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Embedding participatory governance

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ABSTRACT

This symposium examines the challenges and opportunities of recent efforts at embedding participatory governance. It draws together original research that engages theoretically and empirically with some fundamental questions:

•What are the challenges of embedding participatory governance in policy-making?

•What happens when social movements have opportunities to shape the institutionalization of PG processes? Can they reanimate the radical potential of citizen participation for social transformation?

•How can the tensions between the different demands of lay citizens, organized civil society, political parties, and public officials be managed?

In this introductory article, we provide a definition of embeddedness, outlining its spatial, temporal, and practices dimensions, in so doing distinguishing embeddedness from institutionalization, with which it has often been used interchangeably. Our aim is to delineate the breadth of the concept, drawing together its many uses into a systematic framework that can both guide future research and practical experimentation. In particular, our hope is to turn more attention to the informal practices that are essential for embedding. The contributions to the symposium shift attention from institutional design to embedding dynamics and how these work to open or close spaces for meaningful citizen input.

KEYWORDS

Participatory governance; deliberative democracy; social movements; mini-publics; democratic innovations; institutionalization

One of the most important contemporary developments in public policy and administration has been the rise of participatory governance innovations that seek to enhance effectiveness and legitimacy of public agencies and policy-making through forms of public involvement and deliberation (Ansell and Gash 2007; Elstub and Escobar 2019; Geissel 2009; Heinelt 2018; Sørensen and Torfing 2017; Warren 2009). Citizen participation is often portrayed as crucial to efforts to strengthen the quality of democracy and public policies in an 'era of growing uncertainties' (Giovanni, Matteo, and Greta 2021; Stoker 1998) and as an antidote to polarization and democratic decline. Yet the history of participatory governance seems to proceed in waves of experimentation and excitement about the latest institutional innovations – whether participatory budgeting, citizen

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juries, and collaborative governance; public-commons partnership (Bollier 2012); or the most recent 'deliberative wave' of citizens assemblies (Chwalisz 2020) – only for these waves to break into disappointment, as the latest innovation remains at the margins of politics and policy-making. Despite the enthusiasm, participatory governance too often fails to embed, limiting both its effectiveness and legitimacy.

How to embed participatory governance is a significant challenge. Empirical studies in Brazil, one of the countries where institutionalization of participatory governance has gone furthest at different scales of government, have shown how difficult it is to ensure articulation of participatory institutions with decision-making and policy implementation (Almeida and Cunha 2016). Participatory innovations are increasingly criticized, even by their supporters, for failing to fully connect with both political institutions and broader civil society (Johnson 2015; Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2020). There are concerns that they are disconnected from elite governing practices (Papadopoulos 2012) and thus fail to deliver useable insights even for policy-makers who genuinely desire citizen input (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2018). Similarly, it is argued that they are not well integrated into 'the regular political cycle in the life of a community' (Pateman 2012, 10), and as such they risk crowding out civil society action (Martin, Carter, and Dent 2018). Given that the problems of embedding participatory governance have been extensively described, and there has been increasing practical experimentation to address this issue, there is surprisingly little attention in the academic literature to what embeddedness actually means and the dynamics by which it is achieved. This symposium thus aims to stimulate new thinking on embedding participatory governance through both theoretical development and empirical study of participatory processes.

In this introductory article, we provide a definition of embeddedness, outlining its *spatial*, *temporal*, and *practices* dimensions, in so doing distinguishing embeddedness from institutionalization, with which it has often been used interchangeably. Our aim is to delineate the breadth of the concept, drawing together its many uses into a systematic framework that can both guide future research and practical experimentation. In particular, our hope is to turn more attention to the informal practices that are essential for embedding. Current thinking on strengthening the embeddedness of participatory governance has a tendency to focus on codifying particular institutional forms or formal rules as a way of transforming participatory governance from ancillary spaces opened and closed at the discretion of elite actors to stable means of protecting citizens' right to participate and influence decisions. While we recognize the need to think about codification, this over-focus on institutional designs, and their potential for realizing particular functions (e.g. Fung 2006; Smith 2009), neglects important broader processes of culture change and adaptation of forms of democratic innovation to their institutional environment.

The contributions to the symposium shift attention from institutional design to embedding dynamics and how these work to open or close spaces for meaningful citizen input. They demonstrate the importance of the interwoven practices of public officials, practitioners, and activists who shape and contest processes of embedding participatory institutions in policy-making and the wider society, as well as how embedding participatory governance requires a deep appreciation of contextual dynamics and social structures to sustain opportunities for participation. In so doing, the symposium bridges

between a range of literatures – participatory democracy, deliberative systems, coproduction, and the commons – which have to date taken separate approaches to the study of the role of everyday people in politics and policy-making.

Unpacking the difference between embeddedness and institutionalization

The idea of embeddedness is frequently invoked in recent scholarship on participatory governance, mostly as something to strive toward (see Cornwall and Gregory 2017; Edelenbos, Klok, and Van Tatenhove 2008; Fagotto and Fung 2014; Hernandez 2006; Michels 2012; Nabatchi et al. 2012; Smith 2019). This is particularly so of deliberative-participatory initiatives since the systems turn in deliberative democracy shifted focus away from the internal dynamics of deliberation on to its integration in the political system (see Chwalisz 2020; Fagotto and Fung 2014; Green, Kingzette, and Neblo 2019; Papadopoulos 2012; Suiter and Reidy 2019; Suiter et al. 2020). Yet what is meant by 'embedded participation' is seldom explicitly defined. In the few articles that provide an extended definition of embeddedness (e.g. Edelenbos, Klok, and Van Tatenhove 2008; Fagotto and Fung 2014), the term is indistinguishable from new institutionalist understandings of institutionalization, which have theorized how institutionalization is achieved through formal rules, informal practices, and narratives (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Embedded also often appears to be used interchangeably with institutionalized (e.g. Chwalisz 2020). So, are the two simply synonyms? We suggest that, though they are closely related concepts, there are two main features that distinguish embedded participation from institutionalized participation, each of which has important consequences for understanding participatory governance.

The first distinction is that, whereas 'institutionalized' is a descriptive status, 'embedded' is a weakly normative status. Participation is embedded when it sits in a productive relation to the other institutions of the democratic system. Here, we draw on Karl Polanyi's understanding of embeddedness in *The Great Transformation* (2001). Polanyi employs the concept of embeddedness to explain how different institutions, and ultimately the economy as a whole, should be understood as part of larger social structures. Polanyi's critique is that the attempt to institutionalize self-regulating markets is an attempt to disembed the economy from its social and political moorings. This disembedding generates pathologies that erode the social and institutional conditions that underpin a capitalist economy, creating social pressures to re-embed the economy in society. Habermas (1996) also draws on similar ideas in his concern that the lifeworld can be colonized by the instrumental rationality of bureaucracies and markets. The point here is that institutionalization can be directed toward embeddedness or disembeddedness. Whereas disembedded institutions corrode the resources they need to sustain themselves, embedded institutions exist in a mutually supportive cycle with their environment, both sustaining and being sustained by the other institutions with which they interact. Along similar lines, Goodin (1996) proposes that institutional designs should be evaluated according to their 'goodness of fit' with their environment. Accepting insights from critical social theory, Goodin thus argues that there is space for external normative criteria in establishing the desirability of institutional designs. This normative understanding of embeddedness should not,

however, be mistaken with a prescription for collaborative forms of participation. It is possible, for example, to embed forms of participatory counter-governance that productively harness contestation to integrate a broader range of civil society actors into policy decision-making (Dean 2018).

The normative feature of embeddedness thus provides a means for assessing which forms of institutionalization are desirable and productive, and it can offer a new perspective on much of the critique of attempts to formalize participatory governance. Institutionalization of participatory governance can hinder its embedding if it is designed to bypass engaged civil society actors in 'an attempt to tame radical energy' (Blaug 2002, 107). Similarly, it might prevent embedding if participation is designed to have a low-impact on policy-making (Pogrebinschi and Ryan 2018; Tejado 2012), only providing a democratic veneer to legitimate policy that has already been decided elsewhere. It is not institutionalization *per se* but rather the way it facilitates or hinders embeddedness that can either revitalize democratic institutions or sap participatory energy, generating fatigue and frustration among participants and eroding citizens' commitment to participatory practices (Santos and Avritzer 2005). Institutionalization thus has an ambivalent relationship to embeddedness. It can promote embeddedness of participatory processes in the institutional environment within which they exist, but it is not a sufficient condition and at times can even work against it.

The second distinction is that embeddedness entails rootedness. Embedded institutions are difficult to abolish or bypass. They are the rarely questioned foundation stones of organizational legitimacy whose removal would create a legitimacy crisis. There are several examples of embedded forms of citizen participation within today's representative democracies, from voting in parliamentary elections to referendums and rights to protest and petition. These forms of participation have attained the status of a common sense of democratic organization – they are not continuously requested to prove their cost-effectiveness, for instance. Incumbents cannot simply ignore or abolish elections when they produce inconvenient results. In some countries, referendums are also rooted, mandated by constitutional requirements, which, if not followed, would produce serious legitimacy problems. Furthermore, attempts at curtailing rights to protest, although not unusual, are resisted by civil society in most advanced democracies. This is far from true of most participatory initiatives, which even when institutionalized often see their recommendations ignored in favor of other competing institutional imperatives (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2001; Newman et al. 2004), or cherry-picked to fit existing political agendas (Bua 2017; Font et al. 2018; Courant 2021), or which are simply abolished when they become too challenging (Bussu 2019; Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2020). It is important to stress that this limited 'rootedness' does not only concern institutional forms of participatory governance. Elections, for instance, are not always rooted, and therefore embedded, even when institutionalized within established democracies. A good example is the elections of Police and Crime Commissioners in Britain, in which few people vote and which could quite easily be abolished by the government of the day, in all likelihood without generating a public backlash or having a substantial effect on the perceived legitimacy of the police. Like the normative aspect of embeddedness, rootedness is also a relational concept that requires an assessment of how participation interacts with its context.

Dimensions of embeddedness

The fact that the term 'embedded' is often used without a specific definition may suggest that its meaning is taken for granted – however, its use in the literature is extremely varied. The dimensions that characterize embeddedness of participatory governance need to be articulated more clearly. The two most extensive definitions, for example, emphasize quite different dimensions. Fagotto and Fung (2014, 11) highlight the temporal dimension of embeddedness, juxtaposing embedded to occasional deliberation, 'When a community develops a habit of using public deliberation with some regularity, we say it has *embedded* deliberation in the way it discusses issues or faces local challenges'. This temporal element is absent from the definition of Edelenbos, Klok, and Van Tatenhove (2008, 130) who focus instead on embeddedness as a function of the extent of involvement from policy elites, 'An active and direct involvement of politicians in the interactive process is treated here as a high degree of representative–political embedding'. In what follows, we outline three dimensions of embeddedness, which we term *temporal, spatial*, and *practices*.

The *temporal* dimension is commonly invoked as defining embeddedness. Participatory governance, and deliberative-participatory initiatives in particular, has often been criticized for being one-off and *ad hoc*, thus giving too much power to commissioning organizations (Chambers 2009; Papadopoulos 2012; Calhoun 2015). Embedded participation is pursued as a remedy to this impermanence. Fagotto and Fung are emphatic that embedded means iterative: '*almost definitionally, embeddedness requires formal practices of deliberation to be repeated with regularity over time*' (2014, 13 emphasis in original). Chwalisz equates embeddedness with becoming 'a permanent part of the policy cycle' (2020, 121). In this symposium, a temporal dimension that runs from 'exceptional' to 'permanent' is a key element of Courant's typology for institutionalizing deliberative mini-publics. Yet even in this seeming agreement, significant difference exists. Whereas Chwalisz and Courant conceive the temporal predominantly in terms of the degree of permanence of institutional structures, Fagotto and Fung (2014) refer to iteration as the culturally habitual use of a specific practice.

Permanent structures and habitual informal practice can coalesce. In this symposium, both Blanco et al. and Escobar observe how iterative participatory structures can shift the informal practices of public agencies frontline practitioners and autonomous grassroots actors, fostering a sustainable participatory culture (see also, Allegretti et al. 2021). As examined in the next section, it is in the alignment of these factors that embeddedness begins to take place. By contrast, it is also possible for participation to be formalized into a permanent and cyclical structure, whilst failing to embed within the broader political or policy systems it is intended to connect with (see, for example, Syrett 2006). This points to the need to connect temporality with the normative dimension we outlined. We cannot understand whether participation is temporally embedded by examining institutional features of the participatory process alone; we must also ascertain how its temporality works productively in conjunction with the other political and policy cycles in which it is implicated and the civic communities with which it interacts.

In which *spaces* should participation be embedded? The consensus is that participatory processes should be embedded where decision-making power is wielded, whether that is parliaments, executives, or administration (Edelenbos, Klok, and Van Tatenhove

2008), or even the voting public in the case of referendums (Suiter et al. 2020). The concern with how participation can be embedded in decision spaces can be divided up to examine participation at different levels of government and related issues of scalability (Dean, Rinne, and Geissel 2019; Pogrebinschi 2013). Often, the local level is viewed as the most conducive space to embed participation through practical problem solving on issues close to citizens (Fung and Wright 2003). We can also think in terms of policy space. Fagotto and Fung (2014) claim deliberation is embedded when it is 'encompassing', namely, a social practice spanning several policy issues, rather than restricted to single-issues. Among the contributions in this symposium, the participatory budgeting process in Brazil examined by Bezerra, and the community governance spaces in Scotland covered in Escobar's article, are both good examples of participatory governance that is encompassing of decision spaces across levels of governance and a range of policy issues.

Decision space is, nevertheless, not the only space in which participation can be embedded. The practice and scholarship of participatory governance has arguably paid excessive attention to embeddedness within elite policy and political institutions. This is problematic and perhaps at least partially accounts for why too many participatory initiatives are too far removed from the wider public sphere and civil society, whose support may give participatory governance some ballast to act as a genuine counterpower. We should also think about embedding participation in relation to civil society. Fagotto and Fung discuss the extent of 'anchoring' in community or government organizations as a key dimension of embedding. A Habermasian approach would go further and flip the issue around to look at the way communicative deliberation and participation can preserve the lifeworld from encroachment by the forces of instrumental rationality and action (Habermas 1996). Similarly, the literature on democratic anchorage asks how policy networks can be anchored in democratic practices (Sørensen and Torfing 2005). Participatory governance is often advocated as a response to the oligarchic tendencies of political and policy institutions that are becoming increasingly disembedded from society. It might not be participation that needs to be embedded within policy institutions, rather policy institutions should be embedded in a broader system of participation – for instance, through the use of community anchor organizations that can both facilitate partnerships and provide countervailing challenge (see Henderson, Escobar, and Revell 2020). For this reason, theorists of 'post-democracy' (Crouch 2004) find hope for a democratic future in the critical energy of civil society. *Spatial* embedding of participation thus must be conceived of through at least two aspects: the extent to which citizens can access and influence a variety of decision-making spaces and the extent to which participation connects these decision spaces to broader civil society, embedding them in social power.

The final dimension is the *practices* of embedding. Recent literature and practice on participatory governance has often been closely linked to a 'democratic innovations' approach that is framed around specific institutional designs, such as deliberative mini-publics or participatory budgeting (Elstub and Escobar 2019; Smith 2009). Much of the focus for embedding has thus been concentrated on formal rules – for example, regulations that stipulate a form of permanence for these institutional designs (Chwalisz 2020) or, alternatively, legal provision for a 'right' to participation

for individuals and communities (Allegretti et al. 2021; Blondiaux and Sintomer 2009; Fung 2015; Ganuza and Frances 2012; Geissel and Joas 2013). Wide-ranging proposals for different kinds of system-level formalization that might foster embeddedness have followed, for example, conceived in terms of *input*, such as mandating that participatory budgeting must distribute a certain percentage of the city budget; *throughput*, as in the case of a mandatory citizens' initiative review whenever there is a referendum; and *output*, such as provisions that the recommendations of a mini-public must be adopted by the government when they are voted for by a certain threshold of the participants.

While formalization is important, the symposium places greater emphasis on the informal practices of embedding. The papers investigate the relation between the informal character of participatory policy making and formal democratic decision-making procedures, or what Edelenbos, Klok, and Van Tatenhove (2008) call 'institutional embedding of interactive policy making'. Contributors reflect on how participatory behavior and attitudes are as important as methods and procedures for embedding participatory approaches sustainably. Despite their very different contexts, the articles by Bezerra and Escobar both give an actor-centric account of practices of embedding. Their research shows that, whether it is participatory budgeting in Brazil or community planning in Scotland, embedding participation requires actors who can build coalitions that bridge across organizational and activist cultures. As Escobar outlines, this is a continuing process of political work that involves contesting informal rules in use and organizational self-understanding. The boundary work of public engagers working on the frontline shapes the nature of their activism as they inhabit an 'in-between space' across old organizational structures and new territory opened by the Scottish public service reform.

Dynamics of embedding participation

How does embedding happen? By examining the interaction of the temporal, spatial and practices dimensions identified above, we can begin to understand the dynamics of embedding of participatory governance. One avenue to explore further is the relationship between participatory processes and the practices of both civil society and public administration, within different spaces. The articles in this symposium illuminate this relationship in very different contexts and provide fine-grained analyses of the practices of different institutional and grassroots actors, through decision and policy spaces, changes in government and socio-economic stresses, and how these interact to hinder or facilitate embedding. Changing attitudes and entrenched patterns of behavior, particularly among public officials will often trigger resistance (Oreg 2003). As much as innovative institutional design, whether permanent or ad hoc, can generate new fields of power (Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan 2007), it is often changes to practices within decision spaces (e.g. by encouraging risk taking, development of staff skills in engaging with citizens, investment in capacity building, allowing people to cross institutional boundaries and providing incentives for innovation and experimentation through distributed and facilitative leadership) that will assist embedding of a participatory culture (Bussu and Galanti 2018). Policy-makers often require a policy 'product', but the process itself is central for actors engaged in meaningful participatory learning and action.

Dynamics of embedding thus often develop through social experimentation to capture local knowledge and context-specific priorities and definitions of participation. Escobar, in this issue, finds that, rather than being a fait accompli, participatory governance is 'a contested, fragile, and evolving assemblage that takes constant political work', entailing ongoing 'struggles to reshape rules-in-use'.

Multi-level governance, as alluded to when discussing the spatial dimension, raises a set of challenges for embeddedness of participation. Interest and policy divergence at different tiers and national level legal and political frameworks curbed some of the more radical ambitions of participatory governance in Barcelona, the case study presented by Blanco et al. in this issue. The authors highlight the resilience of formal participatory rules in the Catalan city amid changing policy cycles. Whilst clearly rooted in the local governance, these participatory structures lacked the normative feature of embeddedness. At a time of punishing austerity measures driven by the EU and the national government, these participatory institutions came to be increasingly perceived as tokenistic by both local politicians and grassroots movements across the political spectrum. In this respect, albeit deeply institutionalized, Barcelona's participatory structures were not embedded. Informal practices and narratives of participation emerged that became dis-aligned from the formal participatory institutions. Social movements were able to develop innovative approaches that attained a degree of embedding within civil society, creating the proto-institutions that underpinned the renewal of participatory governance in the city, later supported by the progressive Barcelona en Comú (BeC) movement party.

As they imbue and sustain practices, narratives of participation play a crucial role in fostering the dynamics of embedding (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Despite research showing a range of different discourses associated with what participation can bring to the political system and how it should be institutionalized (Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan 2007; Dean 2017, 2019), there has been limited attention to this aspect. The papers in the symposium provide explicit analyses of underlying intentions and epistemological assumptions underpinning participatory policies and practices. Courant proposes a typology that provokes critical reflection on the wide range of often conflicting assumptions and motivations of advocates of citizen assemblies, and sortition more broadly, from social movements to elected representatives. He demonstrates that even for a single, tightly specified participatory instrument – the deliberative mini-public – there are a plethora of competing narratives on how it should be institutionalized. Coalitions can potentially be aligned in favor of embedding, only to break down over conflicts between different visions of institutionalization.

Bezerra looks at motivations of incumbent parties and their impact on creating and promoting participatory institutions. She examines the case of the Brazilian Workers' Party in Brazil, both at state and federal levels, and argues that the party's support of participatory governance is driven by ideological as well as pragmatic interests, as State–Society interaction channels strengthen social governability. Participation officials and political actors at different tiers of government, practitioners, academics, and activists often have very different visions of participation, informed by technically, scientifically, normative, or emotionally based reasons. The strengthening of these different epistemic communities is an essential factor in the consolidation of a particular participatory project.

Conclusion

Embeddedness is a complex concept consisting of spatial, temporal, and practices dimensions. Though it has often been used interchangeably with institutionalization, we have argued that embedded participation is more than institutionalized participation. Embedded participation is characterized by a productive interaction with the other actors and institutions within the governance context, and a rootedness of participatory processes and culture in the political or policy system. We believe that this more nuanced definition of a concept that is oft invoked in research on participatory governance, but largely operates as a vaguely defined goal toward which to strive, can open up new vistas both for academic research and practical experimentation on how to embed participation throughout these systems. It provides a new lens for critical reflection on the continuing debates concerning institutionalization, such as whether formal structures and rules are necessary in order to prevent elite manipulation of participatory energy or instead result into a taming of that energy. We have shown how it opens up questions of when, where, and how (spatial, temporal, practices) to embed, turning attention to neglected aspects of institutionalization. Rather than focusing all energies on creating structures and rules to embed participation into elite spaces, it is also possible to think about how to embed in civil society, as well as looking at other more informal practices by which embedding can take place. The articles in the symposium take up that challenge, offering a range of insights into broader dynamics at play in attempts to create a sustainable participatory ecology. We hope this will prove to be the starting point for a rich vein of new research on participatory governance.

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