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What do we learn from politically engaged citizens concerning participatory tools and initiatives? A French perspective

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- Title : What do we learn from politically engaged citizens concerning participatory tools and initiatives?

Keywords : participatory tools, decision-making process on public policies, citizen participation.

- Aims

Instead of always trying to obtain a representative audience without succeeding so, what can politically engaged citizens teach us about our models of participatory democracy and tools?

- Theoretical framework

Participatory democracy lies in “*the institutionalization of citizen participation in the implementation of public policies*” (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002). Considered as an “*indispensable ingredient for the good governance of territories and public affairs*” (Raymond, 2009), it now constitutes an inescapable reality of the evolution of forms of governance. The dissemination of good practice guides, exemplary cases, benchmarking practices or instruments demonstrate the efforts undertaken by local elected officials to standardize participatory policies regardless of ideological variable (Mazeaud et Nonjon, 2018). Participatory initiatives allow the territories to benefit a certain reputation in the field, as illustrated by the example of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre.

Yet, all the studies regarding representativeness of participating citizens in participatory policies exhibit that the multiplication of tools and initiatives does not mean an enlargement of the participants, their frequentation proving to be very unequal (Blondiaux, 2008; Nez and Talpin, 2010). Those studies indicate for the most part the reproduction of a “hidden quota” (Gaxie, 1987), an over-representation of certain categories of participants of participatory systems (Rui, 2004; Lefebvre, 2007) correlated with a difficulty of extending audiences to the most marginalized groups, the political problem remaining of a lack of consideration of popular demands (Blondiaux, 2008 ; Carrel, 2013; Gourgues and Mazeaud, 2018). Moreover, the political wish to consecrate the new political figure of the “ordinary citizen”, “the average citizen”, the neutral “profane” possessing a civic identity beyond partisan affiliations and traditional political divisions is very largely a matter of a political fiction according to academics (Blondiaux, 2007; Seguin, 2020). Indeed, participatory democracy is approved and experienced essentially by a public already strongly committed to politics: activists, syndicalists, attentive spectators of the political game with a good knowledge of these workings, who are often older, more masculine, better educated, richer and more satisfied with their living conditions than the average (Blondiaux, 2008).

- Main research approach

By taking the opposite view of representativeness, we administrate an online exploratory qualitative questionnaire with open questions targeting French politically engaged citizens on trade union, political or “Gilets jaunes” networks, free and willing to answer of the reasons why of deserting participatory initiatives. We recorded 76 answers.

- Key arguments/findings

The response rate indicates that these politically engaged respondents mentioned between two, three or four different participatory tools which illustrate a good knowledge of them, even if they highlight the importance and the non-substitutability of less conventional means of participation (protests). The referendum remains the most popular participatory tool among respondents, even though it has not been used since 2006 in France regardless of age, the right to vote the second most cited. This may explain the set aside participatory tools because of a lack of notoriety, but above all a lack of influence of relevant territorial scale and concern. Another interesting result is the fact that “le Grand Débat” participatory tool was not mentioned only once for example by respondents, which may be surprising given the media,

political investment and financial impact that the latter may be able to bring. Indeed, almost all the respondents wish to be integrated on decision-making and decision-design policies, ante, during and post projects.

- Practical implications

The desertion of participatory schemes does not mean a lack of interest in politics, in the contrary. The rise of unconventional political participation (protests, petitions, boycott, etc.) in which we find a significant proportion of young people, former militants but also non-partisan people are the turn of the emergence of a new model of citizenship, resolutely more inclusive, more horizontal with more influence of decision-making and process. It is crucial that intermediary, syndicalist, political organizations but also public authorities incorporate these mechanisms in order to remain attractive. Indeed, participatory local tools and initiatives will continue to be deserted as long as a truly proactive policy will not be established.

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