Review: Political Legitimacy and Underrepresentation: How Do Citizens Evaluate the Political System? (PhD by David Talukder, Université Libre de Bruxelles)

*Roberto Foa**

Across the world, citizen evaluations of democracy are low and deteriorating. Public opinion surveys on satisfaction with democracy reveal long-term declines in regions such as Latin America, Southern Europe and the United States, while trust in politicians, political parties and the media have also fallen in many countries. Yet, thus far, relatively few studies have investigated how democratic dissatisfaction is distributed across specific aspects of institutional performance, such as perceived fairness in representation, procedural efficiency, or levels of congruence between political outputs and public preferences.

By filling this gap, David Talukder's doctoral dissertation, *Political Legitimacy and Underrepresentation*, offers a valuable contribution to the literature. In his study, Talukder goes beyond generic assessments of democracy in order to examine specific facets of its functioning, such as whether respondents feel their views are represented politically, whether the democratic process is perceived as efficient, and whether citizens are satisfied with the resultant policy outcomes. Applying Vivien Schmidt's threefold subdivision of democratic legitimacy into *input*, *throughput* and *out-*

put components – that is, the degree of citizen satisfaction with how their preferences are represented, how policy is made and, finally, with the policies themselves – Talukder helps us to better understand the bases of contemporary democratic discontent. As a result, a clear strength of this thesis is the care and attention that is given to the task of conceptualising political legitimacy and operationalising each element of this framework with appropriately chosen survey indicators.

Doing so offers valuable insights into current debates. In recent years, for example, some scholars have dismissed fluctuations in satisfaction with democracy as a product of merely short-term economic factors (such as cyclical unemployment) or individual partisanship (the 'winner-loser gap'), rather than as a meaningful measure of how citizens evaluate democratic institutions *per se*. This leaves us unable to know whether the solution to declining satisfaction lies in the reform of democracy itself – such as via decentralisation, quotas or the greater use of referenda and citizen assemblies – or in addressing non-political causes of social discontent, such as relative deprivation or spatial inequalities.

In his work, Talukder finds evidence that satisfaction with democratic outputs relates to partisanship (having

*   Robert Foa, Assistant Professor, University of Cambridge.

voted for a majority party) and economic well-being, but also that satisfaction overall is strongly tied to a person's intrinsic evaluation of democratic institutions – such as perceptions of the representative process (inputs) or of the transparency and efficiency of the political system (throughput). While broader social grievances may play a role in democratic discontent, this suggests that it can also be reduced through political reforms - such as implementing higher levels of legislative transparency or standards for integrity in public life.

Another set of policies that are widely touted as a solution to the democratic legitimacy deficit are those aimed at making political actors more representative of society with respect to identity categories such as age, gender, ethnicity or social class. In his work, Talukder also conducts extensive analysis of how underrepresentation affects democratic legitimacy and whether groups inadequately mirrored within the political elite become politically disaffected as a result. Surprisingly, perhaps, less evidence is found to support this idea. Instead what appears to matter more is political and ideological representation: that is, the feeling that one's voice is heard and reflected in the views of public figures and that political life offers a narrative worth following with interest. In an age of populist mobilisation, such findings offer a useful reminder that democratic health depends upon the representation in public life of a full spectrum of political opinions, and cannot be achieved through diversity of group representation alone.

These are rich observations, which reflect important contributions to current debates over the causes of demo-cratic dissatisfaction and how they may be redressed through suitable policy reforms. As such, this thesis provides a valuable addition to works exploring the understanding of democratic attitudes and the challenge of revitalising democratic legitimacy worldwide. It exhibits an impressive synthesis of theoretical rigour, precise operationalisation and methodological innovation: and demonstrates that Talukder is an emerging scholar with the potential to make significant contributions in the future to political behaviour, political psychology and comparative politics.