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Citizen participation and democracy in the European Union and Latin America

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I - Introduction

In these early years of the 21st century, it is apparent that governments, representative institutions, political parties and associations are losing some of their prestige. In Europe, the economic and financial crisis has led to unemployment and increased social inequalities, particularly in the southern European countries that have fallen victim to the crisis, to high levels of debt and reduced growth. The crisis has also affected several Latin American countries.

For the first time, both sides of the Atlantic are experiencing significant political, economic and social problems at the same time. In Europe, integration has slowed down (nationalism, i.e. the intergovernmental method, prevails over solidarity, i.e. the Community method, the euro is under threat and unemployment and social uncertainty are increasing. In Latin America, which has been going through a period of democratic consolidation for the past 30 years, social inequalities persist. In both regions, many people are exasperated by these problems and are losing confidence in the political institutions that represent them.

The global economic and financial crisis, the increase in social inequalities, corruption, insecurity, violence, and the failure to respond to people's demands all contribute significantly to the public's disaffection with politics and bring politicians into disrepute. The citizens of Europe and Latin America are calling for a better democratic system. They are dissatisfied with the way that democracy currently works. Democracy must be improved in order to ensure that people have the necessary means to exercise their citizenship rights and guarantee their wellbeing. Over the past few years, since the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the public has been calling for greater involvement in public administration and, in their dissatisfaction, express their concerns about politics through alternative organisations and street protests and demonstrations.

How can citizens be encouraged to participate in political activities and regain their interest in politics and confidence in politicians in order to improve the democratic system?

In order to try to answer this question, it is worth pausing to consider certain concepts.

1. Democracy and citizenship

Democracy can be defined as a system in which the citizens decide who will govern them for a given period through free, fair and transparent elections. Power is divided between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, and other bodies with their own powers also exist, with checks and balances between them to protect people's fundamental rights: civil rights, political rights, and social rights.

Democracy presupposes the rule of law. However, democracy must not be restricted to electoral participation but must be participatory and have channels for political participation in order to improve the quality of democracy. In the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) report of 2004[1], democracy is defined as: a form of organisation of power that implies the existence of a State and its proper functioning; in which although the electoral system is a key element of a democratic regime, democracy cannot be reduced to the mere holding of elections; and which requires full civic participation.

The concept of citizenship may be defined as 'a sort of basic equality to be associated with the concept of belonging to a community, which, in modern terms, is the equivalent of the rights and obligations that all individuals have just by belonging to a national State.'[2] The State shall aim to expand civic participation.

Europe

One of the key elements of European Union democracy is the direct election of MEPs since 1979. Furthermore, the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) established EU citizenship. These provisions support the launch of the first transnational citizenship – European citizenship – and respond to the wishes of EU citizens who have gradually been moving away from European integration, as demonstrated by the result of the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the poor turnout in the last European Parliament elections.

European Commission initiatives to encourage participation have moved in this direction with *Plan D: Broadening and deepening the debate on participatory democracy at European level* (2006), and the *European Citizens' Initiative* (2010) which enables EU citizens to make suggestions for legislative proposals relating to specific issues of interest to them.

Latin America

A little over thirty years ago, there were democracies with free, fair and transparent elections in just three Latin American countries: Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela. The years between 1978 and 1988 saw the biggest move towards constitutionally established civil political systems in Latin America. Never in Latin America had democracy extended so far for such a long time. During the period 1988 to 1998, there was significant progress on rights. Finally, in the last ten years, social and economic advances designed to reduce endemic poverty have been consolidated by applying measures to reduce social inequalities. New challenges have also emerged such as insecurity, violence, drug trafficking, organised crime and the rise of other powers that attempt to undermine the power and role of the State, thereby limiting the quality of democracy. In Latin America today, the debate is not, as it was in the past, between democracy and authoritarianism or between formal democracy and real democracy; rather, it focuses on how to improve the quality of democracy, how to extend and improve citizenship, and how to reconcile democracy and development.

A lack of balance between the powers of the State and social exclusion both affect the legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy. In such circumstances, people begin to doubt whether democracy is the best political system and whether the way it functions will ensure that citizenship can steadily expand.

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[1]UNDP, 'Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizen's Democracy', New York, 2004, p. 60
[2]UNDP, op. cit.

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A poll carried out in various Latin American countries in January 2011 states that 'democracy is the preferred form of government for most people, with approval ratings of more than 85% in all the countries surveyed.'[1] However, it is important to distinguish between a preference for democracy as a political system and satisfaction with the way its institutions work. The people of Costa Rica, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Brazil and Ecuador are the most satisfied with the way their democracies are operating. By contrast, the citizens of Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Honduras are the least satisfied. It is clear that the legitimacy of political institutions has been seriously undermined and it is worrying that this disaffection affects political parties, the legislature and the judiciary in particular.

A strengthened State with reinforced democratic institutions and political parties is a prerequisite for democracy, equitable growth and social cohesion. The State is responsible for creating the necessary conditions to ensure that measures adopted are credible and effective and contribute to the welfare of the population.

2. Citizen participation and political parties

The public's participation in the political life of their country is a prerequisite for the survival of the democratic system. In addition to legitimising the power of elected members through the ballot box, citizen participation improves the quality of public policies, helps build social consensus and adds legitimacy to decisions relating to public policy. Citizen participation also opens up new channels of communication between representatives and those they represent by identifying social demands and monitoring decisions taken. People's sense of belonging to a political community is increased, insofar as they play a part in shaping the initiatives that affect individuals. It promotes transparency and helps to hold the political authorities to account. A better understanding of the complexities surrounding public policy decisions is fostered and the population's political knowledge is increased. Citizen participation also generates social and relational capital, thereby strengthening social cohesion processes.

It appears to be both a means to an end, by improving the quality of public policies, and as an end in itself, i.e. it is both a cause and a consequence of greater social cohesion and, consequently, a better quality of democracy. The ultimate aim of citizen participation is to ensure the wellbeing of the population. According to the UNDP report, 'citizenship is the process and the individual acquisition of those rights'. It is a basic premise that citizen participation in modern democracies requires there to be political parties and that democracy requires regular elections for which political parties are essential.

Political parties are voluntary associations of people who, guided by common values and ideals and a broadly similar assessment of current events and future prospects, channel the public's demands and promote certain public policies. For over a century, political parties played a leading role in democratic societies. Now, with the triumph of globalisation and the success of social networks, many other actors have begun to play a role in society and compete with the political parties themselves.

The **European Union** and other regions of the world are witnessing a decline in citizens'

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[1]UNDP Bulletin/Latin American Institute, January 2011

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political participation. This trend, which affects political parties in particular, undermines modern democratic systems. According to Paul Whiteley[1]there are two reasons for this phenomenon: political parties are too closely linked to the State and it is therefore difficult to distinguish between their representative and executive functions. Parties have submitted to a regulatory framework which affords them quasi-official status as part of the State. As the internal affairs and even the external activities of the parties start to be regulated by law, political parties are becoming public service agencies. In fact, their autonomy and ability to represent the people has been greatly reduced. 'By the end of the 20th century, parties throughout Europe could mainly be characterised as governing organisations, or even as public utilities, while their representative role had become more marginalised and ineffective, or had been passed on to other agencies, movements and the media.'[2]The second reason for the decline of political parties is the growing importance of new forms of political participation which have emerged from long-term social and technological change. In Europe, for example, the question of consumer protection can have a significant mobilising effect when a large number of people decide to boycott certain products for political or ethical reasons.

When people doubt the political effectiveness of traditional parties on account of the disparity between their manifestos and their actions, it can increase voter absenteeism and boost support for anti-establishment parties, for minority parties with manifestos that are not only very different but could potentially lead to conflict, and for populist movements which latch on to governance issues in general. This situation affects European political parties at the national level but not, paradoxically, at the European level (representation in the EP), where the above-mentioned problems have not, as yet, been encountered.

2.2 Latin America

The character and evolution of the party systems in **Latin America** vary widely in line with the differing political histories of the countries in the region. In some countries party systems are reasonably institutionalised, whereas in others party organisation remains weak. However, Latin American political parties find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they were key players in the third democratic wave and yet they are currently suffering the most social criticism and the worst erosion of voter confidence. Surveys (Latinobarometer, 1995-2009) indicate that most mistrust relates to public administration and two of the most important institutions in a representative democracy, namely political parties and parliaments.

Despite the low level of trust commanded by the political parties, which are occasionally viewed merely as 'electoral machines', they are still perceived as institutions that can wield a great deal of influence over government decisions. The public institution in which Latin Americans have the greatest confidence is the armed forces, yet this does not stop Latin Americans reiterating that they must not become involved in government decisions.

What is the reason for this distrust of political parties? One possible explanation is that once political parties take up office they find it impossible to bridge the social gap, ensure public security or fulfil their election promises. Other problems include failing to produce concrete proposals to address public policies, corruption and political cronyism. Unfortunately, the

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[1]The decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world – http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/17/1/21
[2]Journal of European Public Policy, Routledge, January 2010

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general impression of political parties is that they are involved in corruption and influence peddling and use the State as a source of private wealth accumulation.

Both these and other reasons which are more or less evident in some countries might explain why people are so reluctant to accept that individual political actions do not necessarily always have an impact on political effectiveness. Personal involvement in, or estrangement from, political activities are two of the key criteria that people use when evaluating politics and politicians.

3. Civil society and other forms of participation

The concept of civil society refers to the decision of individuals who share common aims and a sense of solidarity to work together outside existing government structures for the common good and take decisions in the public sphere that affect everyone.

Broadly speaking, **civil society** can be defined as the arena in which the will of individuals is represented in organised groups consisting of movements and individuals, volunteers with non-profit-making motives, who are relatively independent from government and the market, and who strive to improve people's lives, encourage the development of shared values, and create associations and ties of solidarity which could influence the shape of society through non-traditional forms of political representation.

The European Commission's 2001 White Paper on European Governance stated: 'Civil society plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and delivering services that meet people's needs.'

Also included under the umbrella of civil society are socio-professional organisations, non-governmental human rights groups, trade unions, NGOs, etc.

Organised civil society (OCS) occasionally intervenes in matters that political parties on the one hand, and governments on the other, consider to be their exclusive responsibility, which can sometimes lead to a degree of overlap. However, political parties and civil society organisations complement each other in many ways. OCS frequently articulates new ideas, promotes government transparency and also evaluates the results of government programmes. Such initiatives can be beneficial to democracy.

The current debate over civil society focuses on its aim of better representing citizens' interests and encouraging the development of shared values and ways in which people can influence the shape of society by participating in the public arena beyond, or as a complement to, traditional forms of political representation.

Since the 1990s, and the Maastricht Treaty in particular, there has been talk of a democratic deficit in the European Union. Concerned about the problem, the European institutions saw that civil society offered one of the solutions to the legitimacy crisis that the EU was suffering. The participation of organised civil society is now a basic principle of EU governance which has been achieved by institutionalising its procedures and giving material support to the transnational development of civil society. The recognition that European organised civil society receives from institutions such as the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has brought it legitimacy, status and grants.

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Civil society within the **European Union** is represented by the EESC, a consultative assembly established by the Treaties of Rome in 1957. Consequently, the EU institutions give voice to civil society whenever they are consulted. Accordingly, democratic 'standards' were introduced: pluralism, transparency, representativeness, and accountability of the associations involved. Although in theory the public's every last interest can be reflected in 'organised civil society', in practice organisations which represent public interests tend to be favoured. Nowadays, therefore, the term 'stakeholders' is often used instead of 'civil society'. Stakeholders have become the European Commission's privileged partners in European governance. In any event, the role that civil society plays at the local, regional and European level is that of a 'school of democracy' which encourages people to participate in politics and help to forge a European identity.

Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations have progressed enormously over recent years in **Latin America.** This is of particular relevance because a robust civil society, with the ability to generate political alternatives and monitor the government and State, can help to consolidate and deepen democracy and create a more equitable and just society.

There is currently a tendency to pit political parties against civil society organisations. Political parties and civil society organisations, however, complement each other in many ways. OCS frequently articulates new ideas and plays a prominent role in promoting government transparency and evaluating the results of government programmes. Increased citizen participation through OCS should not be construed as competition with the political parties. The roles of OCS and the political parties remain distinct: citizen participation for civil society and representation for political parties. The forms of citizen participation that take place though OCS can strengthen links between representatives and those they represent. Increased participation can, therefore, lead to better representation. Participation and representation are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary.

Civil society began to organise itself in the 1990s, all the while bearing in mind its many different interests. Thus were born the first Economic and Social Councils (ESCs), which are broadly defined as follows: 'Economic and Social Councils are advisory bodies consisting of representatives of organised civil society, primarily business organisations and trade unions, the purpose of which is to guide public policy on social, labour and/or economic issues.'
The ESCs share the following characteristics: they are institutionalised advisory bodies that are political in nature, i.e. they are not technical bodies that express impartial opinions; they have a specialised advisory role in relation to social, labour and economic issues; they represent OCS through their composition; they are permanent social dialogue forums.

In the context of different processes of regional integration in Latin America (SICA, CAN, Mercosur) several regional bodies were set up, bringing together OCS from various countries. In Central America, the SICA Advisory Forum was established in 1995 with the aim of encouraging the active participation of civil society within the framework of regional integration. Mercosur's Economic and Social Advisory Forum, created in 1994, promotes the participation of civil society and its integration in the Mercosur construction process and highlights the social dimension of the process. Under the auspices of CAN, the Andean Economic and Social Council began to be set up in 2006 and should eventually take over from the two current committees, i.e. the Labour Advisory Council and the Business Advisory

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Council, both of which were established in 1998.

4. Other forms of participation

In Europe, people seem to be seeking more direct, non-conventional means of democratic representation, such as the Internet (where space can be opened up for forums to discuss political agendas, promoting 'eDemocracy'), consumer organisations and NGOs, public protests, etc.

Nowadays, the key political players have an online presence, whether they belong to traditional forms of political representation, such as political parties, governments and international bodies, or form part of civil society and networks. It is clear that the Internet can be a powerful tool for disseminating new issues on the political agenda. The Arab Spring has clearly demonstrated the role that the Internet can play. Furthermore, the Internet can play a fundamental role in respect of transparency by facilitating public access to official documents and helping to inform people. In Latin America, people are also starting to be better informed, thanks to technological advances, and also more critical. Thus, historically marginalised communities, such as the indigenous peoples and those of African descent, have begun to participate in new ways, although they remain politically under-represented. The landless movement in Brazil, coca leaf farmers in Bolivia and the Zapatistas in Mexico are to be congratulated for bringing important social problems into the public arena for debate.

How can citizen participation be improved?

In western society and in Europe in particular, people are displaying a growing lack of interest in joining political parties and voter absenteeism continues to increase. Nevertheless, Europeans support democracy and believe it to be the best political system, despite the fact that they have become more critical and are unwilling to get involved in politics outside traditional media.
Insecurity, violence, poverty and inequality cause people to lose trust in the judicial, executive and legislative powers which are the cornerstone of democracy. Societies which have little faith in the people who represent them can ultimately become detached from democracy.

According to the 2010 UNDP/OAS report, Latin American democracies must: generate new forms of political participation to counter the representation crisis, strengthen the republican model of State, i.e. the independence of powers, their mutual control and accountability mechanisms; increase the actual political power of the State by modernising its organisations and furnishing them with adequate human and financial resources; proceed simultaneously with effective public policies in the key areas of taxation, social cohesion and public security.[1]

What should be done to restore public confidence in democratic values in Europe and Latin America?

Measures must be taken to encourage people to engage actively in political life by whatever means they choose: political parties, civil society, and non-conventional methods of political participation. The mechanisms of direct democracy, such as referendums, allow people to

[1]Our Democracy, UNDP/OAS, 2010

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give their opinion directly on public policies. Referendums should be used sparingly, given that they are ad-hoc instruments.

One innovative new mechanism is participatory budgeting. It was first used in Porto Alegre,

Brazil, in 1989 and continues to be used today in more than 15 000 municipalities across

every continent. The Internet can thus go a long way towards rehabilitating politicians. The media also now need to be modernised to ensure they provide accurate and properly verified information, with laws put in place to restrict monopolies. Another option would be to establish permanent control mechanisms to ensure the transparency of public administration with a view to creating a solid system of accountability which would inspire greater levels of confidence in the population.

Taxation is a central component of redistribution. In Latin America, where more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line, taxes are of particular importance. The possibility of carrying out election pledges is dependent on taxes so that the State can fulfil its objectives. Unfortunately, however, taxation remains very limited in Latin America. Effective fiscal policies are required.

As far as the administration of justice is concerned, it is vital, particularly in Latin America, that justice is swift for all and that there is no impunity. In the EU, it is essential that individuals or groups of individuals have the opportunity to appeal to the European Court of Justice when all the options for a hearing at the administrative level or before the European Commission have been exhausted.

Nowadays, democracy can no longer be exclusively representative (electoral). In the 21st century it has to be participatory. Between them, there are two alternatives: coexistence and complementarity. In western countries, there is essentially coexistence; in other words, a representative government at the national level coexists with a participatory democracy at the local level. In Latin America there are examples of complementarity (for example participatory budgeting), i.e. representative democracy governments approve the transfer of their decision-making powers to the local/regional level (participatory democracy). In this context, democracy continues to be a system with a future. The basic concept will not alter, but the way in which it is implemented may well change.

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