

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

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Input

II. Democracy between distrust and participation: Re-thinking the relationship between citizens and state.

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There are many problems that weaken contemporary democracies in their citizens' eyes, especially in the situation of economic and financial crisis we are facing since some years ago. The solutions offered so far to this crisis by the political institutions and leaders do not seem to be successful. Therefore, citizens' trust in their political institutions and leaders is dramatically eroding and vanishing in the last years. The "democratic fatigue" is well spread among political systems, either with longer or shorter democratic experience.

There are some pillars, which can be found in many countries where democracy is being put into question and asked for solutions that don't seem to arrive. One of them is the increasing influence of non-democratically elected actors in political decisions, constraining the political framework in which decisions are made. In the same line, it is relevant to outline the lack of democratic control over many of those who make decisions with deep consequences on the population at large. This lack of responsiveness and accountability in our political, social and economic elites is provoking the anger of larger parts of the population. This democratic deficit (due to the lack of responsiveness and accountability; that is; effective control over those making political decisions) enlarges the mistrust of citizens on their democratic institutions and leaders. It is becoming increasingly relevant to look for ways to enlarge, enhance and reinforce the active democratic oversight and control over those making political decisions, improving the procedures and the ways to exert this accountability and oversight.

Another pillar that is eroding contemporary democracies is the increasing amount of authorities that don't have a political background, but a technical one. Also, the high number of institutional decisions that are based in technical arguments and reasons, leaving politics and democratic values, principles and ideas aside. And it gets worse when these decisions are not coherent with democratic principles and values. When political criteria are replaced by technical ones citizens may find themselves lost in a non-democratic maze. It will be hard to return to politics and political criteria in the decision-making processes. But citizens and their social and political organization are the ones to foster the democratic system to get back to its "normal political" pace.

The third pillar I'd like to emphasize is the threat corruption is posing for democratic institutions and citizens' political trust. The extent of these corruption practices in many of our countries and the weak answer by the political leaders weaken the democratic institutions

and, therefore, the support for democracy among the citizenry. The data of the 2011 Corruption Perception Index (as calculated by Transparency International) makes it crystal clear that we are not talking about exceptions and marginal feelings. Out of 180 countries analysed, only 25 rank above 7,0 (in a ten points scale, where 10 means perception of lack of corruption practices in the public sector). Less than 50 rank above 5,0 in this same scale. It will be impossible to foster strong and durable democratic institutions and practices if citizens have such and spread feeling. Transparency, honest and right governance practices should prevail to avoid and get ride of corruption practices, since they erode democratic foundations and beliefs of citizenry.

A fourth pillar of the democratic fatigue may relay in the lack of a truly and enduring democratic commitment by citizenry. If citizens don't organize themselves in an active and critic civil society, both defensive and offensive in their political and social systems, democracy and democratic values and principles will not prevail. We need to find ways to override difficulties to consolidate political activism and to turn social and political hatching, bloom or blossom into long-lasting political commitment and political activism by citizen's organizations. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provide, nowadays, an opportunity-window to make that permanent and long-lasting commitment possible as effective channels of permanent-basis political participation. We still need to find ways to enhance the consolidation of that citizens' linkage to democratic institutions and democratic activity and commitment.

In this frame of democratic fatigue our democratic political leaders seem to have adopted a short-term approach. They are not able to achieve solutions for the serious problems citizens face in their everyday life. They seem to be amenable to this non-democratically elected authorities that restrict the political board, narrowing the alternatives to find political solutions for the population needs. In this respect, they behave more like political managers than as political leaders. These political elites are embedded in electoral list and short-term approaches, monopolizing political action as long as a non-well organized society lets them doing so. Therefore, we need to empower the citizenry and to find ways to institutionalize its political participation through different channels, besides the electoral ones, in an everyday and active basis.

In the building up of this participatory democracy, with long-term, active and intense political commitment by its citizens, civic education must play a relevant role. It will enhance the empowerment of the population at large, using ICT mechanisms and channels to link citizens of different territories to defend the democratic values and principles they believe in. Social, cultural and political modernization and post modernization are provoking wide and deep changes in contemporary political systems. The population's values are changing as these transformations take place: The new values are more linked to self-expression and post-materialist attitudes (and less to materialist, surviving and traditional ones). This cultural change has a relevant impact in our political systems, weakening the authority and power structures, demanding more democratic and choice alternatives, and fostering the self-government and self-determination demands in the population at large. These long-term changes will prevail above the specific economic crisis we are facing nowadays, and will most probably open the way to new freedom demands on the side of the citizens and society.