
Democracy. Research on democracy has long been a staple of WZB scholarship. Attention focuses on the parliamentary system, elections, political parties, the interaction of democracy and the rule of law, the social basis of political participation, and the democratically legitimated control of economic power. This inquiry into democracy is designed as international comparative research that also addresses forms of autocracy and dictatorship. WZB topics related to democracy are explored primarily in the Research Area on the Dynamics of Political Systems.

Toward the Two-Thirds Democracy Ways Out of the Participation Crisis

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Political participation is a key component of any democracy. It is not about arbitrary, but liberally designed and guaranteed participation in pluralist competition. Freedom through political participation should be secured against political turf or authoritarian encroachments. Jürgen Habermas has described this phenomenon as a normative as well as a functional co-originality of political and liberal rights. A substantive, and not merely formal, concept of democracy must take the practical reality of these rights into account. The reality is that most Western democracies are currently characterized by asymmetric and declining participation and representation:

Voter turnout is declining – this threatens the core of participatory democracy. Social selectivity of participation increases – this violates the democratic principle of equality. The voter turnout of catch-all parties is in decline, and thus their political integration capabilities are being reduced; this happens in a time when increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented societies are in a greater need of the integrative capacity of catch-all parties. Parties are losing members and thus their roots in a society.

What can be done? In recent years, several antidotes have been proposed against these elements of crisis. We want to take a closer look at four reform proposals:

Strengthening of Civil Society?

A decline of conventional political participation in representative democracies (that is above all participation in elections) could, in principle, be compensated by other forms of direct participation. Referenda, plebiscites, social movements, civic associations, petitions and demonstrations are examples of alternative and complementary non-conventional forms of political participation. Boycotts of certain products or a critical consumer behavior in general are examples of broadly conceived alternative forms of participation.

It turns out that social selectivity of the non-conventional forms of participation is even more substantial than social selectivity of the conventional forms

Summary: Political participation in developed democracies is steadily decreasing. Voter turnout is in decline, social selectivity of political participation is on the rise. The major political parties face the challenge of dwindling membership. Strengthening elements of direct democracy or fostering alternative methods of political involvement are insufficient. On the contrary, these forms of participation are even more prone to exclude the poor and less well educated. What is needed is a broad range of preventive social, fiscal and educational policies which counteract social exclusion of a significant part of the population.

of political participation. For this reason alone, civic associations and initiatives could never be a democratic compensation for the declining (catch-all) parties. Despite many positive participation impulses stemming from civil society, it generally increases the exclusion of the lower classes from the political sphere. While in general elections the middle and upper income groups participate more frequently at times; other civic activities drive a visible divide in participation to the disadvantage of the lower classes. If one includes the overwhelming dominance of well-educated young people in the NGOs to the general participation balance, the social imbalance increases. In simple terms: The growing activities of civil society exacerbate the exclusion “disease” of our democracy instead of healing it. Civil society organizations cannot be a substitute for strong political parties and trade unions; they only can complement them.

Daring More Direct Democracy?

Are recently reawakened hopes for direct democracy justified? Our empirical knowledge about direct democracy gives us little reason for hope. Referenda produce visibly greater social bias than general elections: The more affluent and better-educated citizens represent “the people” in referenda. Exponents of an elitist democracy argue that this outcome is highly desirable. Irrational decisions by the “incompetent” part of the population are less likely because of this “natural” selection. The lack of substance of this argument is obvious. Expertise does not automatically indicate a personal orientation for the common good. The better-educated voters represent their self-interests just as much as the less educated represent theirs. This can be seen in referenda on fiscal issues: The most likely outcome in the past has been reduction of tax-rates and public expenditures.

There should be no doubt that referenda can be a participatory enrichment for representative democracies. We should not overlook its legitimating function through direct voting on policies. However, direct democratic procedures cannot in anyway solve the problems of social selectivity within a democratic system; they tend to exacerbate it.

Introduction of Compulsory Election?

Voting in general elections is a form of political participation that generates the lowest social selectivity. Nevertheless, even voting is not free from social selection. The extent of an electoral abstention among different social groups translates into a socio-economic bias – especially when the turnout is low. Compulsory voting is a mechanism, which leads to a high voter turnout and reduces the strong social bias. It has been practiced in many countries in Europe, and exists until this day in: Greece, Luxembourg, Belgium and Cyprus, and worldwide in over 30 countries. We do not need draconian punishments to effectively increase the turnout. In order to make abstention an exception it would be enough to require a small monetary fee or symbolic shaming, such as a record in an appropriate nonvoter register. The very low “costs” of voting explain the high electoral participation of the citizens: A polling place is, at least in Europe, usually within a walking distance, the election process takes a little time to complete and is possible throughout an entire election day without queuing.

In addition, we can expect other positive side effects of compulsory voting. Parties do not have to invest in mobilization campaigns anymore, and instead they can put more emphasis on the content of the campaign. Citizens who were previously alienated from politics are obliged to think about which party they are going to vote on. Compulsory voting becomes, therefore, also a measure of political education. One can argue that one of the basic ideas of proportional electoral system – the Parliament as a representative mirror of the people’s interests and values – becomes realized only when all citizens have voted. When only a certain portion of the population casts their votes, it distorts the appropriate representation of “the people”.



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But there are also arguments against the introduction of compulsory voting. Perhaps the strongest counter-argument is the encroachment of compulsory voting on individual liberties. Although the trespass is minimal, the problem cannot be entirely dismissed. However, before we postulate that the introduction of compulsory voting equals with the destruction of liberal democracy, it is worthwhile to identify the actual loss of freedom and the associated dangers. Even in a compulsory election, all citizens are free not to choose any party or cast a blank ballot. Ballots with a category of “none of the above” (none of the parties or candidates) exist and existed in some countries.

The actual “loss of freedom” comes down to a loss of merely 30 – 60 minutes of time, the cost of the ballot and the application and execution of absentee voting. These costs to freedom seem negligible when one considers the democratic equality and quality gains by the introduction of compulsory voting. The democratic exchange of goods is: minimal freedom restrictions against considerable equality gains. However, any introduction of a measure limiting any civil freedom should only be decided after an intensive public debate.

Sharpening of Programmatic Profile?

This approach does not focus on procedures and institutions like in the previous cases; instead it focuses on the supply side of the political system, i.e., political parties. Studies have shown that clear programmatic offers of the competing parties have a positive impact on mobilization of the electorate. The more parties differ, the higher is the turnout. In the past three to four decades, the traditional core constituencies of the parties have dissolved. The lack of parties will is not the only cause explaining the absence of the clear programmatic profile. Differentiation of the social milieu and heterogenization of previously relatively coherent social groups have also made it increasingly difficult for the parties to focus on their core constituency.

Insofar, parties have to deal with considerably more heterogeneous groups of voters, values and interests than thirty or forty years ago; although in recent years they have done relatively little to respond to these changing circumstances. A phrase that Angela Merkel repeated several times before Bundestag elections in 2009 is a clear manifestation of this attitude: “The CDU is liberal, Christian-social and conservative.” It is an attempt to occupy the widest political space possible. The fact that there are considerable tensions, inconsistencies, if not incompatibilities between the Social, conservative and liberal orientations is considered acceptable. Uncertain is, however, whether catch-all parties consider it desirable to sharpen their contours. Clear programmatic profiles, for example in the form of concrete (and: constant!) middle range and long term goals would have certainly helped the parties in their efforts to increase voter participation. If voters have the impression they have choices and choose between clearly identifiable alternatives, they tend to engage in elections more intensively.

Perhaps formulation and implementation of such goals would be far more effective than all the legal and organizational reforms of the core democratic institutions taken altogether. Instead of waging a hopeless battle against symptoms, we must address the causes. To change the cause of the divide, first and foremost, we should change the educational, social, fiscal and economic policies. If there was evidence that politics is still able to reduce inequalities, tame markets and exercise a democratic control – in short, that politics can design the economic conditions and not vice versa – part of the citizenry would be motivated to engage politically again, and to politically defend themselves. These days, more and more these citizens have turned away, frustrated and hopeless.



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