

## Representation vs. Participation: How to overcome the Democratic Fatigue Syndrome?

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### 1. Basic Terminology Connected to the Development of Democracy

(1) The “democracy question” is the most important one in politics as it encompasses and determines the quality of all concrete policy fields. It implies fundamental and deep systemic questions: Who decides on political questions? For what reasons? Are decisions taken only for specific interests or are they taken in the interest of all of us? Can we influence decisions as citizens? If we cannot influence politics or the European project and if we are reduced to being mere spectators the question arises: whose world is this, whose Europe, whose nation, whose region and city is this? The purpose of democracy is to provide us *the freedom and the procedural tools* that enable us to make it ours. Freedom in a democracy means that we can shape and co-create our common life-basis together with other citizens.

(2) Democracy also implies a substantial promise. It must *provide a fair distribution of the life chances*. The problem today is that democracy is limited to the nation-state, although daily life today is strongly determined by transnational structures. The nation-state alone cannot anymore provide a real contribution to the fair distribution of life chances. The main challenge for the current generation is to reconcile a globalized economy with democracy.

(3) The notion of “*conflicts*” is essential. A democracy should constitute the rules, the rights and the procedures in order to make conflicts solvable without any violence. To equate conflicts with violence is a big misunderstanding. Conflicts are an essential medium for social learning. We need to have conflicts to enable us to learn. Therefore procedures and rules are needed which do not tend to violence but foster mutual understanding.

### 2. How can direct democracy help overcome the democratic fatigue syndrome?

Proponents of direct democracy (DD) within civil society such as Mehr Demokratie and Democracy International do not want to replace representation by new forms of participation but find out how to best balance representation and participation. That means the key question is: how can these elements work well together? As such direct democracy is an additional element to representation, which prevents representation to become a monopoly.

The “referendum” is a different instrument than a “plebiscite”. In a direct democracy it is always a part of the people through a “citizens’ initiative” or a “popular initiative” who have the right to invite all people to decide through a referendum. Never the government is free to choose a question and then put this question to the people for a public vote. This is exactly what a plebiscite is. In the tradition of Napoleon the III a plebiscite always was used by dictators to get a legitimacy, which they did not have out of the parliaments. Today the problem with top-down triggered plebiscites is: the person triggering the plebiscite becomes the subject of the vote. However the basic idea and advantage of direct democracy is the exclusive focus on issues not on persons. This fundamentally changes the logic of discussion.

Simply the fact that direct democracy procedures exist (independent of whether they are used) changes the representatives in Parliament considerably. It makes them listening better to those who they shall represent (citizens). Politicians become more responsive and humble, because they know they always can be corrected again in between elections.

Today most Western democracy's framework does not allow the societies to exploit the potentials they have in the citizenry. Citizens feel underestimated and excluded by politics if they cannot participate in decision-making beyond elections. This is one of the reasons that creates the democratic fatigue syndrome.

What you get out of direct democracy depends on how you design it. A badly designed direct democracy is worse than nothing and discredits the processes as unfortunately still is the case in many countries around the world. When however you design it in a way that people are able to express themselves, then you get exactly what the EU and modern Western democracies miss most today: identification, discussion and active communities.

When you invite citizens to participate, they feel themselves as a part of something bigger. It increases *identification* and integration of heterogeneous societies. The best example is Switzerland with the most advanced (albeit not perfect) system of representative democracy complemented with direct democracy. The Swiss writer Dürrenmatt expressed that the Swiss are very different as they have no common history, no common languages, no common destiny, no common religion. (This is very similar to the EU). The only thing what the Swiss have in common is that they are different. And due to the fact that they can regularly express their differences, they like to be together.

By inviting people to participate, one can observe an enormous *increase of discussion and communication*. Communication is the soul of direct democracy. In this sense, one creates many thousands of public spheres. Where ever people meet, they discuss and other people listen and get involved. There is a difference between discussing about issues compared to choosing about people. One gets issue-based discourses and less personalization

Direct democracy helps to create what you need most in the EU: *communities*. Communities don't emerge if you do not activate people. Similar with "*identity*": it is a result of a common action, a common engagement. Passively you lose your identity. Communities are a product of having acted together. Direct democracy can help to make this experience possible. And by offering a common voting-space through direct democracy it can also help to create the missed "demoi" in the EU.

Are citizens sufficiently informed? If one invites citizens to participate, they acquire knowledge and interest. They can learn to take wise decisions. But when you leave them out the question raises why should one be interested? Direct democracy institutions, in which a small number of people is allowed to invite all people to decide, creates not only a process but also sufficient incentives. Everybody has an interest to discuss with everybody because everybody knows that everybody will decide. This is the essential point, which makes a big difference between "Agenda Citizens' Initiatives" and real "Citizens' Initiatives" / "Popular Initiatives" in which a small amount of people can provoke a national or European decision. (In an "Agenda Citizens' Initiatives" you merely invite the institutions to discuss a topic but can't ensure and enforce a decision).

### 3. How to Properly Design Direct Democracy?

Looking at the design DD one has to be very careful and focus on the elements which will decide on the quality of DD. Some of them include:

1. The “entrance”, the quorum to trigger the process, should not be more than 3% of the eligible voters. If the quorum is too high only powerful people can make a use of it. The instrument was created in the French revolution and afterwards concurred in some countries in order to share and limit their power. Therefore one needs to make the DD instrument manageable for those who do not have a lot of power.

2. Quorums of participation and approval should be low. If they are high, they turn out to become an invitation to abstain and boycott the vote, that means not to participate, communicate and to convince. This is why today so many people are frustrated in Italy. Half of the decisions are not valid, although it got 90% majorities. Berlusconi asked citizens to stay at home, so they did not reach the 50% of participation quorum.

3. The interface between indirect (parliamentary) and direct democracy is essential. *Interaction* is needed and not an antagonism. This is why in the Swiss cantons one has decided for a good symmetry. Citizens are invited not only to say yes or no but parliament can also make a counter-proposal. Then all citizens have a choice between three options. In the Californian system however there is no interaction at all. Parliament cannot interact with the citizens’ initiative and provide an alternative proposal.

### 4. Representation & Participation in the Brexit Plebiscite

The Brexit-vote was not direct democracy, but a top-down plebiscite as defined above. The plebiscite was triggered top-down used for instrumental reasons: to silence David Cameron’s opponents in the Conservative Party. It remained unclear what Brexit (leaving the EU) in practice would mean. The problem with this plebiscite is that it is “a one shot” – it remains fully unclear what to do if a correction of the result is needed. Nevertheless the Brexit vote forces us to see social realities and provides valuable information about our democratic systems in the Western world.

The participation rate increased by about 10% compared to the last UK national elections. It mobilized in particular those people who usually wouldn’t go voting anymore in parliamentary party elections. Since they don’t go voting anymore, political parties have no incentive to target them. These are the “left-behind”, forgotten citizens who have given up, who don’t believe to have any interesting future life-chances. They don’t feel anymore represented in representative democracy. Two main factors lead to the result according to opinion polls: fear of immigration and loss of national sovereignty (“Take back Control” was the main LEAVE slogan). In addition we observe a massive social divide in Britain as in nearly all Western democracies.

In a well-balanced and fine-tuned direct democracy one would rarely vote on such big issues. Instead one would vote on immigration, decentralisation, a more inclusive regional and rural policy, the increase of the social state, a more workers friendly economy, a more citizen friendly tax policy. All this are policy elements which went wrong in the eyes of many British

people and united them to vote for a Brexit. However a nation state alone cannot solve this. For this democracy must be transnationalized.

#### 5. How to Transnationalize Democracy in Europe?

One consequence of the Brexit vote must be to fundamentally improve, reform and relaunch the EU political system so the EU becomes actually support-worthy in future votes by delivering the procedural and substantial promise of democracy. Global market forces will need to be domesticated and we as citizens must also be allowed to shape our common life-basis together on the transnational level. As it stands today the EU cannot reflect the preferences and will of European citizens. It is a flawed system which causes a large part of the democratic fatigue-syndrome. The danger is that the EU system cannot renew itself anymore from inside.

Denying participation now - as EU leaders and the Commission are doing - out of the fear of populism is only making the situation worse, increasing people's anger at being ignored - and driving them into the arms of the populists. The anxiety of the future which we fear, we can only overcome if we develop a clear picture of what we really want. The traditional place for such fundamental questions is a *Constitutional Assembly*. And for this we need to develop a democratic pathway at transnational level. In the ideal case such a process would be initiated and raised bottom-up and results into a new European social contract which will – and that must be clear from the beginning - ultimately be given to a vote to all EU citizens.

Helpful Sources:

[The Direct Democracy Navigator](#)

The [website of Swiss researcher Andreas Gross](#) (a leading expert on direct democracy).