



REPUBLIC OF POLAND



THE INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Background paper for the first meeting of the Council of Europe Forum on the Future of Democracy

CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE – THE PRESENT CONDITION AND PATHS TO RENEWAL

It is a tenet of European political thought that democracy cannot function properly without the active involvement of its citizens in public life. Democratic governance is not a natural order of things. On the contrary, to maintain its vitality, democracy requires constant renewal through the actions of an interested and informed citizenry. While civic participation has many forms and faces, for the great majority of Europeans, it means first and foremost taking advantage of their right to vote in elections and referenda on local, regional, national and (for European Union citizens) international level. Electoral turnout thus remains one of the crucial benchmarks of civic participation, allowing us to examine developments across Europe.

Why does it matter if citizens do not feel obliged to exercise their voting rights? Why should we worry if, in many countries of Europe, electoral turnout is either low or in decline?¹ One argument is that democracy can function quite well with very modest levels of turnout as is the case, for example, in Switzerland. It is better, or so it is argued, if only interested and informed citizens take part in electing their representatives, thus low turnout can be seen as an effective barrier against populism. However, the experience of countries with much shorter periods of uninterrupted democratic practice (such as the “new democracies” of Central and Eastern Europe) does not warrant such optimism. In these countries, low turnout has not stopped populists from making successful bids for representation in parliament.

¹Such a decline has been recorded for the countries of Western Europe since the 1990s. See *Voter turnout in Western Europe*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2004.

On the contrary, general electoral apathy tends to produce over-representation of both political extremists and interest groups, whose constituencies, albeit relatively small, are strongly motivated and turn out in force on election day. This, in turn, produces parliaments which are not perceived as representative of the attitudes and preferences of large parts of society. What is more, consistently low or declining voter turnout undermines the perceived legitimacy of elections, in particular where less than half of those eligible to vote actually do so. In some cases (where thresholds are used), low turnout may invalidate the vote, thus disrupting the democratic process and even causing a political crisis. This can lead to a veritable vicious circle, where low trust in democratic institutions leads people to abstain from elections, the results of which then deepen their sense of alienation from politics and reinforce mistrust of the democratic system.

Social scientists offer a number of reasons and explanations for declining rates of voter turnout. Some of the causes seems to be related to political systems. For example, elections based on a system of proportional representation tend to attract more voters than those based on majoritarian systems. Frequent elections tend to diminish voters' interest. However, in some countries, the causes are related to a lack of confidence in democratically elected institutions as well as a mistrust of the political class, often viewed as self-dealing, corrupt and uninterested in the problems of society at large. Such sentiments fuel public cynicism and encourage refusal to participate in democratic processes.

Some social groups, such as the young, are particularly susceptible to political withdrawal. In some cases, the young generation seeks refuge from traditional politics in alternative ways of engagement, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Others withdraw into private life, restricted to family and a close circle of friends. Pursuing one's career, with the increasing demands of market competition, is both an alternative and an obstacle (lack of time) to civic participation for some of the most active members of society. New generations of voters thus fail to develop the "habits of the heart" necessary for consistent engagement in public life.

Added to that are outdated electoral systems and infrastructures, which do not take into account the special needs of some groups of citizens, such as elderly or disabled voters, and thus limit their ability to vote. Modern lifestyles and the ensuing mobility of the more active members of society can also have a negative impact on election turnout, in particular where electoral systems are not flexible enough to take such changes into account.

On the other hand, social and economic marginalisation tends to discourage the less fortunate from taking advantage of their political rights, thus creating a vicious circle of powerlessness and deprivation. In many European countries, the inclusion of ethnic minorities and foreign residents in the democratic processes remains a serious challenge. Women's under-representation in elected representative bodies is both the "reason and result" of abstention.

Naturally, there is more to civic participation than voter turnout. However, a number of other quantifiable data concerning, for example, membership in political parties or labour unions also seems to point to declining rates of engagement in public life across Europe.

According to some researchers, diminishing interest and participation in traditional forms and institutions of representative democracy are or can be compensated by increased activity in other fields of public life, such as NGOs, where people associate to promote a variety of causes, ranging from environmental protection to development aid or alterglobalisation. One may recall that two prominent philosophers, Jürgen Habermas and the late Jacques Derrida, proclaimed the day of pan-European protests against American intervention in Iraq as marking the birth of a new sense of European citizenship. On the other side of Europe, forged presidential elections in Ukraine not only activated record-high voter turnout, but also an unprecedented scale of civic protest known as the Orange Revolution. The high turnout for the French and Dutch referenda on the European Union Constitutional Treaty provides a stark contrast with voters' apathy during elections for the European Parliament. In short, people can be motivated to get out to vote if they feel strongly enough about something.

Therefore, some would argue that a possible way forward would be to encourage development of various forms of civic engagement as alternatives to representative democracy. In recent years, we have witnessed an increased theoretical and practical interest in concepts such as "deliberative" "participatory" and "direct" democracy.

A key development in this field is the focus on so-called civic dialogue. Underlying this concept is the idea that a renewal of civic participation would be achieved by recognising the vital role played by organised groups of citizens – civil society – in shaping public policies through consultations and structured civic dialogue. A number of countries – as well as the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the World Bank and other international institutions – have developed guidelines, rules and procedures for such dialogue. Civil dialogue builds upon the experience of already established social dialogue between representatives of employers and employees, but it encompasses a broad variety of citizens' organisations and is not limited to labour and social policy issues. The aim of such initiatives and practices is first and foremost to

increase the legitimacy of policy making on various levels of governance. This is important both in the case of international bodies suffering from low accountability and a “democratic deficit” and national governments willing to “supplement” the legitimacy derived from more traditional or “formal” democratic procedures, such as parliamentary approval.

A positive example of such supplementary instruments is the “public hearing”, whereby draft laws are subject to open public discussion, and where different civic organisations as well as media are invited to voice their comments and recommendations. Public hearings thus improve the transparency of the legislative process by allowing all legitimate interests of different parts of the public to be expressed within a predefined legal and procedural framework. The public hearing is an example of institutionalising civic dialogue, and is meant to add to rather than replace the “traditional” mechanisms of representative democracy.

Other forms of public consultations initiated by different branches of government administration and legislators are also becoming more and more popular across Europe. However, there is room to criticise some of these new modes of governance. For example, some public consultations are conceived of only in order to bypass the normal legislative process, while in other cases consultations are no more than mere formalities, as no changes are introduced as a result. Problems remain with the “representativeness” of some of the civic dialogue partners; governments as well as international institutions are sometimes criticised for limiting consultations to organisations dependent on them financially. Civil dialogue clearly requires that its best practices be codified and that transparency and accountability standards for both the consultation process and its participants be improved.

The rise of Internet technologies has also created a vast space of opportunity for public deliberation and dialogue through chats, Internet forums and other forms of ICT applications. As always, such opportunities are not risk-free. On the one hand, they can engender rational dialogues on pressing social and political issues, but on the other, they are used to vent political frustration and defame political opponents.

The mechanisms of civic dialogue, in its broad sense, are used to enhance the participation of particular minority (for example ethnic) groups in public life. Thus dialogue between elected public authorities and “community leaders” is one of the tenets of “multiculturalism”. Policies based on this approach recognise different cultural identities and the specific needs of different social groups, and establish forums for these groups to communicate their interests to the larger public. At the same time, such policies are sometimes seen as privileging “community rights”

over the rights of individual members of this community, and as establishing, rather than just expressing, new lines of divisions within society.

In view of how important the levels and forms of civic participation are for the state of democracy in Europe, it seems only proper that the launch meeting of the Forum on the Future of Democracy focus on this issue.

The crucial questions we would like to address are the following:

- Are citizens across Europe still willing to participate in the democratic processes?
- Civic participation in Europe – are we witnessing a crisis or a transformation?
- How will changes affect the functioning of European democracies?
- What can be done to reverse negative trends and to increase civic participation and a sense of responsibility towards the public sphere?

The purpose of this first meeting would be to overview the prospects for and the obstacles hindering active involvement of citizens in public life. Perhaps more importantly, the meeting should become a forum for an exchange of ideas and best practices aimed at increasing and strengthening civic participation across Europe.

The following types of initiatives could be proposed for discussion:

- initiatives to modernise electoral laws and infrastructures to make them more voter-friendly, such as expanding voting time, voting by proxy, mail voting and so forth;
- the application of Internet technologies to both voting and democratic deliberation;
- initiatives aimed at developing civic interest and habits among young people, such as lowering the voting age;
- initiatives to increase the civic participation of immigrants and other hitherto politically excluded groups of society;
- direct democracy (referenda) as a way to increase citizens' impact on policy and decision making;

This is by no means an exhaustive list of initiatives, some of which can be seen as examples of best practice that can be emulated by other countries across Europe.

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