Participatory democracy in an age of inequality

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Representation
Journal of Representative Democracy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrep20

Participatory Democracy in an Age of Inequality

Rod Dacombe & Phil Parvin

To cite this article: Rod Dacombe & Phil Parvin (2021) Participatory Democracy in an Age of Inequality, Representation, 57:2, 145-157, DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2021.1933151

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2021.1933151

Published online: 05 Jun 2021.

REPRESENTATION
2021, VOL. 57, NO. 2, 145–157
https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2021.1933151

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Participatory Democracy in an Age of Inequality

Rod Dacombe[a] and Phil Parvin[b]

[a]Department of Political Economy, King's College, London, UK; [b]Department of Politics and International Studies, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

ABSTRACT
This article introduces this special issue on Participatory Democracy and Inequality, identifying both the primary claims made by the modern iteration of participatory democracy, as well as the main challenges faced by participatory democrats, by drawing on a range of literature, both empirical and theoretical. Despite these challenges, it finds cause for optimism, based on the trajectory of recent research on participatory democracy, and suggests there might be a number of potential means of addressing the problems raised by democratic inequality.

KEYWORDS
Participatory democracy; inequality; democratic theory

Introduction

It seems intuitively right that any political system which claims to be democratic should have at its core an orientation towards the full participation of its citizens. At the very least, democratic institutions should be organised in a way that ensures that no individual citizen is structurally incapable of participating: democratic participation should be meaningfully understood by all citizens as something that they *can* do. This seemingly simple idea has been the focus of a significant amount of recent scholarship, and is proving increasingly influential in the reform of democratic practices. Indeed, after a period in the theoretical wilderness, participatory democracy is experiencing a revival of sorts, with a growing interest in the ways in which the theoretical principles established in some of the 'classic' treatise of participation are relevant today (see Fung, 2004; Pateman, 2012). This has, in turn, influenced some notable recent contributions to scholarship on democracy, with work on democratic theory (Pateman, 2012), deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2017) and democratic innovations (Smith, 2019) finding roots in the assumption that there are both normative and instrumental benefits to maximising the opportunities for participation in democratic life.

However, despite this uptick in interest, proponents of participatory democracy face a serious problem when confronted with the findings of empirical work on the dynamics of democratic participation. Decades of research have established that democratic life is far from open to all and that, in fact, numerous inequalities persist in all forms of participation: many citizens do not take part in democratic life, or even understand

CONTACT Rod Dacombe rod.dacombe@kcl.ac.uk

participation as something that would be worthwhile or possible to engage in. Of the numerous inequalities that exist in participation, the relationship between socio-economic status and democratic engagement forms the clearest and most consistent finding of empirical work in the area – put simply, the poorest members of any society are those least likely to participate in a wide range of democratic activities, such as voting, political party membership or civic activism (Birch et al., 2013; Solt, 2008). Findings like these call into question the normative claims made by proponents of participation – if the reality of political life is that engagement in democracy (and hence, the associated benefits) are concentrated amongst a minority of citizens, what then, are the prospects for a genuinely participatory democracy?

This special issue addresses some of the questions which follow from this insight, collecting together an array of perspectives on the ways in which participatory democrats might understand and respond to the problems presented by inequalities in participation. The articles collected here are, necessarily, drawn from a range of different fields, including contributions from political theory, empirical political science, public policy and research on democratic innovations. The scope and level of analysis also varies widely. Some of the pieces explore the ways in which participation and inequality plays out at the neighbourhood level while others examine regional or national politics. Some take in specific attempts at democratic reform, while others are concerned with broader theoretical principles. That this diversity exists attests to the breadth of concern over these issues in contemporary scholarship. But it also underlines the extent to which a diverse group of authors has each been motivated by a common question: how can inequalities in participation be justified, if we accept the normative value of participatory forms of democracy?

This introductory article sets the scene for the papers that follow, identifying both the primary claims made by the modern iteration of participatory democracy, as well as the main challenges faced by participatory democrats, drawing on a range of literature, both empirical and theoretical. Despite these challenges, it finds cause for (cautious) optimism, based on the trajectory of recent research, and suggests that the problems raised by democratic inequality might be addressed by confronting the theoretical and empirical challenges to participation as it plays out in practice.

Participation in Democratic Theory

Participatory understandings of democracy place the direct involvement of citizens at the centre of democratic theory, suggesting that democratic systems structured along these lines can result in both more legitimate and more effective governance. In contrast with the prevailing view of participation in democracy, and particularly western liberal democracy, as being manifest primarily through the prism of electoral politics, a wide range of different forms of participation are included in such accounts. Participatory democrats prize citizen engagement in both formal activities such as consultations, committee hearings and participatory budgeting sessions, as well as less obviously 'political' action such as spontaneous protests, volunteering or involvement in decision-making in the workplace.

This kind of position is far from new. Interest in participation is a feature of the development of modern democratic theory, and numerous accounts trace the importance of

citizen participation in the work of Rousseau, Mill and Tocqueville amongst others (Pateman, 1970; Wolfe, 1985). However, most contemporary accounts of the idea have their foundations in the contribution made in Carole Pateman's 'Participation and Democratic Theory' (Pateman, 1970), which served to outline the orthodox position of participatory democracy in contemporary political thought. In common with much of the subsequent work in the field, Pateman's theory is characterised by its focus on the effects of engagement in democracy upon both those individuals taking part and the wider society in which democratic action is situated.

Fundamentally, participatory democracy is a transformatory theory, its core normative benefits resting on the idea that taking part in the processes of democracy can work to shape individuals' behaviour, with democratic institutions valued in part for their effects on the 'psychological orientations' of citizens (Pateman, 1970, p. 26). In this view, participation can be seen as a form of 'socialisation', or 'social training'', promoting the development of the capacity, skill and knowledge required to effectively participate as well as engendering a positive inclination towards democracy (Pateman, 1970, p. 42). Consequently, widespread participation is seen as essential for the development of the outlook and capability required of citizens in an effectively-functioning democracy.

Pateman's work sparked a revival in the fortunes of participatory democracy, leaving it, for a time, in a position of prominence in democratic theory (Pateman, 2012). Contemporary scholarship paid attention to both its potential as an alternative to the dominant theories of democracy at the time (Mansbridge, 1983) and its ability to foster radical change to democratic systems (Barber, 1984). A diverse literature followed, taking in theoretical claims as well as, crucially, establishing the idea that participation conceived in this way might provide a foundation for the reform of public institutions (see Fung, 2004; Biaocchi, 2005). This literature rests on a distinct set of claims over the value of participation to democratic life, with benefits associated with the act of participation itself, the potential for greater citizen control over politics and the idea that democratic participation can act as a form of civic education (Dacombe, 2018; Wolfe, 1985). The following sections sketch these claims in more detail.

Valuing Participation

The most obvious connection between the many threads of participatory democratic theory is a shared belief that democracy's value can best be realised through the direct participation of citizens, rather than in proxy through the actions of representatives. That participation might be prized by democratic theorists writing in this tradition might seem self-evident. However, by taking an inclusive view of the location and meaning of participation, participatory democrats aim to ensure that opportunities to engage in democratic life are maximised, rather than restricted to a focus on elections and voting. Opening up democracy to a plurality of voices in this way might lead to tangible benefits in the quality of democratic decision-making. Particularly, rather than shape public decisions according to the voices of the most powerful, or traditionally present groups, new perspectives on the nature of policy problems, and the potential for their resolution, can be identified (Barber, 1984).

Most iterations of participatory democratic theory also recognise a wider value to participation than the kinds of instrumental benefit sketched above. Many participatory hold

that democracy, and indeed all political life, has a wider value and that we should consider the importance of participation not simply for democracy itself but as a part of a broader system of human self-realisation. In contrast to representative notions of democracy, where individuals' voices are filtered and given coherence through the actions of their representatives, participatory democrats hold that full citizenship cannot be attained without direct engagement in democratic life. As Benjamin Barber (1984, p. xxiii) put it, 'without participating in the common life that defines them and in the decision-making that shapes their social habitat, women and men cannot become individuals'.

Accountability and Control

Participatory democracy is also promoted for its ability to allow a greater degree of popular control over the actions of public officials and representatives than would be feasible under more limited understandings of democracy. Participation provides an additional layer of scrutiny over the actions of public officials by increasing the potential avenues for participation, and so dissenting voices can be heard, public figures held to account for their actions and any significant policy failure is more likely to be brought into the open. Equally, any errant behaviour might be exposed in the same manner. The spotlight provided by the direct engagement of citizens leaves little place for unscrupulous politicians.

Such an approach has a certain robustness. Given the diversity of forms of participation allowed, any attempts to restrict participation through formal democratic processes are hindered as citizens might take part in meaningful democratic action in any number of other ways. This is not to say that all forms of participation are equal (voting in a referendum, for better or worse, provides direct policy effects that might not be present in less obvious forms of political action) but experiences of the transition to democracy in totalitarian states suggest that such behaviours can have a tangible effect on the quality of democracy (Hadjisky, 2001).

Participation as Democratic Education

Participatory democratic theory is further distinguished by its educative value. Indeed, in many ways, these benefits can be thought of as the defining feature of participatory democracy (Fung, 2004; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; Pateman, 1970; Vigoda, 2002). This position is distinct from epistemic participatory theories which solely understand participation as a means of knowledge transfer from citizens to bureaucrats, or as a means of restraining excessive centralised power over public decisions (see Dean, 2016). Rather, it suggests that participation's virtues are felt in the lives of citizens, as well as within political systems. Participation, then, has an effect on the character, as well as the knowledge, of those involved.

Perhaps the core insight of this view was summarised by Jon Elster, who highlighted the notion that thinking about democracy in this way could increase the efficacy of the individuals who take part in a way which is quite separate from more instrumental understandings of participation's benefit to public institutions:

> The political process is an end in itself, a good or even the supreme good for those who participate in it. It may be applauded because of the educative effects on the participants, but the benefits do not cease once the education has been completed. On the contrary, the education of the citizen leads to a preference for public life as an end in itself. It is the agonistic display of excellence, or the collective display of solidarity, divorced from decision-making and the exercise of influence on events. (Elster, 1986, p. 128)

This articulation of participatory democracy is one where the processes of participation provide positive externalities which reach beyond the direction of political decisions, and changing the minds and character of citizens is a natural part of the democratic process. Pateman held that 'the major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy is […] an educative one, educative in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures' (Pateman, 1970, p. 42). Such an approach suggests that the kinds of benefit which can be derived from learning through participation are not simply related to the political efficacy of individual citizens but can also promote a number of wider benefits for society.

Taken together, the variety of benefits sketched above reveal a set of normative aims that are shared by much of the work in this area and indeed can be thought of as representing an orthodox position in the recent literature on participatory democracy. The notion that there are benefits to be derived from participation which can be felt both intrinsically, through the kinds of decision that result from democracy, and extrinsically, through their effects on the broader health of democracy, are both important to most recent accounts. Indeed, these latter benefits are rarely considered by participatory democracy's critics, and as we shall see throughout this special issue, provide avenues through which proponents of participation might respond to both the empirical and theoretical critiques at large in the literature.

Two Challenges to Participatory Democracy

Despite the insights provided in the work outlined above, scholarly enthusiasm for participatory democracy has seemed to wane somewhat in recent years. The persistence of representation as a means of political organisation and the apparent success of western liberal democracy on the world stage left proponents of the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making appearing out of step with the way modern politics seemed to function. Even the recent attention given to participatory democracy, despite its success in both challenging the theoretical consensus over democratic participation and in prompting institutional reform, is often marginalised by more prominent theoretical positions. In the following sections, we outline some of the primary challenges faced by participatory democrats, highlighting the questions, both theoretical and empirical, that participatory democracy needs to address if it is to cement its place in the mainstream of contemporary democratic theory.

Theoretical Challenges: Minimal and Deliberative Democracy

We contend that participatory democracy has fallen out of theoretical fashion in recent years because the available alternatives seem more realistic in the light of empirical

evidence over the way democratic participation functions. While participatory democracy has by no means been ignored in democratic theory, scholars working in the field will have noted that the primary focus of theoretical work lies elsewhere. Two, quite separate, strands of theory have taken centre stage, which both raise rather different questions of participatory democratic theory. Minimal (or elitist) forms of democracy rely in part on epistemic concerns over the likelihood of a participatory democracy along the lines prized by the literature, suggesting that both the inclination and capacity required of citizens to meet the normative aims sought by participatory democrats are unlikely to be found in practice. Deliberative democracy, in contrast, shares many of the aims held by participatory democrats, without necessarily adhering to its breadth of focus. On the contrary, such theoretical approaches identify the value of participation under conditions that are conducive to quite specific standards of public deliberation as the key to a successful democracy. The following sections outline these challenges in more detail.

Minimal Democracy

Many democratic theorists resist the idea that democracy should aim at the full participation of citizens, arguing that participatory democracy misunderstands the role of democratic institutions, fails to protect minorities from the whims of majorities, and places too much power in the hands of people who cannot be reasonably expected to wield it responsibly, even if they wanted to wield it at all (e.g. Brennan, 2016; Mutz, 2006; Parvin, 2018). Theorists in this tradition suggest that it is unclear that participation is important to either individual self-realisation or individuality. Rather, many people do not want to participate and do not draw their sense of self or identity from their involvement in politics.

Of course, many citizens do not participate as a result of structural inequalities, but minimal democrats suggest many more *choose* not to, seeking fulfilment in other activities. Moreover, many people who do choose to participate do not see their participation as constitutive of their identity. People have all manner of different ideals and memberships, and engage in all sorts of activities that shape their sense of self. To minimal democrats, the argument that citizenship is the most important among a person's numerous memberships, and that it is democratic participation that enables people to achieve 'self realisation' and 'become individuals' overstates the importance of democracy and merely reveals the biases of participation's proponents (Parvin, 2008). Participation of the kind, and at the scale, defended by participatory democrats would require significant work and commitment which would no doubt be fine for those who understand participation to be fundamental to their identity and interests. But to those who do not, it would come at the cost of being able to pursue other activities.

Further, while participatory democrats emphasise the *self-regarding* nature of participation many minimal democrats emphasise its *other-regarding* nature (Brennan, 2011; Mill, 1859). This suggests participation does not just affect individuals, it affects everyone: all citizens must live under governments and laws which result from citizens' collective participation. As such, it is reasonable that we are attentive to how people participate, who is participating, and the implications this has for other citizens. Minimal democrats ask whether citizens exercise their power over others appropriately and responsibly, or

whether they do so unjustly, wrongly or ignorantly. The fact that participation has both self-regarding *and* other-regarding aspects means that the benefits to individual citizens arising from their participation must be weighed in the balance against the consequences of their participation for others.

As we have seen, participatory democrats emphasise the benefits of harnessing citizens' epistemic insights in the service of public decision-making, alongside the intrinsically educative nature of participation. The more people participate, participatory democrats argue, the more they come to see themselves as part of a common political endeavour with other people who may be very different from them, and the more they learn about these people and the world more generally (e.g. Pateman, 1970). This sees democratic participation as a perfectionist in the Millian sense: it enriches the lives of individual citizens and also the wider society by emphasising cooperation and the search for solutions to political problems through a pooling of on-the-ground experience and knowledge, and reasoned debate in a wider context of facts about the world and people's experience of it.

Minimal democrats have argued that this is utopian, and requires too many institutions. Such a vision of democracy certainly seems to run counter to the lived reality of many citizens of democratic states. But even if we put empirical observations aside, decisions over the direction of complex modern polities might not be made better or more effectively by consulting a wide range of citizens. Good decisions are made by those who have relevant knowledge and expertise, which cannot be gained from a general everyday engagement in democracy, but must come instead from an engagement with (often very complicated and technical) evidence and data. Given epistemic shortfalls among citizens, as well as cognitive biases, minimal democrats suggest participation might actually *hamper* good governance.

Finally, minimal democrats hold that while devolving power down to a fully active citizen body might sound good on proceduralist grounds, it cannot be defended on instrumentalist grounds: participatory democracy in this view is unrealistic and too vulnerable to the challenges posed by epistemic shortfalls among citizens on the one hand and citizen apathy and cognitive biases on the other (Schumpeter, 1942). Consequently, critics suggest, we need an alternative, 'minimal', system which requires less of citizens (in terms of their participation and knowledge) and of institutions (in terms of their roles in educating and shaping the identity of citizens). Such a system strikes a balance. Democracies must ensure that citizens have the meaningful opportunity to participate in the choice of governments and, perhaps, in decision making more directly, through voting and other mechanisms. But they must also ensure that the will of citizens is held in check in order to safeguard good governance.

Deliberative Democratic Theory

In addition to the kinds of criticism presented by minimal democrats, in the recent literature participatory democracy has been pushed to a marginal position in comparison with the growing body of work on deliberative democracy. In part, this is because deliberative democratic theory claims much of the same normative ground as that staked out by the proponents of participation, and indeed, deliberative understandings of democracy can often share many features associated with participatory democratic theory

(Pateman, 2012). For instance, many deliberative democrats aspire to the open and full participation of those involved in decision-making. Deliberative democracy also has an educative element, with engagement in deliberative practice promoting the capacity of individuals to understand, and articulate, arguments over complex political problems. Equally, much like participatory democracy, deliberative democrats aim to provide an alternative means of understanding democracy that does not rely on electoral competition, albeit one which focuses instead on open deliberation between all those who take part (see Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2000).

What distinguishes deliberative democratic theory, however, is its articulation of a distinct, and theoretically compelling, basis for the normative claims that it makes. In contrast to participatory democracy, the legitimacy claims made by deliberative democrats do not primarily reside within participation itself but in the logic of reason-giving argumentation. Democratic legitimacy, in this view, was derived from 'decision-making by discussion' (Elster, 1986, p. 1), and democratic life is defined according to the participation in meaningful deliberation of those affected by collective decisions. In practice, this means that the justification for decisions needs to be made in a way that ensures that either all concerned are satisfied, or are at least able to accept the reasons for the decisions made. Essentially, most deliberative models of democracy rely on an assumption that participants can be persuaded by the 'force of the better argument'.

Rather than see deliberation and argument as a positive force, previous movements in modern democratic theory have tended to treat the plurality of views in society as a source of conflict, which needs to be mediated by democratic institutions. Consequently, the most significant schools of thought around the time deliberative theory emerged into the mainstream relied on an account of human behaviour and motivation which held that the preferences of individual voters were fixed, with the role of democratic institutions being merely to provide an aggregation of the already-determined views of those involved. Voting-centric democratic theories such as these (including participatory democracy) rely on the consent granted through a fair system of aggregation, and acquiescence to the decisions taken, regardless of their alignment with individual preferences. Conversely, 'talk-centric' approaches to democratic theory aim to replace electoral consent with other forms of accountability. In most versions of deliberative democracy, decisions and laws need to be publicly justified to those who are subject to them, and the emphasis shifts distinctly from the point of decision (i.e. the vote) to the processes of discussion and communication which occur earlier, where opinions are formed and preferences shaped (Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2000).

Work resting on this foundation now forms the most prominent theme of work in contemporary democratic theory. Significantly, the growing emphasis of the literature in the area towards explorations of the operation of deliberation in practice has been an important driver in the popularity of deliberative democracy in democratic thought (see Thompson, 2008). Deliberative democracy, therefore, is no longer a theoretical concern but has evolved in a number of directions, with numerous commentators identifying moves towards deliberation as forming the basis of institutional reform, as well as a concern with the empirical exploration of the normative claims made by deliberative theorists (Elstub, 2010; Elstub, Ercan, & Mendonça, 2016). This literature offers a means both of explaining the ways in which deliberation can lead to more democratically satisfactory outcomes and also an increasingly sophisticated array of measurement tools

that can be employed to demonstrate the effectiveness of deliberative democratic reforms through empirical work.

As a consequence, the design of deliberative democratic institutions has been able to explicitly address questions of inequality. For instance, many innovations of this kind seek to undercut existing political inequalities by selecting participants through some means of random sampling. Examples of this kind of practice include the widespread use of deliberative polling (see Fishkin, 2003) or citizens' assemblies. Elsewhere, deliberative institutions have been purposely designed to engage under-represented groups in policy deliberations (Fung, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2001), and it is common for initiatives of this kind to both ensure that those participating engage in a process which is not dominated by a few powerful voices, with open participation facilitated through institutional design and independent facilitation.

Empirical Challenges: Inequalities in Democratic Participation

There are many possible explanations for why participatory democrats have allowed the theoretical initiative to be lost. As we have seen, participatory democracy makes significant demands of citizens that are not held by other theoretical perspectives – minimal democracy does not imagine that all citizens are able or willing to engage in democratic life to the same extent, while deliberative democracy holds that institutional settings can be designed to mitigate the barriers to participation that exist in conventional democratic participation. Considered alongside these, it might be easy to see participatory democracy, as Mark Warren put it, as little more than 'romantic dogma' (1996, p. 243).

However, perhaps the most obvious reason why participatory democracy seems unrealistic is that the available empirical data casts serious doubt over the practicalities of its claims. As we have seen, the modern iteration of participatory democracy is based on a number of claims over the normative value of citizen participation in democracy. Clearly, these kinds of claim only maintain significance if they can actually be demonstrated to occur. There is no shortage of this kind of analysis: from the earliest work in this area, researchers have attempted to clarify the dynamics of citizen involvement in democracy, highlighting the variety of forms of participation, indicating the importance of a broad conception of political engagement that reached beyond the vote, and identifying a wide range of salient features which are related to the likelihood of participation (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978).

A significant body of research has developed from these origins, and a fairly comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of democratic participation now exists (for reviews see Schlozman, 2002; Verba, 2001). This work has arrived at two major findings. First, participation, in general, appears to be in decline in a wide range of countries, to the extent that a number of commentators have identified a 'crisis' in the health of democracy based on the unwillingness of citizens to take part (Chou, 2014; Merkel, 2014). Second, that this decline is not uniformly distributed amongst citizens. As we have seen, one of the major findings of empirical work on democratic participation is that the propensity to participate in democratic life is concentrated amongst the most affluent social groups (Lijphart, 1997; Milbrath & Goel, 1977).

Inequalities like these are not restricted to participation in formal, electoral democracy but can be traced through a range of different activities. These include the likelihood of engagement in civic associations and volunteering, itself an important element of democratic participation in many conceptions – as Archon Fung (2004, p. 520) suggests, '[t]hose who are wealthier are more likely to participate in associations and so acquire the skills necessary to participate in other parts of political life'. That findings like these are marginalised or ignored by participatory democrats is problematic for obvious reasons. Clearly, the normative claims over democratic participation made by participatory theorists are untenable unless an adequate response is developed.

Responding to the Challenges of Inequality in Democratic Participation

Clearly, these findings have troubling implications for participatory democracy. Given the standards established by the literature, it is reasonable to ask whether poorer citizens experience a lower quality of democracy than more affluent individuals and whether the aspirations of participatory democracy are likely to be met in practice. If participatory democrats are to respond to these kinds of challenge and regain the momentum which they enjoyed during the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, then direct answers must be made to the kinds of theoretical and empirical challenges indicated above. This is not usually the case in the existing literature and until now, the defenders of participatory democracy have provided a rather weak set of responses. With a few notable exceptions, the literature is fraught with problems, including but not limited to; an unwillingness to engage with the fundamental concerns that lay at the heart of objections to participatory democracy, a mixed empirical base underpinning any rejoinder and a frequently adversarial tone. Taken together, this has left a good number of the objections raised in the literature unanswered. In effect, this meant that the intellectual initiative has been lost.

In order to effectively defend their position, participatory democrats need to find responses that connect theoretical and empirical perspectives. While empirical work has been common in analyses of participation – as Carole Pateman (2012) notes, although her work has become most celebrated for its theoretical insight, she has always included empirical data to support her arguments – this is not enough. The unanswered theoretical questions raised by the evidence of persistent inequalities in participation need to be directly countered by empirical analyses of democracy in practice. There are two primary issues that this kind of work needs to address. First, as we have seen, more work is needed to identify, not simply the extent of non-participation in democracy (particularly amongst the most deprived groups), but the mechanisms through which this occurs. The existing research in the area has made a major contribution to the field by identifying both the extent of participation in democracy and some of the factors which can hinder democratic engagement. The competing claims in the literature, ranging from rational decision-making through to structural constraints on participation, need fleshing out if proponents of participation are to respond fully to the charges laid against them.

Second, if participatory democrats are to accept the weight of evidence concerning differences in participation between social groups (as most participatory democrats do), then it is important that the literature investigates whether or not this is having a

substantive effect on the quality of democracy. Taken at face value, this latter point might seem obvious – but the consequences of inequalities in democratic participation need to be explored further. For instance, is it really the case that a lower rate of participation in democratic institutions means that people on lower incomes lead lives that are altogether less connected to democracy (and the subsequent benefits) than the rest of society?

As importantly, it is important to understand precisely what these lower levels of participation might have to say about the ways in which people on lower incomes understand democracy's importance. It might be easy, for example, to take these differences in participation to indicate a generalised dissatisfaction with democracy, and to reach the conclusion, as many commentators have, that the principles which underpin democratic institutions are themselves redundant for much of the population. However, it is equally plausible that for some people democracy does not reside in its formal institutions but instead is focused on other forms of participation – a point supported by the recent emergence of 'critical citizens', who demonstrate little confidence in the structures and practices of western liberal democracies but nonetheless retain faith in the *idea* of democracy (see Norris, 2011).

The articles which follow in this special issue each go some way towards addressing these deficiencies. As noted in the introduction to this article, they are drawn from across a wide range of disciplinary and methodological starting points. Kate Harrison's piece examines the impacts of austerity policy on democratic participation, arguing that retrenchment of public expenditure can have a deleterious effect on the likelihood of citizen participation. This argument provides a useful context to Rod Dacombe's argument over the importance of local structural factors in determining the ways in which deprivation affects participation.

Sara Bondesson's analysis of participation in post-disaster environments magnifies the kinds of inequality which exist in participation while highlighting the potential for their resolution of the Occupy Sandy network that emerged in New York City in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. Amanda Machin considers the problems for green participatory democracy presented by inequalities, suggesting that there are dangers that might be exacerbated in situations where experts and citizens act together.

Font, Pasadas and Fabregas explore the motivation to participate in participatory institutions at a number of different levels, from neighbourhoods to national bodies, focusing on the dynamics of participation in advisory councils in Spain. Sonia Exley examines participation in policy, focusing on attempts to engage citizens in policy-making under the banner of 'open policy making' (OPM). Phil Parvin closes the special issue by raising difficult questions for participatory democrats, examining the implications of inequalities in political knowledge for the foundations of participatory democratic theory.

Each of these papers asks questions of the kinds of assumption at large in the literature over the ways in which inequalities affect participation. Some of the arguments raised here are challenging for those who argue in favour of participatory democracy. However, they are arguments worth making. There is, however, cause for optimism. The findings presented here demonstrate the potential for responses to be shaped that are concerned with the intersection of theory and empirical work. Just as significantly, regardless of whether the challenges presented by inequalities in participation can be fully resolved, the articles included here demonstrate clearly that participatory democracy deserves its place in

contemporary democratic theory. As both a set of normative principles, and a means of exploring the potential for democratic reform, its contribution is too significant to ignore.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Rod Dacombe is Senior Lecturer in Politics and Director of the Centre for British Politics and Government in the Department of Political Economy, King's College, London.

Phil Parvin is Reader in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies, Loughborough University.

References

Baiocchi, G. (2005). *Militants and citizens: The politics of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre*. Stanford University Press.
Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy*. London: University of California Press.
Birch, S., et al. (2013). *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*. London: IPPR.
Brennan, J. (2011). *The ethics of voting*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Brennan, J. (2016). *Against democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Chambers, S. (2017). Balancing epistemic quality and equal participation in a system approach to deliberative democracy. *Social Epistemology*, *31*(3), 266–276.
Chambers, S. (2003). Deliberative democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *6*(1), 307–326.
Chou, M. (2014). *Democracy against itself: Sustaining an unsustainable idea*. Edinburgh University Press.
Dacombe, R. (2018). *Civic participation in theory and practice*. London: Palgrave.
Dean, R. (2016). *Democratising bureaucracy: The many meanings of public participation in social policy and how to harness them* [Doctoral dissertation]. London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
Dryzek, J. (2000). *Deliberative democracy and beyond. Liberals, critics, contestations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Elster, J. (1986). The market and the forum: Three varieties of political theory. In J. Elster & A. Hylland (Eds.), *Foundations of social choice theory* (pp. 103–132). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Elstub, S. (2010). The third generation of deliberative democracy. *Political Studies Review*, *8*(3), 291–307.
Elstub, S., Ercan, S., & Mendonça, R. F. (2016). Editorial introduction: The fourth generation of deliberative democracy. *Critical Policy Studies*, 10(2), 139–151.
Fishkin, J. S. (2003). Consulting the public through deliberative polling. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *22*(1), 128–133.
Fung, A. (2004). *Empowered participation: Reinventing urban democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Fung, A., & Wright, E. (2001). *Deepening democracy: Innovations in empowered participatory governance*. London: Verso.
Hadjiisky, M. (2001). The failure of the participatory Democracy in the Czech Republic. *West European Politics*, *24*(3), 43–64.
King, C. S., Feltey, K. M., & Susel, B. O. N. (1998). The question of participation: Toward authentic public participation in public administration. *Public Administration Review*, *59*(4), 317–326.

Lijphart, A. (1997). Unequal participation: Democracy's unresolved dilemma. *American Political Science Review*, 1–14.
Mansbridge, J. (1983). *Beyond adversary democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Merkel, W. (2014). Is there a crisis of democracy. *Democratic Theory*, 1(2), 11–25.
Milbrath, L., & Goel, M. (1977). *Political participation: How and why do people get involved in politics*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
Mill, J. S. (1859/2016). *On liberty*. London: Penguin.
Mutz, D. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative vs participatory democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
Parvin, P. (2008). What's special about culture? Identity, autonomy, and public reason. *Critical Review of International, Social, and Political Philosophy*, *11*(3), 315–333.
Parvin, P. (2018). Representing the people: British democracy in an age of political ignorance. *Political Studies Review*, *16*(4), 265–278.
Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation in democratic theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pateman, C. (2012). Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics*, *10*(1), 7–19.
Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. London: Simon and Schuster.
Rosenstone, S., & Hansen, J. (1993). *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.
Schlozman, K. (2002). *Citizen participation in America: What do we know? Why do we care?* London: Russell Sage Foundation.
Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Socialism, capitalism and democracy*. Harper and Brothers.
Smith, G. (2019). Enhancing the legitimacy of offices for future generations: The case for public participation. *Political Studies*, *68*(4), 996–1013.
Solt, F. (2008). Economic inequality and democratic political engagement. *American Journal of Political Science*, *52*(1), 48–60.
Thompson, D. F. 2008. Deliberative democratic theory and empirical political science. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*, 497–520.
Verba, S. (2001). *Political equality: What is it? Why do we want it? A review paper for the Russell Sage foundation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
Verba, S., Nie, N., & Kim, J.-O. (1978). *A seven-nation comparison: Participation and political equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Verba, S., & Nie, N. (1972). *Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality*. New York: Harper & Row.
Vigoda, E. (2002). From responsiveness to collaboration: Governance, citizens, and the next generation of public administration. *Public Administration Review*, *62*(5), 527–540.
Warren, M. E. (1996). Deliberative democracy and authority. *American Political Science Review*, 46–60.
Wolfe, J. (1985). A defense of participatory democracy. *The Review of Politics*, *47*(3), 370–389.