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CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE AND FORMS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: *ACTIVE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IS CRUCIAL FOR A FUNCTIONAL DEMOCRACY, BUT IT REQUIRES EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT TO BE EFFECTIVE. THE STUDY DISCUSSES CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE, EMPHASIZING ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THE LEGITIMACY AND EFFICIENCY OF DEMOCRACY. VARIOUS FORMS OF PARTICIPATION, SUCH AS VOTING, CITIZEN INITIATIVES, PROTESTS, AND PETITIONS, ARE HIGHLIGHTED AS MEANS FOR CITIZENS TO DIRECTLY INFLUENCE POLITICAL DECISIONS. THE STUDY ALSO ANALYZES FACTORS THAT STIMULATE OR HINDER POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT, INCLUDING EDUCATION, ACCESS TO INFORMATION, AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BARRIERS. THE ROLE OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY, EXEMPLIFIED BY REFERENDUMS, WHICH ALLOW THE EXPRESSION OF POPULAR WILL DIRECTLY, IS EMPHASIZED. ADDITIONALLY, THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IS DISCUSSED, NOTING BOTH THE BENEFITS AND RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH MISINFORMATION AND DIGITAL MANIPULATION. THE STUDY ALSO HIGHLIGHTS THE RISKS TO DEMOCRACY POSED BY THE DIRECT PARTICIPATION OF ACTIVIST CITIZENS AT THE EXPENSE OF A PASSIVE MAJORITY.*

Keywords: DIRECT DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION, REFERENDUM, CITIZEN INITIATIVE

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1. FUNDAMENTALS OF CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE

Citizens' participation in political life is one of the essential pillars of democracy, reflecting both the fundamental rights of individuals and the mechanisms through which the legitimacy of governance is ensured. It does not only encompass the right to vote but also includes a wide range of activities through which citizens can express their opinions and influence political decisions.



Citizens' participation refers to the active involvement of individuals in the political and decision-making processes that influence society. This can include voting, running for public office, participating in public debates, joining political parties or interest groups, and initiating or signing petitions. Political participation is essential for the functioning of democracy as it allows citizens to express their will and contribute to the formulation of public policies.

In an authentic democracy, citizens' participation is not just a right but also a responsibility. It ensures that political decisions reflect the will of the people and promotes transparency and accountability in governance. Active citizen participation contributes to the development of a strong civil society and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

The fundamental political rights of citizens are stipulated in various international conventions and national constitutions and are essential for ensuring active participation in political life. These include the right to vote and to be elected, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. The right to vote is the most evident and universally recognized political right, serving as a mechanism through which citizens can elect their representatives and influence the direction of public policies.

Freedom of expression allows citizens to express their political opinions without fear of reprisal, while freedom of association and assembly facilitates the formation and activities of political parties and other civic organizations. These fundamental political rights are interdependent and essential for creating an open and inclusive political environment.

Citizens' participation plays a decisive role in legitimizing governance. The legitimacy of a government derives not only from its legality but also from the acceptance and support it receives from citizens. Active citizen participation confers legitimacy on governance as it reflects the consensus and support of the population for the political decisions made.

Moreover, citizens' participation contributes to holding public authorities accountable. When citizens are actively involved in the decision-making process, they can monitor and evaluate government performance, demanding transparency and accountability. A high level of political participation reduces the risk of corruption and abuse of power, as rulers know they are under the constant scrutiny of citizens.

Citizens' participation not only ensures that the voice of the people is heard but also contributes to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the accountability of the government. Fundamental political rights, such as the right to vote and freedom of expression, are essential for facilitating political participation and creating a vibrant and inclusive political environment.

a. MECHANISMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The mechanisms through which citizens participate in political life are diverse, offering multiple ways to influence decision-making processes. Among these, voting remains the principal tool of participation, but political parties, interest groups, protests, petitions, and citizen initiatives also play significant roles.

Voting is considered the most direct and fundamental form of political participation. Through voting, citizens express their political preferences and elect representatives who will make decisions on their behalf. Voting is essential for the functioning of a representative democracy, ensuring that political leaders are accountable to the citizens.

Each vote contributes to the formation of a democratic mandate, thereby legitimizing the authority of the elected officials. Moreover, voter turnout is an indicator of the health of a democracy, reflecting the level of citizen engagement and interest in political issues. Voter participation rates are often used as a barometer of civic engagement and the effectiveness of the democratic system.



Political parties and interest groups are other essential mechanisms through which citizens participate in political life. Political parties serve as vehicles for aggregating and expressing citizens' interests and preferences. They play the most crucial role in the democratic structure by organizing electoral competition and facilitating the representation of various segments of society.

At the same time, interest groups, such as trade unions, employer organizations, NGOs, and other civic organizations, allow citizens to promote specific interests and influence public policy. Interest groups provide a way for citizens to directly influence political decisions, thereby complementing the function of political parties. These groups play a vital role in advocacy and lobbying, bringing specific issues and policy proposals to the attention of political decision-makers.

Other forms of political participation include protests, petitions, and citizen initiatives. These forms of participation are essential for expressing dissatisfaction and demanding change.

Protests are public demonstrations through which citizens express their disagreement with certain policies or governmental decisions. Protests can draw public and media attention to urgent issues, forcing authorities to respond. Petitions are tools through which citizens can officially request a change or intervention from the authorities. Petitions provide citizens with a formal way to express their concerns and demand concrete actions. They are often used to initiate parliamentary debates or trigger referendums. Citizen initiatives allow citizens to directly propose laws or legislative changes. These require the collection of a sufficient number of signatures to be considered by the authorities. Citizen initiatives represent a direct form of democracy, giving citizens the power to influence legislation without intermediaries.

b. FACTORS INFLUENCING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Citizen participation in political life is influenced by a series of factors that can either stimulate or inhibit their involvement in decision-making processes.

Political education plays a decisive role in encouraging citizens to participate in political life. Adequate political education provides citizens with the necessary knowledge to understand political processes and make informed decisions. Political education enhances citizens' civic competencies, increasing their capacity to participate actively and influence governance.

Public information is also essential. Citizens need to be informed about political issues, public policies, and government activities to engage effectively. Access to accurate and complete information is a fundamental right in a democracy and a key factor for informed citizen participation. In the absence of adequate information, citizens may become apathetic or make incorrect decisions based on misinformation or lack of knowledge.

There are numerous barriers that can impede citizens' participation in political life. These can be legal, social, or economic in nature and can vary significantly from one society to another, depending on its legislation.

Legal barriers include restrictions that limit the political rights of certain groups of citizens. In many countries, electoral laws may exclude certain categories of people, such as prisoners, minors, or citizens with certain disabilities, thus affecting overall participation.

Social barriers are related to factors such as discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Marginalized groups and minorities often face additional obstacles to political participation due to systemic prejudices and inequalities. The ongoing struggle against discrimination has recently led to the concept of positive discrimination, which allows various minorities to express themselves and become more visible than majorities, often against them.

Economic barriers include the lack of financial resources and time necessary to engage in political activities. Citizens with low incomes and those living in poverty often have less time and



fewer resources to dedicate to political participation, being primarily concerned with daily survival needs.

The media and social networks have a significant impact on political participation, shaping citizens' perceptions and behaviors. Traditional media, such as television, newspapers, and radio, still play an important role in informing the public and setting the political agenda. The media is a primary channel through which citizens receive political information, influencing their level of knowledge and political attitudes. Social networks have become increasingly influential in the modern political landscape, offering platforms for political debate and mobilization. Social networks facilitate rapid and direct communication between politicians and citizens, allowing for the swift mobilization of support for various political causes. However, social networks can also have negative effects, such as the spread of misinformation and political polarization. Misinformation on social networks can lead to the formation of erroneous opinions and the destabilization of democratic processes. The trend is that social networks and online information sources are becoming increasingly important and influential, to the detriment of traditional media. The risk of misinformation, fake news, and manipulation is heightened, as these types of information are not subject to any form of control. In traditional media, there were professionals, journalists, who selected what was relevant and presented the information according to the audience's capacity to understand.

2. FORMS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

a. THE REFERENDUM

A referendum represents one of the most direct forms of democracy, allowing citizens to directly participate in the decision-making process by voting on specific proposals. This practice provides a clear means through which popular will can be expressed on matters of national or local importance.

There are several types of referendums, each with its own characteristics and specific purposes. Among the most common types are mandatory referendums, optional referendums, and advisory referendums.

1. **Mandatory Referendum:** This is required by the constitution or legislation for certain major decisions, such as constitutional amendments.

2. **Advisory Referendum:** This is used to obtain the public's opinion on specific issues without having a binding effect.

In Romania, Law No. 3/2000 on the organization and conduct of referendums refers to three types of referendums, which can be classified under the two mentioned above:

1. **Constitutional Revision Referendum** - which is a mandatory referendum required by the constitution itself;

2. **National Interest Referendum** - which is an advisory referendum according to the above classification, with Law No. 3/2000 specifying the issues that may be subject to a referendum by the President of Romania after consulting Parliament;

3. **Local Referendum** - which can be organized at the level of a territorial administrative unit, whether it be a commune or a county, on issues of local interest. It is generally an advisory referendum but can also fall under the category of a mandatory referendum if the subject of the citizen vote concerns changes to the territorial boundaries of communes, cities, or counties, in which case the referendum is mandatory. The decision is made by the Romanian Parliament, but it is mandatory to consult the population through a referendum.

The procedure for organizing and conducting referendums varies from country to country, but there are a few common steps that are generally observed. The initiation of a referendum can come from the government, parliament, or through a citizen initiative. Depending on national legislation, a



certain number of signatures may be required to initiate a referendum. The referendum question(s) must be clearly and precisely formulated to avoid ambiguities and ensure that citizens understand exactly what they are voting on. The referendum initiator and authorities are responsible for ensuring a fair information campaign, providing citizens with both pro and con information on the subject under vote. Voting takes place similarly to general elections, with polling stations open to citizens. After voting, the results are counted and validated by an electoral authority. Validation procedures may include checking for minimum participation or the majority required for the result to be valid.

Referendums have had a significant impact on politics and society in many countries. Here are some notable examples:

1. Brexit Referendum (United Kingdom, 2016): British citizens voted to leave the European Union with 51.9% in favor and 48.1% against. This referendum had a major impact on European and British politics, leading to complex negotiations and significant economic and social changes.

2. Independence Referendum (Scotland, 2014): Scotland held a referendum for independence from the United Kingdom, with 55.3% voting against and 44.7% in favor. Although independence was not achieved, the referendum led to extensive discussion about regional autonomy and rights within the United Kingdom. The issue of holding a new referendum on Scottish independence continues to be debated, given the large number of citizens who support it.

3. Referendum on the European Union Constitution (France, 2005): French citizens rejected the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe with 54.7% against. This result led to a major rethinking of the European integration process and subsequent modifications to European treaties. Similar outcomes in other EU countries led to the abandonment of the idea of a European Constitution, an act with political and administrative consequences that would have significantly changed the structure of the European Union, a change that citizens did not agree with.

b. THE CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

The citizens' initiative is a mechanism of direct democracy that allows citizens to propose and vote on laws without the direct intervention of elected representatives. This tool provides citizens with the ability to directly influence legislation and actively participate in the decision-making process. This form of direct participation ensures that citizens are not just passive spectators of the legislative process but active players who can directly influence public policies. Citizens' initiatives allow citizens to bypass the legislature and propose legislative measures directly.

The initiative must be proposed and supported by citizens, not by elected representatives. The involvement of a political organization in collecting signatures or drafting the citizens' initiative can turn it into a disguised legislative proposal rather than a genuine citizens' initiative. To validate an initiative and bring it to a vote, a minimum number of signatures from citizens must be collected to demonstrate sufficient public support before it is put to a vote. After gathering the necessary signatures, the initiative is put to a vote. The voting process varies from country to country, ranging from direct citizen voting on the legislative initiative, bypassing the legislature and imposing a normative act, to a simple legislative proposal that subsequently enters parliamentary procedure and is adopted by the legislature.

Examples and Impact of Citizens' Initiatives on Legislation

Citizens' initiatives have had a significant impact in various countries, directly influencing legislation and public policies. Here are some notable examples:

1. Proposition 13 in California (1978): This was a property tax reduction initiative adopted with overwhelming support. Proposition 13 had a profound impact on California's public finances, drastically reducing tax revenues and forcing major budgetary adjustments.



2. Initiative to Legalize Cannabis in Colorado (2012): Citizens in Colorado voted in favor of legalizing recreational cannabis use. This was one of the first initiatives of its kind in the United States, paving the way for similar reforms in other states.

3. Animal Rights Initiative in Switzerland (2022): The proposal aimed to ban intensive animal farming, receiving significant support from the population to be included in the constitution, but it was rejected by the government and parliament. This initiative reflected the growing concerns of citizens for animal welfare and influenced European legislation in this area.

4. Notable examples of citizens' initiatives include the proposal to legalize same-sex marriage in Ireland, which was approved by referendum in 2015. This example shows how citizens' initiatives can catalyze major legislative changes and reflect shifts in public attitudes.

c. PARTICIPATORY AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Participatory and deliberative democracy are advanced forms of citizen involvement in the decision-making process, going beyond the simple participation through voting characteristic of direct democracy. These forms of democracy aim to improve the quality and legitimacy of political decisions by actively and informatively involving citizens.

Participatory democracy involves citizens in all stages of the decision-making process, giving them an active and continuous role.

Deliberative democracy focuses on the deliberation process, where citizens discuss and debate various issues to reach an informed and rational decision. In this form of democracy, the emphasis is on the quality of the discussion and the arguments presented in support of different positions. Deliberative democracy values the exchange of ideas and reasoning in a structured environment, promoting better-informed and more legitimate decisions.

Examples of Participatory and Deliberative Practices

Among the specific practices of participatory and deliberative democracy are citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries.

1. Citizens' Assemblies: These are randomly selected groups of citizens who gather to discuss and deliberate on specific issues. A notable example is the citizens' assembly in Ireland, which played a decisive role in reforming abortion laws. Citizens' assemblies allow for more equitable representation of society and encourage in-depth and balanced discussion.

2. Citizens' Juries: These are similar to citizens' assemblies but have a more formal structure and are used to evaluate and recommend public policies. An example is the citizens' jury in Oregon, which evaluates ballot initiatives and provides recommendations to voters. Citizens' juries offer a structured platform for deliberation and help inform the public and improve the quality of political decisions.

Participatory and deliberative democracy have both advantages and disadvantages. The quality and legitimacy of decisions are higher because they involve citizens in both the decision-making and deliberation processes. A higher level of involvement theoretically leads to greater social cohesion by strengthening social ties and the sense of community. At the same time, these forms of participation are complex and require significant financial and logistical resources. Most citizens cannot participate throughout the decision-making process because they either do not have the time or do not have sufficient knowledge for complex political processes. For this reason, the effect produced is the opposite of what is desired, as only a portion of citizens will participate, leading to greater inequalities than those inherent in traditional democracy. For example, we observe how environmentalist or pro-LGBTQ+ movements are much more visible than the ordinary and majority community interests due to the much more intense participation and involvement of their representatives. This promotion leads to a shift in the public agenda of political institutions under the pressure of public opinion. Therefore, participatory and deliberative democracy offer valuable mechanisms for the active involvement of



citizens in the decision-making process, overcoming the limitations of traditional direct and representative democracy. However, the challenges related to complexity, costs, and inequality must be carefully managed to ensure the effectiveness and fairness of these processes.

3. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Direct democracy, despite its theoretical advantages of directly involving citizens in the decision-making process, faces numerous challenges in the contemporary context. Among these challenges are the decline in trust in political institutions, the impact of globalization and migration on political participation, and the risks of manipulation and misinformation in direct democracy processes.

The decline in citizens' trust in political institutions is one of the greatest challenges for direct democracy. A lack of trust in political institutions can undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes and discourage citizens from actively participating in decision-making. This phenomenon is fueled by the perception that political institutions are corrupt or inefficient, which reduces citizens' willingness to engage actively in the decision-making process. Trust in institutions is essential for the functioning of a democracy, and the erosion of this trust can have severe consequences for political participation.

Globalization and migration have significantly changed the context in which contemporary democracies operate, having a complex impact on political participation. On one hand, globalization has led to increased interdependence between states and the creation of supranational structures that can dilute the power of national decisions. Globalization can diminish citizens' sense of control over political decisions, thus affecting their participation in democratic processes. On the other hand, migration introduces diversity and demographic changes that can influence political participation. Migrants may face difficulties in political integration and in exercising political rights in their new countries of residence. On one hand, they change the ethnic and cultural composition of communities, do not understand the democratic processes and the importance of political balance, and on the other hand, they manifest politically much more radically, believing they only have rights without understanding their obligations. They come from different worlds, from which they fled, but they bring those worlds with them.

Manipulation and misinformation represent major risks for direct democracy, having the potential to distort the popular will and undermine the legitimacy of decisions made through democratic processes. In the digital age, the rapid spread of false or biased information is facilitated by social networks and other online platforms. Misinformation can significantly influence public opinion and affect the outcomes of democratic processes. These risks are amplified by sophisticated manipulation techniques, such as micro-targeting and the use of artificial intelligence to create fake content. Information manipulation and digital propaganda pose serious threats to the integrity of direct democracy, undermining public trust in electoral processes.

4. TECHNOLOGY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

New technologies are transforming the way citizens participate in political life. Online platforms and electronic voting are just examples of how technology can facilitate political engagement, making democratic processes more accessible and efficient. Online platforms offer citizens new ways to inform themselves, discuss political issues, and organize. E-government platforms allow citizens to interact directly with the government, submit petitions, and participate in public consultations. Online technologies have the potential to revitalize democracy by increasing transparency and citizen engagement. The implementation of electronic voting can simplify the electoral process, making it



more accessible to citizens who cannot reach polling stations for various reasons. Electronic voting can increase electoral participation by eliminating some physical and logistical barriers. At the same time, electronic voting makes the vote-counting process and the distribution of mandates much faster and less costly. However, citizens are continuously concerned about the challenges related to cybersecurity and data protection involved in electronic voting, and governments exploit this fear by delaying the introduction of electronic voting or implementing it in ways that compromise the idea. Public manipulation leads to interesting paradoxes: while everyone keeps their financial resources electronically and with electronic access, voters do not agree to vote electronically once every four years, for one or two days, during which the IT systems are extremely well monitored, and the possibility of hacking is almost nonexistent. In these online voting platforms, one of the important issues is the management and protection of personal data. In fact, the whole issue of online voting is one of trust in the state or non-state entities that manage online voting. The stronger the opposition to online voting, the more it signals a lack of trust in the state and the way political processes are managed. What is even worse is that in most states that have not adopted online voting, the opposition does not come from the citizens but from the political actors themselves, parties and governments, which suggests that they prefer the traditional voting system for which dozens of fraud methods have been perfected over time.

Social networks have become a powerful tool for political mobilization and for promoting direct democracy. These platforms allow citizens to connect, share information, and organize collective actions quickly and efficiently. Social networks can facilitate the mobilization of citizens for various political causes, from protests and demonstrations to electoral campaigns. Social networks can encourage active citizen participation and can facilitate direct democracy processes, such as citizen initiatives and referendums. However, social networks can also have negative effects on direct democracy. Misinformation and the manipulation of information can distort public opinion and influence the outcomes of democratic processes. The spread of misinformation on social networks can undermine trust in democratic processes and negatively affect the quality of public deliberation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our study explores citizens' participation in political life, emphasizing the importance of direct democracy and the mechanisms by which citizens can exert their influence on decision-making processes. Political participation is not limited to the right to vote but includes a wide range of activities, such as citizen initiatives, protests, and petitions, which contribute, more or less, to the legitimacy of governance and the accountability of public authorities. Direct democracy, illustrated through referendums and citizen initiatives, allows citizens to participate directly in major political decisions, offering a way for the popular will to be expressed directly and without intermediaries. In Switzerland, for example, citizen initiatives play a crucial role, enabling citizens to propose laws or legislative amendments. However, this type of participation is influenced by factors such as political education, access to information, and socio-economic barriers.

In the digital era, technology has become an essential tool for political participation, facilitating access to information and the organization of collective actions through social networks. However, the challenges related to misinformation and digital manipulation present significant risks that can distort the popular will and undermine the integrity of democratic processes. The effective implementation of direct democracy forms and the use of technology can improve citizen involvement, but careful management of the associated risks is necessary.

There are numerous reservations or arguments against citizen participation and direct democracy. Firstly, the efficiency and decision-making competence of citizens in making informed decisions on complex political or economic issues are questioned. For example, the constitution of



Romania and those of many European states prohibit citizen initiatives on a wide range of normative acts that require specific competencies. Thus, citizens cannot decide through citizen initiatives on taxes and levies. The tendency among taxpayers would be to eliminate any fiscal obligation altogether because it is more convenient not to pay anything to the state from their income. Beyond the fact that it is difficult and very expensive to organize frequent referendums or citizen initiatives, there is also the risk of populism and manipulation of citizens, especially in the context of social media usage. Propaganda, misinformation, and emotional influence can distort citizens' perceptions and lead to a voting outcome based on emotions or false information. Secondly, we question whether the citizen initiative is anti-democratic because it does not respect the results of periodic political votes, and without control over majorities, ideas of a much more active minority can be imposed. We distinguish between an active and activist minority and a passive majority that manifests itself only within constitutional limits. Almost all public manifestations we face in daily life belong to this very active minority (LGBTQ+ groups, green or environmental groups, ethnic and religious minorities, etc.). The media and the internet predominantly publish these groups because, being marginal, they contain an exotic and interesting element, and by adding the sensationalism of these manifestations, they arouse the interest of the general public. Politicians take the pulse of the electorate from the press and the internet, meaning they will change their discourse according to the intensity of minority opinions of all kinds. We reach the point where the public agenda takes more into account what the internet reflects, that is, it focuses on marginal issues rather than the general and important ones for the majority. Thirdly, through this direct citizen participation in decisions, we reach an enclave-like approach, a medieval way of making decisions as if communities were completely isolated. In a globalized world, national, and sometimes even local political decisions can have international consequences. They can serve as models for other societies or groups that borrow them without internalizing them, generating administrative disasters in other parts of the world. Thus, the Californian model can be forcibly borrowed in Europe by certain local communities or even entire states that imitate it in the absence of their own ideas, but the consequences are incalculable.



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