

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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“Democra-city”: bringing the city back into democratic theory for the 21st century?

Mauro Tebaldi and Marco Calaresu*

Abstract

Almost 50 years ago Robert Dahl maintained “we can [...] reasonably hope 1 day to achieve great democratic cities. As the optimum unit for democracy in the 21st century, the city has a greater claim, I think, than any other alternative” (*Am Polit Sci Rev* 61: 953–970, 1967). This article intends to ascertain whether the words of one of the greatest scholars of democracy have had a concrete outcome along the pathways taken by democratic theory and whether, therefore, as was the case in classical theory, real superiority has therefore been restored to the city compared with the other territorial institutions of democracy. In this article we begin with two assumptions, each concerning the theoretical status of democratic theory. The first maintains that a realistic and an idealistic dimension coexist in variable dimensions in theoretical democratic models. According to the second assumption, it can be stated that democratic theory envisages the presence of a local territorial dimension, the importance of which is nevertheless variable in the different theoretical models. The thesis we intend to demonstrate here is that the variable nature of the importance of the local-urban territorial dimension depends on the type of balance created between the idealistic and realistic dimensions of the different models of democracy. Concluding, we aim to theoretically demonstrate why (and at which conditions) the city can become, more and better than any other institutional place, the ultimate arena within which the best results may be achieved for democracy in 21st century.

Keywords: Democratic theory, Models of democracy, State, City, Nation-state, City-state, Quality of democracy, Good democracy

Background: two assumptions of democratic theory

First assumption: democratic theory includes a realistic and an idealistic dimension

In the theory and in contemporary political science the concept of democracy shows a dual nature. Giovanni Sartori (1987, 1993) is one of the most accurate authors in grasping this and most diligent in discussing its implications for research. He emphasises that the lemma “democracy” really became manifest in a theoretical and methodological universe of a descriptive kind: according to this meaning, facts should limit themselves to corroborating or invalidating the explanations of the various empirically observable aspects into which the concept of democracy branches; the purpose is to ascertain which

conditions enable democracy to develop and which others shape its different distinctive features.

This same notion is enriched, however, by intrinsic normative meanings when the aim to explain democratic phenomenology is flanked, often implicitly but not always, by that of steering choices, both of those governing and those being governed, of the regimes, processes and results of democracy: so that the facts selected can point out the routes to be followed in order to create, on a concrete plane, the best of the possible democratic outcomes, given certain objectives to reach or problems to solve.

On this issue Sartori has the approval of some important voices. This was one of the themes raised by Theodore Lowi (1971), when, speaking of American democracy, he said that there was no way of separating empirical political models from opinions on the nature and requisites of good political models. Even Dahl, though aware of the distance between what he called the

*Correspondence: mcalaresu@uniss.it
Department of Political Sciences, Communication Sciences
and Information Engineering, University of Sassari, Sassari, Italy

Ideal Democratic Republic and the concrete applications of democratic rules—the polyarchies—invites us not to give up trying to reach out to ideal models, whenever possible. “But we all know”, Dahl states (1982: 107), “that the institutions, processes, and conditions of polyarchy in democratic countries fall far short of meeting democratic criteria”.

This awareness, Dahl warns, does not, however, justify inaction: “They are simply considerations to be taken into account in clarifying the alternatives before us. Human problems have better and worse solutions [...] even the better solutions will usually have disadvantages, sometimes grave ones. But to say that a solution has disadvantages is never a good reason for preferring the worse to the better” (1982: 107).

Facts and values, when we speak of democratic regimes and procedures, thus show their strong inclination towards interaction. Already the assumption of a particular concept of democracy—let us say Dahl’s polyarchy as quoted—tends to direct the empirical analysis towards a certain universe of values, which corresponds to the retroactive idea of “good model of democratic government”. To speak of polyarchy, then, following Dahl, as a system in which power over those holding political office is widely spread throughout society,¹ means to establish an indissoluble line of contiguity between what democracy is and what we would like it to be.

The fact of actually admitting on an empirical plane that polyarchies do not necessarily implement the fundamental control we were speaking about (of the governed over the governors), and that, on the contrary, this should be checked case by case, implicitly means to adopt a clear, logical approach: that polyarchy, namely what democracy is, depends to some extent on how we (in this case, Dahl) imagine it should be. That is to say, on its ideal configuration.

Nor does the fact of taking as the subject of one’s analysis a concept with a neutral or procedural tendency like, for example, the renowned one of Joseph Schumpeter (1942), exonerate the researcher from making an objective or aim his own, when he is preparing to bring that same notion to life, applying it to the study of concrete cases.²

Hence, if attention to purposes is indispensable to describe a system as democratic, the axiological reference proves inherent in every definition of democracy: “It ensues that the relation between ideal and real (and

sometimes the tension) is immanent in any theory or model of democracy, whether of a normative-ideal or descriptive-realistic type” (Mura 1997: 403).³

On the basis of this assumption we define the realistic dimension of democratic theory as that which tends to satisfy at least one of the following requisites: (1) describe the features of models of democratic rule; (2) illustrate the conditions of birth and development of the democratic regime; (3) conceive of democracy as a system of government endowed with specific characteristics and subject to particular conditions of development, able to produce decisions that are binding for the communities to whom it is applied.

On the other hand, we define the idealistic dimension of democracy as that which tends to satisfy at least one of the following requisites: (1) single out the features of models of good democratic rule; (2) select the conditions of birth and development of a good democratic regime; (3) conceive of democracy as a system of good government endowed with specific characteristics and subject to particular conditions of development, able to produce decisions that are binding, to which positive opinions are attributed by the community to whom the system of government is applied.

Second assumption: the local-urban territorial dimension is a factor of variable importance in democratic theory

Nowadays, for the first time in human history, most of the inhabitants of the planet lead an urban life (in metropolitan areas, in small and medium-sized cities, in towns). This trend is set to continue: in 2050 it is estimated that it will be concentrated in the cities the 75 % of the global population, and that people will reside primarily in megalopolis of several million inhabitants and in regions with an intense urbanization that will extend beyond the borders of the states and continents (Venice Biennale 2006). Quoting a classic work by Louis Wirth we assume here a “sociological definition of the city” (Wirth 1938: 3) that is considered as a “relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals” (1938: 8). In this tripartition, the “large numbers” (1938: 10–14), account for “individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentalization of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory, and associated characteristics”. “Density” (1938: 14–16), on the other hand, involves “diversification and specialization, the coincidence of close physical contact and distant social relations, glaring contrasts, a complex pattern of segregation, the predominance of formal social control, and accentuated friction, among other phenomena”. At last, “heterogeneity” (1938:

¹ By means of a relatively high degree of control exercised by common citizens over their leaders (Dahl 1963).

² Political scientists have moreover hesitated to use the concept of democracy without adding adjectives that to some extent described it further. As the analysis carried out shows, for example, by first-rate theorists like Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl (1993) and Leonardo Morlino (2003).

³ Our translation.

16–18), stands for the “break[ing] down [of] rigid social structures and [...] produc[ing] increased mobility, instability, and insecurity, and the affiliation of the individuals with a variety of intersecting and tangential social groups with a high rate of membership turnover”.

From the early 1990s onwards, to the numerous studies on the economic, sociological, organisational and demographic role of cities in the development of contemporary democracies, just as many papers were added on the political and institutional importance exerted by cities and local governments in the functioning of democracies (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2000; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2004). The latter research theme is crucial for us and political science has produced literature on it that is as vast in its consistency as it is fragmented in its theoretical interpretations. The outcome of this research question would have been quite different if it had been asked a couple of thousand years ago, to the hypothetical experts of political matters of the Greek and Roman world. They would probably not have hesitated to reply, with a certain uniformity of opinion, that the city is the functional prerequisite of any form of government. Quoting Aristotle's first book of *Politics*, they would have reached the point of maintaining that outside the city there is no space for a truly human life, since the city alone enables the flourishing of the associative virtues that characterise the development of community life. Concerning the democratic form of government, in particular, the city indicates the indissoluble link between urban form of the social community and autonomy of political decision, which structurally characterised the Greek *polis* first, then the Roman *res publica*.

If the idea of classical democracy was urban-centred, the development of the concept in modern times has lost the requisite of urban centrality, to take on that of State centrality. In so doing, however, the primordial link between city and democratic government has been lost. Local government in general, and the city in particular, have become one of the many aspects characterising the division of power on a territorial scale, the importance of which tends to alter, upwards or downwards, becoming for some a dangerous diaphragm (a vehicle of particularism and factionalism in the governor-governed relationship), and for others a precious source of inclusivity and participatory capacities.

Methods: research questions, hypotheses and theses

In the light of the second assumption the following questions arise:

- If this is so, what is the role of the city in the different models of democracy, and what determines the variability of this role? If States are the rulers and controllers of

democratic citizenship, are cities still tied to democratic development? In recent democratic theories can we find alternative models of democracy able to challenge the State-centred ones, as regards the importance of the city in democratic political structures and processes?

To answer the above questions in this paper we suggest that there is a cause–effect relationship between the first and second assumptions of democratic theory. Namely, we put forward the hypothesis that:

- Given the one-to-one interaction between realistic and idealistic dimensions, the more or less salient role of the city in democratic theory depends, in basic terms, on the prevalence of one dimension over the other.

Under this hypothesis we support the following thesis:

- The more accentuated the prevalence of the realistic dimension, the less important the local-urban territorial dimension and the more the national-State one; vice versa, the more accentuated the prevalence of the idealistic dimension in the theoretical democratic model, the more important the local-urban dimension and the less the national-State one.

The logical link maintained here is made explicit by the arguments we will call: Hobbes' argument and de Tocqueville's argument.

Hobbes' argument: central control and decisional capacities of representative government institutions

As can be deduced from Chapter XXII of the *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes was not in principle against the presence of local institutions in political regimes. Provided, however, that they be explicitly subjected to the sovereignty of the politico-administrative centre. In the paragraph entitled: “A Bodie Politique For Counsel To Be Give To The Sovereign” on the subject of local institutions, he states that their existence is acceptable “onely for such matters as shall be propounded unto them by that Man, or Assembly, that by the Sovereign Authority sent for them; and when it shall be declared that nothing more shall be propounded, nor debated by them, the Body is dissolved. For if they were the absolute Representative of the people, then were it the Sovereign Assembly; and so there would be two Sovereign Assemblies, or two Sovereigns, over the same people; which cannot consist with their Peace” (Hobbes 1651: 169).

For Hobbes, then, the oneness of sovereignty, namely the control of legitimate violence on a territory by a single holder of power, is a prerequisite of social peace, which is the supreme good of the community.

This is an argument that, with the necessary modifications, may also be applied to democratic theory. For if we follow this line of argument, in realistic types of democratic models it is the actual functioning of the mechanisms and procedures enabling a certain degree of control of the decision-makers by citizens and a certain decisional capacity of those governing that counts.

The actual functioning of these mechanisms and procedures is guaranteed by the spreading of civil and political rights on a plane of formal equality, and by the creation of representative forms of government. When these rights and forms of government are applied to a *demos* composed of a large number of individuals, whose community is based prevalently (though not solely) on cultural affinities of a national nature, the relationship between governors and governed must be based on representative systems of a national character; in order to produce collectively binding decisions, these systems must espouse a certain degree of “Stateness” (Nettl 1968), defined “as the state’s capacity to impose law and order within its territory, to construct and implement policies, and to claim legitimacy as a political unit” (Andersen et al. 2014: 1207–1208). The fragmentation of powers on a local-urban plane tends to weaken the capacities and legitimacy of the democratic State; it ensues that the actual functioning of the mechanisms and procedures both of control (of the governed over the governors) and of public decisions (of the governors for the governed) entails high salience of concentration of State powers.

De Tocqueville’s argument: autonomy of the municipal institutions and virtuous participation of free, equal citizens

In one of the most emblematic passages of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1838: 102) maintains, “The strength of free peoples resides in the town, however. Town institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to knowledge; they put it within the grasp of the people; they give them a taste of its peaceful practice and accustom them to its use. Without town institutions, a nation can pretend to have a free government, but it does not possess the spirit of liberty”.

De Tocqueville’s statement encapsulates, very briefly, the crucial point of the argument on which high salience of the local-urban dimension is based for the theorists of the idealistic kind of democracy, and envisages the following logical steps. In the democratic models of the idealistic type, what counts is the judgement on good functioning of the democracy, in decisional terms. The judges are the citizens, considered free and equal in expressing their opinion. In order to judge in conditions of freedom and equality, these same citizens need to know the reasons for the decisions as thoroughly as

possible and to participate as inclusively as possible in their implementation. Knowledge and participation depend on the proximity of the decisional institutions; the city is the institutional place that is closest to the citizens; high salience of the local-urban dimension enhances the citizens’ capacity for judgement in conditions of freedom and equality. It thus follows that good functioning of democracy (good democracy) entails high salience of the local-urban dimension.

Results and discussion: demonstration of thesis

To demonstrate the thesis supported here we will illustrate three theoretical models of democracy. We define as “theoretical model of democracy” a logical, well-argued construct able to represent the phenomenological class we have called “democracy”.

In the literature we can pick out three general theoretical models of democracy belonging to three different generations, linked in turn with three moments of transformation of the limits and possibilities of democracy itself (Dahl 1989): the first generation theoretical model, which corresponds to classical democracy or that of the “ancients”; second generation theoretical model, equivalent to modern liberal democracy; and third generation theoretical models that can be defined as two types, characterised respectively by a neo-realist approach corresponding to the quality democracy model, and by a neo-idealist approach which tends, on the other hand, towards the inclusive democracy model.

First generation theoretical model or classical democracy model: a high degree of idealism and high salience of the city

Why the classical democracy model is (essentially) a pure, idealistic model?

The first generation model, equivalent to classical democracy, shows a clear, predominant ideal vision. In the Greek idea of democracy both the actors of political activity and the actual activity they have to undertake are idealised, in order to create common good. As Dahl states (1989: 18) “[...] the citizen is a whole person for whom politics is a natural social activity not sharply separated from the rest of life, and for whom the government and the state—or rather, the *polis*—are not remote and alien distant from oneself. Rather, political life is only an extension of, and harmonious with, oneself. Values are not fragmented but coherent: for happiness is united with virtue, virtue with justice, and justice with happiness”.

The tie between city and democracy in the (prevalently) idealistic model of classical democracy

In this theoretical model the concept of democracy is strictly tied to the concept of city. In the past the city

was strongly linked with the ancient democratic regime. The Greek *polis* is perhaps the first example in Western history of a territorial organisation where the struggle for power and government activities coincided, both subjected to a power of self-determination given to the citizens (every adult male belonging to the *demoi* of the *polis*). Consequently, the city may be understood as the cradle of the citizen, who, in turn, becomes the “nuclear” subject of the democratic government. For every citizen is summoned to discuss matters of common interest and all of them, in their turn, carry out government functions.

The Romans specified the bond between city and citizens, when referring to the government of the *res publica*. The *cives*, inhabitants of a *civium*, were conceived as individuals sharing two features: firstly, the accomplishment of longstanding settlement in the urban space, contrary to the stranger (*peregrinus*) and the temporary inhabitant (*incola* or *inquilinus*); secondly, the status of citizen (belonging to the *civitas*) as a condition of freedom, with specific legal requirements protecting the individual from excessive political power and allowing him to participate, directly or indirectly, in the political choices of the community.

In the Greek idea of democracy and the Roman one of *res publica* the concepts of polity, politics and policy tend to converge in the idea itself of city: it is the city that simultaneously represents the place, purpose and practices through which the democratic regime can produce its best fruit (valid decisions for everyone) for the community.

This logical connection has been explained by Dahl (1989), according to whom the democratic order of ancient democracies had to possess, to be able to function and produce effects, certain fundamental requisites, all linked with maintaining the well-being of the city community. These requisites envisaged, first and foremost, that: (1) “Citizens must be sufficiently harmonious in their interests so that they can share, and act upon, a strong sense of a general good that is not in marked contradiction to their personal aims or interests”; (2) “[...] they must be highly homogeneous with respect to characteristics that otherwise tend to produce political conflict and sharp disagreement over the public good”; (3) “[...] the citizen body must be quite small”; (4) “[...] citizens must be able to assemble and directly decide on the laws and decisions of policy”; (5) “[...] citizens must participate actively in the administration of the city”; (6) “[...] the city-state must [...] remain fully autonomous” (Dahl 1989: 18–19).

According to Dahl, this is the first great hiatus that marks the arrival of democracy. As can be understood from his words, it is a historic moment at which there is an alignment of a series of conditions, all linked with

keeping a precise spatial configuration, the *polis*, which keeps the community together, motivates collective government action in terms of equality and disciplines the rules of collective decision.

We may therefore state that in the classical conception the territorial configuration of the *polis* is a necessary condition, even if not sufficient, for the creation of a democracy. The democracy of the ancients was city-centred and, necessarily, polity-centred.

The Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica* gave shape and concrete substance to the Aristotelian definition of perfect freedom of the citizen of the ancient world, who was neither sovereign nor subject, but on different occasions “governor” and “governed”, and capable, therefore both of commanding and obeying. Within the urban dimension of the *polis* a decisive step was taken at the same time towards creating effective homogeneity of equality between citizens, guaranteed by access to offices by drawing lots, and by direct participation in decisions. It was in the city, and within its borders only, that the objective of self-government could be achieved, therefore, which was considered the authentic cornerstone of classical democracy.

From what has been said, it follows that the democracy of the ancients envisaged a single theoretical model, idealised and logically coherent in its components of polity, politics and policy. As Dahl explained (1982, 1989), for the Greeks it was obvious that if democracy were desirable, it would have to exist in a city-state, since a good State could only exist in a city.

On the other hand, if we were to interpret classical theory only in realistic terms, it would lose a large number of its requisites of democraticity, revealing conditions of government of the community of a basically authoritarian type. Seen with realistic eyes, then, Greek democracy would emerge as a regime unable to satisfy the requisites of inclusivity and freedom of public protest valid to establish the minimum threshold of democraticity of a regime. Greek *polis* government, seen from this perspective, would be a particular case of oligarchic despotism (self-government of a minority) exercised over a majority of individuals devoid of any capacity for self-determination. From this stems the fact that the relation between democracy and salience of the city, if introduced into a theoretical context of a realistic type, would lose its sense, since the first term of the relation itself would be lost.

Second generation or liberal democratic theoretical model: a high degree of realism and low salience of the city
Why the liberal democratic model is (basically) a pure, realistic model?

Schumpeter defines democracy, in a procedural sense, as a method to decide on collective problems. It is, however,

a method that—to operate effectively—must be subjected to strict regulatory requirements and functional rules that make the delegation of power from the many to the few tolerable and socially acceptable, according to a formal mandate of representation. In order to exercise their decision-making powers, the representatives must therefore be institutionalised winners of a competition that selects the competitors, translating the vote of those represented into seats in parliament and/or government offices.

These are, in a nutshell, the empirical and functional attributes of the Schumpeterian definition: (1) democracy aims to produce decisions. If it is not able to generate decisions, it is not a method of government suitable for the organised community; (2) decisions are made by a minority: the representatives. Without elites, the democratic method is ineffective, if compared to its decision-making purposes; (3) the selection of the representatives must be the result of a competition; if there is no effective competition among political leaders, democracy decays; (4) the selection mechanism is the popular vote based on majority rule; we cannot speak of democracy if leadership emerges from other selection criteria; (5) the legitimacy of the procedure derives from compliance with the attributes 1, 2, 3, 4, each of which is intended as a necessary condition, and all together as a sufficient condition of effective democracy.

According to Schumpeter, the voter's opinion in a regulated competition between elites (contestability) determines who holds the decision-making powers.

Democratic regimes may therefore be differentiated depending on the complex set of requirements involving how the competition is institutionalised and proceduralised. The outcomes of democracies, namely the capacity to produce decisions, depend on the kind of institutions and procedures that encapsulate the struggle for power between competing elites. It is clear that, in order to work in practice, the democratic method has to manage a system of legal regulation of procedures on which it is based: a structure of rules and roles of authority capable of embodying and ensuring both the rights of freedom and equality for all citizens, and the action of efficient, competent bureaucracies in the processes of law enforcement (Schumpeter 1942).

Schumpeter's model therefore summarises the most important grounds on which contemporary realistic theories of democracy are based. Given the incompatibility of the interests and values at stake, Hobbes' type of reasoning is valid (Przeworski 1988; Hardin 2003), according to which democracy is justified since it represents a humane decisional method at a collective level, which endures and is sustained as long as none of the groups comprising the society finds it more convenient to trigger a social conflict rather than keep to the rules of the game.

"Pluralist" models also took inspiration from this idea, placing among the essential conditions of good functioning of democracy the existence of fragmented, "overlapping majorities", guaranteeing an adequate replacement of power and the fact that no faction systematically find itself at a disadvantage (Dahl 1961, 1978).

If it is true that the peaceful management of political conflict constitutes a problem for every political order, it is just as true that for representative democracy in its State configuration, this issue takes on absolute priority. The reason is explained with great skill by Stein Rokkan (1970) and may be summarised as follows: with weakening cultural uniformity and the limited dimensions of the *demoi* characterising the democracy of the Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica*, the problem is posed of developing efficient institutions fit to solve by peaceful, constitutional means the political disputes that tend to arise along multiple lines of conflict in the territorial sphere of the nation-States.

The tie between State and democracy in the (prevalently) realistic model of liberal democracy

Dahl (1982), when reconstructing the evolutionary pathway of democracy, singled out a second temporal break, which could be placed roughly between the 19th and 20th centuries. This point of discontinuity marked the birth of the modern liberal democracies, within the sphere of a different territorial context, that of national States. These are the consequences of the increase in scale in moving from the city-state to the nation-state: (1) representation has displaced direct participation; (2) no theoretical upper limit on the size of the *demoi*; (3) participatory democracy has become even more limited; (4) greater diversity of people in ways relevant to political life; (5) political cleavages are multiplied and political conflict is inevitable; (6) development of polyarchy as a set of institutions; (7) social and organizational pluralism; and (8) expansion of individual rights in polyarchies (Dahl 1989: 219).

In contemporary democracies, all these devices occur to develop a new concept of citizenship, where the guarantees of freedom (a mix of civil, political and social rights) are extended (for blood rights or soil rights) to all subjects having common cultural characteristics within the boundaries of national States. Citizens, rather than city dwellers, are the individual units of democratic States, to whom all democratic rights and freedom are fully granted.

In modern liberal democracy, therefore, the citizen loses his original juridical bond with the city to consolidate that with the State.

If it is true that the citizen is such because he belongs to a community extended to the whole of the territory

of the State, territorial unity of the State no longer guarantees, as happened for the city-State, the possibility of equal access to offices at the level of politics, or self-government at the level of policy. The competition for power arises above all at a national level (even though the popular vote is granted at local electoral districts) and is organised by intermediate structures (political parties) that establish the link between representatives and the represented. Government decisions are taken by representatives, while those represented, at a local level, are confined to exercising a power of selection between competitive minorities.

The model that has spread through the community of realistic democracy scholars is that of competitive elitism in a unitary democratic State. It comes down directly from State and nation-building models developed by the socio-political sciences, adapted to the different distribution of power democracy imposes if compared with monist or oligarchic regimes.

The unitary democratic State model envisages the presence of two fundamental conditions to create a functioning democracy. Max Weber described both conditions extensively in his writing on the strengths and weaknesses of representative democracy in the modern nation-States (Weber 1922). He argued that the model of competitive elites (called “democracy with plebiscitary leadership”) depends essentially on how the State is able to guarantee a certain degree of rule of law and a certain level of bureaucratic organisation.

Weber, like Schumpeter, states that competition and participation are the engines of democratic functioning. He emphasises that both dimensions risk being ineffective if not supported by thorough institutionalisation of an articulate system of rules and roles capable of defending the public and private rights of citizens, together with the legitimate interests of governments. The fundamental quality of democratic regimes—the capacity given to all citizens to play a role in the selection of ruling elites and to legitimise those chosen by free electoral competition—depends on the effectiveness of the rule of law.

However, a high degree of rule of law is not sufficient on its own to ensure the proper functioning of democracy, if not bound to a certain development of bureaucratic organisation. Bureaucracy, according to Weber, is essential to rationalise the effects of the extension of citizenship to the masses, rather than solve coordination problems created by the development of markets. Mass citizenship in fact determines qualitative and quantitative growth of the input aimed at the State. Those who get the right to vote require not only greater State intervention in many policy areas, but also equal treatment of people with similar needs, that is, fulfilment regardless of individuals, based on calculable rules.

Therefore, specialised, predictable public administration is a necessary condition to achieve the important aims of democracy. Weber quotes, in this respect, the end of arbitrariness, unpredictability and excessive political patronage in the regulation of public affairs; the availability of publicly known procedures to treat or decide upon collective problems; the establishment of rules that allow citizens to verify the legitimacy of decisions and decision-making.

As a consequence, the complexity of democratic structures, procedures and processes tends to make highly centralised political organisation of the State inevitable. Only with centralised, monocratic bureaucracy will accuracy, speed, uniqueness, the publication of decisions, continuity, discretion, cohesion, strict subordination, a reduction of contrasts, objective and personal expenses achieve their best (Weber 1922).

Weber assumed that in democracies bureaucratic development tends to take place, as in non-democratic regimes, following an identical model: the centralised bureaucratic model.

The definitions mentioned above have a clear top-down imprint; in fact, this approach was characterised by a view that reduced the scope of political activity to a minimum in the implementation phase. Better expressed, the model was based on a conception of administration as an executive machine and “closed system”, impervious to social dynamics; it led to conceptualising the implementation of public policy in terms of enforcement: it concerned levels of bureaucratic compliance to governmental decisions and degrees of control carried out by political decision-makers on administrative processes, organisation and technology.

Since State-building started in the modern age, the autonomy and self-government of cities has been considered illegitimate by emerging nation-States. Contemporary democratic States continue to monopolise the legal system and drastically limit the decision-making autonomy of cities: any claim to autonomy and independence not resulting from the power of the central government was illegitimate and illegal. The vertical model of centre-periphery relations thus developed.

From what has been said it follows that liberal democracy also envisages a single logically coherent model, but based, in contrast with the classical model, on the grafting of competitive elitism, representation and a unitary national State, with strong centralised control.

Unitary State and role of political and administrative decentralisation

In the realistic model of democracy the vertical articulation of the unitary model along the axis of centre-periphery relations takes on the features of decentralisation.

Decentralisation can be defined as a “process with a top-down, reversible nature”⁴, thanks to the fact that it can be revoked by that same centre that decided upon it and transferred it to the periphery (Baldi 2003: 6).

The unitary State has experimented during the course of its history with different forms of decentralisation, not always defined unambiguously in the literature (Mény 1990; Sharpe 1993; Baldi 2003). If we wished to find a minimal common denominator, we could maintain that political decentralisation, as a sort of decentralisation category became established in the post liberal phase of the State, evolving out of administrative decentralisation, which originated during the Jacobin State phase in France and characterised the Napoleonic period.

The margins of discretion and the autonomous political-management forms entrusted to local governments as a consequence of the past evolution of the various democratic countries have reduced the features of centralisation, hierarchy and uniformity of the State, while the principle of centralism characterising the unitary model has remained unchanged. Although, in effect, planning, steering and coordination instruments, and finally those of financing and evaluation, assigned to peripheries during the course of the various policy-making phases, may manage to depict territorial boards as authentic centres of political decision, it will always be the central government that will decide upon the degree and contents of decentralisation. For political decentralisation is a top-down process, in which the centre possesses exclusive use in every phase of legislative and regulatory power.

Third generation theoretical models

Neo-realistic or “quality democracy” models

In recent decades many political scientists have reacted to the realistic approach to the theory of democracy, achieving balanced theories of a hybrid nature, i.e. theories that do not intend, on the one hand, to lose their descriptive-empirical overtones on a realist framework but, on the other, face the problem of how to enhance the functionality, capacities and legitimisation of the democratic State. And in so doing, call forth the different values that support it. For the authors that adhere to this school of thought it is therefore a case of harmonising both the empirical and normative aspects of democracy within a single theoretical perspective (Tebaldi and Calaresu 2009, 2016).

The common reflection from which these authors depart concerns the need to evaluate more thoroughly the state of health of today’s mass liberal democracies, with the purpose of strengthening their foundations and improving their performance. Following the wave of

participation of the 1970s and the associated dangers of decisional overload, nowadays democracies have to cope with an almost generalised fall in the rates of participation, both at politico-administrative elections (Gray and Caul 2000) and in all other forms of civic involvement (Putnam 2000; Pharr and Putnam 2000), and with the constant fall in levels of faith in the institutions (Newton and Norris 2000) and disaffection for politics of ever larger cohorts of citizens (Welzel and Inglehart 2005). To this is added, and closely connected, the problem of enhancing the political yield of democracies in coping with the overlapping of cultural, social and economic crises that weaken the capacities of the public decision-makers to respond to citizens’ questions.

As Sartori and Arend Lijphart ask themselves, what, then, is the task of democratic ideals in democracy, seeing as real democracies will never be able to perfectly respond to the ideals that generate them? The answer is simple and concise, and acts as a background to all political studies that have dealt with the problem: the ideal, says Sartori (1993: 54) “remains a parameter that is expected to measure and press the *real* forward ‘towards the best’”⁵ Namely, according to Lijphart (1984: 2): “[...] the end of a scale on which the degree of democratic responsiveness of different regimes may be measured”.

And what is the role of political science, we might add, in pursuing the ideals spoken of, without however running into the ideological fallacy of “evaluative science”? A research plan needs to be set up as follows: as an introduction and a priority, the values need to be stated upon which the entire theoretical construct is based, clarifying their semantic specificity and the relations (of exclusion, agreement, reciprocal reinforcement and non-interference) that bind them to each other and/or to other goods of democracy; on a theoretical plane, the conditions need to be established that make probable or, on the contrary, inhibit the probability that a democratic system may transform the values that have inspired it into concrete results; it is necessary to test, at a factual-empirical level, whether and to what extent, causal relations adhere to the conditions proposed and generate results in line with value expectations.

These three steps reflect to a large extent the procedural points of Lasswell’s pattern (1963) to introduce a “policy science” able to enhance the results of democracy. To this end, he quotes: the clarification of aims, which includes both justification of the values and translation of the abstract principles into operational terms; the sketching out of trends of the past and present as regards implementation of the values selected; the (strictly scientific) analysis of the factors conditioning the implementation

⁴ Our translation.

⁵ Our translation.

of values; presentation of the probable or possible future, based on hypothetical constructs of development; and the evaluation of alternative options the decision-makers are faced with.

Theoretical models of democratic quality, though acknowledging that decentralisation and local autonomy are phenomena that affect the organisational and institutional structure of all contemporary democracies, do not set out from the assumption that these are values in themselves, i.e. components of democratic quality, but share the hypothesis that they are among the explanatory factors of the levels of democratic quality. How and why this influence is exerted is an issue to be considered a problem requiring an empirical survey. Problematisation is summarised well, on a theoretical plane, by Alfred Stepan (1998).⁶ He states that “if it is accepted that ‘freedom,’ ‘equality’ and ‘efficacy’ are *all* important for quality democracy, then we need to ask ourselves how these three principles are linked with each other in a federal democratic system” (Stepan 1998: 15).⁷ For, given that “a strong current of American liberal thought emphasises the contribution of federalism to freedom” and to the “tyranny of the majority”, the author wonders whether the instruments of federalism that guarantee this freedom (e.g. the request for legislative super-majorities or the power of veto) might not end up reducing equality (expressed by the principle “one man, one vote”) and the decisional efficacy of government institutions. In other words, if decentralisation can be seen as a factor of freedom, we must previously single out to which freedom we are referring, since the freedom of local communities may enter into conflict with the freedom of the individual, just as there may be tension between rights defined on a geographic plane and rights founded on universalist principles, like equality, responsiveness and accountability (Mény and Wright 1985).

Similarly, “decentralisation transfers some power closer to citizens and is therefore a thoroughly democratic choice; but precisely this closeness may produce [...] patronage and corruption phenomena and may foster the rise of oligarchic social groups able to endure” (Bobbio 2002: 51).⁸

On the basis of the research carried out, the hypothesis that local power may or may not constitute a factor of development for the quality of democracies has, up to now, obtained responses that do not seem to resolve the matter and appear to lean towards a bland, if not neutral, effect on democratic quality.

One of the more successful attempts to assess the quality of democracies was carried out by Lijphart (1999). As is well known, the distinction between majority democracies and consensus democracies developed by the Dutch scholar was based on two dimensions: the executives-parties dimension and the federal-unitary dimension. The latter dimension, inherent in relations between centre and periphery, envisages: for the majority model, a unitary State system with a flexible, amendable constitution, capable of promoting a hierarchical influence of the national majority over single local majorities, while, for the consensus model, a federal, and/or highly decentralised, State system with a rigid constitution able to guarantee—since it is organised territorially or functionally in politico-administrative autonomies—representation of the single minorities with centre-binding mechanisms. In the case of the majority model, jurisdictional control will be by parliamentary sovereignty, whereas for the consensus model it will pass through a constitutional court of a federal nature. The central bank, for the majority model, will however be dependent on the executive, while in the case of the consensus model, it will be independent from its control.

At a democratic quality level, the empirical analysis conducted by Lijphart led him to state that “[...] the correlations are so weak that they do not allow any substantive conclusions in favor of one or the other type of democracy” (Lijphart 1999: 272); this is if the positive correlation is excluded between consensus democracy and greater efficacy of the struggle against inflation, due to the independence of the central banks from government majorities. On the contrary “[...] consensus democracy makes a difference. Indeed, consensus democracy—on the executives-parties dimension—makes a big difference with regard to almost all of the indicators of democratic quality” (Lijphart 1999: 300).

A model of democratic quality analysis that is just as important is that developed by Leonardo Morlino. The author (Morlino 2003; Diamond and Morlino 2005) considers as “good democracy” and therefore “quality democracy”, first and foremost that system of government that fulfils citizens’ expectations as regards services for public decisions (quality in terms of *results*); secondly, regimes in which citizens, associations and communities enjoy full political equality and freedom (quality in terms of *content*); almost as a consequence, a legitimised democracy will see these same citizens enjoy the power of sanction and assessment as concerns the way and degree to which the government provides them with freedom and equality, in agreement with rule of law criteria. Last but not least, quality democracy requires citizens, organisations and political parties to participate and compete to obtain elective offices which entrust them, not only with

⁶ Stepan (1998) refers to decentralisation only in terms of federalism, but with arguments that can well be applied to any form of decentralisation.

⁷ Our translation.

⁸ Our translation.

the power to hold office and take decisions, but also the responsibility of doing so. It should therefore be the citizens themselves who guarantee high levels of democratic quality, monitoring the efficiency and impartiality of law enforcement, efficacy of government decisions, political responsibility and the continuous responsiveness of the elected to their needs and requirements (quality in terms of *procedure*).

Beginning with the hypothesis that decentralisation can affect in a contradictory manner the dimensions of democratic quality, like equality, freedom, rule of law, responsiveness and accountability, the empirical research conducted on the case of Italy (Morlino et al. 2013) aimed to ascertain, in particular, the degree and type of influence the decentralising process exerted on inter-institutional accountability mechanisms over the span of 20 years. The results of the research, conducted with qualitative and quantitative techniques at regional government level, show that the devolution of power from centre to periphery, if carried out in an uncertain, incomplete way, as in the case of Italy, weakens the processes of accountability, rather than enhancing them: “the lack of implementation of reforms and the inefficacy of controls at a sub-national level make accountability channels weak and relations between centre and periphery not very transparent, in a general situation that prefigures regionalism with variable geometry, potentially damaging for the extension and fruition of equal rights” (Galanti 2013: 176).⁹

Neo-idealist or inclusive democracy models

For the exponents of neo-idealist models the reasons for dissatisfaction with the pure realistic model are basically two. The first is that it ends up validating and legitimising the present situation, characterised by poor quality of life, loss of citizens’ interest in politics and by the prevarication of lobbies and economic interests. The second criticism is that realistic liberal democracy theories are not able, in so far as they take away from democracy any reference to values, to explain the motivation citizens might have to participate in the democratic game. Democracy, in order to function, cannot be understood by the participants as a game far from their interests, tending toward the unknown and not easily influenced in its outcomes, or as a mere, more humane substitute for civil war. This means that, in spite of their claims to “realism”, these models are in no way able to explain how democracies function.

The “right” reaction to confront the problems of the existing democracies, according to these critics, does not consist of limiting ourselves to explaining the way they function, whether good or bad, and accepting

their weaknesses in the name of alleged “realism”, but of renewing the reflection on their normative prerequisites and in the light of these proposing institutional reforms, new participatory practices and greater control of undue misrepresentation or interference on the part of occult and/or oligarchic powers.

1. The participatory model and the centrality of the local dimension.

The main “gauntlet” against the representative model is thrown by the “model of participatory democracy” (Held 2006). Since halfway through the 1960s the social movements active at an urban level have asserted, using the protest as a political resource (Lipsky 1965), the legitimacy of alternative forms of democracy to the representative one, developing a new conception of “bottom-up” democracy (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1994; Gould et al. 1996). In the words of Herbert Kitschelt (1993: 15): “the stakes and struggles of the left and libertarian social movements [...] invoke an ancient element of democratic theory that calls for an organisation of collective decision making referred to in varying ways as classical, populist, communitarian, strong, grass-roots, or direct democracy against a democratic practice in contemporary democracies labelled as realist, liberal, elite, republican, or representative democracy”.

The justification principle of the representative model lies in the fact that, beyond the supremacy of the law, high levels of freedom can only be achieved in a “participatory society” that will encourage a sense of political efficacy, nurture interest in collective problems and contribute to the education of well-informed citizens, capable of having sustained interest in the government process and influence over final decisions (Pateman 1970).

Fundamental diverse features stem from these different justification principles between the two models: if the representative model envisages that the citizen elect his representatives and exercise his control by means of the threat of non re-election at subsequent elections, participatory democracy opposes the principle of delegation, which is seen as an instrument of oligarchic power. In the participatory model representatives must, in effect, always be revocable; not being in possession of a generalised delegation, each time a decision is faced (and not just at the moment of voting), the citizen must be given the chance to actively take part in that decision (Macpherson 1966, 1973, 1977). For there to be “participation”, citizens must, then, be involved in the regulation of the institutions and in the key decisions of society. For this reason, participatory democracy legitimises all those non-institutional forms of pressure on decisions that may be defined as “protest repertoires”.

⁹ Our translation.

From this point of view, the local dimension is particularly important to stimulate the participation and direct commitment of citizens. One of the main assumptions of the participatory model is, in fact, that the vote expressed by the citizen in the place where he spends his everyday life is better than the vote expressed at a national level (Held and Pollit 1986). Participatory practice at a local level is seen as a “school” that teaches the citizen to assess the work of the representatives at a national level. The institutional system that begins to take shape therefore is “open” and strengthens, in terms of democratic choice, on the one hand, the local autonomies and power with respect to the centre and, on the other, the citizens with respect to the State. For the followers of the participatory model, in this way real improvement in the conditions of many social groups is also possible, through the redistribution of material resources and the reduction to a minimum (or if possible complete elimination) of bureaucratic power, not democratically responsible, both in public and private life. Hence the participatory model challenges the justifications, characteristics and conditions of the representative model, introducing the principle of participative strength (and need) of local boards and citizens.

2. The deliberative model and face-to-face interactions.

Schumpeter’s model of democracy and the centrality of the concept of representation are “challenged” further by the followers of deliberative democracy. The theoretical papers that can be attributed to this approach (Bohman and Rehg 1997; Elster 1998; Fishkin and Laslett 2003; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012) maintain that deliberative techniques and structures are potentially able to improve decisional outcomes and raise the responsiveness of the democratic system to the level of subjects who do not have the vote (Habermas 1992; Mansbridge 1999; Dryzek 2000). Deliberative democracy, without intending to totally challenge, on the one hand, “[the] aggregation as a decision rule” (Chambers 2012: 52), and without necessarily intending, on the other, to replace the existing institutions of democracy (Steiner et al. 2004), tries to compete with representative models, seeking solutions that guarantee higher levels of legitimacy to the said regime.

To be specific, the deliberative model aims—with an emphasis both descriptive and prescriptive—to put the citizen at the centre of the public discussion, involving him/her directly in the collective decision-making process, with the purpose of enhancing the legitimacy of this process and its outcomes.¹⁰

¹⁰ As maintained by Nicole Curato, by transposing the deliberative ideal into concrete practices, it would be possible for political decision-making to be governed by “norms of openness, public spiritedness and inclusivity instead of staunch partisanship or political horse-trading” (2015: 103).

The variety of deliberative experiments carried out over recent decades are so numerous and different from each other (Gastil and Levine 2005) that some scholars have reached the point of stating “[...] it is impossible to acquire a thorough knowledge of participatory experiments, especially as most of them take place at the local (small-scale, ‘micro’) level, and are not widely publicized” (Papadopoulos 2012: 125).

What these experiments appear to have in common, apart from their specific nature and the difficulty in classifying them, is first of all “the fact of distinguishing themselves from the traditional forms of participation, centred on the institutes of participatory democracy, and on a distinction between public institutions and citizens who are listened to” (Morlino and Gelli 2008: 20).¹¹ With respect to the participatory model we have already examined, deliberative model theorists again propose to abolish the “incompetent participation” of citizens and “the old utopia of mass participation” through conscious activities of reflection, debate and consideration of issues of public interest.¹² As maintained by Daniela Giannetti (2007: 125), deliberative democracy places itself, in short, as a “new paradigm of democratic participation.”¹³

Secondly, we may note how all the deliberative experiments aim for full equality of participation, not conditioned by specific criteria or citizen competence requisites. The deliberative arenas “only” need to be highly inclusive (we might say, to a maximum), precisely because, as stated, they aim to have all those participate, in equal conditions, upon whom the consequences of the decisions will fall. In other words, deliberative theorists hypothesise that the “outcomes are legitimate to the extent they receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question” (Dryzek 2001: 651).

It follows, from a logical point of view, that the deliberative democratic ideal is prevalently feasible in small-scale societies, thanks to the direct, non-mediated encounter between “sub-groups of citizens” (“self-selected” or “randomly selected”), “stakeholder participants” (Bohman 2012), “small critical communities” (Giannetti 2007), or “mini-public groups” (Fung 2003), where “face-to-face interactions” are the norm (Laslett 1956; Dahl 1970; Dahl and Tufte 1973; Mansbridge 1980); however, “in large-scale mass societies, they are not and cannot be” (Goodin 2003: 54).

¹¹ Our translation.

¹² According to Jeremy Fishkin (2004: 34), the quality and efficacy of deliberation depend on the complete fulfilment of four crucial factors: (1) the completeness of the arguments; (2) the accuracy of information on the theme dealt with; (3) awareness and correctness of the people involved in the debate; (4) pluralism of the positions presented.

¹³ Our translation.

The high salience of a small-scale dimension with the purpose of full achievement of the deliberative ideal is also confirmed by the complications arising from the “distinctive perspectives associated with distant others who must be represented in any genuinely democratic deliberation across an extended polity” (Goodin 2003: 55). For however ideally it is constructed, no single deliberative experiment could possess on a large scale a deliberative capacity adequate “to legitimate most of the decisions and policies that democracies adopt” (Mansbridge et al. 2012: 1).

As further proof of this reasoning, it is possible to highlight with a “contrary” argument that the main challenge for deliberative democracy theorists is still actually nowadays that of finding the way to adapt their ideals to a larger scale,¹⁴ where organising “face-to-face” discussions that will involve non-mediated interactions of extended communities is considered extremely complicated, if not impossible (Minow 1990; Mouffe 1992; Goodin 2003). Almost all the empirical research on the argument has been concentrated, consequently “either on a single episode of deliberation, as in one-time group discussions, or on a continuing series with the same group or in the same type of institution” (Thompson 2008: 213).

Deliberative theorists committed to the challenge themselves admit that theoretical solutions able to release the deliberative model (and its applications) from a “micro” (localised and local) scale, linking it up more (though not univocally) to a “macro” (generalised and global) dimension, are not easy to find. The main attempts at the moment have usually addressed three research approaches: (1) the first focuses on the planning and institutionalisation of deliberative practices and arenas that will be able to legitimise the decisional process, with a function of substitution/integration of the traditional institutions of large-scale political representation (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Fishkin 1997; Goodin and Dryzek 2006); (2) the second approach focuses on the “central” and “mass” institutions already existing in the different liberal democracies, and on all political parties, electoral laws and legislative bodies, without claiming to want to substitute or integrate them but seeking instead to analyse and improve their deliberative nature and that of the “procedures” by which their members are elected (Bessette 1994; Steiner et al. 2004); (3) the third and last approach, which tries to bring together the previous research lines, integrating them, is working on the attempt to configure deliberative democracy in “systemic” terms. The approach in question acknowledges

democracies as complex entities, in which a variety of institutions, associations and places of non-deliberative political representation co-exist, including informal networks, mass media, interest groups, schools, private foundations and non-profit institutions, legislative bodies, executive agencies and courts of justice. In other words, the attempt aims at defining a wider theoretical framework able to increase understanding of the interrelations between institutions, associations and places of political representation (Habermas 1992; Dryzek 2000; Parkinson 2006), with the ultimate objective of maximising the deliberative paradigm within many decisional spheres of democracy (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

Conclusions: bringing the city back in? A challenging question

To justify the supremacy of urban polity as the best territorial unit for democratic development is, for democratic theory, an issue that takes on great importance in first generation idealistic theories but little in realistic second generation ones. If, for the former, the city is the favoured place to enable direct citizen control over government decisions, and in this way synchronically achieve the dual ideals of good citizen and good government, for the latter, it represents a dangerous, distorting factor of the control decision-makers have to exercise over State apparatuses in order to govern with full effectiveness, efficacy and legitimacy.

In third generation theories, which reject the pure dualism between realistic description of power and normative justification of principles, seeking an alternative route in hybrid models, the question of the role of local powers in democratic theory takes on a different outline. For the neo-realist or quality democracy theories, the degree of decentralisation of the political system is not a value in itself, but a factor that can take on a neutral value or can affect, in a positive or negative sense, good democratic government, depending on its overall coherence with the political project it is part of (e.g. a majority or consensus democracy) and its degree of institutionalisation. For the neo-idealist or inclusive democracy theories, the enhancement of local autonomy—though within State systems and consolidated representative processes—is one of the necessary conditions for good democratic government. It is mainly at a local-urban level that both the mechanisms of public discussion able to improve the transmission of information and selection of the best arguments, and the spaces and arenas that produce full, effective and influential participation of individuals and fairer, more pondered final decisions, can be implemented. The basic justification of local democratic institutions, according to these models, is that they institutionalise a fundamental normative principle common

¹⁴ Not only with reference to the global scale or national polity, but also roughly to the regional scale, or simply to a wider citizen context like a small/medium-sized municipality or larger groups of citizens than those of a “mini-public”.

to all discursive, participated interactions, which makes a search necessary for wider, more shared consensus compared with that deriving from the application of majority rule by elected representatives.

Both third generation theoretical models, as can be deduced from our analysis, seek good democratic government. They do it, however, from two different perspectives, upon which the type and degree of importance they give to the local power dimension depends.

Quality democracy models start out, with a certain degree of realism, from the structure of the regime and the competitive processes of representation (democratic politics) to understand how to move closer, as much as possible, to the ideal achievement of “quality democracy”, in terms of fundamental democratic goods or values. For this reason, in quality democracy theories, the role of the city is a matter with a theoretical nature that underpins different solutions (there may be good democratic quality in the presence of strong local autonomy, but also the opposite). It follows that the supremacy of the city, seen from this angle, is not a value in itself, and its pursuit may give variable results: good, if it is placed in an institutional project coherent with the problems and lines of conflict present in the society; irrelevant or, at worst, damaging, if this coherence does not arise. According to inclusive democracy models, on the other hand, good democracy is a direct product of the participatory and deliberative methods by which policy-making processes are carried out, methods that in fact produce favourable consequences on good democratic government, regardless of the competitive logics of politics. Given that maximum inclusivity, participated and deliberative, is achieved at a local-urban level (or at least within a “micro” scale), we can speak of the rising of “democra-city” for the 21st century: 50 years after the words of Robert Dahl (Dahl 1967: 964), the city thus becomes, more and better than any other institutional place, the ultimate arena within which the best results may be achieved for democracy. In a “democra-city” perspective, the city really becomes the optimum unity for democracy, and a real superiority, into democratic theory, is therefore restored to the city compared with the other territorial institutions of democracy.

Authors' contributions

This article is the result of joint research undertaken by the two authors. MT conceived of the study, prepared and edited the background section, prepared and edited the theoretical and hypothetical framework in the methods section, and carried out mainly the first and second generation theoretical models in the results and discussion section. MC carried out mainly the third generation theoretical models in the results and discussion section, and drafted the manuscript. Both authors carried out the conclusions section. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' information

Mauro Tebaldi is an associate professor of Political Science at University of Sassari, Department of Political Sciences, Communication Sciences and

Information Engineering. His research interests and publications are in the areas of public policy analysis and the quality of democracies. He has written widely on academic journals including *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, *South European Society and Politics*, *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*, and other leading scholarly journals. Among his recent books, he edited *La liberalizzazione dei trasporti ferroviari* (Il Mulino, 2012).

Marco Calaresu is a postdoctoral research fellow in Political Science at University of Sassari, Department of Political Sciences, Communication Sciences and Information Engineering. His research interests include security policies and the quality of democracy. Among his recent publications: *Local Security Policies and the Protection of Territory: An Analysis of the Italian Experience* (2007–2009) (City, Territory and Architecture, 2015), and *Assessing Democracies...to Save Democracy?* (Open Journal of Political Science, 2016). He also authored a book on urban security policy in Italy (Franco Angeli, 2013).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the contribution of Giovanni Maciocco at University of Sassari for discussing and debating ideas, concepts and methods related to this work from a wider disciplinary perspective. A special thanks to Christine Tilly, and Giuseppe Solinas for their continued support in proofreading and editing this work.

Funding

The research has been partially funded by a PRIN National Grant 2010–2011 (Ministry of Education, University and Research) entitled “Crisi economiche e qualità delle democrazie in Europa—Economic crisis and the quality of democracies in Europe”. Scientific National Coordinator: Leonardo Morlino. Leading Institution: Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (LUISS), Rome, Italy. Scientific Local Coordinator: Mauro Tebaldi. Local Institution: University of Sassari, Department of Political Sciences, Communication Sciences and Information Engineering, Sassari, Italy. Duration: 36 months. Protocol number: 2010WKTTJP_007. Area: 14.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 16 October 2015 Accepted: 10 December 2015

Published online: 22 December 2015

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