



Direct civic participation – democratising democracy?

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At first, more civic participation sounds like more democracy. After all, in Greek, democracy means the rule of the people. Whether direct involvement or civic participation does, however, lead to more democracy is not as clear-cut as it might first appear. This is because civic participation in the political process is not the only criterion for a functioning democratic system. Other critical factors are transparency, the ability to take effective decisions and avoiding getting trapped in years of negotiations without anything being resolved. Protecting the rights of the individual and working towards the common good are also essential elements of democracy. When it comes to democratising democracy, these aspects must also be taken into account.

Alongside conventional forms of political participation, such as voting, joining a political party or following political debates, there are also more direct ways of getting involved in politics. Direct civic participation therefore means direct involvement by the citizen in political decisions. There are a number of ways in which this can be done: civic referendums, petitions, involvement in participatory budgets, citizens' forums, committees and organised public debates. Many of these instruments are already in use within regions and municipalities, as well as on a European level. Since April 2012, for example, it has been possible to start a European Citizens' Initiative. If we consider direct civic participation in more detail, there are various pros and cons.



Swift solutions to problems and good results?

It is often pointed out that swift and efficient problem solving can be adversely affected if a civic referendum is involved in the decision. Decisions made by citizens require an exchange of information and opinions and logistical organisation, which takes time and incurs significant costs. There is also the danger that referendums lead to complex political issues being reduced to yes/no decisions, thus failing to do justice to the complexity of the matter. Furthermore, there is concern that political decisions become less factual and more emotionalised, which could boost populist movements. We should also bear in mind that, when the majority decides in favour of something, the voices of minorities are not necessarily included in the solution blueprint. A further problem can occur where short-term public moods result in long-term political projects taking a different direction. Here again, proponents of direct democracy maintain that, by including citizens in political decision-making, these decisions gain a higher degree of acceptance and therefore sustainability. The point is also made that, with the help of instruments of direct democracy, better and more practical, problem-oriented solutions can be found. On a regional level, for example, the participatory budget draws local residents into the debate around how much money should be spent on roads, children's nurseries and so on.



Are citizens capable enough?

Critics doubt citizens' capability to understand the complexity of the problems. The more detailed and technocratic the issues are, the harder it is for the average "Joe Bloggs" to fully comprehend and consider all of the pros and cons when making a decision. In addition, all citizens would need to keep themselves constantly up to date and take part in the debates. On

the other hand, advocates say that our democracy and understanding of citizenship have progressed. Being a citizen now no longer means simply voting for a preferred representative every four or five years, but actually getting actively involved. This is all the more the case, they say, as election promises are not honoured and there is a lack of alternatives in the political landscape. There is also criticism that political figures make decisions that relate solely to securing and retaining power.



All are equal within a direct democracy?

An important feature of elections in a representative democracy is that votes are cast in secret and carry equal weight. Insofar as individuals vote in elections for a parliament or president, their votes carry exactly the same weight as everyone else's. While this is still the case with citizens' referendums, the required level of participation is considerably higher. Frequent citizens' referendums would mean permanent commitment from citizens. The opinions of those who do not have the time or the resources to get involved then find no voice in political problem-solving. In Germany, it seems to be predominantly the well-educated middle classes who get involved in citizens' referendums on a regional level. This means only certain issues may be discussed and other social groups may find themselves sidelined. Critics therefore talk about an elitist democracy that could develop. Conversely, proponents of direct democracy assume that disadvantaged groups who are structurally distant from politics will be given the opportunity to forge a direct connection with politics. This could be the case in France, for example. It appears, then, that there may be national and regional differences regarding which social groups would use the method of direct civic participation.

On a European level, the idea of equality is adapted to the political system of the EU, as it is often a case of meeting two democratic requirements. On the one hand, each individual EU citizen's voice should carry equal weight. On the other hand, nation states also claim that they have differing levels of influence on political decisions, in accordance with the size of their populations. As in all federal systems, the two ways of thinking must be reconciled.

When we consider the advantages and disadvantages of direct civic participation, it is certainly advisable to check exactly where it makes sense to integrate citizens into the political process. When should this be their right, and where would direct participation be counter-productive to the interests of the general public, minorities and effective decision-making? It would also be feasible to allow elements of direct democracy on specific administrative levels (European, national, regional). Direct democracy and representative democracy do not, however, necessarily have to be seen as fundamental opposites, but can also complement each other. Maybe here lies the key to more democracy in democracy. When considering where and how citizens could get involved in decision-making, we should not forget that, ultimately, it is all citizens together who make up the sovereign.