

Accountability impasses: dilemmas and alternatives of political representation¹

Luís Felipe Miguel
University of Brasília

ABSTRACT

One crucial element of electoral democracies is accountability, which guarantees the connection between those who represent and those who are represented. Nonetheless, the expectations that have been deposited in it find but its pale reflection in political practice. The ability that constituents have to supervise their representatives is limited, due to factors that include the complexity of public issues, weak incentives for political qualification and control over agendas. In light of this situation, proposals for the radical transformation of the mechanisms of representation that redeem the idea of "descriptive representation" and either weaken or abolish accountability have emerged. This is notably the case for the representation of groups and the substitution of elections with a lottery system. Although lacking in formal instruments for the responsiveness of those who govern to those that are governed, the forms that have been proposed would generate a body of representatives more similar to the population in its entirety and would increase the rotativity of decision-making positions. The present article analyzes proposals for descriptive representation through the prism of the relationship between representatives and the represented. Although they often suffer from serious fragilities and do not seem viable for effective implementation, these proposals do incorporate important criticisms and ones that deserve consideration regarding the functioning of electoral representation and, in particular, accountability.

Keywords: political representation; democracy; accountability.

¹ This text includes initial results from the research project "Alternative Models of Political Representation", supported by the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* (National Council for Scientific and Technologic Development, or CNPq) through a Research Productivity grant. A first version was presented at the "Democratic Controls and Citizenship" Work Group, at the 27th annual meeting of the *Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-graduação em Ciências Sociais* (ANPOCS-National Association for Research and Post-Graduation in Social Sciences), held in Caxambu, Minas Gerais, from October 21-25, 2003. I would like to thank Fábio Wanderley Reis, Paulo D'Ávila Filho, Cláudio Gonçalves Couto, Fernando Lattman-Weltman and all other members of the group for their critiques and suggestions. I also wish to thank Regina Dalcastagnè for her careful proofreading and for her comments. The mistakes and omissions, all always, are still entirely my responsibility.

I. INTRODUCTION

No matter where we place the start of the search for a science of politics – whether it be in Aristotle, Machiavelli or in Hobbes, to name but three often-cited precursors – one main theme will always be the constitution and maintenance of political power. As the construction of knowledge of politics unfolds, before and after the birth of a Political Science as it is modernly known, that theme will develop into discussions on the problem of “political obligation” – a dear one to liberal tradition²; on the “legitimacy” of domination, as in Weber’s famous formulation; on “hegemony”, which became one of the great concerns of Marxist thought – and which undoubtedly refers us to Gramsci, 2000 [1932-1934]; on “governability” – a highly popularized concept which may be traced back to the most conservative thought (CROZIER, HUNTINGTON & WATANUKI, 1975); and into numerous other discussions.

It is legitimate to say that in most modern Political Science the issue of the formation and maintenance of power is turned into the issue of democratic organization. Since World War II, in what has been a continuous process, democracy has gained universal legitimacy. In western countries, it is the sole political regime able to guarantee citizens’ acceptance. Throughout the world, various different regimes have either tried to adapt the label “democratic” to their own peculiarities – which has given rise to the countless adjectives that have been applied to democracies, from the “popular democracies” of Eastern Europe to the “Islamic democracy” of Libya and Iran – or, at least, tried to sell their shortcomings as necessary stages in the solidification of democracy, such as the national security dictatorships in South America.

Thus, in the field of political theory, at least since the second half of the XX century, the theory of democracy has become the central concern – followed by the discussion on justice. Democracy is also one of the key issues in empirical studies in Political Science, whether directly or indirectly so – studies on elections, on decision-making processes or on elites, for example. Though put here in very simple terms, one may still substantiate that, for some decades now, democracy has become the normative horizon – explicit or implicit – of almost all Political Science.

If, as has been mentioned, there are “labeled democracies”, there is also a non-labeled democracy: the political regime generally accepted as democratic by common-sense as well as by the Social Sciences. Nonetheless, such a regime is far from the etymological sense of democracy and from the characteristics of classic Greek democracy – from which we have inherited not only the word but a good deal of our popular conceptions associated with it as well. On the one hand,

² For a critical review, see Pateman (1985).

the people do *not* exercise power, except – at best - in a very mediated fashion. On the other, the central institutions of contemporary democracy – the electoral process and the parliament as a college of representatives – are foreign to the Greek experiment. Up until the XVIII century, they were considered intrinsically aristocratic³.

Our democracies, therefore, are *representative democracies*. To demonstrate that direct democracy is simply unfeasible in contemporary societies has become redundant. Our states are too big for everyone to meet and too populous to imagine a dialogue that incorporates each and every one of its citizens. Political issues are too complex for us to dismiss the specialized services of those who govern. Furthermore, our private affairs absorb too much of our attention and reduce the time available for political participation to a minimum. The *demos* has incorporated many new groups – workers, women and immigrants –, thus deepening the cleavage inside it and making the existence of some sort of mediation indispensable. In short, no matter what the justification, there is no doubt that political representation is an unavoidable challenge to the construction of democracy in contemporary national states.

Although the expression “representative democracy” has become commonplace, the fact remains that it conceals a contradiction: the term refers to a government of the people, but the people are not present in the decision-making process. In a more systematic fashion, we observe that the construction of a democratic order must overcome a series of obstacles: the relations between individual preferences and a hypothetical “collective will”, that is, how to make room for the free expression of conflicting interests and still maintain the minimal unity without which no society may exist; the differentiated capacity – differentiated by cognitive resources – that each individual has to determine his/her own interests, or the fact that formally equal access to decisions does not solve the problems raised by the real inequalities existent in society; or, still, the possible manipulation of the “collective will” by means of the strategic use of the rules of preference building.

These are challenges present even in the case of a “direct democracy”. However, the need for political representation brings with it a new and enormous share of problems, far more serious than the first ones. There are at least three fundamental and intimately interconnected problems:

(1) the separation between those who govern and the governed, that is, the fact that political decisions are, in fact, made by a small group, not by the mass of people who will be subject to them;

³ According to Montesquieu (1951 [1748], p. 242), "suffrage by lottery is in the nature of democracy; suffrage by election is in that of aristocracy ". The same appears in Rousseau (1964 [1757]). For more on this matter, see Manin (1997).

(2) the formation of a political elite distanced from the general public resulting from the functional specialization mentioned above. The “rotation principle”, crucial to the democracies of old – to govern and to be governed, alternately –, does not apply, since the group in power tends to exercise that power permanently; and,

(3) the bond between the will of the represented and the will of the representatives is severed, due both to the fact that those who govern tend to possess social characteristics distinguishing them from the governed and to mechanisms intrinsic to functional differentiation. These mechanisms act even in the absence of inequalities deriving from social origin, as Michels (1982 [1914]) had already attempted to demonstrate at the beginning of the XX Century⁴.

The answer democratic institutions tend to give to these three problems is the same: accountability. The term refers to the control the established powers exercise on each other (horizontal accountability), but, above all, it refers to representatives’ need to account for their actions and to submit to the general public’s verdict (vertical accountability)⁵. Vertical accountability culminates in elections, which, consequently, stand in the spotlight of representative democracies and set in motion the two main mechanisms of democratic political representation: authorization – the people, who hold sovereignty, delegate the power to decide - and accountability itself – to a small group of persons.

In political practice, however, the hopes placed on (vertical) accountability are only scarcely realized. Voters’ ability to supervise their representatives is reduced by factors such as the complexity of public issues, the low incentives for political qualification and controls that are maintained over the political agenda. In the last decades, in most countries with a competitive democracy, this has exposed the false illusions of mechanisms of representation, which may be observed in low election turnouts, in the erosion of party loyalty and in displays of alienation.

In the first part of the text, I will briefly cover the basic concepts pertaining to our discussion, such as “representation” and “accountability”. Next, I will present a summary of studies made in the 1970s that pointed to a crisis in representation or in democracy in western countries and that focused on the problem of “governability”. More recent studies, published since the 1990s, that

⁴ Despite its simplifications, determinism and excessively peremptory tone, the book offers valuable clues for understanding the problems of political representation.

⁵ Peruzzotti and Smulovitz (2001) present an additional type of accountability, which they call “social” accountability and which would be exercised by the means of communication and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such a dimension, however, lacks the ability to apply sanctions; its warnings and accusations gain effectiveness only when they strike a chord with one of the constituted powers, especially the Judiciary (horizontal accountability) or the electorate (vertical accountability). Indeed, I believe it is relevant to understand the role played by the media and by NGOs in contemporary representative democracies, yet giving them the status of a third dimension of accountability is simply unjustified.

reveal the generalized distrust of representative institutions among ordinary citizens will also be touched upon. Finally, I will consider and weigh proposals for radical change of the mechanisms of representation – especially those involving electoral quotas and drawings – although they bear a significant cost in terms of the reduction of accountability.

II. REPRESENTATION, RESPONSIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY: CONCEPTS

It has become quite commonplace to note that *accountability* does not have a precise translation in Portuguese – nor in other neo-Latin languages – and, thus, to speculate as to the quality of our democracies in contrast with those of Anglo-Saxon origin. Nonetheless, Political Science vocabulary in the Portuguese language, in Brazil, includes the word “*responsividade*”, which has not yet been registered in dictionaries – the *Aurélio* and the *Houaiss*, the two most acclaimed dictionaries, acknowledge only the adjective “*responsivo*” – already widely used in texts in the area*.

“*Responsividade*”, however, corresponds more closely to the English “*responsiveness*”, a concept which is very close to accountability though the two may easily be distinguished⁶. Accountability has to do with voters’ ability to impose sanctions on those who govern, namely to keep those who have satisfactorily performed their duties in their offices and to bring down those whose performances have been inadequate. It includes the notion that office holders must report to the people, who, in turn, will pronounce their verdict. Accountability is exercised by the people⁷ and depends on institutional mechanisms, above all on periodic and competitive elections. Responsiveness, on the other hand, refers to the representatives’ sensitivity to the will of those whom they represent; or, in other words, responsiveness refers to a government’s willingness to adopt the policies preferred by the governed.

At a first glance, the distinction between the two concepts is very weak, since the representatives’ readiness to respect their voters’ preferences (responsiveness) depends on the voters’ ability to award or to punish the decision makers’ behavior (accountability). This is really one of the cornerstones of the institutions of modern constitutional regimes: distrusting the kindness of governors, and, rather, establishing a system of social checks, both horizontal (separation of powers) and vertical (periodic elections). But, as will shortly be seen, differentiating between the

* Translator’s Note: The reader must remember that the original text, in Portuguese, was aimed primarily at the Brazilian public; thus, the need for this initial clarification.

⁶ For the distinction between accountability and responsiveness, see Manin, Przeworski and Stokes (1999, p. 9-10).

⁷ It is curious to observe that while it is asserted that “the government is accountable”, evidently, the power to exercise accountability, as it is presented here, belongs to the governed.

two concepts becomes more useful as proposals that seek to increase responsiveness through mechanisms that minimize or ignore accountability come onto the scene.

In studies on democracy, accountability is accentuated for promising the people a reasonably high control over those who hold political power – exerted in a feasible fashion, in populous, vast, complex and specialized societies such as contemporary ones. It presents a more sophisticated and attractive model of relations between representatives and the represented than the unethical views of a “free mandate” or “imperative mandate”.

A naïve view of political representation tends to consider the representative as a delegate of the voters whose duty it is to express the will of the majority in deliberative assemblies. It is the idea of an “imperative mandate”, which, in the end, reduces the representative to the role of mere emissary. At most, he would be able to negotiate solutions of commitment, which would still need to be submitted to the represented for approval – as commonly occurs with union representation. In the first case, the representative-emissary performs a mechanical function which, strictly speaking, becomes dispensable as communication technologies improve. In the second, the representative-negotiator retains important power resources, especially as he combines the (outward) ability to speak and the (inward) ability to lead. Here, however, the decision-making process becomes slow and demands multiple rounds of negotiations and assembly meetings. It is not a viable model for multifunctional, permanent representation in complex contemporary societies.

In contrast with the imperative mandate, there is the idea of a “free mandate”, which was triumphant in representative democracies and was formulated with exemplary clarity in the latter half of the XVIII century by Edmund Burke (1942 [1774]). In his famous “Speech To The Electors of Bristol”, the English thinker aligned two main arguments in order to justify a representative’s autonomy in relation to his electors. The first one has to do with the nature of representation: the Member of Parliament represents the nation, rather than his particular district and certainly not only those who voted for him. Parliament, he says, is not “a congress of Ambassadors of different and hostile interests”, but “a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole” (*idem*, p. 312). The second argument is connected with competence. In addition to being chosen for their distinctive qualities, members of parliament are placed in a position which allows them to better understand public concerns, in light of the information to which they have access, the discussions in the parliament itself and to the specialization in legislative duties. Burke emphasizes that the legislator acts not on the basis of will, but on reason – an answer to Rousseau, who had written in the Social Contract, years earlier, that political representation was inadequate because it is not possible to represent will.

Burke's doctrine offers a response to Plato's famous critique of popular government by guaranteeing the expertise of decision makers. It harmonizes democracy with the "liberty of moderns" focused on private life, characteristic of the liberalism that was exalted by Benjamin Constant; due to the division of political labor, the majority of society may, and should devote itself to private affairs, while a minority cares for the matters of government. Specialization and expertise, in fact, are two sides of the same coin, one leading to the other.

Nevertheless, the free mandate Burke praised does not leave any room for interlocution between representatives and the represented; the latter group is left to a predominantly passive role. It is, then, possible to understand accountability as a sort of a "middle ground" between the free mandate and the imperative mandate⁸. The representative is not bound by the expressed preferences of his voters, but, ideally, he must decide the same way they would if they were in the same position to deliberate – with the same amount of time, same access to information and the same qualification. This hypothetical bond can be referred to at any moment, for the office holder must be ready to answer his constituents' inquiries and it is his constituents who decide just how convincing his answers are – the verdict is given in the following elections.

This is a very ingenious description of the workings of accountability, but one must approach the various obstacles to its implementation with greater care. One of those obstacles is raised by the fact that political representation in modern societies is *multifunctional*, that is, the mandate given, both in the Executive and in the Legislative branches, covers an indefinite array of questions. The mandate holder has the power to decide on the most diverse issues and will, typically, participate in hundreds of different deliberative processes throughout his/her term. Above all, the cost of information to voters becomes very high since, by definition, they may only dedicate a small fraction of their time and attention to those public matters.

The multifunctional aspect of representation implies that a governor or legislator must provide accounts for his/her actions on multiple levels; the voter should not only be able to follow them – according to his/her interests – but also be able to weigh and judge them, and, consequently, give a global evaluation of their performance. Thus, the adoption of strategies that significantly reduce accountability is not at all uncommon and transforms the discourse on political alternatives into an evaluation based on the mere impression of the impact of governmental action on the life of each individual, as done by Downs (1957). Another possible result of those strategies is that they limit accountability to forms of corruption control, thus completely dispensing with the substantive evaluation of government policies. This can be seen, for example, in documents from

⁸ Pitkin(1967), in his classic study, appears to reach this very conclusion.

the World Bank itself (WORLD BANK, 1999) or in documents influenced by its perspective (SHAH, n/d; AFONSO, 1999).

These strategies may also facilitate the implementation of accountability, but at the sake of impoverishing the meaning of democracy as a government of the people. If however that notion of democracy is preserved, the demands made on the political system become much greater. In this case, vertical accountability will then come to depend on a series of factors: on the institutional existence of effective sanctions on representatives, the provision of adequate and plural sources of information – not only information on what those who govern do, but on the social world in general – and on how successfully interest in politics is stimulated among different social groups.

At present, regimes that are considered democratic guarantee electoral-type sanctions on those who govern, but fail, to various degrees, in other areas. The pluralism of the mass media is limited, whether by professional constraints or by the homogenizing pressure of market competition; or, more importantly, by the common interests of mass media tycoons, who, incidentally, increasingly monopolize the market (BAGDIKIAN, 1997; MCCHESENEY, 1999). Various indicators – some of which will be discussed in the next section – show that interest in politics, in turn, is generally low and, as causes still greater consternation, is distributed very unevenly. By rule of thumb, individuals from groups with the lowest political power, such as workers, women and ethnic minorities, show the lowest interest in politics – this seems to indicate that, at least in part, interest is related to opportunities for effective and open participation in the political system.

One last requisite for the proper working of accountability must be added: representatives must have the effective power to implement the policies they prefer. The quality of popular control is compromised when a significant number of decisions are determined by external influences and not subject to voters' sanctions, whether those influences be international multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations or the European Union; finance agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank; private economic groups in a position to use extortion; the "market" or even foreign states. If such organizations have the ability to block alternatives, little room is left for the people to exercise sovereignty. Furthermore, of course, the globalization process has made the exercise of accountability more difficult, especially in peripheral countries, most vulnerable to the global order.

It is important to emphasize that the discussion outlined here focuses only on the power delegated by the people to a group of elected representatives. Nevertheless, this is but one dimension of political representation, the most evident. In vast, populous and complex societies mechanisms of

representation are also necessarily present in *political debate*, which takes place, firstly, in the mass media and in other spaces in which collective preferences are constructed (MIGUEL, 2003).

III. THE CRISIS IN REPRESENTATION

The idea of a “crisis in democracy” gained strength from the famous report by Samuel Huntington, Michel Crozier and Joji Watanuki to the Trilateral Commission, in the mid-1970s. According to them, democracies would become “ungovernable” for reasons intrinsic to the democratic method itself, which destroyed all social hierarchies, increased the demands of all sectors of society, generated a “culture of contestation” and also hyperpoliticized society. Huntington had already touched on this last issue in his *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 1968, at which time he believed the problem to be restricted to peripheral countries undergoing modernization.

The report must be understood in the historical context it was written. The 1960s were the stage of an expressive increase of political activism in central countries. In the United States, the black civil-rights movement was still growing, and taking on an increasingly impetuous form. Anti-war protests against the Vietnam War were taking center stage. In 1968, youth rebellion broke out in the USA and in Europe, especially in countries such as France and Italy where the movement was backed by important fractions of the working class.

Some of the Political Science of the time praised apathy as an important component of stability in political systems. Lipset (1963 [1960]), in a much-cited statement, held that low turnouts at the polls indicated a high rate of satisfaction in the population – things were going so well that people felt their intervention was unnecessary. With slightly more sophistication, Almond and Verba (1963) postulated that the ideal “political culture” was one in which citizens combined a high regard for their political powers with rare attempts to use them. The report to the Trilateral Commission lies within that same logic but reverses it: instead of praising apathy, it fears mobilization. Its apprehensive tone also sets it apart from Lipset’s and Almond and Verba’s previous works, which clearly displayed their contentment with the state of the developed capitalist world and, above all, with the United States.

The model Huntington and his colleagues developed starts off in the post-World War II years of economic prosperity, a prosperity which, according to them, was based in the combination of a free-market and a Keynesian administration of the economy, in addition to the social security provided by the welfare states (CROZIER, HUNTINGTON & WATANUKI, 1975)⁹. At the same

⁹ The summary made in this paragraph follows Held (1996, p. 240-244).

time, those were years of generalized democratization, that is, of the introduction of more democratic patterns of relations, not only in the *polis*, but also in other spaces, such as households and schools. It must be duly noted that private firms were left out. Economic prosperity led to higher expectations; democratization, in turn, led to weakened patterns of deference to social superiors and respect for hierarchies, which Huntington (1975, p.102) calls “democratic distemper”. This, consequently, meant a rise in social pressures for localized improvements. Since politicians compete for votes, they strain to meet those pressures by increasing state intervention in the economy and in social life. As the complexities of the administration of society increase, the need for social control also increases. This control, however, becomes all the more difficult, due to the decline of hierarchy. Concomitantly, the success of pressures on the State leads to even higher expectations and, therefore, to greater pressures, generating a vicious cycle. In turn, greater State presence results in the reduction of the capitalist market which was the base of initial prosperity.

In short, “demands rise, as the government’s ability to respond stagnates” (CROZIER, HUNTINGTON & WATANUKI, 1975, p. 9). It is not difficult to note the similarities between this model and another, created around the same time, but at the opposite end of the political spectrum, that is, within the Marxist camp, which observed a fiscal and a legitimacy crisis in the capitalist world. O’Connor’s (1973) and Habermas’s (1975 [1973]) analyses, among others, were made famous; the best synthesis may perhaps be found in Claus Offe (1984 [1972]). Driven by the need to guarantee the legitimacy of its political and economic institutions, as well as of its own administration, the government is compelled to offer increasing benefits to wider portions of the population, above all, through social welfare. Since this is achieved primarily through taxation, taxes tend to go up, thus compromising the other job of the capitalist State which is to provide guarantees to capital. In short, the job of valuing and legitimizing capital tend to become contradictory; herein lie the factors that trigger the crisis.

Nonetheless, the similarities cannot hide the differences, which are even more significant. The scenario that Offe and other authors belonging to the Marxist camp see as a distribution conflict between capital and labor, Huntington and his partners describe as the exaggerated demands of a rude populace that cannot understand that putting the market economy at risk is equivalent to killing the cash cow – an image with somber shades of Ortega and Garcia’s “rebellion of the masses”¹⁰. The most fundamental difference, however, is that, at that moment, Offe believed the

¹⁰ In the early twentieth century, the Spanish thinker had already described the erosion of hierarchy and the decline of the general public’s deference to that reduced group of individuals who made their prosperity possible – the “select” (ORTEGA Y GASSET, 1987 [1937]).

problem to be within capitalism, whereas the theorists of “ungovernability” saw it as a flaw in democracy.

If the roots of all evil are excessive demands and a decline in authority, the solution must be fewer demands and stronger authority. Yet this means two times less democracy – incidentally, Huntington (1975, p. 114) firmly states that there is too much democracy and that it must necessarily be reduced. In his view, there are two complementary ways to proceed. First, hierarchies have to be reinforced – in stark contrast with the social equality that Tocqueville saw as the raw material of democratic life – on the basis of the belief that possession of special abilities is also a criterion for the attribution of power and is as legitimate as democracy. Second, there must be an increase in political apathy. Huntington’s chapter, in particular, makes it clear that certain groups need to be kept out of the political process and goes as far as mourning the fact that black Americans were questioning their traditionally marginal role.

To a certain extent, it is possible to say that Huntington and his colleagues’ concerns were quelled by the implementation of the neoliberal project, whose basic distrust of democracy dates back to Hayek’s writings in the first half of the twentieth century. Pressures on the State are softened by the fact that the State itself is now weakened, that is, there is less room for decisions made by democratic rules and more room for far-reaching non-democratic, market decisions, which can be summarized in the equation “less democracy, more market”.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rapid incorporation of the old Soviet block by the world of liberal capitalism, enthusiastic manifestations were heard that pointed to the final triumph of western institutions (Fukuyama) or, at least, signaled another stage in the global expansion of democracy (Huntington himself). Yet, it did not take long before the alarms went off. While it was true that electoral democracy’s institutions were being adopted in more and more countries around the globe, in central countries, their legitimacy was falling. As Robert Dahl (2000) put it, it was a “democratic paradox”: citizens who were attached to democratic norms, but who distrusted the institutions responsible for enforcing them.

Of the many recent studies that have sought to measure and analyze this paradox, the volumes organized by Pippa Norris and by Robert Putnam and Susan Pharr merit special attention. The research Norris conducted presents itself as an up-to-date version of *The Civic Culture* – “It is *The Civic Culture* study 40 years later”, says Gabriel Almond on the cover –, that is, it focuses on citizens’ political dispositions. Putnam and Pharr’s research, also commissioned by the Trilateral, seeks to dialogue with *The Crisis of Democracy* and is mainly interested in the conditions for the stability of political systems. Since political culture and institutional stability are intimately related in the model adopted by authors from both sides, not only is the data they present very

similar – the World Value Study surveys, applied in old and new electoral democracies, are the primary source in both cases –, but also the way they interpret that data.

Norris expands some of David Easton's categories and points out five aspects of political legitimacy: support expressed for *the national political community*, for *the principles of the regime*, *the regime's performance*, for *the institutions of the regime* and for *political actors*. From a general overview, it is possible to say that the level of support for political communities is high, satisfaction with performance varies and trust in politicians has its ups and downs. More important, however, is the contrast between the maintenance of high rates of adhesion to democratic principles and the drop – a real plunge in some cases – of trust in institutions. The author interprets this as a *décalage* between the perception of an ideal democracy and the realistic understanding of its workings – an echo of earlier works by Giovanni Sartori (1994 [1987], *passim*; NORRIS, 1999, p. 11). But, it is also possible to say that this is, in fact, a very realistic perception of how our present institutions fail to realize democracy's fundamental promises, such as the political equality of its citizens and the people's sovereignty.

The studies conducted by Pharr and Putnam turn their attention to and focus only on North America, Western Europe and Japan and detect a generalized wave of skepticism, and even cynicism in regards to governmental institutions. The data reveals, for a great majority of countries, the drop in people's trust of politicians, parties and institutions (PUTNAM, PHARR & DALTON, 2000). Though some of the texts do explore the issue of a loss of autonomy on the part of those who govern as globalization proceeds, there is greater emphasis on the problems haunting the relations between representatives and the represented, particularly the deterioration of political leadership, of voters' standards of judgment and/or of social capital – according to Putnam, the standard of interpersonal trust within society.

Thus, we should note that the political activism of the 1960s and 70s, which sought to stretch the limits of western democracies, was substituted by generalized discredit. But, perhaps, behind these very different attitudes, some similar feelings remain: citizens strongly agree as to the value of democracy, understood as the people's self-government, yet they do not feel represented; that is, the bonds that should ideally connect common voters with legislators, candidates, parties and, in more general terms, connect voters with constitutional powers have been weakened. Mobilization in non-electoral periods and apathy are different responses – the first indicates hopes for change, whereas the latter reveals skepticism; nonetheless, both are opposed to the confident adhesion to the political system which the proper working of representation is supposed to disseminate.

IV. SHOULD ACCOUNTABILITY BE ABANDONED?

The problems of political representation faced by electoral democracies have given rise to innovative proposals, such as the introduction of a certain degree of randomness in choosing representatives or the reserving of special space for groups that have been marginalized or denied privileges (quotas). In general terms, those proposals aim at one or more of the following objectives:

- (1) greater mimetic representation of the decision-making body, that is the attempt to make those who govern appear more like the governed;
- (2) presence of a greater plurality of voices and perspectives in decision-making spheres;
- (3) greater political power for traditionally marginalized groups; and,
- (4) greater rotation in decision-making positions, in the hope of avoiding the rise of a political elite.

From the many critiques aimed at such proposals, one may highlight the possible restrictions of voters-citizens' freedom, since their choice would be limited by prior criteria of representativity of certain groups¹¹ or even discarded in favor of a random selection, and the probable reduced competence of those who govern, which, in turn, would lead both to a drop in the effectiveness of governmental action as well as to an increase in the power of State bureaucracies. The most important critique, however, has to do with the reduction of accountability. Since the access to decision-making positions depends less on the will of the governed – and more on the predetermined rules of distribution of vacancies among groups or even on luck – the responsiveness of those who govern to the will of the people would be seriously compromised.

The most radical approach to changing mechanisms of representation, as explored in different ways by political theorists, is the introduction of random mechanisms in the fulfillment of public offices. This, in fact, is a return to classic democratic procedures (MIGUEL, 2000a). The multiple proposals that make use of a drawing, however, include very moderate suggestions, such as Fishkin's (1989) "deliberative opinion poll", in which a random sample from the population studies political problems and discusses them with candidates. This would serve as reference material for the selection of voters¹², or for the creation of advisory chambers, that is, without

¹¹ This particular point is highlighted by Arato (2002 [2000]), in his brief refutation of descriptive representativity. Other critiques, such as the relation between mimetic representation and the "tradition of the supreme soviet" are completely inappropriate. In the last paragraph of the article, the statement that claims it is necessary to complement accountability with institutions of descriptive representativity is contradictory.

¹² Attempts to implement what came to be known as "*deliberative polling*™", such as a commercial-political-media-academic enterprise, are described in Fishkin (1997).

decision-making powers, such as the “minipopulus” proposed by Robert Dahl (1989, p. 122-125; 1990, p. 340), whose only effective power would be its “moral influence” on the elected chamber. Among proposals that can be mentioned here, on a scale of increasing radicality, we can first cite Amar’s (1984) “lottery voting”, in which each candidate would have as many chances to be drawn as the votes he received – in the hope of promoting electoral political participation; a bi-chamber system with an elected and a drawn legislative chamber, as in Callenbach and Phillips’s (1985) proposal; Burnheim’s (1985) complex “demarchy”, with various decision-making bodies randomly made up, having the power to deliberate on one single issue each; and, finally, Barbara Goodwin’s (1992) utopian society in which all social resources – not just political power – would be randomly distributed.

These proposals face three basic objections. The first one – the one that most informs common sense – is the disbelief in the democratic premise of equality among all; a lottery system obscures the *selective* character of the electoral process. The second is tied to the idea that an election authorizes a representative to act on behalf of those being represented – something random selection would not attend to. Strictly speaking, this is not a very serious objection, since, today, it is believed that authorization is given even by those who voted for the defeated candidates. In other words, participation in the electoral process would mean there is an agreement as to the fairness of the selection process, which might also be true for the lottery.

The third objection refers to accountability, that is, the fact that representatives are held responsible by their constituents. Accountability would be eliminated if governors did not owe their mandates to the expressed will of the majority of the population, but to simple chance. The absence of electoral debates, in which candidates make their viewpoints clear, and, above all, of the power given to citizens to dismiss or keep their representatives in office would be tremendously felt.

This is a crucial issue, since all the proposals to reintroduce a drawing are anchored in the same diagnosis: the inoperance, or, at least, insufficiency, of electoral accountability mechanisms. The desire to be elected or reelected does not make politicians especially sensitive to the needs of the common citizen, but to the needs of “big voters” – those who control local political machines, mass media groups and campaign financiers. On the other hand, the system offers only a limited role to the simple citizen who is condemned to dissolve his/her vote in thousands or millions of

other votes; thus, it cannot promote the active participation envisioned by Stuart Mill, but, rather, the loss of interest and the passivity which have, in fact, developed¹³.

With the lottery system, the chosen candidate no longer depends on powerful groups, who would thus lose their political influence. The counter-argument is that, without the sanction of non-re-election, the governor would be much more exposed to the temptations of corruption and the exercise of power in self-interest. The answer, in part, would be in another benefit expected from the lottery: citizens moving in and out of government positions. One of the problems related with representative democracy is precisely the fact that, as they specialize in their function, representatives develop private interests that differ from those of their voters – a phenomenon called the “iron law of oligarchy”, with some rhetorical exaggeration, by Robert Michels, 90 years ago. With random choice, the professional politician ceases to exist. Each term in office would probably be that individual’s only term. That is, his/her medium and long-term interest is not the only the interest of someone who governs, but also that of someone who is governed, as s/he will soon be once again. This was a fundamental element in the structure of the Greek *polis*.

With this rotation of public functions, the number of persons with some experience in government would significantly increase. Each citizen, man or woman, would either have completed a mandate or expect to begin it. In his/her place of residence or of work, he or she would find many others in the same position. This would generate political interest and qualification, which would, in turn, counterbalance the apathy and passiveness that is characteristic of electoral regimes.

One last advantage of random selection is the guaranteed representativity – in a mimetic sense – of the population. Based on the law of large numbers, it is possible to say that there will be an approximate proportionality of the different parts of the governing body. The search for a stricter proportionality, with the application of sampling techniques, raises serious problems – identical to problems faced by quotas – since the relevant social cleavages as well as each individual’s position within the groups would have to be determined *a priori*.

Of all the proposals to change the mechanisms of selection of representatives, the lottery is the one that most decidedly advances toward the four objectives mentioned above, though at the cost of a greater loss of authority by the common citizen. Proposals involving quotas have a small,

¹³ At least since the 1940s, with the work of Schumpeter and Lazarsfeld, the common voter’s “typical” indifference has been recognized. The interpretation given to the fact varies: a result of “human nature”, a necessary component to the stability of a given political system – which, in any other case, would be subjected to an excessive amount of tension – or, in a more critical reading, a consequence of certain structural biases within that same system. For two different approaches from this latter current, see Bourdieu (1979, cap. 8) and Offe (1984 [1972]).

though not insignificant, impact on the fourth objective – an increase in rotation between the governed and those who govern. Contrary to random selection, which would improve mimetic representation of decision-making bodies but whose first step brings citizens' atomization, quotas are connected with the idea of *group representation*.

One of the biggest problems identified in contemporary political representation has to do with the under-representation of certain social groups. The group of those who govern, in relation to the whole of the population, tends to be more male, richer, better educated, and whiter – an observation that is valid for Brazil and for electoral democracies in general. The expansion of suffrage rights and the rise of new groups, such as women, workers, and the illiterate, to political citizenship status, has not substantially changed the situation. As Anne Phillips has observed (1999, p. 35), it is not enough to bring down the barriers to inclusion, as in the liberal model; rather, marginalized groups must be explicitly incorporated to the political body.

The acknowledgement of the political relevance of all social groups leads to a rupture from the abstract individualism that marks liberal thought – and on which western democracies are constitutionally structured. The break with this tradition is theoretically supported by a myriad of thinkers, who, nevertheless, oscillate between exalting group differences, and abandoning any unifying perspectives, such as Iris Marion Young (1990), to committing to civic republicanism, and emphasizing the need for people to notice the limits to their own space in “the broader community to which we all, at last, belong”, which is Phillips's (1993, p. 106) own opinion on the matter.

The main mechanism for promoting the political participation of subordinate groups is the adoption of electoral quotas (MIGUEL, 2000b; 2001). Though they are adopted, at times, to protect ethnic minorities, especially indigenous groups, most experiments with electoral quotas benefit women, who then have a reserve of seats in parliament or of candidacies for election, as is the case in Brazil. The effectiveness of this measure – that is, the real increase in the number of women present in deliberative assemblies – is influenced by various factors, particularly by the electoral system¹⁴.

There is a clear connection between this perspective and what, in her classic study, Hanna Pitkin (1967) described, and criticized, as “descriptive representation”, which understands parliament as a sort of map on which one may see a perfect, though scaled-down image of society. Thus, what representatives *do* loses importance in relation to who they *are*; also, elected officials' responsiveness to their voters – a key aspect of political representation – is cast aside.

As she defends what she prefers to call a “politics of presence” from the criticisms of Pitkin and others, Anne Phillips (1995) admits that it is born of the disappointment with vertical accountability, which has shown itself incapable of protecting minorities. Nonetheless, one must note that the rupture promoted by the adoption of quotas is much less drastic than that posed by random selection. Reserving slots for members of certain social groups does not rule out the need for all representatives to go through the electoral process and answer to the common citizen.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Both the proposals for random selection of those who govern and for reserving slots for marginalized groups reveal dissatisfaction with how vertical accountability mechanisms currently work. The sanctions voters may exert – which quite simply come down to the power to remove their representatives from or to keep them in office at each election – seem insufficient to guarantee the responsiveness of their representatives’ decisions. Mimetic representativity can be seen as attempt to provide responsiveness without the need for accountability, which is then replaced by similitude. Political decisions would correspond to the will of the common citizen because they would be made by his/her peers¹⁵.

In the case of quotas, similitude is a complement to accountability – representatives are still dependent on popular vote, but the interests of certain groups are taken into account because of the presence of a number of its members in deliberative spaces. At an extreme, accountability would only be possible among peers, as can be understood from Iris Marion Young’s (1990, p. 184-187) proposal of granting vetoes to minority representatives in matters that affect them closely¹⁶.

The lottery system, however, due to its intrinsic logic, leads to a complete dismissal of vertical accountability, which is then substituted – not simply complemented – by similitude. That might be the reason why all the proposals to introduce lotteries in contemporary democracies combine them with electoral processes, so as not to completely eliminate some sort of popular control over representatives. It must also be highlighted that lotteries strengthen similitude, promoting rotation of public offices. That is, any person who now exercises decision-making power knows s/he will

¹⁴ For discussion on effects in Brazil and comparisons with other countries, see S. M. Miguel (2000) and Araújo (1998; 2001).

¹⁵ The formalism of a good deal of conventional democratic theory tends to disregard this sort of statement, which, nevertheless, was already quite present, in different ways, in thinkers such as Rousseau and Tocqueville, sensitive to the social determinants of politics.

¹⁶ In a later work (YOUNG, 2000), the author moves away from this proposal.

soon return to his/her status of common citizen; a person who governs would not nourish any lasting ambitions opposed to his own interests as a member of the populace.

From a practical standpoint, however, this remains the strongest opposition to the wager for similitude. Without the checks and incentives offered by the common citizen's ability to impose sanctions, whether positive or negative, those who hold decision-making powers would rarely resist the urge to satisfy their private interests and legislate on their own behalf or succumb to corruption. The result would be the ruin or the swelling of control organisms, that is, the strengthening of horizontal at the expense of vertical accountability. Either way, the people's sovereignty is reduced.

From a theoretical standpoint, there is yet another serious problem. When political life is thought of only in terms of the promotion of interests, as is generally the case, formulas aimed at guaranteeing the presence of certain groups in spheres of power lose their strength. After all, voters manifest their interest by voting. If each person is the best judge of his/her own interests, as in the utilitarian dogma, then today's marginalized groups would elect their members for decision-making positions, if that were truly their will, without the need of any measure other than mere formal political equality. On the other hand, if individuals are submerged in a "false consciousness" and come across obstacles when attempting to identify their true interests, such phenomena as alienation would persist, regardless of those persons' access to power.

In this sense, Young's (2000) proposed shift from an "interest" to a "social perspective" is quite interesting. The access of members of marginalized groups to public deliberations is necessary not because they share similar opinions and interests, but because they share a social perspective, that is, a place from which they look out on the world, tied to certain socially-structured patterns of life experience. The term is very significant insofar as it refers to a point of departure rather than an arrival. Furthermore, the idea of perspective allows one to perceive the uniqueness of the experiences constructed by the group, from its particular position in society, without postulating a unified content (*idem*, p. 138-139). Women, for example, may understand their interests in different ways – and those interests may very well be defended by men – but they bring certain shared life experiences to the public arena that are shaped by their subordinate position and which no man, regardless of how sensitive he may be to women's problems, is capable of incorporating. Young is tied to a sort of Habermasian view of "deliberative democracy", which envisions an ideal of dialogue that is unrestrained and geared toward consensus, leaving little room for the concept of interest. Yet, her approach is important in that it shows that the need to have minorities present in the public arena is not suppressed when other ways to protect their "interests" – however these are conceived – are found.

Rousseau (1964 [1757], p. 429), in his famous critique of political representation, stated that one cannot represent sovereignty, for it consists essentially of the (general) will and “one absolutely does not represent the will”. It is reasonable to say perspective too cannot be represented – at most, it may be shared. Which does not mean it is a final solution to the problem of the exercise of power in contemporary societies. Returning to Iris Marion Young (2000, p. 134-136), she notes that representation involves both *interests* – that which is considered necessary for individual or collective agents to reach their objectives – and *opinions* – values and principles that support judgment – as well as perspectives.

Adequate mechanisms of representation should involve these three facets. For the proper working of vertical accountability, which requires ways to empower the common citizen, it is of utmost importance that the interests and opinions of different social groups be present in decision-making spheres; nonetheless, this does little in terms of perspectives. The latter demand political presence. If members of various groups do not participate in the debate, those aspects of reality to which they have become sensitive, based on their life experiences, will not be taken into consideration.

Instruments that promote responsiveness independently of accountability may be important in guaranteeing the presence of different social perspectives in political debate and decision-making venues. This justifies the adoption of electoral quotas, a measure that liberal individualism is incapable of assimilating. Lottery system proposals suffer from more serious side-effects; their fragilities are rather evident and, in general terms, their effective implementation seems unfeasible, except perhaps at the local level. Nonetheless, they embody important criticisms of the working of electoral representation and, especially, of accountability. Those criticisms deserve to be taken into consideration.

REFERENCES

AFONSO, J. R. R. 1999. *Brasil: descentralización y accountability del gobierno local*. Article presented at the 5th Annual Conference on Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Valdivia (Chile) under the auspices of the World Bank. Digit.

ALMOND, G. A. & VERBA, S. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University.

AMAR, A. R. 1984. Choosing Representatives by Lottery Voting. *Yale Law Journal*, New Haven, v. 93, n. 7, p. 1283-1308, June.

ARATO, A. 2002 (2000). Representação e *accountability*. *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, n. 55-6, p. 85-103.

ARAÚJO, C. 1998. Mulheres e representação política: a experiência das cotas no Brasil. *Estudos Feministas*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 6, n. 1, p. 71-90, jan.-jun.

_____. 2001. As cotas por sexo para a competição legislativa: o caso brasileiro em comparação com experiências internacionais. *Dados*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 44, n. 1, p. 155-194.

BAGDIKIAN, B. 1997. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon.

BOURDIEU, P. 1979. *La distinction : critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Minuit.

BURKE, E. 1942 (1774). Discurso a los electores de Bristol. In: _____. *Textos políticos*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

BURNHEIM, J. 1985. *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics*. Berkeley: University of California.

CALLENBACH, E. & PHILLIPS, M. 1985. *A Citizen Legislature*. Berkeley: Banyan Tree.

CROZIER, M. J.; HUNTINGTON, S. P. & WATANUKI, J. 1975. *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York : New York University.

DAHL, R. A. 1989. *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University.

_____. 1990. *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*. Revised edition. New Haven: Yale University.

_____. 2000. A democratic paradox? *Political Science Quarterly*, Washington, D. C., v. CXV, n. 1, p. 35-40, Spring.

DOWNS, A. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.

FISHKIN, J. S. 1989. *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven: Yale University.

_____. 1997. *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University.

GOODWIN, B. 1992. *Justice by Lottery*. Chicago: The University of Chicago.

GRAMSCI, A. 2000 (1932-1934). *Cadernos do cárcere*. V. 3: Maquiavel. Notas sobre o Estado e a política. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.

HABERMAS, J. 1975 (1973). *Problemas de legitimación en el capitalismo tardío*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu.

HELD, D. 1996. *Models of Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University.

HUNTINGTON, S. P. 1975 (1968). *A ordem política nas sociedades em mudança*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense-Universitária.

_____. 1975. The United States. In: CROZIER, M. J.; HUNTINGTON, S. P. & WATANUKI, J. *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University.

- LIPSET, S. M.** 1963 (1960). *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Garden City: Anchor.
- MANIN, B.** 1997. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- MANIN, B.; PRZEWORSKI, A. & STOKES, S. C.** 1999. Introduction. In: _____. (eds.). *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- MCCHESENEY, R. W.** 1999. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics In Dubious Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois.
- MICHELS, R.** 1982 (1914). *Sociologia dos partidos políticos*. Brasília: UnB.
- MIGUEL, L. F.** 2000a. Sorteios e representação democrática. *Lua Nova*, São Paulo, n. 50, p. 69-96.
- _____. 2000b. Teoria política feminista e liberalismo: o caso das cotas de representação. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, São Paulo, v. 15, n. 44, p. 91-102, out.
- _____. 2001. Política de interesses, política do desvelo: representação e "singularidade feminina". *Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, v. 9, n. 1, p. 253-267, jan.-jun.
- _____. 2003. Representação política em 3-D: elementos para uma teoria ampliada da representação política. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, São Paulo, v. 18, n. 51, p. 123-140.
- MIGUEL, S. M.** 2000. *A política de cotas por sexo: um estudo das primeiras experiências no legislativo brasileiro*. Brasília: Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria.
- MONTESQUIEU.** 1951 (1748). De l'esprit des lois. In: _____. *Œuvres complètes*. T. II. Paris: Gallimard.
- NORRIS, P.** 1999. Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens? In: _____. (ed.). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- O'CONNOR, J.** 1973. *The Fiscal Crisis of State*. New York: St. Martin.
- OFFE, C.** 1984 (1972). Dominação de classe e sistema político: sobre a seletividade das instituições políticas. In: _____. *Problemas estruturais do Estado capitalista*. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro.
- ORTEGA Y GASSET, J.** 1987 (1937). *A rebelião das massas*. São Paulo: M. Fontes.
- PATEMAN, C.** 1985. *The Problem of Political Obligation: A Critique of Liberal Theory*. Berkeley: University of California.
- PERUZZOTTI, E. & SMULOVITZ, C.** 2001. *Accountability social: la otra cara del control*. In : PERUZZOTTI, E. & SMULOVITZ, C. (orgs.). *Controlando la política: ciudadanos y medios en las nuevas democracias latinoamericanas*. Buenos Aires: Temas.
- PHILLIPS, A.** 1993. Must Feminists Give Up on Liberal Democracy? In: HELD, D. (ed.). *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- _____. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- _____. 1999. *Which Equalities Matter?* Cambridge: Polity.

- PITKIN**, H. F. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California.
- PUTNAM**, R. D.; **PHARR**, S. J. & **DALTON**, R. J. 2000. Introduction: What's Troubling the Trilateral Democracies? In: PHARR, S. J. & PUTNAM, R. D. (eds.). *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton: Princeton University.
- ROUSSEAU**, J.-J. 1964 (1757). Du contrat social. In: _____. *Œuvres complètes*. V. III. Paris: Gallimard.
- SARTORI**, G. 1994 (1987). *A teoria da democracia revisitada*. 2 v. São Paulo: Ática.
- SHAH**, A. n/d. *Fostering Responsible and Accountable Governance: Lessons from Decentralization Experience*. Disponível em: <http://www.federativo.bndes.gov.br/>. Accessed on July, 2003.
- YOUNG**, I. M. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- _____. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- WORLD BANK**. 1999. *Fostering Institutions to Contain Corruption*. PremNotes, n. 24. Washington, D. C.: The World Bank Group. Disponível em: <http://www.worldbank.org/>. Accessed on June, 2003.

Received on September 26, 2004

Approved for publication on October 12, 2005

Luís Felipe Miguel (lfelipe@unb.br) holds a Doctorate in Social Sciences from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (São Paulo State University in Campinas, or Unicamp) and is currently a professor at the Instituto de Ciência Política (Political Science Institute), affiliated with the Universidade de Brasília (Brasília University, or UnB).

Translated by Paulo H. de M. Arruda

Translation from *Revista de Sociologia e Política* [on line]. Nov. 2005, nº25, p.25-38. ISSN 0104-4478.