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Citizen participation and democracy in Latin America and the European Union

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Citizen participation and democracy in Latin America and the European Union

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 international economic and financial crisis has led to unemployment and has increased social inequalities, particularly in the southern European countries that have fallen victim to the crisis, owing to high levels of debt and reduced growth. The crisis has also affected several Latin American countries.

For the first time, countries on both sides of the Atlantic are facing significant political, economic and social problems at the same time. In Europe, progress towards further integration is slowing, as feelings of national identity and the corresponding intergovernmental method of European governance take precedence over a solidarity-based approach. The Community method and the euro are under threat, and unemployment and social uncertainty are increasing. In Latin America, which has been consolidating democratic governance for the past 30 years, social inequalities still remain. Unfortunately, reality shows that representative democracy alone does not necessarily lead to prosperity and equal living conditions for all citizens. In both regions, many people are exasperated by these, as yet unresolved, problems and are therefore losing confidence in the political institutions that represent them.
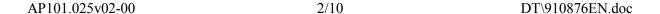
The global economic and financial crisis, the increase in social inequalities, corruption, insecurity, violence, and the failure to respond to people's needs all contribute significantly to the public's disaffection with politics and politicians. European and Latin American citizens are calling for improvements to the democratic system of government. 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 rights as citizens and to guarantee their well-being. Over the past few years, since the collapse of Lehman Brothers, people have been calling for greater involvement in the management of public affairs and have been expressing their dissatisfaction with politics through alternative organisations and street protests and demonstrations.

What can be done to encourage people to participate in political life and to restore their interest in politics and their trust in politicians in order to improve the democratic system of government?

In order to help answer this question, it is useful to take the time to consider certain concepts.

1. Democracy and citizenship

Democracy can be defined as the system in which citizens decide who will govern them for a given period on the basis of free, multiparty and transparent elections. In such a system, power is divided between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Other bodies with their own powers also exist, along with checks and balances in order to protect people's fundamental civil, political and social rights.

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Democracy presupposes the rule of law. However, democracy should not merely mean that people can vote in elections. Rather, a democracy needs to be participatory and to provide ways for people to partake in political life 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 the electoral system is a key, but not the sole, element; and which requires full civic participation.

Citizenship is understood as a precept of basic equality, 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 by belonging to a national State.[2] One objective of a State should be to increase civic participation.

1.1 European Union

One of the key elements of European Union democracy is the direct election, since 1979, of Members of the European Parliament. EU citizenship was also established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. These elements underpin the launch of the first example of transnational citizenship – European citizenship – and respond to the wishes of EU citizens whose support for the European integration process has been gradually declining, as demonstrated by the result of the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the reduced turnout in the last European Parliament elections (2009).

Encouraging participation has been a key element of European Commission initiatives, which include Plan D (2006), which seeks to increase and deepen the debate on participatory democracy at European level, and the European Citizens' Initiative (2010), which enables EU citizens to make suggestions for legislative proposals on specific issues of interest to them.

1.2. Latin America

A little over thirty years ago, only three Latin American countries had a democratic system of government and held free, multiparty and transparent elections, namely Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela. The years between 1978 and 1988 saw the biggest move towards constitutionally established civilian political systems in Latin America. Never before in Latin America had democratic rule extended so far and for such a long period. Between 1988 and 1998, there was significant progress on rights. Finally, in the last ten years, social and economic achievements designed to reduce endemic poverty have been consolidated through the application of 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 are seeking to undermine the power and role of the State, thereby diminishing 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 is concerned with how to improve the quality of democracy, how to extend and improve citizenship, and how to reconcile democracy and equitable and sustainable development.

Social exclusion and a lack of balance between the powers of the State both affect the

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[1] UNDP, La Democracia en América Latina: 'Hacia una Democracia de Ciudadanos', New York, 2004, p.60

[2] UNDP, op. cit.

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legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy in Latin America. In this context, people are beginning to doubt whether democracy is the best political system and whether the way it functions can ensure that civic participation will gradually increase.

According to a poll carried out in various Latin American countries in January 2011, 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 people are seriously questioning the legitimacy of political institutions, and it is worrying that this lack of trust is particularly acute in relation to political parties, and the legislative and judicial branches of government.

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 conditions needed to ensure that any measures adopted are credible and effective and contribute to the well-being 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 public policy decisions. Citizen participation also opens up new channels of communication between representatives and those they represent through the identification of societal needs and the monitoring of any 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. It also fosters a better understanding of the complexities surrounding public policy decisions and enhances public knowledge of political issues. Citizen participation also generates social and relational capital, thereby strengthening social cohesion processes.

Citizen participation appears to be both a means to an end, by improving the quality of public policies, and an end in itself, i.e. it is both a cause and a consequence of greater social cohesion and, therefore, of a better-quality democracy. The ultimate aim of citizen participation is to ensure the well-being of the population. According to the aforementioned UNDP report, citizenship is the process and individual acquisition of certain rights. One basic democratic principle is that political parties are needed in order for citizens to participate in modern democracies. Parties are also essential for the holding of the regular elections required under a democratic system of government.

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

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

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have 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.

2.1. European Union

The European Union and other regions of the world are witnessing a decline in public participation in politics. This trend, which affects political parties in particular, undermines the modern democratic system. According to Paul Whiteley,[1] there are two reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, 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 are starting to be regulated by law, political parties are becoming public service agencies. In fact, their autonomy and ability to represent the people are much more limited. '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 as a result of broad social and technological change. In Europe, for example, the issue 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.

Public doubt about the political effectiveness of traditional parties on account of the disparity between their manifestos and their actions can lead to an increase in voter absenteeism and boost support for anti-establishment parties, minority parties (with manifestos that are not only very different but could be contradictory), and populist movements, highlighting general problems of governance. This situation affects European political parties at national level, but not, paradoxically, at European level (when represented 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 according to the differing political histories of the countries in the region. In some countries, the party systems are reasonably institutionalised, whereas in others party organisation remains weak. However, Latin American political parties find themselves in a paradoxical situation: whilst they were key players in the third democratic wave, they are currently beset by unprecedented levels of social criticism and erosion of voter confidence. Surveys (Latinobarometer, 1995-2009) indicate that citizens have a particularly acute lack of trust in relation to the civil service 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

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

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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 from reiterating that they must not become involved in government decisions.

What are the reasons for people's distrust of political parties? One possible explanation is that political parties, once they take up office, find it impossible to reduce social inequalities, ensure public security and fulfil their election promises. Another explanation is their failure to produce concrete proposals to address public policy concerns, corruption and political cronyism. Unfortunately, more and more people equate political parties with corruption, influence peddling and the use of State resources as a source of private wealth accumulation.

These reasons and others which are more or less evident in some countries might explain why people are so disengaged from politics, since their perception is that their individual political actions do not necessarily always have an impact on political effectiveness. Whether or not people are involved in or disengaged from political activities are two key factors which determine their attitude towards politics and politicians.

3. **Civil society and other forms of participation**

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

Broadly speaking, **civil society** can be defined as the arena in which people's concerns are represented by groups, movements and individuals, on a voluntary and not-for-profit basis, that are relatively independent from government and the market, and that strive to improve people's lives, encourage the development of shared values, and create associations and ties of solidarity which could influence the future of society through non-traditional forms of political representation.

The European Commission's 2001 white paper on European Governance stated that '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 and 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. This 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 action. Such activities can be beneficial to democracy.

The current debate on civil society is in relation to its aim of ensuring that the interests of citizens are better represented and of encouraging the development of shared values and the means by which people can help shape future society through their participation in the public arena, whether outside of or in addition 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 affecting the EU. The participation of organised civil society is now a basic principle of EU governance, achieved by institutionalising its procedures and giving material support to the transnational development of civil society. The recognition of European organised civil society, by institutions such as the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), has given it legitimacy, status and financial support.

3.1. European Union

Civil society is represented in the European Union by the EESC, a consultative assembly established by the Treaties of Rome in 1957. The EU institutions thus give voice to civil society whenever they consult them. Accordingly, democratic 'standards' were introduced: pluralism, transparency, representativeness, and accountability of the associations involved. In theory, organised civil society can reflect the public's every last interest; however, in practice, priority tends to be given to organisations representing wider public interests. 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 local, regional and European levels is that of a 'school of democracy' which encourages people to participate in politics and helps to forge a European identity.

3.2. Latin America

Civil society or 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 action. Increased citizen participation through OCS should not be construed as competition with the political parties. The roles of OCS and political parties remain distinct: civil society is a vehicle for citizen participation whilst political parties have a representative role. The ways in which OCS facilitates citizen participation can strengthen the 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 in a way that reflects 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.

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

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a specialised advisory role in relation to social, labour and economic issues; they represent OCS through their membership structure; they are permanent social dialogue forums.

In the context of the different regional integration processes in Latin America (SICA, CAN, Mercosur), several regional bodies were set up, bringing together OCS from various countries. In Central America, the SICA Consultative Committee was established in 1995 with the aim of encouraging the active participation of civil society within the regional integration framework. Mercosur's Economic and Social Consultative Forum, created in 1994, promotes the participation of civil society and its integration in the Mercosur construction process by drawing attention to social issues. Under the auspices of CAN, the Andean Economic and Social Council began to be set up in 2006 and should eventually replace the two current committees, the Labour Consultative Committee and the Business Advisory Committee, 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 forums can be created to discuss political programmes, and 'eDemocracy' can be promoted), 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 information about 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 key role in ensuring transparency by facilitating public access to official documents and helping to inform people. In Latin America, technological advances have meant that people are beginning to be both better informed and more critical. Thus, historically marginalised communities, such as 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.

This political representation crisis, which is related to the economic and financial crisis, has sparked protest movements in Europe, Arab countries, the Americas and elsewhere. Young people in Tunis and Cairo were protesting against the oppression of their countries by their dictator-leaders. Meanwhile, their counterparts in the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, Plaza Sintagma in Athens, London, New York's Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, Montreal and Santiago in Chile were denouncing the way in which their democracies were being run. They felt that their democratic systems had stopped responding to priority issues in society and that there was therefore a need for a new society in which human concerns were more important than political and economic interests. In this way, the protestors were not rejecting democracy as a form of government (a dangerous trend that could lead to autocracy and fascism), but were democratising public life. The protest movements have thus adopted a horizontal organisational structure that encourages broad participation, as opposed to a centralised structure with a single leader. Their decisions are taken by consensus. This decision-making approach, which is not voting-based, was used by the OWS movement in

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particular. In this context, consensus not only means unanimity, in the sense of an opinion agreed on by all, but also 'unity' or a higher truth which is reached by considering the differing views and which unifies them all.

The OWS movement claims to represent the majority of the population (99 %) who have simply become a means to enrich the minority (1%) that holds all the political and economic power. These kinds of movements launch all sorts of initiatives and carry out demonstrations and activities in relation to many different issues: housing, the power of multinationals, international arms sales, student debt and campaigns for free and high-quality education, among others. The violent removal of protestors in Madrid, London and New York has not stifled the movements. Instead, they have withdrawn to other areas where they continue to take less visible, but still effective, action, such as preventing penniless families from being expelled from their homes and even occupying empty houses or buildings.

How can citizen participation be improved?

In western society and in Europe in particular, people are less and less interested in joining political parties and voter absenteeism is still on the increase. Nevertheless, Europeans support democracy and believe it to be the best political system, despite the fact that they have become more critical and relatively unwilling to take part in politics in ways beyond the conventional means.

Insecurity, violence, poverty and inequality cause people to lose trust in the judicial, executive and legislative branches of government that form the backbone of a democratic system. 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 government, i.e. separation of powers, mutual checks and accountability mechanisms, increase the actual political power of the State by modernising its bodies 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 can 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 give their opinion directly on public policies. Referendums should be used only in very specific cases, given that this is a procedure for exceptional circumstances.

One innovative new approach is participatory budgeting. It was first used in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989 and is still used today in more than 15 000 municipalities across every continent. The Internet can thus go a long way towards improving people's perception of politics. 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

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[1] Our Democracy, UNDP/OAS, 2010

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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 among the population.

The use of electronic and digital network resources can be extremely useful in this respect, because they enable citizens to express their opinions directly. It is also vital to consult cultural minorities, protect minority ethnic groups and to adopt urban development rules and permits that are in line with the views of local people.

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 ability to carry out election pledges and the capacity of the State to fulfil its objectives are dependent on taxes. Unfortunately, however, taxation remains very limited in Latin America. Effective fiscal policies are required.

It is also vital, particularly in Latin America, to ensure that justice is administered promptly and that there is no impunity. In the EU, individuals or groups of individuals should have the opportunity to take their cases to the European Court of Justice when all the options for action 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. There are two possible ways of combining these approaches: coexistence and complementarity. Western countries essentially opt for the coexistence approach; in other words, they have a representative government at national level which coexists with participatory democracy at local level. In Latin America, there are some examples of the complementarity approach (for example participatory budgeting); in this case, representative democracy governments allow for the transfer of their decision-making powers to the local/regional level (participatory democracy).

Democracy thus continues to be a political system with a future. Its basic principles will not change, but the way that they are applied may vary, creating new channels for political expression by the new social and cultural movements that are emerging in today's society.

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