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. 5: How do institutional factors affect citizens' political and civic participation?

May 2012

INTRODUCTION

Institutional factors and citizen participation

Patterns of political and civic participation are complex phenomena that are influenced by a wide range of different institutional factors. By distinguishing between the different forms of participation and non-participation, and by identifying the factors which facilitate participation, it is possible to generate a number of policy recommendations concerning the steps which may be taken by policy-makers, politicians and political institutions to enhance citizens' levels of political and civic participation.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Forms of participation

There are various forms of participation. These forms can be classified in a number of ways. First, it is possible to distinguish between political vs. civic participation. Political participation involves behaviours which have the intent or the effect of influencing government. Political participation may take place either through conventional means involving electoral processes (e.g., voting, standing for office, etc.), or through non-conventional means which occur outside electoral processes (e.g., demonstrating, signing petitions, etc.). Civic participation instead involves behaviours which are focused on helping others, achieving a public good or solving community problems (such as raising money for charity, helping neighbours, community volunteering, etc.).

Second, both political and civic participation can take place either at the individual level (e.g., voting, displaying a badge expressing

support for a cause, helping a neighbour, etc.) or at the collective level (e.g., belonging to a political party, participating in a demonstration, working for a charity, etc.).

Third, a distinction can be drawn between manifest participation (as in all of the preceding examples) and latent participation (where an individual takes an interest in and pays attention to political and civic matters but does not undertake any political or civic actions). Latent forms of participation are important, because people displaying this pattern can be considered a political or civic reserve. They may be thought of as stand-by citizens, who remain informed but do not participate, although they have the potential to do so if the need should arise. The concept of the stand-by citizen highlights how interest in or trust in a system does not necessarily lead to active participation.

The nature of non-participation

Non-participation differs from latent participation because it involves a complete disengagement from political and civic issues. Non-participation can be divided into two main forms, namely those who are apolitical (i.e., those who perceive political and civic issues to be uninteresting and unimportant) and those who are antipolitical (i.e., those who feel hostile towards politicians and actively avoid following political and civic issues).

The apolitical category is important because people within this category may not participate or take an interest in politics but this is something that may change over time if they are given access to new opportunities for participation. Many young people fall into this category. Some women may also be apolitical because they find it difficult to participate due to their maternal and domestic roles, but their situation may also change as their circumstances change (e.g., when their children start attending school).

Traditional views of citizenship, in which the ideal citizen is equated with active participation, can reinforce inequalities or marginalise individuals who might lack either the time or the resources which are needed to participate (such as women or youth).

How political institutions can facilitate participation

The way in which the political institutions of a country are structured influences citizen participation. Open decentralised states which have formal and informal mechanisms and procedures for allowing social movements, local communities and other groups to influence policy are perceived as being more responsive to citizens' views and so facilitate citizen participation. Closed centralised states in which non-state actors have relatively few opportunities to influence state policy tend to deter citizens from participation, although when citizens in such states do become active they are more likely to engage in more extreme forms of participation (such as strikes and demonstrations rather than petitions and campaigns).

The rules and design of the electoral system also impact on citizen participation. First-past-the-post systems lower voter turnout because they eliminate minority representation from the legislature, thus discouraging those who have minority points of view from voting. By contrast, systems using proportional representation

typically elicit higher levels of voter turnout. Ease of registration and the day chosen for polling are also important determinants of electoral turnout: complex registration rules and holding voting on a working day rather than on a rest day make it more difficult for people to vote.

The participation of minority and migrant individuals is highly dependent on electoral, political and legal institutions, because these institutions specify the rules for granting citizenship to foreign nationals, determine whether or not these individuals are granted or denied voting rights, and these institutions may or may not employ formal consultative bodies or channels for liaising with minority and migrant groups. However, there is a paradoxical relationship between discrimination and participation, because in contexts of electoral exclusion and marginalisation, participation may instead take the non-conventional forms of protests and demonstrations.

Citizen mobilisation by institutions

Politicians and political institutions can also encourage citizen participation by inviting individuals to become more involved in specific participatory activities. Being asked or invited to participate in activities is one of the most important predictors of people's levels of participation.

Another mobilisation or stimulation measure that enhances participation is increased campaign spending by political parties, which decreases the costs of information acquisition by citizens.

An increased use of new technologies and social media to communicate with citizens can also reduce the costs of information acquisition for citizens and can facilitate their interaction with the state. This is particularly important for young people.

Young people's participation can also be boosted through effective civic/citizenship education in school. The most effective civic/citizenship education curricula are those that provide young people with high quality participation experiences.

Membership of, and active participation in, civic associations and organisations is another strong predictor of political participation, especially when they give individuals the opportunity to take on active roles through which they can develop their civic skills and knowledge. Such associations and organisations are particularly important for women, youth and ethnic minority individuals. For minority individuals, inter-ethnic or intercultural associational participation is better at encouraging participation and integration than participation in monocultural associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Policy-makers who wish to remove barriers to participation and to take actions that will enhance citizens' levels of political and civic participation should consider all of the following:

The priority is to remove structural and institutional barriers to participation

Active participation should not be construed as being essential for good citizenship. To expect all citizens to be active ignores cases where non-participation is a result of choice. This expectation also serves to further marginalise those who are unable to participate at the same levels or in the same ways as other citizens due to a lack of resources, structural barriers or the design of political institutions. The priority for policy-makers should be to remove barriers to participation and to make political and civic institutions as open and as accessible as possible to citizens, rather than to focus uncritically on levels of participation *per se*.

A right of participation has to exist

Citizenship rights should be made as inclusive as possible. In particular, the status of migrants should be regularised in order to facilitate their participation, and consideration should be given to extending voting rights as far as possible to migrants (for example in local elections). Consideration should also be given to lowering the age of voting to 16 years. These actions would enhance migrants' and young people's levels of conventional participation.

Political institutions have to be inclusive

Political institutions should be as inclusive as possible to allow all voices to be heard and interests debated. In terms of electoral representation, proportional representation systems are more representative than first-past-the-post systems. In addition, institutionally recognised advisory or consultative bodies or youth forums should be formed in order to increase interaction between marginalised groups and the state. Such bodies could have a virtual dimension using information technology to widen participation. Most importantly, they should have a real role to play and not be tokenistic.

Participation has to be easy

Formal systems for political participation such as the electoral system may contain implicit barriers in their design. Complex registration requirements should be removed. Voting should also be made as easy as possible so that voting via the internet, voting on rest days, and having more than a single day to vote are possible.

Institutions need to be aware of differential impact

Institutions should recognise that their policies and procedures may have a differential impact on different groups of citizens, thereby impeding the inclusion and participation of some groups. Wherever possible, policies and rights should be interpreted in a religiously, culturally, gender and age sensitive manner to enable the participation of all sections of society. This also includes the labour market and other socio-economic structures which have been shown to favour men over women, thereby acting as a barrier to women's equal position and participation in society.

Building capacities enables participation

Policy-makers should support initiatives that build political and civic capacity, skills and knowledge, mobilise members, and act as socialisation contexts for formal political participation. This includes ensuring that all citizens have access to a range of associations and organisations, and encouraging and enhancing citizens' engagement

in these associations and organisations. Informal links between community and minority associations and local government should also be used to further enhance the participation of marginalised groups. Policy-makers should be particularly supportive of those associations which increase civic skills and promote links between different sections of society. Policy-makers should also ensure that effective civic/citizenship education is provided by schools in order to build capacity for youth participation.

Governments have to be responsive to citizens' views

Politicians and political institutions should ensure that they are responsive to citizens' views and are accountable to the electorate. This will increase citizens' sense of political efficacy and will enhance citizens' levels of participation.

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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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?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 4 (2012). *What do psychological theories 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, 2011and 2012. These may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.