

Title: Democracy and Sustainability - what is their connection?

ESEE theme and sub-theme: 4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change; 4.4. Interrelations between societal, cultural, and economic and political values

Summary:

Environmental degradation is a growing societal concern. While there are many drivers of environmental sustainability, political factors are gaining more attention, particularly since the 1987 United Nations agreement on pursuing a sustainable development. We have performed a theoretical review of the linkage between sustainability and democracy and a comparative analysis of empirical studies on the topic. We conclude that theoretical discussions on the subject point that sustainability and democracy are naturally linked in many ways, while empirical studies have been struggling to find this connection. The main weaknesses of these studies are their lack of structure and the divergences in what democracy and sustainability mean and how can they be measured and correlated. In spite of this, the majority of empirical studies point to a positive correlation of democracy and environmental protection, while nations going through democratization processes usually perform worse, even than autocracies.

Extended abstract:

There are many lens by which we can observe the relationship between environmental sustainability and political regimes. Environmental damage can be connected to failing states, that are unstable and constantly on a context of conflict. On the other hand, environmental damage is connected to richer nations that usually have higher rates of consumption and production. Finally, it makes sense that the type of political system can determine the range of ambition in environmental policy, being a booster or an obstacle to sustainable development.

Considering that we need to pursue a strong sustainability vision, we will have to look at a very ambitious transition plan, which even might be incompatible with the current governance models of industrial societies, whether they are based on capitalism or socialism. The concern of whether the centralisation of powers, potentially leading to eco-authoritarian futures, is a necessary condition to surpass the short-term self-interest options is not new, and have already been discussed by Hardin (1977) or Walker (1988). More recently, this debate has reappeared in the context of the discussion about alternatives for our present economic structures, which arose with strength in the context of the financial crisis that started in 2008 (e.g. Bonaiuti, 2012; Deriu, 2012).

There are various types of disruptive approaches to a more sustainable society, which generally defend no-growth, slow-growth or degrowth models for our economy. According to Kallis (2011, p. 874), the degrowth model is a "multi-facet political project", that has the goal of defending "a socially sustainable and equitable reduction (and eventually stabilisation) of society's throughput". In other words, this perspective entails a re-thinking and downscaling of production and enhancing non-market forms of exchanging products (informal economy), actions that need to be done in pair with an increase in the direct participation of citizens in politics (Bonaiuti, 2012). This is not the pathway we are chasing with the increasing consumerism and economic growth.

According to Bobbio (1987 *in* Bonaiuti, 2012), there are four types of paradoxes that characterise modern democracies. The first one is the size of the organizations. The size of state institutions have been increasing throughout the 20th century as the state assumes more responsibilities, and now they are so large that the importance of direct democracy and representativeness is becoming questionable. The second paradox is the proliferation of the functions of bureaucracy linked to the extension of the welfare state after the II World War. Bureaucracy is, by its structure, hierarchical and non-democratic,

and its expansion involves, along with the increase in services and material living conditions, a consequent loss of democracy. The third paradox is related to the increasing technical skill necessities of the industrial societies. The need of having specialized people giving support to political decisions promotes a loss of democracy, since these decisions are increasingly based on technical knowledge that a minority of people have. The fourth paradox is related to the increasing mass societies, phenomena that has the effect of conformity and lack of critical thinking. For Bonaiuti (2012) these four paradoxes are positively correlated to the scale of institutional structures and therefore to economic growth. On the other hand, there is an academic debate about whether the more ambitious measures to stop overconsumption are themselves a threat to democratic systems (e.g. Boillat et al., 2012; Deriu, 2012).

According to Wurster (2013), democracies are better at solving problems that have a technical solution (weak sustainability), since they are adaptable to a certain point, but the same is not true when it comes to solving major environmental problems. According to the author, this happens because in democratic regimes it is easier to include present public interests into politics. Despite the stability in democratic institutions, it is difficult in these regimes to solve long-term ecological issues, due to the short cycles of power and the greater emphasis on the present needs of the electorate. This discussion suggests that in order to pursue sustainability, we need institutional changes to attain the necessary transformations to the political system.

Many empirical studies have been published to test the relationship between democracy and environmental sustainability, although the findings have been limited and conflicting (Li & Reuveny, 2006). These studies can be divided in two great groups: the ones that do cross-country analyses of the relationship between democracy and environmental protection (e.g. Buitenzorgy & Mol, 2011; Chen, 2013; Li & Reuveny, 2006; Myint & Lambert, 2014; Wurster, 2013), and the ones that do that analysis for cities/specific regions or specific aspects of the democracy-environment nexus (e.g. Bernauer & Koubi, 2009; Fredriksson et al., 2005; Halla et al., 2013; Jacobs, 2002; Kosamu, 2014; Neumayer, 2003; Prado-Lorenzo et al., 2012; Sjöstedt & Jagers, 2014).

This research aims at doing a comparative analysis on how the concepts of democracy and sustainability are connected. The goal is to understand if environmental sustainability is related to the quality of democracy of a country and how that connection is materialized. We did a theoretical review on how different political regimes influence the state or capability for achieving sustainability of a certain country and developed a framework to compare empirical studies that explore that connection. A critical review of these studies was performed to understand their assumptions, methods and conclusions, and based on that review, if they can be compared and/or complemented.

In the overall, these studies differ in their characteristics and types of conclusions, namely they have: (i) different ways to measure democracy and sustainability, presenting different concepts of democracy and different explanatory variables for sustainability; (ii) different degrees on the analysis of autocracies and democracies, presenting only the extremes or various degrees of freedoms; (iii) different presentation of conclusions, such as comparing environmental performances of autocracies and democracies, the positive or negative impacts of democracy and democratic transitions on the environment, whether democracies have more tendency to stronger environmental commitment at the international level or not, among others.

The preliminary conclusions suggest that there is empirical evidence that democracy has positive consequences for environmental protection, what makes sense for sectors as health. In other sectors, the connection is not so clear or it is inexistent. On the other hand, some authors argue that there is a possibility that we will only attain a strong sustainable development with a great influence from state, by the means of having experts to decide what is best for the environment and that being applied without the possibility of public discussion. This leads to the question of whether democracy is not protective enough of their citizens, since the majority of people do not think that environmental protection is important, except when it is directly affecting their health or the landscape of their backyards.

Further research on this topic is needed, more consistent empirical studies should be done since until now they have been done with different indicators, different conceptualizations of democracy and with a

very limited sustainability viewpoint. This makes it impossible to compare the results in a satisfactory way. Finally, there are many shades of democracy and autocracy, and the findings point to the fact that the regimes have to be broken down by type to be carefully discussed which ones are more probable to boost a sustainable development.

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