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Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy

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► **To cite this version:**

David Bousquet. Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2022, 30 (3), pp.582-583. 10.1080/14782804.2022.2053824 . hal-03974968

HAL Id: hal-03974968

<https://hal.science/hal-03974968>

Submitted on 17 May 2024

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Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy. Edited by Agnès Alexandre-Collier, Alexandra Goujon and Guillaume Gourges. London & New York: Routledge, 2020.
228 pages, ISBN 9780367134129

In recent years, the idea of a crisis in representative democracy has become a trope of the academic and popular literature about politics, as well as of political discourse itself. With the current wave of right-wing populism in Europe and North America, democratic institutions and their underlying concepts are facing serious attacks. Simultaneously, the idea of an increase of citizen participation and calls for deliberative or even direct democracy have been gaining ground among many left-wing organisations and social movements.

Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy grapples with that context but offers a different approach to these issues. Instead of seeing representative democracy as an outdated system that needs to be overcome, it highlights that it can also be comprehended as a set of institutions that are constantly being reinvented through political innovations emanating from professional politicians, citizens or interest groups. While the book focuses on very recent developments, it is based on the notion that representative democracy has always been subjected to such processes of creative change when considering its historical evolution.

The book uses a broad understanding of the concept of political innovation as “any attempt to get a political organization out of its stabilized routine” (p. 3). This distinguishes it from democratic innovation, whose main focus is to make representative democracy more deliberative or participatory, often through prescriptive measures formulated by social scientists and political experts. *Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy*, on the other hand, adopts a more descriptive approach centred on actual practices implementing changes in democratic institutions. This allows for an understanding of political innovation in all its complexity and reveals that attempts at reinventing politics are by no means unidirectional, coherent or even effective.

After a general introduction highlighting its main conceptual and theoretical foundations, the book includes case studies which underline the diversity of current political innovations. This diversity is of course geographical, with cases taken from the French context (since most contributors are French academics) but also Europe and the United States. The nature and function of these innovations are also diverse, and they are organised into three streams which structure the book. In the conclusion, Anika Gauja highlights the main findings and puts them into perspective.

The first stream is called “elite selection stream” and includes “innovations seeking to renew the sociological profile of party and political elites” (p. 6). This section focuses mainly on internal democratic procedures within political parties, the de-professionalization of politics and the increasing role of primaries in the selection of political elites. These themes are first discussed through a case study of the 2017 landslide victory of the newly created party *La République en Marche* in the French legislative election, following Emmanuel Macron’s rise to the presidency (Dominique Andolfatto). The question of open primaries is then investigated in the context of the US Republican Party (François Vergniolle De Chantal), the Italian *Partito Democratico* (Giulia Sandri, Antonella Seddone and Fabio Sozzi) and the French non-partisan citizen initiative *LaPrimaire.org* (Rémi Lefebvre).

The second stream of innovation relates to governance and includes “procedures allowing actors from civil society to participate actively in politics and thus regenerate traditional representative institutions” (p. 7). The focus is on de-verticalization and externalization, and the section discusses issues linked to citizen participation while also covering the theme of advocacy and the engagement of various interest groups in the political arena. In a context of growing distrust towards political

parties and gradual loss of membership, this section investigates the role of supporters' networks in the two main British parties (Agnès Alexandre-Collier and Emmanuelle Avril), the tendencies towards presidentialization in Spain's *Podemos* (Mathieu Petithomme) and the role of para-partisan groups in US electoral campaigns (Alix Meyer). Participatory governance and civic activism are also studied through the examples of the French village of Saillans (Guillaume Gourgues and Clément Mabi) and the *Strong Communities* initiative in Ukraine (Alexandra Goujon).

The third stream is the technological stream and "deals with the impact of technological innovation in electoral mobilization and activist practices" (p. 9). It does so by providing two case studies of the 2017 French presidential election, one focusing on viral Twitter posts (Alex Frame and Gilles Brachotte) and the other on the use of big data in electoral campaigns (Anaïs Théviot). The last chapter offers an analysis of digital mobilisation through a comparison of the online practices of *La France Insoumise* and *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Paola Sedda).

Despite their variety, the findings of these case studies converge. They suggest that innovations which are often portrayed as inherently democratic have more complicated and ambivalent outcomes than what may appear at first sight, and that they are often limited in their effects if not altogether counterproductive. Sociological patterns that are deeply entrenched in the history of political institutions and practices are not easily challenged, and the results of experiments are not easily predictable. In that sense, the book also highlights the gap between the actual results of innovations and the way they are presented in political discourse by their initiators.

To some extent, then, *Innovations, Reinvented Politics and Representative Democracy* disproves the very premise on which it rests, since it tends to show that political innovations only bring about limited change and are often unable to modify deeper, long-standing trends of political life. However, it provides a thoroughly original angle for the analysis of contemporary politics by conceptualising innovation as a positive and creative phenomenon, albeit an incomplete, incoherent or ineffective one. It thus marks a departure from common analyses emphasising the theme of institutional decay, which often rest on little more than an idealisation of the past, and shows that representative democracy is in a constant process of being reinvented by its actors. The rigorous work of the editors in structuring and conceptualising the book's main issues and the illuminating conclusion by a leading expert in the field stand out and, complete with a string of well executed case studies, make this book a must-read for any student or scholar of the field.

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