The assumed crisis of representative democracy and the role of citizen participation in Germany

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This short essay gives an overview of how democracy as a whole can be strengthened by establishing stable structures and procedures of dialogue-oriented participation as a key to more democratic participation. The perceived crisis of representative democracy appears more and more as a chimera when taking into consideration that political procedures are not only based on one single pillar – the representative one –, but, between elections, include citizens through consultation and deliberation in a second, independent pillar.

1 Introduction

In recent decades an increasing loss of trust in democratic institutions has been visible in nearly all Member States of the European Union (EU). First of all the declining degree of trust in traditional politics seems evident in view of the decreasing participation in general elections and other direct-democratic procedures (Heußner & Pautsch 2016). With a focus on the particular situation in Germany, a lower voter turnout has become more and more significant with voters staying at home in elections at all three levels of the federal system. It is an especially crucial fact that on the local level this development has resulted in the
lowest voter turnout, even though people are assumed to be much closer to the municipal politicians and can even directly elect their mayors and the members of the municipal councils. Normally, the system of local self-government is considered to be the basis of democratic legitimation (CoE 2010) and to form the so called ‘school of democracy’ (Heußner & Pautsch 2016).

A possible explanation for this development can probably be found in the typical answers given by people asked about the actual state of representative democracy:

• Political affairs have become too complex to be understood by most of the people.
• Political decision making processes are often perceived as not being transparent.
• The political elite, even on the local level, takes decisions in isolation without asking the people that hold sovereignty.

Although direct democracy is established on two out of three levels of the political system in Germany (except on the federal top-level) and citizens are enabled to initiate a citizens’ initiative such as a popular referendum, the grade of satisfaction concerning democratic institutions is significantly lower than it was decades before. This may well be due to the complexity of political issues, such that even referendums on the municipal level are not attracting citizens to participate in strengthening democracy.
local policy by taking an active part in the decision making process. The main option observed that is taken by the initiators in a direct-democratic procedure is to oppose the municipal council by nullifying a council decision ex-post. This supports the assumption that direct democracy is also too often characterised by complex matters that have to be explained to the voters – and to be discussed with them – before making the final decision.

At present, it can also be stated that, on one hand, citizens consider their municipality as a place with intact political institutions (Egner, 2016). But on the other hand it is obvious that the voter turnout is lowest on the local level: The average participation in municipal elections over the last five years is 49.6% over the whole of Germany, whereas the average of those participating in parliamentary elections on the federal state level is 59.3% and on the federal level 71.5%, both significantly higher (Egner, 2016).

As a result – particularly in German municipalities – we have to face the issue that there is a gap to be closed between the existing procedures of representative and direct democracy. And, especially in this context, citizen participation has to assume a more important role as long as it is understood as a complement
to the representative and, to some extent, also direct-democratic pillars of democracy. It depends on the fact that citizen participation has to be seen as an opportunity to involve people in the procedures of decision making rather than only in the result of such procedures.

2 Rethinking democratic procedures as a possible remedy?

As mentioned, democratic participation is based on two main pillars: the representative and – if existing – the direct-democratic pillar. In terms of decision making both forms of participation are characterised by the binding character of the decisions finally taken. But at the same time the grade of democratic legitimation is declining, because less people participate in elections (representative form of legitimation) and in popular votes (direct-democratic form of legitimation). Hence, it seems obvious that a third pillar in the democratic process is needed, which could be completed by an institutionalised framework of citizen participation (Nanz & Leggewie, 2016). Rethinking democratic procedures also means strengthening the interdependency of all pillars of the democratic system – and not only highlighting the disjunctive aspects.

The proposed remedy can be characterised as follows:

- Representative democracy as the main pillar and the basis of any democratic

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legitimation which itself is based on legitimation derived from regular elections.

- Direct democracy as a partial corrective and as an element leading to binding decisions on the same level as decisions taken by the respective representative institutions.
- Dialogue-oriented democracy as an institutionalised framework of citizen participation that works as a permanent safety mechanism (‘umbrella function’) with regard to both other pillars.

3 Citizen participation as a term with wide interpretations

If citizen participation takes on the role of a complementary pillar in between the pillars of representative and also direct democracy, it will be important to define its sub-functions as a part of the general umbrella function. It is obvious that terms and definitions of what is meant by ‘citizen participation’ are not consistent. On the contrary, citizen participation is a term with wide interpretations. In this context we understand citizen participation as a dialogue-oriented framework of democracy consisting of the two sub-elements of consultation and deliberation in a permanent form, e.g. by establishing permanent open councils or political idea competitions. Thus, through strengthening citizens’ democratic competence, people can, furthermore, open up their ideas for inclusion in political procedures. Recent studies prove that there is a correlation between the degree of participatory activity and the level of interest in politics, overall policy and trust in others (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016).

4 Constraints

To strengthen citizen participation as an independent pillar in the democratic system it is necessary to overcome systemic constraints. First of all it must be ensured that the fear of the political system’s representative elements and institutions being undermined is properly dealt with. Although this fear is unfounded (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016), it depends, nonetheless, on the forms of regulation that enable people to
take part in dialogue-oriented procedures – in consultation or deliberation. The role of citizen participation must not be to replace decisions of the representative institutions or to avoid direct-democratic initiatives. Therefore it is important to keep dialogue-oriented instruments and procedures informal, without a legally-binding character. It is obvious that informal citizen participation promotes the acceptance of policy outcomes because it makes people better informed about the crucial details of complex issues. As long as the right to take the main decisions is vested in the representative institutions or the people itself through direct-democratic procedures, citizen participation can play an important complementary role between the pillars.

Another constraint to be faced is the common fear that citizen participation (as well as direct democracy) would only promote the special or partial interests of particularly active and well-organised

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Recent studies prove that it depends mainly on how citizens are chosen or involved in dialogue-oriented procedures of citizen participation (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016). The choice of the right instrument and procedure is the most important aspect to ensure a balanced process of citizen participation. This could – for example – be reached by random selection of participants or a balanced scoping procedure.

5 Conclusion

As long as it is well-organised and well-implemented, citizen participation can play an important role in strengthening the confidence in our democratic institutions. The so-called crisis of representative democracy will become more and more of a chimaera when dialogue-oriented instruments and procedures of citizen participation, consultation and deliberation are used for consultation and deliberation. In this context citizen participation – especially if it is applied on the local level – is an eligible way of completing the democratic system consisting of representative democracy as the main pillar, direct democracy and – as a new addition – dialogue-oriented citizen participation as a third pillar with a certain umbrella function.
Literature (cited and for further reading):


