



# Can Citizen Participation Really Revive European Democracy?

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*At its recent global summit in Ottawa, the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative comprising seventy-nine national governments, twenty local governments, and thousands of civic organizations, released its first flagship report assessing the state of open government globally, “[Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box](#).” The report analyzes and evaluates both progress and shortcomings in OGP members’ efforts to make governance more transparent and accountable to citizens. Building on this valuable stocktaking report, and reflecting the importance of this topic globally, the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program is publishing a series of three articles exploring key issues facing the open government agenda. This is the third article in the series.*

From Hong Kong and France to Sudan and Algeria, the viral spread of protests is a testament to citizens’ demand for a greater voice in how political power is exercised. The Open Government Partnership’s (OGP’s) recent report “[Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box](#)” emphasizes how much progress is still needed on citizen participation.

In Europe, initiatives to increase citizen participation have made substantial progress. Participative forums that involve ordinary citizens in public decisionmaking have significantly expanded in recent years, including ad hoc citizens’ assemblies that address specific policy questions, government-instigated citizens’ panels that cover wider sets of challenges, and more fixed deliberative structures and citizens’ petitions. These efforts may offer lessons of global applicability.

This spread of consultative participation represents a notable development in European political governance. Enthusiasts argue that such participation offers a means of rebooting democracy and creating at least a partial antidote to illiberal populism—to the extent that it addresses citizens’ frustration with not having an impactful say in public policymaking.

The participative turn in European democracy is welcome and overdue. Yet, to date, it remains confined to relatively narrow policy issues; its wider political consequences have been modest. Consultative participation has affected mainly what can be termed



low-politics issues—decisions related to local projects—rather than high-politics issues related to national-level ideological matters. There are severe difficulties and challenges to overcome if participative forums are to address these core issues and contribute more significantly to democratic quality.

## EUROPE'S PARTICIPATIVE TURN

Until a few years ago, the potential of citizen participation outside the main channels of representative democracy was underappreciated, except among a fairly self-enclosed community of experts who pushed for participative initiatives and focused on the procedural details of how they should best be organized and run. But as problems with representative democracy have intensified, European governments, international organizations, civil society bodies, and citizens have embraced participative practices more widely.

Just in recent months, there has been a flurry of new developments. On the back of its so-called **Grand Débat**, or Great Debate, the French government has established a citizens' assembly to discuss climate change. In Belgium, a particularly sophisticated new system of participation is being set up for the German-speaking community. In Spain, the **Madrid city council** has established—with OGP backing—a permanent assembly to deliberate on local issues. A network of citizens' assemblies has been established in a number of Polish cities. Through its Innovation in Democracy Programme, the British government is piloting a similar scheme across a number of local councils. In April 2019, the Scottish parliament announced it would set up a **citizens' jury** to issue recommendations on a wide scope of political challenges. Around a dozen citizens' assembly projects are now underway across the **United Kingdom**. After previous successful exercises, the Irish government announced in June 2019 that it intended to run two new citizens' assemblies on gender issues and reforms to municipal politics in Dublin. The **European Citizens' Consultations** process, from mid-2018 to 2019, welcomed suggestions on the future of the EU.

With many more such examples, it is evident that a critical mass of participative initiatives is beginning to accumulate. While old hands caution that similar initiatives have existed previously, participative forums are multiplying and attracting more general interest for the first time in Europe.

Moreover, the **methodological quality** of many of these participative initiatives has improved significantly in recent years. After years of trial and error, experts have reached agreement on the procedures necessary to generate high-quality citizen participation that revolves around deep and balanced deliberation. Such measures include selecting participants by random lot; moving methodically from broad agenda-setting discussions to more specific solutions; involving experts; structuring deliberation in ways that avoid polarizing debate; and getting public authorities to commit to the results of participative forums.<sup>1</sup>

An increasing number of successful examples of participation has helped dispel doubts over whether citizens really want to be involved with decisionmaking or can engage open-mindedly with complex policy debates. A **wealth of evidence** suggests that participative initiatives can effectively engage citizens in specific debates, and participants often converge around an agreed-upon compromise.

But as the demand for participative forums grows, necessary **methodological standards** have begun to slip. Several recent examples in Europe show how shallow and hastily designed initiatives are being promoted as “democratic participation” when, in fact, they do not represent progress in any meaningful sense. Some recent participative forums have not been especially deliberative; some have been quite deliberative but with fairly limited participation. As European governments increasingly feel obliged to demonstrate citizen consultation, they will be more tempted to check that box with one-off conferences and the like. Ensuring that methodological standards are maintained and that the involved ministries devote sufficient resources to participation will require renewed vigilance.

## MOVING FROM LOW POLITICS TO HIGH POLITICS

Participation across Europe is contributing constructively to low-politics issues. To date, experts have focused mainly on improving the internal processes and methodology of participation and deliberation. This mode of analysis places the onus on initiatives organized around practical challenges that permit constructive solutions, allowing only limited consideration of the role of citizen participation in broader democratic renewal.<sup>2</sup> That means there is a tendency to work toward a fairly narrow understanding of technical or sector- and service-based local participation, as opposed to genuinely open-ended *political* participation.

Participation has most commonly taken the form of governments and local authorities asking for opinions on a specific issue. This is different from a permanent citizens' mechanism to solicit input on a full range of policy issues and wider matters of national identity.

So far, the majority of citizen participation has taken the form of debates about projects—what authorities should spend local funds on. It most commonly takes place around issues needing a one-off decision—for instance, choosing between alternative development plans for a local neighborhood or deciding whether to introduce a traffic-reduction scheme. Of course, most matters of public policy are not like this. Rather, most issues are the subject of ongoing discussions and decisions, do not lend themselves to ever being definitively resolved, and require a rolling series of balances and trade-offs rather than the simple selection of one option over another. Consider the decisions governments make to balance revenue and spending, or the negotiations they have to undertake with international partners on a huge range of matters.

While participation at the project level is extremely valuable in the practical sense of gauging support for specific, funded projects, it is unlikely to quell citizens' larger anxieties over the state of European democracy or their diminishing trust in politicians. A key question is

whether participatory initiatives can move to a higher political level and contribute meaningfully to democratic revitalization. This would require authorities to make some significant, qualitative changes to the way that citizen participation is structured, in order to correct the disadvantages currently plaguing these forums.

The challenge of *scaling up* participation from the local to national level is a key part of any such evolution. Optimists point to a small number of cases where citizens' assemblies have worked at a national level on big political issues like abortion and other questions of values. However, making participation more political is not just—or even primarily—a question of scale; rather, it requires a qualitative shift in the kinds of issues and debates that participation broaches. While experts most commonly focus on scaling up participation, this is not in itself sufficient to shift such forums from low to high politics.

The same is true of another issue prominent in current debates: the shift from one-off to *permanent* forums. While the creation of more permanent assemblies is important, it does not in itself denote a move from low to high politics. Some local authorities have begun to move toward the creation of more permanent structures of participation, but the basic mode of action remains largely the same: citizens reviewing different project-based ways of spending local resources.

Even where participation is scaled up and made more permanent, a qualitative challenge remains in how citizens' assemblies deal with the intricate and complex *linkages* between different areas of policy. While participative initiatives tend to treat issues distinctly, the thorniest political dilemmas result from the tensions and necessary trade-offs between different policy goals and citizens' preferences. At present, a core problem is the inconsistencies between what citizens do in participative forums and their political party preferences.

For instance, climate change is an increasingly common focus of many new national-level citizens' assembly proposals. Citizens in local participative forums support



projects like greener neighborhoods, pedestrian streets, more parks, and limits on traffic. Yet many citizens then vote for national political parties whose broader policy agendas run counter to all these goals—and, in fact, government-imposed green taxes are often a trigger for citizens' protests. While climate change is clearly a high-politics issue, climate change-related assemblies will only be useful if they address this issue in the context of voters' wider political choices.

The way that participation has developed so far means that the number of citizens involved has been very limited—in most instances, no more than a few dozen people. Most citizens are not even aware of their increased prominence. The sobering reality is that even in places with successful, recent experience in participatory initiatives, this has not sufficed to stem illiberal macro-level political trends. Estonia's online and other deliberative initiatives are world-famous, but the right-wing, populist EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) **surged** dramatically in the country's 2019 elections. Belgium has the G1000, one of the most respected and innovative participatory initiatives, yet Flemish nationalists **rose dramatically** in 2019. The Madrid city council's much-admired cluster of participatory initiatives is likely to be maintained but **remodeled**, because local elections in 2019 brought to power a coalition that includes the far-right Vox party. Participative forums have not provided any antidote to the rise of illiberal populist parties—at least, not yet.

This record suggests that dovetailing participation with other areas of democratic reform still presents a significant challenge. For many years, experts have argued that emerging forms of direct citizen participation need to work in tighter concert with existing channels of representative democracy. This is a much-repeated point. Yet practical progress in joining together different types of democratic renewal remains limited across Europe—at the EU, national, and subnational levels.

In a small number of recent cases, participative assemblies have worked in tandem with parliamentary

debate forums and mechanisms of direct democracy. **Estonia's assembly** on elections, political parties, and citizen engagement, as well as Ireland's approach to amending a constitutional clause prohibiting abortion, are normally cited as the best examples. Such successes are the exception, however—and even the Irish case has its **skeptics**. In general, efforts across Europe to improve the participative, representative, and direct forms of democracy are not particularly synchronized.

Indeed, notwithstanding plentiful rhetoric about combining participative and representative democracy, many participative initiatives are still framed in opposition or as a counterweight to parliaments and parties. Debates among citizens' assembly experts can sometimes be strikingly dismissive of political parties, parliaments, and other bodies of democratic representation. For many enthusiasts, the whole point of participative forums is to move the democratic center of gravity away from these pillars of democracy that they insist are in irremediable decline. **Some fear** the new popularity of citizens' assemblies risks worsening one of democracy's underlying problems—namely, politicians' tendency to shirk difficult decisions.

In some sense, participation across Europe can sometimes feel curiously depoliticized. Citizens' initiatives individualize citizen engagement—they are predicated on citizens participating as individuals. This risks deflecting attention away from the ways citizens still need collective organizations, like parties, unions, and associations. Without these, democracy is left devoid of its necessary collective transmission belts between the individual and the state. Such mediated representation is still needed to help address deep-seated power relations between different groups in society. If participative forums undercut this, they risk crystalizing existing social, economic, and political imbalances and injustices. In some instances, they can even appear quite conservative—to the extent that they implicitly work around the deeper systemic distortions of European democratic processes.

This depoliticization means that participative initiatives are often based on the unrealistic assumption that policy and identity disagreements among different groups can be neutralized—and that this is the key metric for democratic progress. Yet the main, underlying reason why democracy is faltering in many EU countries has more to do with stubborn and deep-rooted structural impediments to equality and justice. Similar to the way the concept of civil society can be used—or misused—civic deliberation implicitly gets framed as a tame, consensus-oriented, civilizing phenomenon, devoid of sharp, ideological power contestation.

The fact that left, right, pro-EU, anti-EU, local, pan-European, populist, and anti-populist voices all formally support more citizen participation is clearly a strength.<sup>3</sup> However, it should perhaps also ring some alarm bells. It remains to be seen whether, on bigger political issues, participative initiatives can really dissolve differences and simultaneously benefit all these diverse ideologies. European democratic renewal cannot and should not be inoculated from deeper power struggles and divisions—whether rooted in class, material, identity, or national divergences. Yet the spread of new participative initiatives across Europe still looks strikingly disconnected from such intrinsic dynamics.

## WAYS FORWARD

What do these challenges mean for the future of citizen participation? And can they be resolved? Expectations around participative democratic initiatives are now running extremely high. Arguably, the pendulum has swung from neglect all the way over to an uncritical assumption that deliberative citizens' initiatives can be a major plank in efforts to restore EU democratic accountability.

Conversely, skeptical voices raise doubts that participative processes can be extended from low to high politics. They warn that small-scale deliberation may work when consensus is within easy reach, but

will be stretched past the breaking point when applied to the divisive problems that afflict the overall state of European democracy.<sup>4</sup> In private, many experts who have been working for years in this area express unease that participative forums are now being so widely touted as a panacea to populism and the bigger problems plaguing European democracy.

Heeding these warnings, governments and other authorities will need to be guided by a measured degree of ambition. They should begin to explore pilot ideas for how to modestly widen participative forums by tentatively moving them into increasingly political territory without overextending the dynamics of citizen engagement. The goal should be to widen the political relevance of participation without undermining the practical features that have made it successful in some EU states and municipalities—to maximize its potential without running the risk of overstretching it. If the potential of participative forums is oversold, citizens may become disillusioned. If it is undersold, these forums will remain a niche arena, disconnected from broader political problems of European democracy.

The challenges identified above highlight the *qualitative* changes necessary to give participation a modest injection of high-politics relevance. So far, the focus has been on spreading existing, low-politics forums and methodologies to a larger number of localities. Alongside these efforts, governments and EU institutions might also experiment with participation of a different kind. This would involve zooming out from singular issues to broader policy questions; finding ways of incorporating participative initiatives into other areas of democratic reform; and molding participation around more contentious power dynamics.

European governments are unlikely to consider standing national legislative chambers made up of randomly selected citizens. But they might consider more modest experiments, in which citizens and members of parliament work together on specific issues in a single forum. Local citizens' forums might be used as a base

to feed into higher-level deliberation, so that different levels of debate relate organically to each other. The EU might provide a common template on the kinds of questions that will guide the next phase of citizens' initiatives across Europe.

So far, there has been no higher-level systems perspective on the broader political impact of the rapid growth of participative initiatives across Europe.<sup>5</sup> The need to work toward such an understanding will be at the forefront of the next phase of European citizen participation. It will be important to propel participation without overly idealizing its potential relative to other areas of much-needed democratic reform. European democracy will need a judicious balance of mediated and unmediated citizen engagement. The challenge will be to design participation in a way that improves other forms of democratic accountability, rather than undermining or overshadowing them. Participation will need to be a catalyst for reforming democracy, not a stand-alone alternative.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

- 1 John Gastil and Robert Richards, "Making Direct Democracy Deliberative Through Random Assemblies," *Politics and Society* 41, no. 2 (June 2013): 253–81; Marcin Gerwin, *Citizens' Assemblies: A Guide to Democracy That Works* (Krakow: Open Plan Foundation, 2018).
- 2 Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps, "Generating Democratic Legitimacy Through Deliberative Innovations: The Role of Embeddedness and Disruptiveness," *Representation* 52, no. 1 (2016): 13–27.
- 3 Richard Youngs, *Europe Reset: New Directions for the EU* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
- 4 See, for instance, Andre Bachtiger et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 5 Frank Hendriks, "Democratic Innovation Beyond Deliberative Reflection: The Plebiscitary Rebound and the Advent of Action-Oriented Democracy," *Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2019): 444–64.

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