Political representation by civil society

Democratic reforms have produced new spaces in which civil organisations engage in representation of sectors of the population. The forms of political representation practised by civil society (collective) actors such as NGOs, neighbourhood and community associations and non-profit service providers, differ from more conventional forms of representation thus destabilising long-standing ideas about democratic legitimacy.

Understanding the dynamics of political representation by civil organisations is at the cutting edge of the debate on contemporary democracies. Two questions in particular are becoming increasingly important:

- Who do civil organisations represent when they act as representatives in the polity?
- In what terms is this representation constructed?

Although civil organisations often do not have formal electoral systems or membership-based structures, alternative claims to representation should not be rejected out of hand. Where a poor minority has little relation to the state, associations do help to connect people to public officials and service providers. Policymakers should be prepared to take an open-minded approach and to consider how informal arrangements are really working before assessing their compatibility with democratic norms and processes.

Research conducted in Brazil by the Centre for the Future State explored the range of concepts of representation that civil organisations use to justify their roles. Promisingly, the most common form of representation claimed by civil organisations, that of 'mediation', is the most compatible with democratic norms and existing, more conventional, representative institutions.

Implications for democratic legitimacy

Democratic reforms intended to, amongst other things, enhance citizens' direct role in making public decisions and monitoring their execution, have had the unintended consequence of

spawning complex new forms of political representation. Participatory governance structures have emerged alongside the classic institutions of representative democracy in Brazil and elsewhere. They encompass not only direct participation by individuals, but also provide an arena in which collective civil society actors claiming to represent sectors of the population engage with the executive.

The forms of political representation carried out by civil organisations generally differ from those of more conventional political actors such as political parties and trade unions. The new notions of representation have often been neglected by studies of comparative democracy, which consider only forms based on elections or associational membership, and studies of citizen participation, which focus on individual involvement in participatory institutions.

Although the institutionalisation of a role for civil society has been promoted as a means of enhancing democratic reforms, the new forms of political representation pose a substantial challenge to democracy in low and middle-income countries. Participatory governance institutions were supposed to increase the responsiveness and legitimacy of state action, but in some cases the civil organisations that participate may be less democratically legitimate than the organisations they are intended to support or replace.

There are no widely accepted historical or theoretical models of political representation that fit the type of claims made by civil society actors today. In contrast to political parties and trade unions, most civil organisations do not have formal electoral systems and are not membership based. They lack historically consolidated mechanisms through which their publics authorise representation and ensure accountability and responsiveness. This has frequently been overlooked by analyses that see civil society as an authentic and natural extension of society itself. The claims actors make to represent others should be explored and their compatibility with democratic norms and process should be assessed.

The historic challenge facing civil organisations is to construct and institutionalise a new democratically legitimated basis for their representative roles. Civil society actors in Brazil are acutely aware of this challenge and have launched competing efforts to construct new versions of democratic legitimacy. This process is ongoing. These new forms of political representation cannot be ignored and how well the challenges they pose are met will be crucial to the survival of the democratic current of which they are a part.

Understandings of representation in São Paulo

Research conducted by the Centre for the Future State explored the subjective understandings of organisations that believe themselves to represent the urban poor of the Brazilian city of São Paulo.

In the absence of well defined and widely agreed upon mechanisms for ensuring the responsiveness of the representative, the research addressed actors' subjective commitment to the people they represent. The unilateral claims made by actors, or 'assumed representation', are not equivalent to effective representation. However, by taking the statements of civil society actors as its starting point, this research recognises that commitment to the interests of those represented is a vital component of representation. Furthermore, it was clear that civil organisations who thought of themselves as engaged in representation were more likely than others to participate in processes where representation was likely to take place, such as engagement in participatory governance institutions, mediating demands to government departments, supporting political candidates and making demands of a municipal assembly.

Which actors are engaged in political representation?

The results were drawn from a survey of 229 civil organisations working with the urban poor in São Paulo. This comprised organisations engaged in a range of activities including:

- Community associations working on behalf of an 'imagined community'
- Advocacy NGOs with a particular target population but lacking formal membership or any exit option
- Coordinators created specifically to link civil organisations to each other (often on the basis of membership) and to mediate relations with the state
- Service non-profits whose beneficiaries are individuals

In what forms of political representation do they engage?

Understandings of representation in São Paolo are crystallising around a small number of notions of representation. Six distinct variants emerged from the research. The least widespread were claims that a shared identity with a sector of the population, an electoral mandate or membership of the public in the organisation justified representative functions. More common were claims that organisations provided tangible benefits to those represented or had sufficient physical proximity to their publics and openness to participation.

The most common understanding of political representation functions advanced was that of *mediation*. Mediation entails connecting 'politically excluded' segments of the population to the state and the political-electoral arena, remedying inequality in access to the state. In contrast to the other understandings of representation, mediation is legitimated in terms of the activity of mediation itself, rather than a claimed relationship with the population represented.

Mediation was most often advanced to support claims of assumed representation by coordinators and advocacy NGOs, although it also emerged from community organisations and service non-profits and was the only kind of claim made by all types of organisation relatively frequently.

The importance of mediation should be understood in the context of Brazil's long history of authoritarian rule and highly unequal access to the state.

Mediation and democratic legitimacy

The mediation argument appears to be the understanding of political representation that is most amenable to alignment with democratic principles. Civil organisations engaged in mediation sought to remedy inequalities in access to the state and the political-electoral arena. By engaging in mediation, civil organisations were not claiming to be an alternative to the traditional forms of representation, but saw themselves as a means of linking the needs and demands of particular segments of the population to public decision-making centres.

Further reading

Houtzager, Peter and Gurza Lavalle, Adrian (2009) *Participatory Governance and the Challenge of Assumed Representation in Brazil*, IDS Working Paper 321, Brighton: IDS

Houtzager, Peter and Gurza Lavalle, Adrian (2010) 'Civil Society's Claims to Political Representation in Brazil', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 45.1: 1-29