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Voting, Deliberating, Deciding – How More Diversity Strengthens Our Democracy

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The political culture in Germany has changed and become more participatory. Voting alone is no longer enough, as citizens want to be able to participate in deliberations and decide things for themselves. In their view, the greatest need for improvement lies with referendums. In any case, our democracy has become more diverse – and that's a good thing, as more citizens' participation strengthens our democracy. While citizens have already embraced a diverse democracy for some time, political elites continue to cling more strongly to the representative system.

Sources

All of the cited survey data come from the 2014 study "Partizipation im Wandel – Unsere Demokratie zwischen Wählen, Mitmachen und Entscheiden," edited by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Baden-Württemberg State Ministry. The representative survey of 2,700 citizens from 27 municipalities across Germany was supplemented by surveys of the mayors, council members and leading administrators of each of the municipalities.

The Political Culture in Germany Has Become More Participatory

The political culture in Germany has undergone a lasting change – and not just since the prolonged and intense public protests surrounding the Stuttgart 21 train station and railway project. Indeed, this culture has become more participatory. For most Germans, voting alone is no longer enough. They want a more diverse democracy, one that offers them more opportunities to have a say and to (co-)decide directly on important issues.

Already since the 1970s, local-level democracies have reacted to this desire by being increasingly open to more citizens' participation, dialogue and direct democracy. Likewise, since the 1990s, Germany's federal states (Bundesländer) have also become increasingly amenable to having citizens participate more in decision-making in addition to introducing new instruments of direct democracy. In contrast, it is only the national level that has remained largely unaffected by such changes. Indeed, despite sinking voter-participation rates, massive reductions in party-membership numbers and declining approval and confidence rates, the federal government continues to lag behind municipalities and states when it comes to granting citizens the right to participate in decision-making via deliberative or direct-democratic processes. Although there have been promises and assurances that things will change, nothing has yet come out of initial attempts at dialogue.

Still, the pressure is growing: Three-quarters of German citizens want more opportunities to participate in discussions and would like to make decisions on important issues themselves. Citizens have progressed further along the path toward a more diverse democracy than the political elites, with the latter continuing to have reservations about allowing citizens to participate in political decision-making, whether in a direct or deliberative manner, on several issues. Will more citizens' participation weaken the institutions of our representative democracy? Will citizens make decisions in a less rational and fact-based manner than experts within the public administration or elected political representatives? Will major projects be hampered by additional costs and delays if citizens are allowed to participate in related decision-making?

These are just some of the questions raised by those who are skeptical about a more diverse democracy. However, the study presented here shows that most of these fears are unfounded, and that the opposite frequently turns out to be true. The new forms of citizens' participation strengthen the democratic system and thereby the representative democracy, too! This is very clearly illustrated by the following results of the most comprehensive empirical study ever on the impacts of participation on the political system, which was conducted in 27 German municipalities.

Germany Is on the Path from a Representative to a More Diverse Democracy

More than three-quarters (76%) of German citizens consider it very important to have a general right to have a say and participate in deliberations before their elected representatives make decisions. Likewise, more than two-thirds of them (69%) would like citizens to have direct decision-making power on important issues. Thus, the vast majority of Germans desire to have direct-democratic and deliberative tools that allow them to have a say and co-determination in decision-making. Indeed, co-determination via direct means and dialogue are just as firmly anchored in their understanding of democratic decision-making as going to the ballot box. Citizens in Germany want more diversity in their democracy. At the same time, though, it should be noted that approval rates of representative democracy are also high: Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens continue to view voting during elections to be the most important form of democratic participation. Thus, having more diversity doesn't come at the expense of representative democracy!

A similar picture emerges when citizens assess the concrete processes of decision-making: Approval rates for forms of direct participation (80%), such as referendums and petitions for referendums, are extremely close to those for participation in elections (82%), involvement in citizens' initiatives (79%) and taking part in civil dialogues (73%). Likewise, there is high degree of conformity among the assessments of citizens and political decision makers: Even among the political elites, referendums (70%), citizens' initiatives (73%) and civil dialogues (71%) have become almost exactly as important as participation in elections (74%).

„Representative processes have lost their monopoly status.“

Thus, it becomes clear that even though representative processes continue to enjoy widespread approval, they have nevertheless lost their monopoly status. Democracy is supported by three strong pillars: Deliberation and direct democracy complement a purely representative democracy and make the democracy more diverse.

While Political Elites are More Reluctant, Citizens Have Fully Embraced a More Diverse Democracy

When asked what kind of political system they would like in the future, citizens and decision makers have varying priorities and focuses: While citizens already favor participatory forms of political governance over purely representative ones, elected politicians cling more strongly to the representative system.

This can be clearly seen in a comparison of the system preferences of citizens and political elites: On a scale of 0-4, citizens favored a participatory democracy over a



Video only available
in German

About Gisela Erler

Gisela Erler, b. 1946, is honorary State Counsellor for Civil Society and Civic Participation and, as such, a member of the government of the State of Baden-Württemberg. Her function as state counsellor is to increase citizen's participation in the state. From 1992 to 2008, Erler was the managing director of pme Familien-service GmbH, a Berlin-based organization she founded to help employees better combine work and family. EINWURF spoke with her about the issue of diverse democracy.



purely representative one 3.01 (participatory democracy) to 2.52 (representative democracy). Meanwhile, the system preference among political elites was almost the mirror image of the citizens' preference and thereby more or less clearly in favor of representative democracy, preferring it 2.99 on the same 0–4 scale to 2.70 (participatory democracy).

Differences of opinion between citizens and their elected politicians can also be seen when comparing how they understand the representative mandate (i.e., why and for what they have chosen represen-

tatives): Only 43 percent of citizens believe it is correct for elected politicians to make decisions based exclusively on their own opinions even if the majority of the population has a different opinion. In contrast, the vast majority of elected representatives (80%), mayors (85%) and leading administrators (79%) understand the representative mandate to be freer and less dependent on the concrete will of citizens, preferring to allow mandate holders to make decisions based upon their own opinions even if they go against the opinion of the popular majority.

This demonstrates that citizens are less and less willing to accept that their representatives make decisions without taking into consideration public feedback. Indeed, the notion that being elected is the one and only basis for the legitimacy of political decisions is losing acceptance.

In the View of Citizens, the Greatest Need for Improvement Lies in Direct Democracy

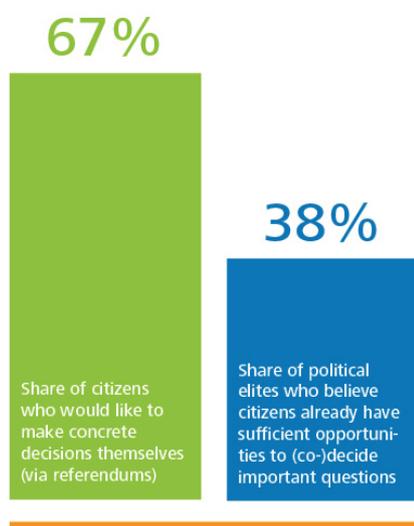
More than two-thirds (67%) of citizens want to participate in deciding important questions themselves via direct democracy. However, there are significantly fewer opportunities to do so, and only 38 percent of political decision makers believe that their fellow citizens are actually capable of (co-)deciding important questions in a direct manner.

This implies that the shortage of opportunities for direct democracy isn't really even a matter of controversy between the population and their political elites. Both sides implicitly agree that range of available opportunities in terms of direct-democratic decision-making processes, which are administered by the political elites themselves, is significantly smaller than citizens' desire to be able to decide important questions by themselves via direct democracy.

Various Forms of Political Participation Are Mutually Supportive

The worry that various forms of political participation will compete among themselves has yet to find any confirmation. On the contrary, the three forms of participation – electing representatives, joining deliberations and directly deciding – are mutually supportive. As it turns out, almost three-quarters (72%) of citizens who are active in the institutions and bodies of representative democracy also participate in referendums and petitions for referendums, and two-thirds (66%) are also active in deliberative processes. Moreover, one-quarter (25%) of citizens who do not take an active role within the institutions of representative democracy are willing to participate in direct-democratic processes, and 14 percent of them would get involved in civil dialogues.

GREATEST NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT WITH DIRECT DEMOCRACY



Citizens' Participation Promotes the Common Welfare

There are some concerns that the new forms of citizens' participation privilege well-articulated (and well-financed) special interests in the political process, and that this harms the common welfare. But the surveys indicated that, on average, neither citizens nor the political elites share these worries: Three-quarters (75%) of citizens and even more than three-quarters (79%) of political decision makers are convinced that citizens' participation actually strengthens the common welfare. Citizens' participation allows fresh ideas to be introduced into politics and to be taken into consideration during the decision-making process. Almost eight out of 10 citizens (79%) and almost as many decision makers (76%) believe that citizen's participation generates fresh ideas.

Successful Citizens' Participation Raises Levels of Satisfaction with How the Democracy Works and Increases Confidence in Democratic Institutions

In Germany, general satisfaction with democracy as a form of government is high. This is also reflected in how survey respondents assessed their local democracies. Only 18 percent were displeased with how their local democracy functions, while more than 42 percent were even very explicitly satisfied with it.

This level of satisfaction climbs even higher if one surveys those who have already participated in politics – and viewed this participation as having been successful. Indeed, among these individuals, the level of satisfaction was some six percentage points higher than the average for the overall population. Among those who successfully participated on a local council, on its committees or in political parties, the level of satisfaction even jumps by 13 percentage points, to reach 55 percent.

When citizens' participation is done well – that is, when citizens view it as transparent, sustainable and responsive – the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy goes up. However, when participation is done poorly and not viewed as being successful by citizens, one sees the opposite effect: It destroys confidence and engenders dissatisfaction.

Citizens' Participation Increases Their Interest in Politics and Their Democratic Competence

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that there is a close correlation between citizens' interest in politics, their democratic competence and the degree to which they actively participate in politics. While only four out of 10 (40%) citizens described themselves as interested in politics, the share of such individuals is significantly higher among citizens who are politically involved. In this case, well over half (55%) of respondents described themselves as politically interested. Furthermore, among citizens who participate in direct-democratic political processes, more than six in 10 described themselves as interested in politics; and among those who actively participate in deliberative processes, the proportion even climbs to well over two-thirds (71%). Finally, the strongest impact is found among those who are involved in representative bodies. In this case, almost eight in 10 (79%) describe themselves as interested in politics.

These figures illustrate that being interested in politics not only is a prerequisite for political engagement, but also fosters it. Participation and interest are mutually strengthening.

Citizens' Participation Increases Acceptance of Political Decisions

Two-thirds of citizens (66%) and even more than two-thirds (68%) of decision makers are convinced that being able to have a voice and be heard in deliberations during the decision-making process increases the likelihood that citizens will accept the decision ultimately made – even if it doesn't correspond with their desires. Only 10 percent of citizens and 8 percent of decision makers did not agree with this assessment. What's more, two-thirds of citizens (66%) and almost two-thirds of decision makers (63%) also believe that the level of acceptance for decisions is higher among citizens after direct-democratic political processes even if the decisions don't match up with what they had wanted. Once again, only a minority (12%) of members of both groups viewed things differently.

On the whole, these assessments of how citizens' participation increases their acceptance of decisions are very positive. However, they presuppose that citizens take seriously the participation opportunities on offer and view them as being transparent, fair, credible and responsive.



Citizens' Participation Prevents Mistakes in Planning and Investing

When asked about the usefulness and impacts of more citizens' participation, more than two-thirds of citizens (67%) as well as almost two-thirds of all political decision makers (63%) (completely) agree with the assessment that, if correctly timed, citizens' participation can help prevent mistakes in planning and investing.

This holds true not only for major infrastructure projects, but also for the quality of political results across the board: Almost three-quarters of all citizens (72%) and decision makers (73%) believe that civil dialogues that allow citizens to be heard and to participate in discussions are apt to improve political decisions. Only a small minority of citizens (8%) and even fewer decision makers (6%) view the matter differently. When it comes to direct-democratic decisions, however, the assessment turns out to be somewhat more differentiated. In this case, significant difference can once again be seen between the assessments of citizens and those of political decision makers: While nearly two-thirds of citizens (63%) believe that referendums also improve the quality of political decisions, only a bit less than half of all decision makers (49%) hold the same view.

More Citizens' Participation Is Not a Democratic Luxury

Many questions and doubts arise when people consider making democracy more diverse: Can municipalities or federal states (Bundesländer) even afford it? In times of tight financial resources, aren't there more important things to do? In other words, isn't introducing more citizens' participation really just a democratic luxury? The answer is: no. The fact is that no correlation can be established between the economic strength of a municipality (as measured by the average purchasing power of its citizens) and the intensity of local participation.

Further Reading:

Bertelsmann Stiftung/
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Partizipation im Wandel –
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Latent and Manifest Political
Participation. In: New forms
of Citizen Participation:
Normative Implications.
Edited by Erik Amna.
Baden-Baden: 191–203.

Furthermore, not only citizens, but also political decision makers believe that the costs and benefits of having more participation stand in a balanced relationship. In other words, more participation pays off and is in no way just an ornamental luxury good for a representative democracy. Nevertheless, many citizens have precisely this suspicion about participation. Indeed, half of all citizens and decision makers view citizens' participation as merely symbolic as long as the citizens' participation isn't also simultaneously associated with a right of (co-)determination regarding the "whether."

Make Democracy Diverse!

All of this shows that the citizens of Germany are serious about having a more diverse democracy. They want a democracy characterized by more dialogue and direct-democratic processes – and they want this as a complement to rather than a replacement of a purely representative democracy.

However, the results also demonstrate that participation only helps democracy, creates satisfaction and confidence, and strengthens the representative institutions of our democracy if it is done well and if citizens perceive it as successful. Thus, the real issue is "how" our democracy can become more diverse rather than "whether" it should. And two principle challenges arise when determining just how this will be done: If participation is to be done well, it needs quality standards, and it needs to be organically integrated into the democratic system. Only then can more participation help our democracy!

In more concrete terms, this means that binding quality standards for transparent, unbiased, sustainable and responsive citizens' participation are a fundamental prerequisite for the success of a diverse democracy. Moreover, participation in decision-making through both deliberative and direct-democratic means must be dovetailed with the representative system. This isn't about existing in parallel and surely not about competing against each other. This is about having direct, deliberative and representative democracy exist in harmony with each other!

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