



# **Public Participation in Europe: a call for evaluation**

**EIPP**

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The sense of impotence is what one never gets used to, of being led into ignominy and not being able to do anything about it except march and, one day, vote.

Alan Bennett, *Diaries: 2003, 10 April*

The full version of this report written by Simon Dalferth with Renzo Provedel and Trevor Boutall is available on the EIPP website [www.participationinstitute.org](http://www.participationinstitute.org)

## Foreword

The motivation behind this report is the conviction of the founders of EIPP that contemporary democratic politics can be improved by including citizens more directly in decisions that affect them. The goal is to increase the impact of the participatory process in public decision-making at the local, regional, national and even European level. More public participation can increase the democratic legitimacy of political decisions and lead to qualitatively better results.

The disaffection of citizens with existing political processes is apparent from decreasing voter turnout and plummeting approval ratings for politicians as a profession. The rise of populist parties in many parts of Europe suggests that citizens demand that their voices are better listened to. This is not a viable or healthy situation for democracy.

The potential for public participation is growing. Opportunities to include citizens directly in policy-making have been created through technological developments, such as the internet. There is greater understanding of participatory methods. A growing theoretical understanding of deliberation as a mode of democratic exchange is accompanied by practical forms of citizen involvement that provide for a deliberative exchange between decision-makers and citizens, compelling both sides to justify their position.

The full report on which this shortened version is based is being disseminated developmentally. That is, it is published as a work in progress on EIPP's website, and experts and practitioners in the field of public participation are invited to critique and supplement the material and start new lines of thinking.

# Contents

Executive summary .....	3
Public participation.....	4
The picture from three countries: UK, Germany, Italy .....	5
The case for evaluation .....	8
Conclusions .....	11

## Executive summary

# Public Participation in Europe: a call for evaluation

**The development of public participation in Europe is held back by the absence of evaluation that asks the really important questions. It is not clear how well participation processes are working, and too many reports fail to show how to make them better. In this report EIPP argues that well-directed evaluation of public participation can make it more effective and ensure it makes its intended contribution to democratic life.**

This report presents an account of public participation in contemporary policy-making in Europe. It draws on deliberative and participatory democratic theory and discusses the challenges arising from the attempt to do two important things at once: to involve large numbers of people and to enable deliberation among participants. It defines the concept of public participation, its relationship to representative politics and the scope of its use.

Three chapters, on Germany, the UK and Italy, provide snapshots of the opportunities and challenges of public participation in action. They examine government policy and practice, compare civil society developments and present the main actors in the field. They show how political cultures create both opportunities and challenges for public participation.

If public participation is to develop and achieve the confidence of European citizens, the methods used must be selected and applied more systematically and the quality of deliberation must be enhanced. These improvements can be achieved through empirical work on the effects of the methods currently used in public participation, provided there is also a culture of learning among those who commission and facilitate participation.

Successful public participation therefore needs to be more strongly based on:

1. A clearly defined constitutional framework for public participation. Only through an explicit, shared understanding between politicians and citizens can confidence be developed and public participation realise its democratising potential
2. A systematic approach to public participation methods to help organisers of public participation processes choose the most suitable and effective methods
3. Rigorous and challenging evaluation of public participation in practice to develop a culture of learning about participation and advance the systematisation of participatory methods

EIPP offers this report as an encouragement to debate and learning. Governments and public officials who enable and commission public participation processes need to know more about what they are asking for. Other actors – facilitators, moderators, researchers – need to ask themselves the tough questions that evaluation encourages. Citizens have the right to expect that these things be done.

We are keen to hear from people with interesting experiences to report, and we invite all interested parties to offer their comments on the views expressed in the report and join us in promoting and learning from the approach we have outlined.



## Public participation

The participation of citizens in decision-making is one of the pillars of democracy. Participation has been the feature of political activity that allows the expression of one's own position. In modern democracies, however, participation has tended to be restricted to elections, and the decision-making has been vicarious. Citizens are called to the polls once every number of years and their elected representatives take most decisions. The growing feeling of citizens is that their involvement in policy-making is unsatisfactory. Now a new strand of democratic thought is gaining in strength, participatory and deliberative democracy.

Public participation is the deliberative process by which interested or affected citizens, civil society organisations, and government actors are involved in policy-making before a political decision is taken.

By deliberation we mean a process of thoughtful discussion based on the giving and taking of reasons for choices. Public participation recognises the pluralism of aims and values and enables collaborative problem-solving designed to achieve more legitimate policies.

When citizens are engaged through **information**, the flow of information is largely one-way, from the sponsor of the exercise to the representatives of the public. The goal is to increase the information citizens have, and thereby change their understanding of, or sympathy for, a policy or issue. This may be done through information campaigns, public information broadcasts, TV debates, open houses, hotlines or public hearings and inquiries. The common feature of the methods is that the addressees are passive recipients of information, though they can ask for clarification in settings such as public hearings. The relative passivity means that it is hard to check whether the intended effect on the citizens is realised.

Public **consultation**, as a second order of citizen engagement, includes interest groups and the general public in the decision-making process. The intention is to develop policies based on information delivered to decision-makers by citizens. The decision-making process itself, however, remains in the hands of politicians. The flow of information in this case is from the citizens to the sponsors of the engagement process. Consultation is common in the European Union, where the EU Commission and national governments regularly call on the public to submit their views on consultation documents, such as Green or White papers. Other methods are surveys, opinion polls, focus groups and study circles. The intention of this group of methods is to provide decision-makers with a better understanding of the 'informed opinion' of a certain population.

**Public participation**, finally, is the highest order of public engagement. Here, information is exchanged between the sponsors of participation processes and the participants. In the interactions, dialogue and, ideally, deliberation takes place. Rather than simply exchanging raw information, sponsors and participants each allow the possibility of their opinions being changed through the exchange of argument. In deliberative settings participants can come to a shared understanding of issues and solutions and can thus make substantially better decisions. Crucially, participation also enhances democratic understanding in the individual and accountability in government and administration. It enriches democracy. Participation encompasses multiple methods, such as citizens' juries, action planning, (21st century) town meetings and planning cells.

## The picture from three countries: UK, Germany, Italy

Trevor Boutall explored the state of participation in the UK against the background of extensive government activity in recent years to establish public participation in local and regional (and some national) policy-making. Rather than seeing primarily a need for the broader use of public participation, he identified challenges in the implementation of public participation mechanisms, seen by some commentators as not being coherent enough. He found a broad and promising cooperation between governmental actors and the service providers in civil society.

Simon Dalferth in his study of Germany found a public participation framework beginning to emerge. It looked different from the British experience, chiefly because of the absence of a binding political commitment to participation and an understanding of public participation that carries a strong undertone of mutual help. He was also able to explore the use of eParticipation, which is emerging as a tool at the federal level, and he found strong activity in this field within Germany and beyond its borders.

Renzo Provedel approached public participation in Italy from a critical perspective. Italy combines strong civil society activity with a weakness in democratic trust. That weakness results from an unusually high concentration of control of information and media resources and a fundamental, long-standing mistrust of the political 'casta'. As a result, Provedel found much public participation to be an oppositional instrument rather than a cooperation of civil society and public administration. Whether such a high commitment to civil society can transfer to more political public participation in Italy is uncertain.

Europe, it seems, is a laboratory for public participation. Our reporters reveal a range of experiments taking place, albeit with common features that arise from human nature and the character of elective democracy. It suggests a need for a coherent framework through which to make inferences and learn lessons.

In the UK the government has taken on public participation as an explicit policy, particularly applied at local level, in an attempt to re-engage the public with political processes and improve the quality of political decision-making. Participation is interpreted broadly and includes informing the population. The German federal government has recently begun to look into participation. There are constitutional obstacles to participatory co-decision-making at federal level, but it intends nevertheless to explore the possibilities of eParticipation at this level and to fund more research into participation as a whole. Citizens in Germany have a stronger inclination to participate in social rather than political action, so it has also started to establish structures for cooperation among civil society actors. This may develop into a fuller strategy on public participation in the near future. Italy does not profess any strategy on public participation at the federal level, but has a strong tradition of engagement through civil society organisations. Both Germany and Italy have experience of using public participation in policy-making at the level of local communities, but at the discretion of local politicians, and these uses of public participation are not yet part of a larger-scale approach.

Constitutional characteristics have significant effects. The UK does not have a written constitution and thus has few formal obstacles to using participation. Even so it has used national legislation to promote participation mainly at local level. In Germany the constitution does not allow the use of participatory methods at the federal level. For example, it is not allowed to have a referendum on a contested issue. In the regional Länder, however, regulations have

recently been adopted that make the use of participation much easier than before. In Italy, the constitution allows for referenda, but not other kinds of citizen participation at national level. The government has not expressed any intention of promoting other kinds of participation, but cities and regions offer examples of participation in action. Thus there are conditions in all three countries that are allowing participation to develop, constrained by different constitutional and legal contexts and with varying degrees of enthusiasm on the part of national governments.

### **What makes participation credible?**

Our three reporters have detected a common uncertainty about whether offers of participation are seen as genuine. In the UK this is expressed as a concern about the misuse of public participation as window dressing for governmental policies, rather than a serious attempt to engage with citizens. Organisers of participation in Germany have expressed a similar feeling, though less pronounced as the governmental weight behind participation is less. In Italy views of participation are coloured by the general mistrust among citizens towards politicians. The greater challenge in Italy is to develop trust in any initiative that comes from political authority, rather than preventing participation from being misused. In the three countries top-down initiatives are met with a greater suspicion of disingenuousness than are bottom-up initiatives from civil society. Trust in public participation is easily damaged if it seems to be used to give a participatory gloss to decisions by public institutions or pacify the public. Trust is certainly lost if the outcomes of public participation processes are ignored by decision-makers. By contrast, credibility is enhanced when participants are given feedback after the event so that they know what happened and did not happen as a result of their contribution and why. We might describe this as the responsiveness of the process.

### **Opportunity and challenge**

Despite the scepticism of the citizens and critics and commentators, public participation is on the increase in the three countries. Service providers have emerged, especially from civil society, in response to the growing demand of public authorities for support and training. Many of these have a background in the subject of participation, planning, healthcare or science, for example. As a result, they do not give much weight to the democratic impact of public participation, even though this is an important part of the theoretical argument for it. Namely that it can bridge the current rift between political institutions and citizens. Nor do the service providers, as subject experts, necessarily have the expertise in the processes of facilitation or moderation that participation requires.

There is, in the three countries, a need for more information about what public participation processes can and cannot achieve. There is a lack of easily used guidance on the range of different methods and how and when they are effective. Public officials in all surveyed countries lack the knowledge and competence to conduct or even commission public participation processes. We know empirically that citizens must trust the methods of public participation as well as in the way that they are being used, so this lack of expertise is serious. Public officials may also lack conviction that public participation is important, may feel that it interferes with their operations and may share some of the public scepticism about the motives of the politicians who are promoting it. Yet these public officials are the people with the power to make sure that public participation is used in a manner that realises its democratising potential and is not used merely to manage the public's response to politicians' decisions. Public officials need the information that enables them to understand how public participation can contribute to the development of those parts of the society for which they have responsibility. They also need the information that allows them to commission effective participation processes that command the respect and enthusiasm of citizens.

## Willingness to give power

The provision of such knowledge and the development of understanding that can follow it will not be uniform across Europe, because of the differences between political cultures and systems. In UK the inclusion of third parties, offering expertise and political neutrality, is well established. Germany, aside from its constitutional differences, is in many ways similar to the UK, but its administration is less open to third party collaboration. This may have contributed to its initial reluctance to embrace participation more comprehensively. Recent experiences with participation, however, and fresh thinking among a new generation of administrators may be increasing the openness to participation, especially at local level. In Italy, by contrast, the main challenge for participation is the seclusion of the political 'casta' from the citizenry and the deep seated lack of trust. The strong belief that participation processes can be co-opted to politicians' wishes is a major obstacle to establishing citizen engagement and a renewed affiliation to democratic processes.

The experiences of Germany and Italy, and in a smaller way in the UK, emphasise the importance of the factor of independence in convincing citizens that administrations are really willing to cede power to them. Participation processes and their organisers must be seen to be uncommitted to particular policies and politicians.

# The case for evaluation

## Developments in knowledge and expertise

The direct involvement of citizens in day-to-day policy-making has been gaining ground in Europe in recent years. The issues for which public participation is employed and the methods used to enable it have come a long way since their first use in the mid-20th century. Public participation is now being used to solve problems in many areas and take advantage of new technological developments.

Governments are either thinking about (as in Germany) or have already established (in the UK) strategies for citizens to be included at various levels of policy-making. These developments still have to overcome the reluctance of bureaucrats. Participation processes create uncertainty, the opposite of conventional ideas of 'managing' an issue. Actors in administration need more information and knowledge about how participation can be used to benefit decision-making and democratic processes.

Civil society has responded to this development. Individuals and businesses have set themselves up to plan and implement participation processes. They tend to be small and innovative, seeing their role as convincing public administration to use public participation more regularly. They provide information and education for partners in the participation process about the usability and adequacy of participation and about relevant methods. They act as contractors for public administration, where their main source of revenue lies. Some advise on the use of participation within private institutions as well.

The field of eParticipation is younger, having more recently been recognised as a potent tool for participation by governments. Among civil society actors significant efforts are being undertaken to get to know each other better through networking and conferences.

## The need for systematic understanding

The arguments for public participation have yet to translate into consistent practice. Knowledge about what already exists in the field is patchy. There needs to be a clearer mapping of the field of public participation. Even its boundaries are uncertain. Ought it be restricted to the domains of planning and resource use, or include health, science and food policy, community and social services as is happening to some extent in the UK?

Participatory methods need to be set out systematically, to give guidance on how to choose which method for which aim and setting. Some pioneering work has already been done, notably, *PeopleandParticipation.net*. Mapping tools could be even more useful if they incorporated how participatory methods should be combined. Many participation processes are extensive, and the relationship between one stage and another is important. Such a tool could also extend to cultural settings other than the UK, and there is potential for transnational cooperation. Systematisation must also reveal the democratic impact of different methods, not absolutely specifying relationships between decision-makers and citizens, but giving enough indication to be able to work out what can happen in a given context.

We need to know more about how online and offline processes work together. Above all we need empirical research on matters such as whether online processes work well enough on their own or benefit significantly from face to face engagement.

## Constitutional security

The success of public participation depends to a great extent on the clarity of the constitutional framework that establishes it in the political setting, defining the relationship between participatory arrangements and representative democracy. An effective constitutional framework specifies how the outcomes of participatory processes are linked to policy action. It provides rules that apply to different uses of the participatory processes: informing citizens, consulting them on a given issue, directly involving them in policy-making. A framework

regulates the interface between citizens and decision-makers. It formally embodies expectations of the process, helping dispel citizens' perceptions that they are being co-opted or not taken seriously.

A constitutional framework may itself be developed through a participatory process that includes citizens, experts, political decision-makers and administrators, in which participants deliberate about the role of public participation in the larger political setting.

### **Learning through evaluation**

Public participation as a discipline or a technology has lacked shared learning. Actors have been so busy trying things out that, with a few exceptions, they have failed to think about how collective knowledge could be developing. Many people are happy to report what they are doing, and assert its virtues, theoretically and empirically. What is missing is the cool, critical review of performance that we call evaluation. Participatory processes can be employed in an inadequate or irrelevant manner, and no-one will know. Citizens may feel mistreated or grow wary of participation and not trust the opportunity it offers, and without effective evaluation, no one will know. Evaluation must include the costs and the benefits and the impact of participation processes in action and link these measures to the coherent theory and framework for which we argue. It must attend to the democratic benefits of public participation as well as the more technocratic efficiencies. Even though the democratic benefits may be harder to determine they are at the heart of the rationale for participation.

### **A framework for participation**

Political actors are fond of the term 'engagement'. The breadth of this concept is meant to capture the full spectrum of citizen activities. This ranges from mutual help among citizens, through public information and consultation, to the involvement of citizens in actual policy-making. When talking about public participation in decision-making, however, engagement is too broad a term. Participation more strongly suggests that citizens are active in the process.

Participation is meant to have an impact on society. Only by making an impact can it heal the rift between policy-makers and citizens that has been identified as a malaise of contemporary democracies.

Participation can manifest itself in the unsolicited expression of their position by citizens to decision-makers or to the media. It can take the form of consultations, where decision-makers ask citizens to contribute their knowledge to solving a problem. It can be the direct inclusion of citizens in making binding decisions (co-governance). In all these cases the citizens are active.

Consultation, co-decision and co-governance all require, to have any meaning or validity, a willingness on the part of decision-makers to respond directly to the citizens and the outcomes of their work. This is less a requirement in the case of unsolicited expressions of citizens' will, where response to media pressure on decision-makers may be seen by the citizens as a sufficiently valid response.

There are two key steps in determining the form of public participation:

1. Appraisal of the constitutional framework and political situation, in particular the regulatory opportunities and the political climate. What kind and extent of public participation is legally possible and what could be legally mandatory? What challenges does public participation meet in a particular country and what precautionary measures need to be taken?
2. Choice of the method for participation to fit the political appraisal and the specific purpose and subject. The choice should be unbiased, taking into account social and monetary costs, the need to maximise involvement and the evidence of the effectiveness of methods in achieving democratic and efficiency benefits. Popularity of the method should be a secondary criterion

When participation is conducted with the aims of improving the democratic culture and reducing the disenchantment of citizens with contemporary political practices, any approach to public participation must include a deliberation component. Through deliberation democratic processes are being learned. Therefore the choice of participatory methods should include the quality of deliberation within each process.

## An evaluation framework for public participation

We cannot develop measures of the effectiveness, of public participation unless we can relate one instance to another.

So the development of systematic knowledge about public participation requires a classification or typology of processes. This allows one example of participation to be related to another and thus make more general inferences.

If that can be achieved, learning about participation benefits from two complementary points of view. One perspective is that of the participants, the other of an evaluator seeking to make normative judgments about the requirements for public participation and its impact.

An evaluation framework should be a rich mixture of the parameters and questions that can reveal the effectiveness or efficiency of the planning and implementation of public participation processes, the quality of decisions, the democratic effects on those involved in the process and the changes brought about in the political system. A holistic approach that includes, for example:

- Do participants know why participation is taking place?
- Can the process claim some sort of representativeness, and is that clearly communicated?
- Does the choice of process match the question at hand and the intention of the process?
- Is every participant given the opportunity to speak and be heard?
- What are the costs and benefits for citizens (time and resources devoted in comparison to the perceived impact of the process) and for organisers?
- Was everything that had been promised realised? Is the political system as responsive as it claimed?
- What do citizens perceive of the process? Do they develop feelings of ownership for the process and the outcome?

- Does participation change people's attitude to democratic processes? What do they learn about policy-making?
- Do discussions within the participation inform wider public debate?
- Are politicians and public officials responsive? Are the outcomes of the participation reflected in their policy justifications and actions?
- What have the organisers of the participation learned about the methods they have used?

Whatever tools are used, evaluation depends on asking the critical questions. 'What are you attempting to do?' 'Why have you chosen this method?' Part of the formative power of evaluation is the way it makes you think. Irrespective of how evaluation is approached, it must be based on an agreement about the intention of the evaluation process, the topics that are to be analysed, and the methodology to be used.

Only through the continuous application of evaluation to participatory processes can we develop systematic knowledge about them. Only a more extensive use of evaluation and consequent changes in approach can improve the value of participation to its sponsors.

# Conclusions

- Public participation is increasingly important in European democracies. In all countries, irrespective of their differences, local, regional and/or national authorities have in recent years made experimental use of public participation
- Most public participation takes place at local and regional level. There are greater organisational and resource challenges to organising public participation processes for a larger public
- A core challenge for all public participation processes is the way the outcomes are fed into the decision-making process. In order to increase the chance of public participation being successful, arrangements ought to be made in all countries to link public participation formally to the heart of decision-making.
- Both from a practitioner and an academic perspective, there is need for more systematisation of public participation methods. This would help to mitigate a disadvantage of current practice, namely the high costs. In addition it would help to demonstrate the wealth of available options and the multitude of possible uses of public participation. We propose a dual approach to systematising public participation methods. It combines structural characteristics with focus on the quality of deliberation and thus on the democratising potential of public participation methods.
- Too many organisers of public participation do not seem to use the tools that already exist to assist them in organising public participation and choosing methods. The tools that are available are too little known or present large amounts of information in a manner that is only of limited accessibility. Existing tools need to be developed further so that organisers can more easily use them.
- Systematic use of evaluation is needed to provide more normative, evidence-based advice on the organisation of public participation processes and to make resilient statements of the likely effects of choices in organising public participation. .

Based on these conclusions, we emphasise three key needs:

1. **A clearly defined constitutional framework for public participation.** This framework must clarify to what degree the outcomes of a participation process will be taken into account by decision-makers
2. **A methodology for choosing adequate methods of public participation.** This ought to take the form of an easy to use tool with real added value to the work of the organisers of public participation processes
3. **More consistent and systematic evaluation of participation processes in order to build a knowledge base.** Only the development and continuously keeping it up to date will allow a realistic and fruitful use of public participation in a manner that realises its democratising potential.