Early in 2009 Uruguay was the first country in the world to approve legislation which established that “at least one third” of the radio and television spectrum—both analogical and the upcoming digital—will be reserved for community media. Argentina passed a law, in October 2009, breaking the monopoly on media houses by the Clarin Group. Similar discussions took place during the year in Ecuador, Bolivia and other countries in the region. This trend over the communication strategic sector not only reveals that the political space in Latin America has been opened wide for progressive governments democratically elected, but also tells much about the struggles in civil society for the right communicate, a concept that takes one step forward freedom of expression.

In India, although legislation was passed by the end of 2006 recognizing the right of communities to have their own media, community radio is not emerging as expected in large numbers, but still very slowly due to bureaucratic red tape. Other regions of the world are struggling to establish the difference between freedom of expression which generally favours mass media and journalists, and the right to communicate as a key human right for individuals and communities.

In spite of the political discourse having evolved in recent years towards the effective exercise of the right to communicate for all people (WCCD, 2006), governments are reluctant to release that portion of power. People are however deciding to fight on two fronts: a) organizing civil society movements to promote their own communication tools and processes and b) creating civic-driven media observatories to analyze and supervise the behaviour of commercial media on development and human rights issues.

Communication of information into and across public space is often a conflicted interface between civil and political society. This paper will draw on international experience to describe and analyze the conditions and experiences that mediate across these borders.

References:


Abstract

From neighbourhood through nation into the global arena democracy is not working well to achieve even minimum standards of freedom from want and from fear for the world’s population. The litany of today’s crises and tomorrow’s spectre of a tragedy of the global commons have as many causes as there are analysts and pundits. Yet, despite controversy and debate about causes and affects, there is common ground that politics is both source of governance failure and, yet also, its remedy. Where it is permitted, competitive party politics has become commoditized and incapable of generating public trust. Nor is it capable of motivating engagement for the public good (Marquand, 2004). The question and critical area for research, therefore, is how can politics be ‘regenerated’ to be effectively controlled by and serve a polity?

This paper explores possible answers through the theoretical lens of civic driven change (Fowler and Biekart, 2008) and Jeffery Goldfarb’s (2006) strategic perspective of small scale civic agency. Here, civic agency is understood as prosocial behaviour, stemming from the rights and obligations of citizenship, directed at change in society as a political project (Dagnino, 2005). In doing so it draws on the insights of complexity theory (OECD, 2009). This conceptual framework helps to explore the dynamics of, as well as connections between, micro-political advances that can reach substantial momentum and political ‘tipping points’ seen in mass action and social movements that can result in regime change and political renewal (e.g., Tarrow, 1998).

In asserting rights and fulfilling obligations, much micro civic agency is ‘invisible’ to outsiders because it is seen simply as part of life. This attribute, and the fact that civic agency can be applied at any level of socio-political organization, obscures how politics is self-constructed separate from but impacting on formal political systems. The empirical evidence for this enquiry is provided by a set of twenty two case studies of micro civic agency presented at a conference on civic driven change in June 2009. They span examples from global policy arenas to inter-generational strategies that concentrate on the formative years of a child’s life to develop critical faculties required for conscious citizenship in adulthood.

Because they do not grab the headlines, the small, myriad impacts of civic driven initiatives may seem inconsequential, yet they contribute to what can be called individual and collective ‘political navigation’ outside of ‘politics as party’. How political navigation can work in terms of influencing power over public policy and governance – a politics of non-party politics – is explored. This involves careful attention to political-historical context; identification of the source of drivers for civic energy; the current ‘revolution’ in electronic communication; the complex construction of political identities; and the risks perceived in redistributing different types of power across actors. The aggregation or diminution of civic energy is co-determined by the emergence of positive or negative feedback loops that either amplify or quell the potential forces that power holders must respond to in one way or another.

References


