THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Gianfranco Pasquino, University of Bologna and Bologna Center of the Johns Hopkins University

The two most recent and interesting developments in contemporary political science concern the study of the status of democracy. Questions concerning both the quality of democracy and the so-called “democratic deficit” have attracted the attention of a large number of political scientists, rightly so for two major reasons. First, the number of democracies, be they electoral only or liberal-constitutional has grown significantly. Second, in the many remaining non-democratic regimes, the battle cry is, indeed, “democracy”. In a way, the studies devoted to the quality of democracy and those, fewer in number, devoted to the democratic deficit have something in common. The immense literature on both topics, much of it summarized and analyzed by Morlino (2012), has not, however, attempted clearly to identify the areas of overlapping and cross-cutting issues. In fact, there has been the tendency to treat the two phenomena separately. I believe that the time has come to proceed to a fruitful “conciliation” of the two areas. But I also think that it is important to start with a better definition of the concepts that are utilized. In this paper I leave temporarily aside the analysis of all the issues and indicators regarding the quality of democracy (Diamond and Morlino 2005) and will concentrate on the concept of democratic deficit and related aspects.

The quest for terminological precision
Both terms, democratic and deficit, cover very complex phenomena and are practically loaded with a plurality of meanings. When they are put together, their political and scientific complexity is bound to increase. Hence, if the two terms are not defined with clarity and precision, all the discussions concerning the questions of what the democratic deficit is, which are its origins, its features, and its consequences run the risk of remaining confused and becoming fundamentally useless.

Needless to stress, democracy has always been a key (and controversial) concept in political science. It has become even more important in the past twenty years or so following the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991). It is my opinion that the two most important theories of democracy remain those formulated by Hans Kelsen and by Joseph Alois Schumpeter and that almost all the subsequent formulations are, one way or another, even when they seem oblivious to those theories, highly indebted to them. I also believe that Giovanni Sartori (1987) has offered the best criticism and synthesis of the debates and of the problems surrounding the theories of democracy. Among Sartori’s most important contributions, I would point at his distinction between real and ideal democracies, that is, between democratic regimes as they exist in reality, and democracies as some scholars would like them to be, that is, imagined democratic regimes. Sartori’s appreciation of the gap and tensions between real and ideal democracies captures at least one possible component of the democratic deficit. His conceptual definition of what a democracy is and is not (Sartori would not be happy with the most recent emphasis on “hybrid” regimes) serves to guide the scholars to the study of real democracies, their structures, their functioning and, eventually, their deficits, that is, their ever-present shortcomings.

Sartori would have no objection to the classification of “democracies with adjectives” (Collier and Lewisky 1997) provided the adjectives do not contradict and distort the substantive. The most infamous example of a
blatant contradiction was the usage of “popular democracy” to define situations in which the regimes were by all means quite “unpopular” and most certainly “undeveloped” as well, where the people could only play, indeed, were meant to play a subordinate role. As to ideal democracies, building on Sartori’s criticisms of the so-called “participatory democracy” (another instance of democracy with an adjective), I think that most authors who have argued the case for such a type of democracy would agree that participatory democracies ought to exhibit two major features: equal and full participation by all citizens; equal influence by all of them on the decision making processes. In principle, really existing democracies offer equality of access to participation and equal treatment in front of the law (*isonomia*). Then, it is up to each and all citizens to decide how much time and energy they are willing to dedicate to participatory activities. Unequal outcomes, that can always be redressed by changes in the citizens’ attitudes and behaviors, are the inevitable consequences of the choices and of the differentiated commitments by the citizens themselves. According to Sartori, one cannot speak of “participatory democracy” as a specific form of democracy. All democratic regimes are based on the freedom to participate by their citizens. If those who argue the case for participatory democracy imply that all the political decisions are made by the citizens, they are really suggesting the possibility, denied by Sartori, of direct democracy as opposite to representative democracy.

The main purpose of my long digression is to point at two possible criteria to evaluate the deficit in or of a democracy: participation and influence. Incidentally, both criteria could also be utilized to evaluate the quality of democracy. (Electoral) participation by all citizens and equal influence by all of them would indicate the existence of a high quality (ideal) democracy. In practice, even the “participationists” know that not only this has never been and cannot be the case, but that the search for the democratic deficit should be located in the mechanisms and structures that are making it difficult or tout court preventing citizens’ participation.
and influence. Therefore, all scholars are encouraged to define the essential features of a democratic regime before looking for and discovering (perhaps, also measuring) any type of democratic deficit.

At this point, in order to proceed it has become absolutely imperative to unpack both terms: democracy and deficit. There is a wealth of definitions of democracy. I have decided to make use of two of them. The first one was pronounced by the US President Abraham Lincoln, in the famous Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863): “democracy is government by the people, of the people, for the people”. The second one is a definition that cannot be attributed to any single contemporary scholar. There is widespread agreement that democracy requires free, fair, competitive elections plus the protection of civil and political rights. Where elections are held, but civil and political rights are neither guaranteed nor protected, one would at the most find “electoral” democracies. Where in addition to the possibility of taking part in competitive elections, the citizens enjoy civil and political rights, there one witnesses and certifies the existence of liberal-constitutional democracies. Indeed, it is when we deal with liberal-constitutional democracies that the issue of the quality of democracy comes to the fore. In a way, one could say that it is possible to evaluate the quality of a democracy exclusively once we have precisely defined which specific kind of regime a democracy is. Simply said, a liberal-constitutional democracy is the regime where civil and political rights are guaranteed and protected and where elections are free, fair, and competitive. Political accountability, in its electoral and inter-institutional varieties, both necessary, is a welcome consequence of both sets of requirements.

The same definitional procedure is to be followed in order to identify what is a democratic deficit and to measure it. Deficit cannot mean anything else but shortage, lack of something. Therefore, democratic deficit suggests that something is lacking/missing in (some) democratic
regimes. What is missing is too often not precisely spelled out. It must be something of significance that negatively affects the nature, the quality, and the functioning of a democratic regime. Some would go so far as to say that the existence of a deficit seriously impair not just the functioning of a specific democratic regime, but the possibility itself of having a democracy. Before disentangling all these decisive questions and in order to do so, it is important to look at the origins of the concept and of the problematic of democratic deficit.

**Discussing the democratic deficit of the European Union**

It is somewhat surprising that the concept “democratic deficit” and the discussion of its nature and consequences have originated with reference not to specific national democracies, but to the grand process of construction of a supra-national democratic union. In a way, the joining together of many democratic states has not produced a “superdemocracy”. On the contrary, something of democratic importance has gone lost. Unfortunately, to my knowledge there exists no specific study entirely or largely devoted to the origins of the concept and to its application in the analysis of the functioning of the European Union. When discussing the inadequacies of the European Union, several scholars Indirectly Schmitter and commentators have pointed to its major drawback calling it “democratic deficit”. Briefly, according to them, the European Union shows a significant democratic deficit in what concerns the institutional arrangements and their day-to-day working. While never precisely spelled out, the European democratic deficit seems to derive from the limited participation and influence of the citizens of the member-States, of the non-existence of a European demos (people), from the way the activities of the European Union are carried out and the decision-making processes are developed.
This view of the democratic deficit within the European Union seems to be fundamentally grounded in a purely electoral conception of what democracy is and should be (quite a different perspective is taken and elaborated by Schmidt 2006, especially ch. 5). The proponents suggest that the three major European institutions, the Council, the Commission, and the Parliament are based on limited electoral legitimacy. In fact, only the European Parliament is elected by the European voters. However, as is well-known, the elections of the European Parliament have been defined as “second-order elections”. European voters choose among their national parties and those parties’ candidates. Moreover, rarely the electoral campaigns in the various European nations are fought on European issues. Worse, more often than not anti-European Union parties, of the right and left, are the only ones forcefully running electoral campaigns on European issues, though, needless to add, only in order to criticize the European institutions and the technocratic “anti-popular” behavior especially of the European Commission.

Still, even from the perspective of an electoral democracy, the European Parliament can be positively evaluated. Though not fully comparable with the other parliamentary bodies of the member-States and within the limits set by the European “Constitution”, the European Parliament works in a fully democratic manner. Moreover, Europarlimentarians attempt to offer political representation to their voters and to translate their preferences into policies. The European Parliament monitors, checks, encourages, and supports the initiatives and the activities of the European Commission. A rigorous assessment of the democratic quality of the Europarliment and its members would probably suggest that there may perhaps exist a democratic deficit only if another criterion of democracy is taken into consideration, that is, the criterion of accountability. For a variety of reasons, many Europarlimentarians do not run again. Therefore, they cannot be asked to explain and justify their behavior to their voters. Continuing the examination of the EU
democratic deficit along the lines of an electoral democracy, one may come to the conclusion that the Council of the heads of government is even less legitimate (and, perhaps, less “democratic”) than the European Parliament. However, it is important not to forget that all European Union heads of government are members of the Council because and as long as they command a parliamentary majority in their own countries. Indeed, the existence of a majority supporting them is a necessary and sufficient “democratic” requisite. Critics would underline that this is a purely formal requisite. What counts is that those heads of government behave in such a way as to protect and promote their national interests. In my opinion, their actions do not necessarily suggest the existence of a “democratic deficit”. On the contrary, if they have been elected, as is highly likely, on a platform promising exactly that protection and promotion, their behavior indicates that they are accountable. At work here one finds a mechanism that produces and reproduces political-democratic equilibria. When those heads of government are no longer considered representative and/or capable they will be replaced democratically, that is, through electoral procedures, by the will and vote of their citizens. A Council made of democratically elected heads of government cannot be considered, I surmise, having a democratic deficit. To those who point at the complex, slow, sometimes disappointing process of decision-making by the Council, one could answer that this is a different story not to be confused with the issue of the existence or not of a democratic deficit.

In any and all discussions of the EU democratic deficit, the European Commission always appears as the most exposed and most vulnerable potential culprit. In fact, the Commission has no legitimacy of its own. It is a “second-order” organism. All its components are appointed by the heads of government, and (or but) are confirmed and are subject to a no-confidence vote by the European Parliament. If elections are the only path through which a democracy must work in filling all governing and representative offices, then, obviously, the modes of selections of the
European Commission substantially contribute to the EU democratic deficit. However, if, though indispensable, electoral empowerment is only one component of a really existing democracy, then one may want to evaluate the role of the Commission with reference to other criteria. Admittedly, these criteria are largely soft. In my opinion, the most important of them is the criterion already mentioned above: accountability. All Commissioners are accountable to the European Parliament, not to their national, and, in any case, democratic, governments. They are bound to pursue European goals. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that most, if not all, Commissioners consider themselves accountable also to a certain idea of Europe and, said with a grain of rhetoric, to history (Bardi and Pasquino 1994). Of course, none of these considerations can fully convince those who denounce the existence of a democratic deficit in the European Union. Nevertheless, the above-formulated considerations may help in redefining the concept and in limiting its field of application. At this point, perhaps, the “supporters” of the democratic deficit would want to redirect their attention and criticism to the actual working of the EU institutions. All this said, I would be very cautious in accepting the idea that what amounts to or contributes to a democratic deficit in the European Union is “red tape” (a less than democratic surplus of rules and regulations), even though, we all know that “bureaucratization” may clash against democratization. I would be more inclined to find some problems in the vagaries of rule implementation and enforcement. But this is, first of all, an almost entirely different story and, second, certainly not a deficit in terms of “lack of democracy”, though a deficit in terms of performance.

Those who point at the existence of a democratic deficit because the European demos does not have enough electoral-political power have also stress one additional phenomenon: national referendums on European issues. Several of those referendums, held in Ireland, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, have revealed negative evaluations of important
issues such as the European Constitution. Their results have been almost entirely disregarded and new referendums were called. Recently, the pressures put on the Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou to recall a referendum signal that, in fact, the relationship between the European Union and democracy is somewhat problematic.

A couple of lessons can be drawn from this albeit brief discussion of the so-called democratic deficit within the European Union. In fact, there seem to be two types of democratic deficit. One is a deficit concerning the input. From this perspective, the existence of a democratic deficit is due to the fact that European citizens do not have enough influence on the selection, and dismissal, of those who hold political power in the European Union. The other type of deficit concerns the output. The European Union works slowly and is hampered by bureaucratization and a surplus of rules. As a consequence, it does not perform to the satisfaction of European citizens. In a way one can say that insofar as it exists, the first type of deficit is structural. It depends from the overall institutional arrangement of the European Union. Therefore, the remedies will be found only when an incisive reform of the institutions will be made that opens more space to the participation and influence of European citizens. This is not the place to entertain the issue in many details. Nevertheless, when it comes to electoral democracy one should stress that the power of the citizens may be increased also by diversifying the repertoire of participatory instruments, such as citizens’ initiatives and referendums. I would not discount the democratic impact of a European Union referendum provided it is run according to very stringent rules.

The output deficit is to be considered largely behavioral, that is, concerning the authorities. In fact, as far as it exists, it finds its origins, on the one hand, in the alleged lack of competence and in the limited capabilities of those political authorities occupying representative and
decision-making offices. Perhaps, it is exacerbated by the authorities’ lack of accountability. On the other hand, the present working of the European Union institutions themselves constitutes a hindrance in the production of those outputs necessary to satisfy the expectations and the needs of European citizens. Being in part behavioral in part structural, the output deficit will not be solved by resorting, as it has been suggested, to practices and techniques of deliberative democracy. Significant changes in the rules, procedures, and institutions are required.

In Search of the Deficit

Whether or not there is a democratic deficit in the European Union, at this level the deficit has been essentially defined with reference to electoral criteria and requirements. To my knowledge, these criteria and requirements have not been extended and utilized when trying to define the democratic deficit in a theoretical way. So far I have written about the origins of the concept and I have attempted to show that its application to the European Union institutions appears somewhat problematic. Moreover, the “European” discussion does not seem to throw enough light on the definition, the identification, the analysis, and the evaluation of the democratic deficit. I am aware that there is a lot more to say. The best starting point is to remind all of us that, in a way, there is always a democratic “deficit”. All of us entertain a conception of what a “true”, ideal democracy should be. All of us have to deal with past and present democratic regimes as they have been and are. The gap between ideal democracies and really existing democracies represents a deficit to which there is no permanent remedy. To be sure, the demos never holds and never exerts enough kratos to justify the definition of a regime as democratic. Exactly because democracy did not appear to him the appropriate term to define a situation in which power was not in the hands of the citizens, the demos, but in the hands of organized groups
competing among themselves, Robert Dahl (1971) proposed to use the term “polyarchy”: unsuccessfully. But his suggestion was made exactly when there was an intense and interesting discussion concerning the nature of pluralism and of neo-corporatism and their impact on the working of democracy. As far as I can remember, in no study could one find references to a democratic deficit produced by neo-corporatist arrangements and policies even though the neo-corporatists were, more or less explicitly, criticizing the pluralist conception of democracy.

It is exactly around the period in which pluralism and neo-corporatism entered into a sort of theoretical and practical competition that the first post-war challenge to the existing democratic regimes appeared. The word crisis was utilized to define that challenge. No distinction was made between crisis of democracy and crisis within democracy. The Trilateral Commission seemed to harbor no doubt. The title of the book sponsored by them emphasized the word crisis, but it was a crisis of governability (Crozier et al. 1975). Nevertheless, whether the problem was defined as overload of demands (Rose 1980) or surplus of citizens’ participation (Huntington 1975), most scholars were aware of dealing with challenges within the democratic regimes and not against them, in any case not so dangerous to overthrow those democracies. In any case, no democratic regime was overthrown and in less than a decade those challenges were defeated. The second wave of challenges made its appearance around the turn of the century. Once again, the challenges were defined in several different ways: malaise, desencanto, Verdrossenheit, overload, or, simply, disaffection. Notwithstanding the opinions of too many pessimistic or apocalyptic analysts, these challenges too have come and remain within the fold of the democratic regimes. None of them aims at the very nature and essence of democracy.

Today, for a large number of intellectuals and opinion-makers it has become fashionable to declare that all democracies are in crisis, or even,
that they have failed. Political theorists and political scientists are more cautious and have tried to be more precise. Those among them who are critical of existing democracies indicate the existence of two problems (deficits?): lack of participation and lack of influence by the citizens. From their writings it is unclear whether these two deficits are structural, that is, whether they are inherent in “mass democracies”, or whether they represent the consequences of the fact that democratic regimes have not fulfilled their “promise” to educate their citizens (Bobbio 1984).

“Participatory” scholars impute to the existing democracies their unwillingness to create and provide spaces to make possible and easy the participation of as many citizens as possible. “Deliberative” scholars suggest that it is indispensable to create and shape situations and mechanisms through which all citizens will become better informed. Both groups of scholars seem to believe that there are “participatory democracies” and “deliberative democracies”, the two of them to be preferred to Kelsen’s proportional and Schumpeter’s majoritarian democracy which share a common and crucial the feature, that of being competitive democracies. Moreover, they claim that neither Kelsen nor Schumpeter were interested in participatory and deliberative processes for their conceptualization of what a democracy is and how it could work, which is simply not true. In any case, the existence, or lack of it, of participatory and deliberative processes must be evaluated empirically, in all situations and political systems. Perhaps, inadvertently, some of the scholars adopting the participatory and the deliberative perspectives have shifted the focus from the structural arrangements to the behavioral characteristics of the citizens. Hence, again, perhaps against their own intentions, those scholars may suggest that there are two potential quite different democratic deficits: one regarding the way democratic regimes are structured; the other deriving from the way “democratic” citizens behave.

The deficit of democratic citizens
Since immemorial time there has been a debate concerning the qualities democratic citizens ought to have. There is a consensus that the ideal democratic citizen is interested in politics, has a good amount of political information, regularly turns out at the polling station and participates in other ways too, enjoys and shows a feeling of political efficacy (Almond and Verba 1963). In reality, only a minority of citizens in all democratic regimes has these “ideal” qualities and the available data indicate that there exist some minor differences, not especially significant, among the democratic regimes (Thomassen 2005). More significant are the differences of interpretation and evaluation among the scholars. I have detected three positions. First, there are those who look at the empirical data and limit themselves to analyze them. Second, there are those who justify the lack of interest, knowledge, and participation of many citizens and go as far as to suggest that too much participation would be/is detrimental to a democratic regime. Third, there are those who decry the low levels of interest, information, and participation, criticize the institutional features of existing democracies, their allegedly complacent supporters (at the time, even Robert A. Dahl), above all the “ruling” elites, and argue the case of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970).

Especially controversial is the topic of how much participation is to be considered necessary for an existing democracy to satisfy its promises: power of the people. Here I confine myself to a couple of statements. It is not how much electoral and political participation exists, that is the rate, that may have a negative impact on a democratic regime. Sudden and unpredicted surges and declines of political participation may have important consequences. The second aspect to be taken into consideration is whether there are or not parties capable of accommodating and channeling the suddenly increased political participation and of reacting as well to its plummeting.
At this point, the most important question, perhaps the decisive one, to be answered is whether one would be justified in defining and discovering the “democratic deficit” in those situations where the people have a limited amount of political power. But, in principle, how much political power should be in the hands of the people? And which amount of political power should be exercised by the people, and how? The existence of free, fair, and competitive elections does not convey enough useful information concerning the power of the people. Electoral power is just a (small) portion of political power. Nor can the degree of turnout be interpreted as an indicator of the power of the people, that is, one cannot say that because there is a high turnout in a specific democratic regime, therefore the people have more power than in those as much democratic regimes in which there is a lower turnout. This said, it may not be farfetched to suggest that the people have more (electoral) power when the repertoire of electoral instruments is extended to referendums, propositions, legislative initiatives, even recall procedures. Considering the widest repertoire one could then state that there is at least an “electoral deficit” in those democratic regimes where the people do not have access to referendum, propositions, legislative initiatives, recalls. One might also want to pursue the subject of “electoral power” by examining all the features of the many available electoral systems and their peculiarities.

The debate on the virtues and the vices of the parliamentary models vs the presidential models has gone on for quite a long time (Linz 1994; Cheibub 2007). It has never been framed with reference to the power of the people. Governmental stability/instability, decision-making and accountability have been the three major aspects taken into consideration by all the many scholars who took part in the wide-ranging debate. In the perspective of a possible electoral democratic deficit, one could probably come to the conclusion that the (electoral) power of the people is greater in presidential systems than in parliamentary ones.
because in the former the people elect the President who is at the same
time head of the State and head of the government. In the latter, the
people elect neither. Remaining in this complex field, a lot can be and has
been said concerning the electoral systems. When and where
proportional electoral systems are used, the voters enjoy at the most only
the power to choose their favorite party. In some few cases, they are also
allowed to cast one or several preference votes. Plurality and majority
systems applied in single-member constituencies possibly allow the
voters to cast a more powerful vote. Some critics would say that when
“the winner takes all”, those voting for the defeated candidates have
enjoyed no power at all, while in PR all the votes cast contribute to the
elections of some candidates. This is a position I do not share. In any case,
with reference to the power of the people, a lot may depend on how the
candidates are selected. Primary elections empower the people. Party
selection, re-selection, de-selection are all procedures that do not allow
the people to obtain, exercise, increase their power.

All these “electoral” instruments have to do with the input side of
democratic regimes. We are all quite aware that there is an ongoing
discussion on how to improve their functioning from different
perspectives. We also know that the direction and the goals of many an
electoral reform are not necessarily inspired by the willingness to give
more power to the people. For instance, the British referendum on the
Alternative Vote held in May 2001 was fought more on the issue of how
to produce a fairer parliamentary representation than on how to give
more power to the voters. On the other hand, “more power to the
voters” was most certainly the goal of the 1993 electoral referendum
movement and of the 1994 electoral reforms in Italy. Though obviously
not justified as an attempt to withdraw a portion of electoral power from
the people, the 2005 Italian reform has in practice drastically curtailed
the impact of the citizens’ vote allowing party leaders substantially to
appoint their parliamentarians.
Input and output deficits

On the side of the input, the democratic deficit may make its appearance because the parties are unable to perform their most important functions in a satisfactory way. Though briefly, I have already dealt with candidate recruitment and selection. At least in the eyes of the people, the limited rate of circulation of parliamentary representatives may be an indicator of a portion of democratic deficit. The search for “new faces” and the demand of term limits equally indicate the existence of another portion of democratic deficit. From both points of view, the USA is not doing well. The percentage of Congressmen/women re-elected several times is above 90. For a couple of decades and more term limits have been applied for the election of a majority of State Assemblies. Now the tide is going into a different direction. Term limits have been a guarantee of turnover for the US Presidents. But the combined effect of the election of George W.Bush and the potential candidacy of Hillary Clinton has raised the threat of “dynasty”. Though different from the perils of dynasty, the long tenure of one party and/or one leader in government (some selected examples: Helmut Kohl, 1982-1998, CDU/FDP, 1982-1998; François Mitterrand, 1981-1995; Felipe Gonzales and the Spanish Socialist Party, 1982.1996; the Conservative Party, 1979-1997, Margaret Thatcher, 1979-1990; the Labour Party, 1997-2010, Tony Blair, 1997-2007) may be considered an instance of democratic deficit by those who believe that governmental turnover is quintessential democracy. Useful and felicitous for many reasons, governmental turnovers are not to be considered an indispensable component of a democratic regime. What is important is that the elections be competitive and that the outcome be in the hands of the voters. Hence, the lack of alternation does not automatically imply the existence of a democratic deficit (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2011).
The other two functions to be performed by political parties must be analyzed together. Parties offer to the voters platforms of promises. Their parliamentary representatives commit themselves to translate those promises into policies/performances. Here, the democratic deficit can be found in the distance between the promises and the performances. All this can be appropriately measured as is done also by several think tanks. In a way, in political science “the distance” between promises and performances constitutes one of the elements of the difficult, but very important, analyses carried out under the heading of accountability. Indeed, the existence of accountability leads periodically to governmental turnovers which are the best occurrence to signal and mark that the request for the reduction of the democratic deficit has been temporarily met. When looking at accountability, the analyst will be obliged to enter into the area in which outputs (and outcomes) are evaluated. Probably, the concept that best captures the production of outputs and the assessment of outcomes is performance. We seem to be on solid grounds whenever it is possible to measure the effectiveness of the decision-making process in terms of the amount of time needed to produce each decision, and the efficacy, that is, how much the goals and the targets have been reached.

At this point, the readers may wonder whether I am still dealing with “democratic deficit” defined as the gap that separates any really existing democratic regime from the ideal conception of democracy. Indeed, it would appear that lack of accountability, of performance, of effectiveness, and of efficacy may all contribute to the existence of a democratic deficit. Though, of course, one will have immediately to distinguish between two types of deficit: one related to the structures (and dynamics) of a specific democratic regime; the other tied to the behavior of the authorities. Below I will focus at length on this distinction.
To my knowledge, Pippa Norris (2011) has been the only scholar so far to have written a book completely devoted to the democratic deficit. Throughout her book, one can find several, not always consistent, definitions of the democratic deficit. In all likelihood, the most precise, and, in any case, the most frequently used, is to be found in the following sentence: “The gap between aspirations and satisfaction is captured here by the concept of democratic deficits” (Norris’ italics, p. 5). Somewhat surprisingly, Norris seems to suggest the existence of more than one democratic deficit. Before exploring whether there are in practice several democratic deficits, I believe it is imperative to go to the basics. Fundamentally, the lenses through which Norris watches the democratic deficit(s) are those of the citizens. This perspective is based on totally subjective criteria. The existence of a democratic deficit will be denounced by the citizens themselves. The dimensions of the democratic deficit will be discovered through appropriate surveys. Indeed, the Eurobarometer has constantly probed the degree of satisfaction European citizens nourish concerning the way their democracy works. Thanks to the Eurobarometer we also have reliable time series of the satisfaction of European citizens vis-à-vis the working of democracy at the European level. Expectedly, there is no country in which all its nationals are satisfied with the working of their democracy. This is even more the case when the object of (dis)satisfaction is the European Union.

If the democratic deficit is defined as the gap between aspirations and satisfaction, then it will always exist. Citizens’ aspirations are bound to exceed the capabilities of any democracy (of any regime) to satisfy them. In a way, the democratic deficit does not appear dissimilar from the distance existing between democratic regimes and ideal democracy, as indicated by Sartori. Moreover, as, again, Sartori has suggested, in really existing democracies needs and aspirations can never be fully satisfied and the democratic deficit will never disappear. The paradox here is that the deficit may decline in those political systems where the citizens have
resigned themselves to the poor working of their democratic regime and, as a consequence, have reduced their aspirations. Another paradox is that where the albeit democratic rulers have succeeded in compressing and discouraging the aspirations of their citizens, the gap may be small. There may surface a large democratic deficit in those political systems whose citizens have become more demanding, where a revolution of rising aspirations has occurred. Be that as it may, but relying only on subjective evaluations bordering with psychological states of minds does not tell us much concerning the actual working of the democratic regimes and how they could improve their performance. The burden of the democratic deficit cannot be put entirely on the shoulders of citizens nourishing high aspirations. And the blame for not satisfying those, perhaps misplaced, aspirations cannot be put entirely on the democratic arrangements.

The most frequently quoted classification of contemporary democracies is, indeed, based on the type of institutional arrangements. Lijphart (1999) has distinguished majoritarian democracies from consensual (that, is, proportional) democracies. Then, he has tried to prove and has decided to claim that “consensual” democracies perform much better than majoritarian democracies. Curiously, Lijphart never uses the words democratic deficit. On a more solid ground, Powell (2000) has shown that proportional democracies do better than majoritarian ones in terms of electoral (and political) accountability. Both authors come to the conclusion that proportional democracies perform better than majoritarian ones. Were one to define the gap between the two types of democracies as a sort of democratic deficit, both scholars would probably suggest a precise and practical solution. Institutional reforms introducing significant proportional elements will represent the best way to close the gap and to reduce the democratic deficit. All this said, however, there remains a lot of work to do because the available data do not indicate that the distance that democratic citizens measure between their aspirations and their satisfaction within their respective political
systems is smaller in consensual/proportional democracies than in majoritarian democracies. In any case, we may be grateful to Lijphart for indirectly making a very important point relevant to the discussion of the democratic deficit. In the functioning of contemporary democracies institutional arrangements play a prominent role.

In criticizing Lijphart’s classification (Pasquino 2011), I have emphasized that it is necessary to distinguish very precisely between the structural features of democratic regimes and the behavior of their political elites. I believe that this distinction is useful also when trying to identify and evaluate the democratic deficit instead of focusing on the very vague, ill-defined and inevitably always existing “gap between [citizens’] aspirations and satisfaction” (Norris 2011, p. 5). My suggested analytical framework has the shape of a fourfold table accommodating the different types of democratic deficits and the potential remedies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remedies</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficits</td>
<td>Behavioral reform of the electoral law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional regime change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In a way, my proposal draws inspiration from David Easton’s framework, that, incidentally, was fruitfully utilized by Norris in her previous book (1999). Hence, I give the utmost attention to the authorities and the regime and keep them analytically separate. The democratic deficit can be the consequence of a regime whose rules, procedures, and institutions are unable to provide what citizens look for and aspire to. The electoral system may be criticized because it does not satisfactorily channel the preferences of the voters. Certain types of bicameralism are a hindrance to the law-making process. The government and the Prime Minister may lack or have acquired too much power (the process of presidentialization of politics). The judiciary may be badly structured and enjoy too little or too much power. All these are institutional deficits regarding the regime. They may require structural modifications. Behavioral deficits are those deriving from the activities, or lack of, of the authorities who may prove to be incompetent, inefficient, unwilling to respond of their decisions and non-decisions, corrupted. To make just one example, the judges may have become inefficient and self-referential. A structural remedy may consist in changing the rules through which those authorities have been selected and promoted. The conjunctural remedy, which is the most frequent one, is produced by occasional adaptations and, in what concerns governing authorities, by rotation in office or governmental turnover.

There are several overall lessons that one can draw by filling the boxes in the table presented above. First of all, it appears quite difficult to locate an overriding deficit of democracy. Those who maintain that there is a crisis of democracy should be invited to be more precise. Most of the
time what one is witnessing is the surfacing of some problems, not necessarily to become crises, within existing democratic regimes. Those possible “crises” may be the product of several types of deficits. Second, those deficits may belong to two general categories: institutional, that is, deriving, from the rules, procedures, and institutions of the regime; and behavioral, that is, being the consequence of the capabilities, or lack of them, of the behavior and of the decisions and non-decisions made by the authorities. As to the remedies, one can find many cases of political systems whose institutions have been reformed in significant ways. Perhaps, the most extreme of these is represented by the regime of the Fourth French Republic being totally replaced in 1958 by the Fifth Republic. In other cases, some structural changes have been less wide ranging affecting, for instance, only the electoral system as in New Zealand in the early 1990’s. In some cases reformist attempts have failed as in Britain regarding the abolition of the House of Lords and concerning the referendum on the introduction of the alternative vote in May 2011. When the democratic deficit is the consequence of the behavior of the authorities, the remedy all democracies systematically offer is governmental turnover, rotation in office. Too frequent rotations suggest, not that the conjunctural remedies are insufficient, but that the problem lies with the overall quality of the authorities and with their capabilities to satisfy voters’ expectations. The democratic deficit is not only produced in and by the political sphere. Its origins may also be found in the societal sphere, but most definitely this is the topic for another full-blown paper.

Preliminary conclusions.

I have come to few tentative conclusions that open the way to further theoretical efforts and to some necessary empirical researches. First, there will always exist democratic deficits, that is, deficits reflecting the unbridgeable gap between, on the one hand, existing democratic regimes
and, on the other hand, citizens’ ideas or ideals of democracy. Second, most democratic deficits are the product and the consequence of the behavior (and the quality) of the authorities. These are deficits within the democratic framework. Third, it is only when the deficit is the product of the poor design and the malfunctioning of the institutions, it will manifest itself as a crisis of democracy. Still, even this major deficit can be solved, as the case of France shows, without provoking the demise of democracy. In the end, scholars, analysts, citizens should never panic.

In the end, however, I cannot escape the most fundamental question. Does the concept “democratic deficit” contribute something new and indispensable for the advancement of political knowledge and, specifically, for the study of democracy? I am afraid not. I believe that by making good use of three concepts: voters’ power, authorities’ performance (Roller 2005), political accountability, scholars will learn what is necessary to evaluate existing democratic regimes and to identify, if they exist, democratic deficits. In any case, the deficits in voters’ power, authorities performance, political accountability constitute the stuff of politics and a powerful stimulus to political change and, occasionally, to political improvements.

Bibliographic References


Schmitter, Ph. (2000) *How to Democratize the European Union... and Why Bother?*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield.