Research Project and Publication

Participatory Democracy and Digital at Local Level: European Discourses and Practices

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Call for contributions

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Objectives

- Original critical analysis of the Political Discourses in the European Public Spaces about Digital Participatory Democracy at Local level.

- Original critical analysis of Practices of Digital Participatory Democracy at Local Level (including transborders examples), in, at least, 5 different Members States of EU.

- Pluridisciplinary approach: public administration, political science, communication, management, political sociology, geopolitics...

- Putting experiments into perspective in order to propose a bottom-up framework for contextualized "good practices"

Project Description

Participatory Democracy and Digital at Local Level:
European Discourses and Practices

Today, the political discourses (in the broadest sense, from local and national elected representatives, but also from citizen organizations that participate in the life of the city), disseminated within European public spaces, seem for the most part positive, even very positive, with regard to the current evolution of citizen participation, particularly at the local level.

The Internet, in particular, would promote citizen participation, a new form of citizen participation, which would strengthen democracy (Cardon, 2010). Indeed, the latter is in dire need of renewed methods and tools, if only because a significant portion of citizens have been turning away from voting for several decades, but also because citizens often feel that their demands are not being listened to. The Internet would thus constitute a fundamental element of a democratic renewal, or even of a change of democratic paradigm, which could challenge or adjust systems of representative democracy with systems of participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970; Fischer, 2009, Pateman, 2012; Röcke, 2014, Beebeejaun, 2016), even if it means suggesting that this participatory democracy would be a direct democracy.

It is also, sometimes within the European Union, about promoting a new form of deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2011), the modus operandi of which would be made possible by online consultations and debates. Numerous experiments of this type, with digital devices, have been set up, particularly in France, from the five-year term of Nicolas Sarkozy to become a political systematization with the current government.

These discourses are also, very often, voluntarist, and participate in a technocentric stance that puts forward the technical device before its appropriation, the solution before the problem (Morozov, 2013). Emphasis is thus often placed on resources, training, and access to networks and services. Risks are minimized or even denied, such as the exclusion of part of the population (not necessarily on the basis of age criteria, cf. Rouet, 2019a), or the establishment of a safe society (or secure) to the detriment of public freedoms, denounced with the dictatorship of algorithms (O'Neil, 2016), including in the public sphere (Rouet, 2019b).

Chaire Jean Monnet
Ad personam
Identités et Cultures en Europe
Université Matej Bel, Banská Bystrica

EUMMAS

LAREQUOI
Research Center of ISM-IAE
Graduate School of Management

UVSQ
université PARIS-SACLAY

The intentions are thus more or less clearly supported by a global or globalizing vision of the society of the future, of the digital citizen. However, and perhaps paradoxically, the discourses are often directive, based on a necessity without really basing it on any particular analysis. Futurists foresee the society of tomorrow, more or less realistic utopias that often respond to electoral objectives, but rarely in an operational way. It is often a question of foreseeing the implementation of tools, without any hindsight on their functioning and, above all, on their appropriation by citizens, based on expert arguments which then legitimize political decisions. Discourses rarely envisage different scenarios, "B plans", and thus contribute to a blissful optimism linked to a belief in a saving technical progress (Bellanger, 2014). Analysts who attempt to put "digital powers" (Griziotti, 2016) or the effects of technical communication on human relations (Wolton, 1999; Turkle, 2011) into perspective, for example, are very often considered technophobic, backward-looking, and ultimately enemies of progress and therefore of democracy.

These discourses are not necessarily connected with local actions, which could be more concrete, precise, limited, and adaptable and correspond to given realities and contexts. These actions are often dictated and justified by pragmatic stances, induced by locally shared perspectives of needs, wishes and possibilities. Often, these actions also have an ideological justification. Although they are limited in scope, they cannot be generalized, despite the trend towards a universalism of "good practices" which has become the rule in many aspects of public life, and which is also linked to the "solutionism" mentioned above. This difficulty in generalization is a weak point, whereas the discourses are highly incentive-based, and promote a normative isomorphism (Côme et al., 2019), sometimes coercive and above all mimetic, with an approach that often leads to significant wastage of resources. To make the discourse performative, experiments are set up by adapting, sometimes minimally, that is done elsewhere, in other contexts. The fashion effect is obvious, and is linked to the merchandising of the necessary tools. These adaptations to new audiences and new uses lead to the emergence of real catalogues of solutions that are more or less locally adapted. The actions can then be confiscated by a bureaucratic technostructure that does not want to let go of its power and which, in fact, limits citizen participation by invoking numerous reasons, all legitimate, of security, confidentiality, societal responsibility, etc.

Active or passive citizens in Europe, how and where?

This collective publication project proposes to put into perspective analyses of the discourses related to citizen participation and its implementation, in order to attempt a typology according to the actors, the public spaces, and their place in the decision-making processes. The aim is to propose a necessarily partial inventory of the "visions" thus developed and publicized within the European Union in order to identify possible coherences and possible divergences. This critical analysis leans on an exploration of concrete participatory actions, with digital devices, implemented locally in several European countries. The study of the possible distance between discourses and practices is based also on the analysis of the practices and postures of local actors, as citizens who have the opportunity to legitimize local political action, and the possible successes and failures of mobilizations. The project of this publication is to highlight the prospects for the appropriation of digital tools for the development, at the local level, of a participatory democracy, in full awareness of the limits and risks that political discourse does not often consider.

The book seeks to provide answers to several questions in order to understand the challenges of digital technology in participatory democracy. First of all, it seems that participatory democracy has become widespread in the discourse, but is it a truly European or even global phenomenon?

Even if the origin is "local", shared between individual or collective initiatives and relays, support or incentives from local governments, the integration in the discourse is, at least in France, at the national level. It is therefore necessary to verify whether this situation is identical in Europe and more specifically in Central and Eastern Europe.

The different discourses at the national level put as an objective of citizen participation the co-construction (for example concerning climate policy), is it the same in countries more decentralized than France?

In the reality of municipal practices, the objective is often passive participation, citizens approve or disapprove, they never ask the question (with rare exceptions). Very clearly this is not the norm in some European countries (in Norway for example). Is it possible to establish a typology of practices in Europe, notably on the basis of typical examples? How can this difference be explained?

The introduction of digital technology, with all its limits, should in the discourse contribute to strengthening co-production, but in reality, in France, an increase in passive participation has been observed, in particular because the filter constituted by the Internet and especially by computer and communication services further prevents taking initiative and directly expressing a discordant discourse to decision-makers. What is the situation in other European countries? What is the weight of the use of digital technology in society compared to its use in participatory democracy?

Because of the many authors from different countries, the proposed approach is comparative but with two questions as a guideline: Is there a difference between the local and the national in the discourses and practices on participatory democracy and the role that the Internet can and does play in it? Can we have a representation of the various cases in Europe to then understand and explain this diversity?

The objective of the book is therefore, in summary, to list the positive experiences that allow, thanks to digital technology, to increase participatory democracy, starting from a review and an analysis of this type of experience, in order to explain its effectiveness and, above all, the limits of its use according to the social, cultural, political, religious contexts… Because of the differences in discourse, it is likely that these experiences will be more situated at the local level. This "local" level has a different outline depending on the countries studied, the history and political traditions: municipalities (or even city districts in some cases), departments, regions. "National" experiences are also to be considered in certain countries (generally "small").

Even if it is interesting to highlight interesting experiences that can be transposed to other contexts, the ambition of the book is not to be a methodological guide to good practices but rather a guide to understanding the conditions for successful use of the Internet to increase participatory democracy.

The Covid-19 health crisis has limited physical contact and travel for the past year, with certainly consequences for the displacement of democratic practices online. It is important to attempt an assessment of this possible acceleration.

Theoretical background about discourses and practices

We consider the participatory democracy experiences as a social practice that exists in a bundle of other social practices: voting practices, social movement practices, political campaign practices, political marketing practices, lobbying, administration, etc. Schatzki (1996, p. 89) defines social practices as "Practice is a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and

sayings" "organized around shared understandings[1] (Schatzki, 2002). Sayings are the discursive part of practices. The shared practical understandings are partly implied in saying and in doings. We can study practices as a routinised articulation of doings and sayings or as a performance (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012). In the first case we study the routinised articulation of elements of practice in a historical and a structural level, in the second case, we study a particular case of, a specific spatiotemporal realization of the practice.

The literature on participatory democracy is large and varied, however, we wish to focus on the theory of practice, with works that look more for practices as performances (Geibel & Joas, 2013; Bherer, 2019, Santomer et al. 2008), and others that focus more on practices as the articulation of certain elements (Buza-Garcia, 2015; Lindgren & Persson, 2011; Kohler-Koch & Quittkal, 2013).

To precise what the "sayings and doings" of participatory democracy practices are, the sayings articulated by practical understandings are discourses of political actors, of administration practitioners, of citizens, ONG, about the participatory democratic practices in media, in interview settings and in a dialogue and negotiation during a socio-temporal participatory democracy event.

Thus, discursive practices allow for categorization and negotiation of social actors' roles and positions, technologies, performances and participate in the process of articulation of the other practice elements. In a Laclau & Mouffe (2014) perspective, discourses are focused on the study of articulation or structuration between practices elements (Howarth & Glynos, 2007), in a ethnomethodological (Jayyusi, 1984, Arminen, 2005) and ethnographic studies, discourses allow as to observe the negotiation process in a specific performances of participatory democracy.

The "sayings" are them-selves doings because of their performative impact. But, doing here, underlines the socio-material aspects of practices by embodied behavior and technology in use. Embodied part of doing imply to be present and competent participant in the practice (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012). Technology in use means that tools and devices do not have a rigid, deterministic impact on social practices. In a socio-material perspective, technology has affordances that need to be activated by their users (Heath & Luff, 2000). Like discourses, embodied behavior and technology in use participate also in the articulation of the participatory democracy elements.

Planned authors will base their analyses on policy documents or survey and interview methodology. Thematic and semantic analyses of the interviews conducted may be considered for the chapters on the local experiences studied. All the local experiences will be analyzed taking into account the national contexts, in particular. It is indeed impossible to attempt an analysis of local policies in isolation from this context.

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1. Shared understandings are a whole of practical and general understandings, rules, and consequences understandings.

Contributions

We would like to include, at least, four types of contributions for this project.

First, it is to focus on different aspects of participatory democracy practices, taking into account contexts, historical and socio-political perspectives and concrete performances of participatory democracy practices, with a particular attention to the form of Internet use and discursive negotiation processes.

Second, this research focuses not only on the experiences of participatory democracy in Western Europe, but also on those in Central and Eastern Europe. Participatory democracy is a social practice that is articulated with other practices of political, administrative and civil engagement. From a historical point of view, this set of social practices for the realization of democracy could be locally specific but very little studied. What is more interesting is that in some of these countries, distrust of the local political process is so strong that citizens are trying to have a local impact through democratic participation at the European level.

Third, the interconnection between participatory democracy practices and administrative practices: the understanding of shared and specific practices and the words of citizens are not identical to those of administrative staff and require translation or transposition.

Fourth, we propose to study the use of the Internet as an element of participatory democracy practices and not as a cause or a solution. It is not the technology and the tools that define the practice, it is the practice that actualizes different types of uses according to its articulation between actors and meanings.

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Proposals for contributions

Project Coordination: Thierry Côme, Gilles Rouet, Stela Raytcheva, LAREQUOI, Paris-Saclay University

thierry.come@uvsq.fr - gilles.rouet@uvsq.fr - stela.raytcheva@uvsq.fr

Written Contributions: English – Conference language : English, French

Proposals for contributions (title, summary of the proposal in English or French - 150 words -, 4 to 6 keywords, and personal presentation of the author (s)) must be sent before **October 30 2021**, simultaneously to

Emmanuel Aman-Morin, emmanuel.aman-morin@uvsq.fr &

Gilles Rouet, gilles.rouet@uvsq.fr

The selected authors will receive formatting instructions and will have to send their text before **December 30, 2021**.

After the conference, a collective publication will be composed with the selected contributions and delivered to Springer editions (contract already signed) under the title *Participatory Democracy and Digital at Local Level: European Discourses and Practices.*

Scientific and Organizing Committee

Emmanuel Aman-Morin, LAREQUOI
Mourad Attarça, LAREQUOI
Thierry Côme, LAREQUOI
Antoniy Galabov, NMU, Bulgaria
Petia Gueorgieva, NBU, Bulgaria
Radovan Gura, UMB, Slovakia
Miroslaw Natanek, ISE, Krakow, Poland
Gabriela Pascariu, CSE, Iasi, Roumania
Grzegorz Pozarlik, ISE, Krakow, Poland
Stela Raycheva, LAREQUOI
Maria Rostekova, UMB, Slovakia
Gilles Rouet, LAREQUOI
Peter Terem, UMB, Slovakia