



Lab 6 - Citizens' disconnect: can parties open up?

Moderators:

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Initiatives:

Organisational transformation through democracy innovation, PASOK (Greece) by Mr Antonios SAOULIDIS, Supreme Court Lawyer, Member of the Political Cabinet and of the Central Political Committee, PASOK

Four years of a direct Democracy Party in Argentina, Net Party by Mr Alejandro INTI BONOMO, Member of the Executive board of Net Party

Changing the dynamics of politics. Citizenship as an engine of change, Coalició Compromís by Ms Àgueda MICÓ, Compromís co-spokesperson

Discussants:

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The lab in brief

Nowadays, the role of political parties within modern democracies is questioned, as citizens do not feel represented by established political representatives, sometimes showing complete disinterest. This is manifested through the high rates of abstention during recent European elections but also through the worldwide rising popularity of former marginalised political parties. The gap between citizens and political parties is more perceptible today than ever before and the populist threat clearly established itself as a democratic priority. In this context, some parties aim to reinvent themselves by working on answers how to minimise the citizens' disconnect.

This lab discussed the level of attractiveness of political parties and movements that are based on different forms of participatory democracy. Opportunities for traditional parties to transform themselves and develop new political narratives enhancing citizens' trust in policy-making were explored.

About the initiatives

Organisational transformation through democracy innovation, PASOK (Greece)

PASOK is now a social-democratic party in Greece. It was founded 1974 as a socialist and left-wing nationalist party. Stimulated by electoral losses after the 1981 electoral success (majority in parliament), PASOK introduced a number of participative actions, such as open meetings at local level, collaboration with local authorities and CSOs, etc. In order to achieve increased citizen participation, PASOK deployed a decentralised structure, i.e. local permanent representations, prefectural committees, regional committees. PASOK is aware that their intention to better include citizens must be monitored. Therefore, performance indicators were elaborated, amongst them the number of participants, the number of organised meetings, the number of decisions taken, etc. These initial indicators were all quantitative, instead of qualitative (quality of dialogue, extent of agreement ...). The PASOK transformation-process encountered several difficulties, for instance sometimes disappointment was expressed by citizens towards politics in general. To overcome these obstacles PASOK tried to address this democratic deficit through adapting their political organisation towards connecting citizens more directly with decision-makers and the decision-making process.

Four years of a direct Democracy Party in Argentina, Net Party" (Argentina)

The Net Party is a political party in Argentina, with 1500 formal members and about 100 active members involved in daily decisions. Their goal is to elect deputies in the legislative elections that make decisions according to decisions voiced by regular people, through a software (DemocracyOS) that gathers opinions and votes. The deputies vote according to the decisions taken by online participants, thus promoting "liquid", "hybrid" and "direct" democracy.

Dating back four years, about 60 people gathered once every week to discuss a specific topic on which they made a decision by consensus. These meetings often took a long time before consensus was reached through persuasion, argumentation, sharing of experiences etc. But this was not considered as waste of time or inefficiency. On the contrary, people were satisfied that their voices were heard and that they could unconditionally share their thoughts, doubts and arguments.

The Net Party does not have a predetermined programme and agenda. The party's sole aim and reason of existence is to really represent citizens. To find out people's opinion about a certain issue and come to a joint/ consensus decision about this issue, internet

tools were used to reach out to as many citizens as possible. As the figures of people responding rose, the Net Party started wondering to whom they concretely reached via internet. From dedicated studies they learned that the main internet participants were middle-income men in their forties. This was dissatisfying, and stimulated the Net Party to elaborate new tools to include citizens' opinions.

Changing the dynamics of politics. Citizenship as an engine of change, Coalició Compromís (Spain)

Founded in 2010, Compromís is a political coalition of three former socialist political parties, supplemented with about 1.000 citizens and CSOs in the county of Valencia, taking responsibility in the county's government and parliament (about 20% votes in the 2015 elections). The coalition's ideology can be summarised as "political Valencianism": situated at the left of the political-economic spectrum, people form the core of their politics. Compromís' process to put forward candidates for the regional 2015 elections was presented: political list formation was the result of an open online participative process including about 40.000 involved citizens (out of which 30.000 persons voted on the list formation). The dedicated website contained both information on the candidates, the process, as well as on how citizens could get more involved. As Compromís is now participating in the government, structural changes have been introduced: for instance, for the first time ever in the Valencia county, the Ministry for Transparency in the Consel Generalitat Valencia implemented regulations on transparency (comprising i.e. rules on budget spending and control, data privacy) and a good governance code (to counteract and prevent corruption).

Key points issues by the debate

Citizens' bottom-up decisions vs. top down party/coalition's ideology and institutional/legal constraints. Citizens often expect politicians to 'be there' for them/ not to be 'let down'. How do parties respond to it? Do citizens need to learn more about institutions' current powers and limits? Are the presented initiatives sustainable (e.g. embedded in the constitution or legal instruments)? The Net Party, for instance, was a reaction to people's lack of trust in politics, using new tools and introducing a new mode of decision-making. The underlying starting point for this new mode was that citizens' costs for participating had to be smaller than citizens' potential costs/impact of decisions taken without their involvement (rational cost-benefit calculation). Realising lasting changes is a long-term learning process for all involved stakeholders- people).

In more general terms, people (especially youngsters) might need realigned expectations regarding politicians: governors' powers are limited or often less extensive than people often think (e.g. next to executive government, rule of law entails legislative power and the judiciary). Today's youngsters grew up in an age where 'getting things right and quick' became the norm, while democratic political decision-taking is often a time-consuming process. Many people have the feeling that decisions are taken above their head; on the one hand they feel unheard, on the other hand they often lack knowledge about political institutions and their functioning. How can these feelings and lack of information effectively be eliminated/ reduced? What are the tools and the methods to enhance citizens' knowledge and involvement into policy-making? Coalition governments are seen as possible way to make people understand how political decision-making works. People do want to be involved in politics, but they often lack the culture of participation. Therefore, political education (and patience/time) towards citizens is necessary, as well as politicians behaving as good examples (for instance, since the Coalició Compromís promotes green mobility, the accountable governor comes to office by bike). Finding lasting solutions that correspond to the specific context is a learning process by definition.

Recommendations

- ✓ To promote face-to-face dialogue opportunities (thus at local level) to allow citizens to realise that change is a long-term process, to learn from one-another, to (re)shape their opinion and to come to joint decisions. Therefore, mutual learning is an important driver for democratic change (e.g. citizens' personal interests versus general interests; citizens' expectations towards politicians versus politicians' legal powers).
- ✓ When starting a democratic change-process it is important to first analyse clearly what is causing disconnect between politics and citizens in order to find fitting responses. Furthermore, it must also be considered from the start how the process will be translated into political actions once elected and thus accountable.