Abstract: Isabelle SINIC-BOUHAOUALA

Conservatism and Direct Democracy in California: questioning the legacy of progressivism

One of the most salient traits of California’s political life is its propensity to resort to the instruments of direct democracy, notably the initiative and the referendum. Initiated by progressive governor Hiram Johnson and written into the California Constitution in 1911, popular petitions allow citizens to directly intervene in the legislative process when the state legislature is deemed unable to respond to their concerns. A century later, even if twenty-four other states also use the initiative and referendum, nowhere else but in California does direct democracy weigh so heavily on public life, hence the hyperbolic terms and neologisms used by observers of California politics: “hyperdemocracy”, “hybrid democracy”, “hyperpluralism”. The result is a situation of political stalemate where pressure groups and lobbies compete with legislators and short-circuit the usual policymaking process.

This paper first accounts for the historical and political factors leading to the breakup of Californian democracy into two separate and conflicting systems - one representative and the other direct. It then focuses on the blurred limit separating participation and contestation in California and shows that popular petitions have given a prominent political voice and ascendancy to conservative movements: proposition 13 (1978) limits property tax raise and has led to sharp budget cuts, proposition 187 (1994) sought to prevent illegal immigrants from using public services, proposition 209 (1996) eliminated affirmative action, proposition 227 (1998) curtailed bilingual education, etc. These initiative measures have imposed severe restrictions on the capacity of institutions to protect equal rights and achieve social reform. By examining the stranglehold of conservative movements on direct popular decision-making I intend to question the ideological foundations of California’s system based on the idea of collective popular wisdom. Finally, after looking into the detrimental effects of direct democracy in California, the elements of a fairer and more operating system will be sketched.

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