1 · Mobilizing for democracy: citizen engagement and the politics of public participation[1]

VERA SCHATTAN P. COELHO AND
BETTINA VON LIERES

Introduction

What are the conditions under which citizen mobilization strengthens democratic institutions and cultures? In exploring that question, this book introduces eleven original empirical case studies of how different forms of citizen mobilization have generated democratic outcomes in seven countries of the global South. It highlights the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches to addressing the challenges of building democracy, and it demonstrates how the prospects for achieving democratic outcomes depend on a combination of forms of mobilization and distinctive political and institutional contexts.

Drawing on the case studies, the book's focus is on what we call 'mediated citizen mobilization', in which marginalized citizens rely on mediators or interlocutors either to trigger or to shape their strategies. The case studies examine three forms of mediated citizen mobilization: associations, social movements and citizen involvement in formal governance mechanisms.

The case studies provide examples of citizen mobilization that has had democratic outcomes in political contexts that vary significantly in terms of constitutional and legal frameworks, state capacities and histories of citizen mobilization. Each of these contextual factors leaves distinctive traces of how citizens and their organizations mobilize for democracy, and also shapes the choice of forms of mobilization. Sometimes, in fragile states or emerging democracies, the most important outcomes of engagement are the construction of democratic citizenship, the capacity to press for rights, and the deepening and expansion of the practices of democratic participation. Where there is a longer history of citizen mobilization, there is a better chance of larger-scale gains – such as the crafting of new agendas for citizen participation or sustained access to economic resources, rights and accountable institutions.

In focusing on the importance of the forms of citizen mobilization and the political context, this book contributes to the debate on

democracy building. While international studies devote increasing attention to citizen mobilization and its potential contribution to deepening democracy (Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Björkman and Svensson, 2009; Hossain, 2009), there is still little echo of this debate in the mainstream political and developmental approaches to democracy.

Carothers (2009) defines the political approach to democracy building as centring almost exclusively on building and strengthening representative institutions, such as competitive elections, an independent judiciary and a strong legislature (following Dahl, 1971; Manin, 1997; Przeworski, 1999). By contrast, the developmental approach involves 'a broader notion of democracy, one that encompasses concerns about equality and justice, and the concept of democratization as a slow, iterative process of change involving an inter-related set of political and socio-economic developments' (Carothers, 2009: 5; also Gerrits, 2007; Youngs, 2008).

This book complements these approaches by arguing, through empirical research, that democracy is not built by political institutions or developmental interventions alone. Taking a broader societal view, the chapters explore the conditions under which citizen mobilization has successfully contributed to the articulation of citizens' concerns, the promotion of democratic change, and the pressuring of states to act more accountably and democratically.

We begin this introductory chapter with reference to studies that discuss the challenges of deepening democracy through citizen mobilization. These include the complexities of political representation, the competing claims of political legitimacy and the trade-offs between long-term and one-off democratic gains.

In addition to these problems, we point to the lack of comparative research into how citizen mobilization plays out in different political contexts, and we describe the framework within which we have compared citizen mobilization across contexts.

The next section presents a review of the case studies, organized around the three different forms of mobilization under consideration. We conclude by calling attention to the importance of citizen mobilization for the project of deepening democracy.

Deepening democracy through citizen mobilization

This book engages with the 'deepening democracy' approach in current debates on democracy – a strand that, put simply, focuses on the 'contemporary project of developing and sustaining more substantive and empowered citizen participation in the political process than what

is normally found in liberal representative democracy alone' (Gaventa, 2006b: 7; see also Fung and Wright, 2003; Dryzek, 2000).

Scholars and activists who take this approach argue that citizenship should mean far more than just the enjoyment of legal rights and the election of representatives. Many of them view citizenship as involving the building of broad coalitions and mobilization with the potential to frame new agendas and to provide a counterbalance to state power by encouraging citizens to voice their demands, to advocate for special interests and to play a 'watchdog' role (Dagnino et al., 2006; Appadurai, 2002; Edwards and Gaventa, 2001). For others, deepening democracy involves being heard by the state and participating directly in deliberation and decision-making on political and policy issues (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Mansbridge, 2003; Avritzer, 2002; Warren, 1992); or else having direct relations with government institutions, as opposed to relations that are brokered by powerful patrons or relations that are characterized by detachment (Houtzager and Acharya, 2010).

In short, the deepening democracy approach highlights the importance of citizen engagement in shaping the opportunities for wider democratic change. Within this approach, however, there is a growing body of literature that focuses on the challenges inherent in getting citizens involved in democratic change.

A first set of challenges concerns a tendency by some commentators to automatically equate the growth of civil society organizations (CSOs) with increased democratization. Lewis (2004) and Houtzager and Acharya (2010), among many others, call attention to the fact that there is often nothing inherently democratic about CSOs and movements. They focus attention on the possible disjunctures between the practices of democracy, as advocated by CSOs, and the everyday realities of clientelism, patronage and authoritarian local politics experienced by their members and ordinary citizens. Several cases highlighted in this volume show empirically how citizens' mobilizations are, to varying degrees, shaped not only by the organizations that mediate them, but also by existing local power dynamics. These cases demonstrate the need for a better understanding of how different modes of rule, authority and political culture interconnect and cut across one another in practice; how and why they last; and how they affect emerging forms of citizen mobilization.

From this perspective a second set of challenges embraced by the authors in this book concerns the task of specifying the conditions under which groups and associations not just mediate but actually produce the democratization of public politics. As Heller states: