EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

PIDOP – Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation

An EU-funded research project investigating the processes which influence political and civic participation by young people, women, minorities and migrants in Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 4: What do psychological theories tell us about citizen participation?

April 2012

INTRODUCTION

Political vs. civic participation

Researchers in psychology who investigate citizen participation draw a distinction between 'political' and 'civic' participation. The term 'political participation' is used to refer to activity which is intended to influence governance. Political participation is further broken down into 'conventional' vs. 'non-conventional' activity, where conventional activity involves electoral processes and non-conventional activity takes place outside electoral processes. The term 'civic participation' is used to refer to voluntary activity aimed at helping others, achieving a public good, or involvement in community life.

Examples of conventional and non-conventional political participation and civic participation

❖ Examples of conventional political participation:
  - Voting
  - Membership of a political party
  - Running for political election
  - Working on political election campaigns for candidates or parties
  - Making donations to political parties
  - Trying to persuade others to vote

❖ Examples of non-conventional political participation:
  - Membership of groups or campaigning organizations with a political focus
  - Participating in protests, demonstrations and marches
  - Signing petitions
  - Writing letters or emails to politicians or public officials

- Writing articles or blogs with a political content for the media
- Participating in fundraising events for a political cause

❖ Examples of civic participation:
- Helping other people in one's own community
- Membership of community organizations and other non-political organizations (e.g., religious institutions, sports clubs, etc.)
- Undertaking organized voluntary work
- Giving money to charities
- Fund-raising activities for good causes
- Consumer activism: buying or boycotting particular goods or services in order to support specific causes

Psychological theories of political and civic participation

A large number of psychological theories of political and civic participation have been developed over the past 20 years. These theories are based on findings from social-scientific research into the psychological and social factors that drive political and civic participation among citizens. These theories have identified a wide range of psychological and social factors that influence participation.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Psychological factors influencing participation

All of the following psychological factors influence political and civic participation:
- Having a sense of civic duty or social responsibility, and holding a view of good citizenship as being connected with a duty of participation
- Perceiving an injustice, and perceiving that the roots of the injustice lie in the behaviour of a group, an organization, an institution or 'the system'
- A curiosity-driven interest in political and civic matters
- Attentiveness to what is happening in the political and civic domains, for example, by following the news on television, radio, newspapers and the internet
- Having knowledge about political and civic matters
- Holding opinions about political and civic issues
- Having a sense of one's own personal political efficacy, that is, the belief that one is able to understand and to influence political or civic affairs
- Having a sense or belief that by acting together with others one is able to influence political or civic affairs
- Trust in political and societal institutions, the absence of cynicism about politics and politicians, and the belief that politicians and political institutions are responsive to citizens' views and demands

Because all of the above psychological factors influence levels of participation, activities and interventions which enhance these factors are also likely to enhance participation.

Sense of community

A particularly important psychological factor influencing levels of participation is an individual's sense of community. 'Sense of community' refers to the feeling of belonging to a community. Communities can be formal or informal social organizations bounded by a geographical location, such as a local community, a town, a neighbourhood, a school, or even a nation or a supranational entity such as the EU. A community may also be a social community based on common interests, goals or needs, for example sports groups, political groups and volunteering groups.

A sense of community involves four main aspects. These are:
- A sense of belonging, and the feeling that one is part of a community
- A shared emotional connection with other members of the community
- The feeling that one has the opportunity to participate in community life, to have influence over the decisions and actions of the community, and to make a contribution
- The feeling that some of one's own personal needs are satisfied by being a community member

A strong sense of community is related to various forms of participation. For example, it is associated with citizens' involvement in community activities, with activists' sustained involvement in favour of a common good, and with young people's participation in structured activities within school and other contexts in their community (e.g., volunteer associations). A sense of community also plays a significant role in influencing people's feelings of social well-being.

Social factors influencing participation

All of the following social factors also influence levels of political and civic participation:
- The family
- Ethnic background
- The school
- The peer group
- Organizational membership

The role of the family

The socioeconomic circumstances of the family and parents' levels of education (which are interrelated factors) are strong predictors of a person's levels of participation. Individuals from poor families, and those whose parents have low levels of educational achievement, are less likely to be politically active.

Affluence and parental educational achievement influence the types of experiences which are made available to young people as they grow up, and affect the opportunities which they have for developing political and civic capacities. For example, those who experience regular political discussions with their parents while they are growing up tend to display higher levels of participation. Having politically engaged parents is an important factor that influences young

people's patterns of participation.

The role of ethnicity

Ethnic background is also related to levels of participation. For example, individuals from ethnic minority and ethnic majority backgrounds participate in different kinds of volunteer activities, with minority individuals participating more in activities relating to their own ethnic community and to other minority groups.

The generational status of migrant and minority individuals is also linked to levels of participation. For example, the first generation is less likely to be registered to vote than later generations, and is also less likely to engage in volunteering and boycotting compared to majority group individuals. By contrast, the second generation often displays higher levels of civic and political participation than members of the majority ethnic group.

In the case of minority and migrant individuals, perceived discrimination by the majority society is often a precipitating factor which stimulates these individuals into civic and political activity.

The role of the school

Some classroom activities can be very beneficial for the development of participation. For example, having an open classroom climate at school (i.e., the opportunity to discuss controversial social issues and to express and listen to different opinions in the classroom) predicts individuals' levels of political and civic knowledge, their likelihood of voting in the future, and their sense of their own political efficacy.

Education can directly enhance the specific knowledge, skills and motivations which are required for participation. Individuals who remain in full-time education for a longer period of time have higher levels of interest in politics, higher levels of attentiveness to civic and political events, and higher levels of knowledge of civic and political matters.

However, direct teaching about the political system is less effective than open classroom discussion or the teaching of special skills such as political letter writing and debating. Direct teaching is also less effective than providing students with positive high quality experiences of participation through volunteering and community service.

Education exerts effects on participation not only through the enhancement of students' political and civic skills, but also through the effects which education has on an individual's employment opportunities, social networks and positions of influence in later life, all of which are related to levels of participation.

The importance of the peer group

Young people who are well integrated into their peer group and who have a high number of friends tend to be more politically and civically active, and are more likely to commit to political and civic goals and values.

However, the amount of time spent in the evenings outside the home with friends is related to low levels of civic knowledge in those countries where the peer group culture devalues education.

The importance of organizational membership

People who are members of organizations and clubs, or who volunteer or work for the community in their youth, have higher levels of participation in adulthood. The largest effect stems from membership of organizations that involve activities such as public speaking, debating, community service and representing the community.

The effects of organizational membership on participation are caused in part by the opportunity which such activities give for acquiring and exercising civic and political knowledge and skills, and in part by the increase in sense of community and social trust which results from these activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Schools should operate with an open classroom climate

The development of the skills, attitudes and motivations which are required for active citizenship depends not only on the acquisition of knowledge but also on the accumulation of practical experience of discussing controversial issues, and expressing and listening to different opinions. Schools should ensure that teaching staff operate with an open classroom climate so that their students obtain substantial practical experience of discussing and debating opinions.

Schools should stimulate the appropriate psychological attributes in their students

Schools should identify and implement ways to stimulate civic and political interest, attentiveness, knowledge, opinionation and personal political efficacy in their students. For example, they should consider:

- the introduction, or expanding the number, of debating clubs
- hosting question-and-answer sessions involving politicians to stimulate interest in civic and political matters
- organizing 'mock elections' in order to encourage young people to form opinions
- teaching skills such as those needed to write letters to public officials and politicans
- making available to their students a wide range of opportunities to obtain high quality experiences of participation rooted in their own local communities, especially experiences involving volunteering and community service

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Ethnic community leaders and youth agencies should encourage minority and migrant youth to participate in projects involving their own ethnic community

Ethnic minority and migrant youth are often especially engaged with issues concerning or affecting their own ethnic community. This interest can be built upon to provide these youth with high quality participation experiences, to develop their participatory skills, and to raise their awareness about participation and citizenship through volunteering. Ethnic community leaders and youth agencies should encourage young people from ethnic minority and migrant groups to take part as volunteers in projects involving their own ethnic community. Such projects might, for example, focus on heritage and cultural issues, promote the role of their own community in a multicultural environment, challenge ethnic stereotypes, or promote inclusion.

National, regional and local governments should ensure that all youth have access to membership of a range of organizations

Greater involvement in organizations is associated with higher levels of civic and political participation. National, regional and local governments should ensure that all youth have access to membership of a range of organizations, including youth and leisure centres, sports clubs, cultural centres, local community centres, etc., and should encourage youth to take up membership of these organizations.

Organizations should aim to attract young people, who should be offered a wide range of opportunities for participation so that they can obtain high quality participation experiences

Organizations should make greater efforts to attract young people, particularly disengaged youth who are not members of any organizations. Youth should be offered a wide range of opportunities for participation and the opportunity to obtain high quality participation experiences within organizations based in their own communities.

In particular, organizations should ensure that youth are given:
- The opportunity to acquire a strong sense of belonging
- The opportunity for active involvement in their community
- The opportunity to exercise influence within their community
- The opportunity to develop strong emotional connections with their peers
- The opportunity to satisfy their own personal needs within the communities in which they live

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

PIDOP is a multinational research project funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. The project is examining the processes which influence political and civic participation in eight European states – Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.

The research is examining macro-level contextual factors (including historical, political, electoral, economic and policy factors), proximal social factors (including family, educational and media factors) and psychological factors (including motivational, cognitive, attitudinal

and identity factors) which facilitate and/or inhibit political and civic participation.

A distinctive focus of the project is the psychology of the individual citizen and the psychological processes through which macro-level contextual factors and proximal social factors exert their effects upon citizens' participation. Young people, women, minorities and migrants are being examined as four specific groups at risk of political disengagement. The research is exploring the differences as well as the overlap between civic and political engagement.

The overall aim of the project is to explain how and why different forms of participation develop or are hampered among citizens living in different European countries and contexts.

Methodology

The research has involved three strands, as follows:
- New political and psychological theories of political and civic participation have been developed. These theories concern the nature of political and civic participation, the different types of citizens that can be identified on the basis of their patterns of participation, and the various factors and processes which drive citizen participation.
- Existing data from previous surveys have been analysed using advanced statistical techniques. The surveys which have been used include the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, International Social Survey Programme, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the World Values Survey.
- New data on political and civic participation have been collected from ethnic majority and minority populations. These data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus groups, individual interviews and survey methods. Data have been collected in nine different national locations across Europe. In each location, data were collected from members of the ethnic majority group and from members of two ethnic minority or migrant groups. In total, data have been collected from 27 ethnic groups living across Europe.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Consortium

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Budget

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Project website

http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop/

More information

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Further reading

PIDOP policy briefing papers

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 1 (2011). *What can be learnt from the analysis of current policies on participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 2 (2011). *What do young people believe and think about citizenship and participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 3 (2012). *What do existing survey data tell us about citizen participation?*

All policy briefing papers may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.

PIDOP presentations

A large number of papers from the PIDOP project have been presented at conferences in 2010 and 2011. These may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.