

ROUET, G., CÔME, T., EDS. (2023). PARTICIPATORY AND DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL EUROPEAN DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES

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Contemporary societies face several significant challenges that need to be addressed to ensure good governance. In this regard, the academic (scientific) community plays a vital role here. Scholars can identify, characterize, and detect, and evaluate, but also propose solutions based on data, or possibly anticipate possible directions or emerging risks. National governments, but also local authorities, if there are interested, have a partner that can provide important insights for their current or future functioning. For this reason, scientific texts are produced on various social realities. One of these is a reviewed, edited publication covering the field of democracy, participation, and, naturally, innovation and digitalization.

The involvement of citizens/individuals in the governance of society and its parts is a crucial issue to be addressed in the context of representative democracy. In current theory and practice, any attempt to limit the participation of citizens in elections is not taken into account. Nowadays, we have come to understand political participation much broader than this narrowed view. Political participation can be seen as an open concept that is constantly in need of updating in line with the development of society. Therefore, attempting to precisely define political participation might not be useful and may need constant updates. In some countries, such as Slovakia, there is no definition of political participation in the legislation. Only certain tools and their role in the political system are defined here. The issue of precise differentiation is demonstrated by the tools mentioned in this context. As mentioned above, political participation is no longer limited to elections or activities directly linked to the electoral process. Similarly, some existing tools, such as petitions, have also been modernized. This is mainly due to technological progress and digitalization. Hence, nowadays we can discuss both the traditional and modern versions of the tool. Nowadays, citizens can sign electronic petitions (e-petitions) without leaving their homes and easily browse through the list of current petitions using the available platforms. At first sight, comparable tools

such as 'petition' and 'e-petition' seem to have different characteristics and different levels of difficulty in their implementation. We are currently in a phase where e-participation has become increasingly significant. This phenomenon naturally has both advantages and disadvantages. But the result is that the basis for a certain blurring of boundaries is emerging. Moreover, citizens can interact directly with their representatives (politicians) via social networks, without the need to attend rallies or other events for physical contact. Furthermore, social networks have enabled a two-way information flow, where citizens/participants actively create content and communicate directly with their representatives rather than being passive recipients of information. As previously discussed, each aspect has potential drawbacks that should be identified and, where possible, resolved. This brings us back to the opening statement about the role of scientists in this area.

One of the publications dealing with current issues related to participatory democracy, digitalization, and thus innovation, with a focus on the local level, is the edited book *Participatory and Digital Democracy at the Local Level: European Discourses and Practices*. It was published by Springer in 2023. The editors are Gilles Rouet and Thierry Côme. The covered topics have been divided into four sections, which are named: I. Participatory Democracy in the European Union, II. Digital Tools for Democracy 4.0, III. Participatory Budgeting: Discourses and Realities and IV. Evolution and Perspectives. In total, 49 authors have contributed chapters covering the respective thematic area. At first sight, this edited book has both the classic positive and negative aspects of this type of text. On one hand, it addresses certain issues from different viewpoints and perspectives using various research approaches and methods. On the other hand, it is limited by the professional focus of the contributing authors. As such, it does not constitute a unified, compact entity that a monograph can provide, and it offers a selective view of certain attributes in some respects. However, this does not diminish the quality and significance of this publication. Each chapter contributes to current knowledge and examines a key issue in contemporary democracies from a specific perspective.

The first section of this edited book deals with the central theme, focusing on the European Union. Here, seven chapters bring two approaches. The first approach contains more general chapters that do not focus on the research of a single or a few cases (such as state, city, or municipality). Stela Raytcheva's chapter belongs to this category. The issue of participatory democracy about social practices is at the center of this chapter. The title of Marco Cilento and Mihaela Gavrilă's chapter, which utilizes the term "bridge," is eloquent: *European Free Mobility and Participatory Democracy: Knowledge and Digital Technology as a Bridge*. This chapter discusses the important topic of traveling or mobile citizens - individuals who travel and do not reside in their country of origin. Two projects are presented as examples to illustrate the above objectives: EUREKA and PRODEMO. A specific

approach has been taken by a group of authors led by Loredan Maria Simionov. They do not focus on a single or a few cases, but they also avoid making broad statements. They examine EU member states with a particular focus on Central and Eastern Europe, with some consideration for the Western part. As part of this work, they address the question of democracy and its digitalization - and thus e-democracy or e-participation. They analyze the current situation by examining them in a historical context and considering the potential and feasibility of implementing digital tools. Additionally, they explore the possible consequences and regional specificities, as demonstrated by their findings.

The second approach is covered in chapters on specific cases. For instance, Camille Morio focuses on the case study of France. Her work involves monitoring the legal framework related to participatory democracy and the use of digital tools. The collective of authors around Alessandro Ambrosino addresses the issue of youth participation, the possible reasons for their lack of interest, and the potential of e-tools to enhance their engagement. The authors present examples from three European cities (Krakow, Leiden, and Trieste). The chapter by Diana Petkova covers a highly relevant topic. The author reflects on the complex issue of freedom of speech and the contemporary challenges associated with hoaxes. New media, including social networks, are of great significance in this context. The author's focus is on the study of this phenomenon, with an emphasis on Bulgaria. Katarína Vitališová and Jaroslav Dvořák compare participatory governance at the local level in two countries, Slovakia and Lithuania. This chapter provides a definition and identification of the differences and similarities in the use of recent participation tools, as well as the e-tools in these two countries.

The second section of this edited book is dedicated to digital tools and consists of six chapters. Elise Bernard briefly introduces EuropaNova at the beginning, followed by Daniela Bozhinova and Petia Gueorguieva who examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participatory democracy and digital tools, with a focus on Bulgaria in the subsequent chapter. The authors highlight some interesting findings. The results indicate that, contrary to initial expectations, there has been less change in this area. The next chapter by Mohamad-Amin Alomar and his team focuses on Municipal Councils in Brussels. The authors observe social learning conditions associated with formal deliberation frameworks, while also considering the role of digital tools. A vital contribution in this chapter is the collection of primary data through questionnaires from 13 respondents (municipal council presidents and general directors), collected during the year 2020. This means that the data was collected at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the world. Ildiko Otova investigates the potential of the world-famous social network Facebook. In her own words, she poses a provocative question that is contained in the title she chose to use: „Could Facebook Save Cities?“ (p. 193). Her interpretation of the term „save“ is: „revitalization of democracy and

overcoming the crisis of legitimacy and representativeness“ (p. 193). This case study concerns the city of Sofia and the "Save Sofia" initiative. The key point of this text is that the answer to the above question can be summarised in a two-letter word. The following chapter focuses on local self-government in Slovakia. It also introduces the issue of digitalization and smart governance, identifying not only the current state but also the problems and challenges in this area. The research is based on data collection from experts and municipalities. This adds a unique dimension to the chapter. The final chapter of this section highlights the most essential tool of political participation, without which representative democracy could not function, but in a modern guise. This section focuses on e-voting, also known as internet voting. The author, William Guéraiche, examines the issue of voting for citizens living abroad, focusing on France.

The third section of this edited publication is exclusively focused on one political tool in the sense that it is monothematic. Each of the five chapters deals with participatory budgeting. The first chapter analyses 4,043 projects submitted in Paris between 2014 and 2021 and attempts to define the role of the description of project intentions in their subsequent funding. Thierry Côme, Stéphane Magne, and Alexandre Steyer addressed this topic. David Špaček and Marek Navrátil described the current state of participatory budgeting in the Czech Republic and its implementation using digital tools. In the following chapter, a group of authors led by Juraj Nemec discusses the implementation of digital tools and the process of digitalization in the context of participatory budgeting. The focus is on Slovak municipalities. Jens Weiss has dedicated a chapter to documenting the impact of the digital world, predominantly through social media, on the evolution of participatory budgeting in Germany. The authors of the last chapter in this section are Alexandru Roja and Nicolae Urs. They present the case of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, as a positive example despite facing certain negative development trends, partially attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participatory mechanisms associated with Cluj-Napoca are monitored in this chapter.

The last part, as the title suggests, deals with evolution and perspectives. It is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses the working mechanism with a focus on remote working. Then, in the next two chapters, the authors Evelina Staykova and Gilles Rouet capture the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of digitalization. The author Kalli Giannelos raises a very specific issue that is not often discussed in the case of political participation. The ethical dimension is reflected here.

The reviewed publication opens important issues related to participatory democracy and digitalization. It is an important material because of the considerable heterogeneity in the coverage of the topics and in the focus itself. Parts of it can certainly be an important contribution to further research. At

the same time, however, it should be added, as it appears in some parts of this publication, that digitalization is not a panacea, but it can be one of the potential drivers.

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