

# Participatory Democracy and Sustainability

Subjects: Political Science

Contributor: Norbert Kersting

The crisis of representative democracy triggered democratic innovations. Endeavors for the qualification of democratic systems and democratic reforms are high on the agenda. Political participation plays an important role in democracies. With the Rio conference in the 1990s, the Local Agenda 21 strategies strengthened a new trend towards more deliberative political participation, focusing on sustainability. Political participation is defined as an individual and organized act to influence political decision-making. Democratic innovations focus on political participatory instruments, electoral reforms, etc. In contrast, civic engagement and all forms of communal self-help predominately concentrate on producing certain services and, in general, do not include any decision-making competencies. This social innovation is not primarily oriented towards the influence of decision-making, but focuses on civic engagement as co-production. Political participation and civic engagement are interdependent, but have to be differentiated.

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## 1. Representative Participation

In the representative sphere, participation encompasses elections and direct contacts with political candidates and political administration, predominately. In this area, it can be shown that new Green political parties have played a more and more critical role in many countries <sup>[1]</sup>. In Germany, the Green Party entered local, regional, and national parliaments in the early 1980s and became a coalition partner in a number of the local and regional governments in the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, in the late 2010s, it can be shown that sustainability policies were more and more supported not only by the Green Party but also by most relevant political parties except the right-wing populist party.

## 2. Direct Democratic Participation

In the direct democratic sphere, referendums and petitions are important instruments of this numeric participation. Parliamentary petitions are used at the regional and the national level (e.g., Bundestags-Petitionsausschuss) <sup>[2][3]</sup>. Additionally, civil society organizations use online petitions, which focus on topics of sustainability, in the invented space (e.g., Change.org, MoveOn, Campact) <sup>[4]</sup>.

## 3. Demonstrative Participation

In Europe, ecological political parties often developed from strong social movements in the 1970s and early 1980s. This is quite obvious in the German case, where strong fundamentalist positions and even strategies characterized the Green Party, often as extra-parliamentary opposition ("Ausserparlamentarische Opposition," APO). There was, and in certain regions there still is, a strong link between economically left-wing social groups and ecological parties <sup>[5]</sup>. In the early 1980s, the development of the Green Party was strongly connected to the peace movement and large demonstrations such as the one in 1982 against NATO decisions in Bonn. Furthermore, green parties firmly focused on direct and deliberative democracy.

In the following years, strong inclusion into the parliamentary system became apparent. In the 2010s, new social movements and protest were developing in larger European cities, such as "Anonymous" in Madrid <sup>[6]</sup>. In Germany, strong protest against infrastructure projects such as the railway station and shopping mall project "Stuttgart 21" took place. In the late 2010s, with the movement Fridays for Future, the younger generation, including striking pupils, became highly involved in politics. Their focus is on the World Climate Conference (COP-21) results in Paris in 2015, on the end of coal power stations, and on new regenerative energy. Here it can be shown that this movement strongly influences all political parties. Fridays for Future has highly decentralized but digitally connected branches, and it uses decentralized weekly demonstrations and online networks to influence local, regional, and national politics. The social movement is related to the protest against large infrastructure projects to develop coal mining (in the late 2010 Hambacher Forst) and new

highways (Highway 21: A47). Besides demonstrations, consumer boycotts, strikes, and digitally organized flash mobs, etc., are characterizing these social movements' activities. From a global perspective, these movements are robust in other European countries such as Sweden, France, the UK, and Italy, as well as in Australia, Brazil, etc.

## 4. Deliberative Participation

In the 1990s, new deliberative instruments were implemented. Here, already existing formal local council commissions and informal advisory boards were added, especially at the local level. This deliberative turn <sup>[2]</sup> brought three different types of deliberative instruments <sup>[8]</sup>. Already existing advisory boards were redeveloped. In neo-corporatist contexts, these informal instruments incorporated existing organized interest groups. They were predominantly administered by the local administration and chaired by the mayor or the town clerk. New modern advisory boards try to incorporate broader new social movements from civil society. These advisory boards predominantly focused on particular interest groups and topics. Furthermore, some of them were directly elected. They are chaired by a civil society representative, which is very important for agenda-setting and influence.

In the 2020s all this participatory instruments have a strong focus on sustainability. Elections and representative democracy is still high on the agenda. But all participatory instruments are accepted by a clear majority of citizen and local politicians. Demonstrative as well as direct and deliberative participatory instruments are slightly more favoured by green and left wing political parties and less by conservative councilors.

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