

## **ELITIST AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: TOWARDS A NEW EU CITIZEN**

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### ***Abstract:***

*Can we provide a valid EU model of governance that combines the characteristics of the elitist and participatory democracy? Is it possible to accept the civil and political elites as educators and propagators of the EU participatory democracy and obtain as end-result an accountable and responsible model of an EU citizen?*

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We live in a world of hybridization, where even simple models of democracy with clear characteristics are no longer available. Is a new model of an EU citizen possible between two prevalent, recognized models: participatory and elitist/representative democracy? The European Union is in search for a model of an EU citizen able to value the principles of EU governance and the importance of a European civil society. The role of a common European civil society is to educate and propagate the new EU participatory democracy and obtain as an end-result an accountable and responsible prototype of an EU citizen.

But let us not forget that the representative democracy, a recognized type of elitist democracy, is defined as the founding principle of the EU.

### **Participatory Democracy for EU**

The basis of the participatory democracy is the deliberative concept even if the participatory democracy is usually described as a passive, non-active system composed of citizens. The participatory theory of democracy assumes that people's participation is the most important quality.

According to this view, the power of the people is exercised when they participate. Participation is moreover presumed to help in the creation of identity, to encourage a desire

to participate further in common affairs and to develop responsibility. In contrast to an elitist democracy, participation between elections is assumed to vitalize democracy (Hanberger, 2001, p. 218).

Quoted in Dawid F. (2006), Habermas considers that for the deliberative, hence for the participatory democracy, the civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres (Habermas, 1996, p. 367).

Encouraging participation was an important element of the EU institutional reform agenda at the turn of the century. In particular, the period between 2001 and 2005 saw a number of proposals in relation to participation – the 2001 White Paper on Governance being the best known one – which culminated with Art. 47 on participatory democracy in the proposed European Constitution.

We have the European Citizen's Initiative (2012) as a proof of the participatory democracy, plus previous programs like the European Parliament's Agora project (2007), the Consultation Forum Concerning The Future Action Programme 2007–2013 To Promote Active European Citizenship (2005), other experiments with means for citizens' participation, supported by the EU Commission: "Meeting of Minds" or the "European Citizens' Consultations". These programs started as simple links between the European Institutions and European civil society.

The ECI is the best proof that the EU seeks not just to communicate with citizens, but genuinely to listen to them. The Initiative is considered the first working instrument with the power of covering the gap between the EU institutions and its citizens. The European civil society is calling on the Commission to ensure access to the ECI for all citizens, something which will facilitate EU policies that are in the interest of the European people.

## **Elitist democracy**

Participatory democracy is a vital mechanism for controlling elites. A direct opposite of participatory democracy is elitism. Democratic elitism is a top-down approach to governance, a hegemonic approach because it gives to the general public the idea that they are participating while they are simply choosing between elite-defined options (Belden, 2009, p. 6).

Elitist scholars, like Joseph Alois Schumpeter, argue that government ought in principle to be controlled by elites of education, wealth and social status. Some of them argue that elites dominate because the masses lack education, resources, are lethargic, passive, unsystematic and unimportant (Keorapetse, 2012).

The elitist theory allows the citizen only a passive role as an object of political activity. The safety of contemporary democracy lies in the high-minded sense of responsibility of its leaders, the only elements of society who are actively striving to discover and implement the common good (Walker, 1966, p. 288).

According to Habermas and its Lockean/liberal view of the theory of elitist democracy, citizens can control their government by choosing among competing elites. Ordinary citizens are encouraged to participate every three or four years in elections but are not given a direct

role in the policy process, and democratization implies improving the elite's representation of the people. In other words, the core idea here is that of representative democracy. This notion of democracy is implicit in the expert-oriented or technocratic policy discourse and practice (Hanberger, 2001, p. 218).

The elites are a main characteristic of the representative democracy, where the citizens can control their government by choosing among competing elites and its essential value is accountability. The major threats are apathy and non-participation.

### **The new EU citizen**

Most researchers do not believe in the existence of solely EU participatory democracy. A proof of not being prepared to accept the term is the disappearance of the name of participatory democracy from the former article 47 in the proposed European Constitution, even if the content was kept entirely in the new article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty:

- “1. The institutions shall by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.
2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.
3. The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.
4. Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties” (TEU, Art. 11, p. 9).

The establishment of participatory democracy as one of the EU's normative bedrocks is a potentially important step because it makes clear that representation cannot be the sole means to a legitimate regime in the EU. However, we should notice that participation of citizens and civil society organisations in EU governance is not conceived in these provisions as an enforceable subjective right (Cuesta-López, 2012, p. 6). The EU brings into attention that there is no meaningful participation of the masses in public policy or key decisions. Participation can be achieved through civil society and active media.

European cooperation among political actors, media, and civil society is still fragile and badly defined, in spite of the visible interdependence. A positive collaboration can help to promote the image of the Union to the Europeans. The development of a veritable European public space demands the true integration of the civil society in political debates and the decision-making process. The civil society in EU needs subventions given by the European institutions in order to survive and develop. This civil society is composed by representative citizens capable to act as facilitators of ideas and to assume the role of creating a debate between the grand public, experts and institutions and recognize the importance of their actions in this field (Balosin, 2010, p. 23).

The elites cannot be excluded from the participatory democracy model, especially at the EU level. The barely formed EU civil society, including the voluntary registered interest groups,

lobbying groups, civil society organisations, is the best example of an elite representing the interests of participants – whether at local, national or European level, the transmission belt between the European citizen and EU institutions.

Speaking about institutions, the main EU institution dedicated to social dialogue is the newly reformed European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). As a consultative body, it gives representatives of Europe's interest groups, a formal platform to express their points of view on EU issues. Its opinions are addressed to the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

In the White Paper on European Governance, we can find the following statement: “Civil society plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of the citizens and delivering services that meet people’s needs. [. . .] Civil society increasingly sees Europe as offering a good platform to change policy orientations and society.[. . .] It is a real chance to get citizens more actively involved in achieving the Union’s objectives and to offer them a structured channel for feedback, criticism and protest” (CEC 2001, 34).

Above all, the participation of civil society organisations (CSO) in European governance processes and its normative promise to increase democratic legitimacy has gained attention.

The reason for the creation of participatory mechanisms involving civil society organisations is that they are expected to be close to citizens and act in two directions between the public institutions and the emerging European citizenry: first, CSOs can give voice to citizens’ concerns and channel them into the deliberative process or European governance. Second, they can make the internal decision-making processes of the EU more transparent to the wider public and formulate technical issues in accessible terms (Dawid, 2006, p. 7).

European civic associations display little interest in educating their members back in the Member States about EU issues, but rather get caught up within the ivory tower world of Brussels institutional politics. We can encounter a situation of civil society associations becoming elitist in a way that leadership distances itself from the followers instead of providing incentives for citizens’ active participation (Tomšič and Rek, 2008, p. 414). The suggestions made by the Commission in its White Paper on Governance are designed to stimulate the involvement of active citizens and groups in some precise procedures, and not to enhance the general level of civic consciousness and participation. True, some proposals have been made to encourage the clarification of European issues and the development of the discussions around them, but they generally remain rather vague and long-term prospects, while reforms to facilitate the direct participation of organised groups are clear and can be immediately implemented (Magnette, 2003, p. 5).

Consultations with civic organizations are becoming a common procedure of policy processes on the EU level, even though one of the biggest concerns is whether transnational civic organizations are actually able to mobilize Europeans on specific policy issues and whether they can promote interests and participation of the EU citizens and on their behalf influence the policy-making of the EU institutions (Tomšič and Rek, 2008, p. 410). The price CSOs pay for their inclusion in the Brussels circuit is perceived as a loss in autonomy, which is likely to be problematic with regard to the demands of their constituencies. The incentives of the Commission to CSOs to not primarily act as political, strategic actors can have real consequences. As some have pointed out, there exists by now a consultation fatigue amongst CSOs, which has led some of them to withdraw from the consultation processes. The obvious consequence is that if opposing interests cannot be voiced within

the system, or influence EU policy processes, they will at best vocalize their concerns outside the system. Added together, these concerns raise the question whether, against official intentions, the Commission may not be contributing to – instead of alleviating – the democratic deficit of the EU (Kröger, 2008, p. 37).

The best solution of the EU becomes obvious and simple, a few improvements in the status of the EESC in the Lisbon Treaty (2007). It gives the CSOs and the citizens the possibility of participating in opinions and information reports every year, requested by the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament, in which some are own-initiative opinions and information reports, or exploratory opinions generally requested by the country holding the EU Presidency. The EESC also organizes several annual initiatives and events with a focus on civil society and citizens' participation, such as the *Civil Society Prize*, the *Civil Society Days*, the *Your Europe, Your Say* youth plenary and the *European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day*.

## Conclusions

The concept of participation that is inherent in the notion of “*European governance*” does not in itself encourage citizens to become active, because the policy-making process remains highly complex – and is even made more complex by governance practices. In these conditions, citizenship in the European Union is likely to remain an elitist practice, limited to those citizens and groups who benefit from their intellectual and financial resources to try and influence EU politics and policies (Magnette, 2003, p. 13).

Participatory governance is not a definitive solution to improve the democratic quality of EU: participation of civil society organizations in the policy-making can never replace widespread political participation through representation. Direct participation and political representation should thus be seen as complementary to democratize the EU. EU is a mix between the representative and participatory democracy; between elites and simple participants which at present should benefit from the same rights and be accountable for their actions.

In my opinion, the best example of such a working mix is the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), which contributes to strengthening the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of the European Union by enabling civil society organisations from the Member States to express their views at European level.

Most Europeans do not have sufficient knowledge and information of how the EU works, what ways of inclusion and political participation it offers. As long as Europeans do not have this knowledge, they will tend to feel far away from the EU. This is where the EESC comes into stage. According to its official website, among its main roles, it must be more in touch with popular opinion, by acting as an institutional forum, representing, informing, expressing the views of and securing dialogue with organised civil society; promoting the values on which European integration is founded and advancing, in Europe and across the world, the cause of democracy and participatory democracy, as well as the role of civil society organisations.

To be clear, participatory democracy is not a bedtime story. In the light of Brexit, European Union needs the involvement of European citizens in its actions, for dispelling scepticism and distrust in political/civil elites all over Europe. The EU can become more transparent and accountable than its Member States, as it provides many more opportunities to engage with

the policy-making process, like petitions to the European Parliament, public consultations (opinions, position papers), hearings, the ECI.

As already mentioned in the beginning of the article, the best example to introduce a new model of European citizen is through the European Citizen Initiative and the attempt of the Commission to start the dialogue with the citizens by opening a public consultation to hear what they expect from a more efficient and an easier-to-handle ECI.

Announced on all EU social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn), for supporting the EU citizen, European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) launches digital version of the European Passport to active citizenship in the autumn of 2017 meaning an official increase of the level of political participatory democracy, greater public visibility and discourse about policy aims and means, greater awareness and mobilisation of citizens.

Would that represent a solution to eradicate the democratic shortcomings of EU decision-making or avoid mistrust and disinterest among European citizens?

The purpose of all actions in this new model of participatory democracy is for the EU citizen to contribute to decisions through providing new information, different ways of seeing an issue and motivation to address problems, helping EU decision-makers and the public to become more informed and develop an enlarged view of issues.

The best way to end this article is with a quote of EESC Vice-President Gonalo Lobo Xavier: "I call on European citizens: Get active in Europe as Europe is yours!" (ECI Day 2017, 12th April 2017)

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