

THE RESEARCHER COLUMN

Will enhanced popular participation do the trick?

When discussing the EU democratic deficit it is frequently argued that if the Europeans are more included in EU policy-making, they will endorse the EU project to a greater extent. Yet, we do not know if enhanced participation is what people really want. And in that case if it yields more pro-European sentiments.

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The democratic deficit discussion of the EU has many dimensions. One addresses the institutional deficit, targeting the lack of popular elections for the powerful Commission and Council. Another aims at the European Parliament's lack of power vis-à-vis the strong Council – even if the Lisbon Treaty (2009) transferred considerable powers to the Parliament, elevating the co-decision procedure to become the common decision-making procedure. Lastly, there is the European people, which is probably the most discussed dimension of the democratic deficit. And it is around this dimension I concentrate my research.

It was the Danish no to the Treaty of Maastricht more than 20 years ago that initiated this whole discussion. The beginning of the 1990s was the heyday of democracy; the Iron Curtain fell, East and West united, and the Cold War, having preoccupied international politics since WW2, ended. Fukuyama did not make his now-famous “end of history”-statement in a vacuum. And then Denmark voted no in a popular referendum to the Treaty transferring the European Community to a political union. In this context, it came as a shock: why were the Danes against measures to unite and integrate the European continent? In brief, the paradigm of the understanding of a *permissive consensus* amongst the European people regarding European integration was over. The political and the academic elite entered a new phase of reflection on the phenomenon of ‘euro-scepticism’.

20 years later much work has been published on the democratic deficit. And where the conclusions are plentiful, addressing very different areas in the debate about the EU's democratic outlook – except from the work of Moravcsik and Majone – relies on one strong assumption: if the Europeans were more actively engaged in the European enterprise, the skepticism towards further integration would diminish. Most research on popular attitudes towards the EU derives questions on the basis of this assumption. The question is, however, if it is true that regular Europeans wish for more active political involvement. And, if so, whether enhanced participation

indeed will bring a more pro-integration population.

Where consensus (almost) exists within EU studies, positively linking political participation with democratically desirable attributes like legitimacy and trust, the results nevertheless become blurred if the view is expanded beyond EU studies. Recently, for example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (University of Nebraska) conclude in their controversial work on stealth democracy that people do not desire participatory democracy. Rather, due to widespread conflict aversion and a perception of false consensus, a majority prefers to be left alone when it comes to political decision-making. In essence, they prefer democratic decision-making, assimilating the processes seen in the efficient business world.

In my work, I explore these questions in a comparative Danish-Italian context. On the basis of laboratory experiments, I investigate if inclusion in decision-making processes is positively linked to trust. Testing different decision-making processes, varying on degrees of participation, I conclude, however, that the highest levels of trust amongst people participating are found after decision-making processes, resembling representative political institutions, and where elected leaders are decision-makers. Surprisingly, I did not find support for the thesis that enhanced participation yields more trust.

These conclusions are a contribution to the debate about participatory democracy in general, but also a reply to the extensive research within EU studies, arguing for higher levels of participation. Frequently you hear arguments for generating an EU public sphere, for example, through deliberative forums – which has been explored in depth over the past decades. My conclusions, however, point to a potential problem of having misinterpreted the symptoms, and, consequently, prescribed the wrong cure. Despite 20 years of extensive research on the democratic deficit, we still do not know if people really want more participation – and whether participation relates to ‘euro-scepticism’. Based on my results, I call for enhanced focus on the assumptions upon which we conduct research on attitudes towards the EU.

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