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Partizipation im Wandel

Unsere Demokratie zwischen Wählen,
Mitmachen und Entscheiden

Abstract

In recent decades, expectations regarding popular political influence and participation in our representative democracy have fundamentally changed. Surveys today consistently show that more than 80 percent of German citizens want more opportunities to take part in the political discussion, and even want to make decisions on certain issues themselves. Particularly in German municipalities, dialogue-oriented and direct-democratic processes are increasingly found alongside traditional representative processes such as elections and participation on advisory committees or in parties. No such trend has yet emerged on the federal level, but in many federal states, an increase in the importance of dialogue-oriented and direct-democratic processes is evident.

But how do the new modes of participation fit into our existing representative democratic structures? There already is extensive research on how individual formats function, the degree of satisfaction expressed by participants and politicians, and whether the results of these processes are ultimately implemented and accepted. However, we know far too little about how the new procedures affect the structures of our representative system as a whole. With the current study, Baden-Württemberg's state councilor for civil society and citizen participation and the Bertelsmann Stiftung would like to contribute to closing this gap in the research.

The core of the study is an empirical survey carried out in 27 German municipalities. We would like to thank them once again for their willingness to participate. In these municipalities, we interviewed

mayors, administrative department heads, council members and citizens. The representative citizen survey with its 2,700 respondents across Germany has secured a broad foundation for the study. In addition, we examined the current state of participation in German federal states, while considering international case studies with an eye to what might be learned in Germany.

From these three sources and the subsequent analysis of the municipalities derive the study's three key findings, which might be summed up in the statement that "dialogue-oriented and direct-democratic citizen participation strengthens representative democracy":

- (1) Citizens and political elites today already assess the new forms of participation as being (nearly) as important as voting in elections. Our democracy has thus already become more diverse, as the ability to have a voice on concrete policy issues and participation in dialogue opportunities is for Germans as important as casting a vote at the ballot box:
 - 82 percent: Participation in elections (representative pillar)
 - 80 percent: Participation in (citizen) referenda (direct-democratic pillar)
 - 79 percent: Engagement in citizen's initiatives, and 73 percent: Participation in open-access citizen dialogue (dialogue-oriented pillar)
- (2) Asked about their views on how our political system should function in the future, citizens and policymakers put slightly different emphasis on the three pillars: Political decision makers are still more attached to the representative system, while citizens showed a preference for participatory forms of policymaking.
- (3) The greatest participatory potential lies with direct-democratic measures: More than two-thirds of all citizens surveyed wanted to take a more direct role in making concrete policy decisions, and called for a strengthening of direct-democratic measures of governance.
- (4) The fear that our political system's representative elements and institutions might be undermined – which one might suspect lies

behind politicians' wariness of participatory reforms – is unfounded. Indeed, the opposite is true: Our democracy is strengthened by the dialogue-oriented and direct-democratic pillars.

- The three pillars and forms of participation are mutually reinforcing. Those who take part in processes of citizen dialogue and popular referendums are more likely to vote at election time, and vice versa.
- Participation strengthens citizens' democratic competence. That is, there is a correlation between the degree of participatory activity and the level of interest in politics, overall policy knowledge and trust in others.
- The frequently heard contention that citizen participation and direct democracy would promote only the special interests of particularly active and well-organized citizens is not an opinion shared by the overwhelming majority of the population or the political elite. Three-quarters of respondents in both groups believe the new forms of participation will promote the common welfare, and that different interests and values will be brought into the political sphere.
- Citizens and the political elite agree that citizen participation promotes the acceptance of policy outcomes. Three-quarters of the citizens and politicians surveyed believe that citizens are more willing to accept results they do not personally support if they have previously been given an opportunity to register their opinion, and their voice has been heard.
- Citizens and political elites also agree that citizen participation helps prevent planning failures and bad investments. Just over 85 percent of respondents in each group agree with this statement. Citizen participation rationalizes the planning process, and incorporates citizens' knowledge and experience.
- Finally, a comparison of municipalities' budgetary situations shows that citizen participation is neither optional nor a luxury, but has rather become a part of the "normal" policy process. Municipalities are introducing new formats of participation regardless of their budgetary situations.

However, there remains much to do in shaping and stabilizing the transition and further development toward a diverse democracy.

The positive effects of participation are strongest when participation is well-planned and well-implemented, and when there are binding rules governing how the process is to be run and how the results are to be implemented. The quality and binding status of participation are areas in which more can certainly be accomplished.

Another key issue will be how we strengthen the social inclusiveness of all three pillars, thus enabling participation for citizens of all citizen groups. These new paths hold great potential, which we should use.