Participatory democracy in France: subsumed by local politics

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In spite of the development of new forms of participatory democracy, turnout at local elections in France has never been lower. Far from rejuvenating "local democracy", the experiences of participation tend instead to reinforce local powers that are increasingly distanced from electors.

Participatory democracy has in recent years become a standard part of local public action. Local councillors consider it is essential to involve citizens in decisions regularly – and not just at election time – and to make this involvement known. The continual decrease in turnout rates in France, which weakens the legitimacy of elected officials, has further reinforced the pervasiveness of the "participatory fever" that has taken hold of all local tiers of government (municipal, departmental and regional). While the legal requirements incumbent upon councillors to encourage the participation of their constituents are minimal, there has nonetheless been a veritable proliferation of measures of various sorts that have accumulated, often without any real coherence, at multiple territorial levels. Innovation, experimentation and the *ad hoc* creation of new tools are the order of the day.

Participatory democracy is essentially local

Participatory democracy takes place first and foremost at neighbourhood level – deemed the optimum scale for the holy grail that is "proximity" – principally in the form of neighbourhood councils. At this level, it is a matter of engaging citizens in debates on day-to-day issues and on their living environment, which call upon their expertise as users of urban spaces. However, the injunction to participate has now moved beyond this micro-local scale and spread to all forms of local government in a mimetic fashion that has, to date, no doubt been called into question all too infrequently.[1]

In urban areas, a range of transversal, global and sectoral measures have been created. In France, "development councils", often with limited resources, have sought to remedy the democratic deficit that exists at the intermunicipal level[2] and give "civil society" an appropriate role in metropolitan debates that are still too often confined to the urban elites (Lefebvre and Revel 2012).

Regional councils in France have proved to be a key arena for innovation and often project an image of being new democratic "laboratories" (Sintomer and Talpin 2011). They propose the "development of measures" (Gourgues 2012) of an original nature and build new audiences for participation on new territorial bases (Mazeaud 2012). The "citizen juries" that have been created in certain regions (such as Nord–Pas-de-Calais and Rhône-Alpes) make it possible to reach out to "lay" citizens (by randomly selecting names from the electoral register) and seek to reconcile

1 "Participation professionals" (consultants, research organisations, etc.) and researchers alike – who are often advocates of participation – contribute to these phenomena of dissemination and circulation (Nonjon 2005).

2 In France, intermunicipal structures (or intercommunalities) exist in most areas, each covering a number of *communes* (municipalities); however, their members are not currently directly elected.

numerical factors (or at least representativeness) and *rationality* (through the implementation of procedures that follow the model of deliberative democracy). Councils have started to allocate budgets for these participatory measures, with the effect of involving citizens – or high-school students – in decision-making processes from which they were previously excluded.

Departmental councils[3] have also started to follow the trend (albeit in a more restrained way) for participatory democracy. In 2012, for example, the departmental council of the Nord *département* set up cantonal councils[4] for consultation purposes and, each year, via "participatory laboratories", opens up a debate on a particular sector-based policy or *département*-wide issue.

In France, participation at local level is therefore in the process of being "procedurised" in the form of numerous measures. In the face of this enthusiasm, two questions must be posed:

1. How can the success of this new standard be explained?
2. Has this apparently flourishing phenomenon of participatory democracy had a profound impact on the political scene at local level?

Unclear top-down initiatives

The notion of participatory democracy has become an institutionalised standard – all the more so since its content has remained vague, its objectives multiple and the legal framework particularly lax (Lefebvre 2007). The French "local democracy" law of 2002 requires only those towns and cities with more than 80,000 inhabitants to set up neighbourhood councils, in whatever form they feel most appropriate to their areas. Development councils have been obligatory since the 1999 "Voynet" framework law on land use and sustainable development in France, but, here too, intermunicipal structures can set up these councils in any way they see fit. The latest territorial reform, on the other hand, passed in 2010 by the Fillon government, has left the issue of local citizenship completely untouched (Lefebvre 2010). In practice, the *organisational design* of participatory measures has been left to the discretion of local authorities. Participation is typically perceived by councillors in terms of their own objectives and local strategies (Gourgues 2012). The fact that social and political mobilisation in favour of participation is relatively limited means that elected officials have all the more freedom to organise the participatory measures that they want. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of participatory democracy is that it has developed at a time when one might perhaps challenge the existence of a real social demand for participation, which is typically implemented by elected officials in order to give legitimacy to their measures rather than being truly citizen-led.

The success of participatory democracy from a social standpoint depends to a large extent on the uncertainty of its objectives, the heterogeneity and plasticity of the worlds of meaning that it mobilises, and the ambiguous relationship that exists between participation and decision-making. It is as if we are celebrating "the advent of a right to participation without specifying exactly what one has the right to participate in" (Blatrix 2009). The label "participatory democracy" covers a number of coexistent procedures, techniques and approaches of varying importance, the common aim of which is to "associate" citizens in political decision-making. The word "participation" thus subsumes a number of different elements: communication, information, consultation, dialogue, involvement, joint decision-making, deliberation, etc. The boundaries between these various approaches have proved porous, and the link with decision-making often remains obscure. For example, merely informing citizens is sometimes passed off as participation. Moreover, elected officials often seek to maintain this confusion and these ambiguities, while reaping the symbolic benefits attached to "participation".

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3 Departmental councils (in French, *conseils généraux* – literally "general councils") are the equivalent of county councils in England and cover an entire *département* (of which there are 101 in France).

4 Cantons are the electoral divisions in each *département*. One departmental councillor is elected per canton.

Multiple – and often indirectly democratic – objectives

The fact that participation has become a standard shows that it is increasingly imbued with a philosophy, shared by elected officials, than can be described as managerial. It relies heavily on the participation of users and their expertise in terms of their use of the city. With this in mind, participatory democracy helps improve urban management on the basis that "managing better means managing more locally and managing together". The aim is therefore greater efficiency in decision-making processes and better management of potential conflicts. Exchanges with inhabitants help optimise the rationality of proposed solutions and decisions taken, and to anticipate and defuse conflicts, and thus ensure projects are watertight. Participatory measures can be a managerial tool that councillors can use to put pressure on administrative departments, increase their reactivity and "externalise" modernisation and adaptation constraints. In areas where political power alternates regularly, participatory democracy is a means of regaining control of, and remobilising, council departments and services (Mazeaud 2012). Secondarily, objectives may also be social. In this case, it is a question of improving – through the involvement of residents – social cohesion across a given area, or even of maintaining "social peace". Here, the role of such measures is to re-establish "social links" and rebuild mutual confidence between citizens and local government.

Finally, those who promote participation typically pursue political objectives. For elected representatives, it is a matter of reinforcing their own representative legitimacy. The development of participatory measures has taken place in the context of a "crisis of representation" that is increasingly internalised by elected officials, who use all available means to cultivate consent, loyalty and legitimacy. Participatory democracy – through the style it gives to public action and the signals it enables officials to send out to the population – forms part of this symbolic activism. The rituals involved are derived from new forms of political events and a new staging of political power. Participatory democracy complies with an approach where modernity must be demonstrated: it symbolically exhibits change in a milieu where this is viewed extremely positively. In the face of growing distrust for elected representatives, councillors are constantly looking for new ways of legitimising action and seek to experiment with new ways of making contact with ordinary citizens.

Other political uses of participatory democracy can also be evoked here. Neighbourhood councils, for example, are a means for political parties to symbolically "reward" activists for whom the local electoral scene appears inaccessible. Conversely, local councillors can use participatory procedures to bypass political parties and enlarge their networks.

Local democracy remains essentially representative

Broadly speaking, if participatory democracy has taken off at the local level, it is because it does not fundamentally call into question representative democracy, which remains an essential property of the local political system. Despite the growing number of "participatory detours" (Blatrix 2009), the role of citizens is typically limited to choosing between local elites. The electoral procedure determines the political delegation, while micro-local democracy – and the interactions that it facilitates – to some extent attenuates the autonomy of local leaders by ensuring they are held accountable to their constituents. Whether at municipal, departmental or regional level, the exercise of local power is therefore always marked by the supremacy of the executive, the weakness of parliamentary procedure and the culture of debate, and ineffectual checks and balances that favour long electoral terms and the development of local oligarchies (Lefebvre 2011). There currently seems to be no clear public forum conducive to informed discussions on the local "common good", even though the media is no longer a mere mirror of "local society" and appears to be playing an increasingly critical role.

Complex local democracy: a democracy of abstention

Distanced by the complexification of local-government contexts and the professionalisation of politicians, citizens are participating less and less in local elections, as the issues at stake are increasingly difficult to assess, increasingly difficult to understand and sometimes obscured. Efforts to establish intermunicipal democracy have given rise to recent works that are particularly convincing (Desage and Guéranger 2011). Local politics in France – historically unaffected by falling turnout levels – is no longer immune from this phenomenon, and now generates reactions of indifference or demobilisation. Abstention rates in municipal elections have risen continually since 1983 (when 21.6% of voters abstained in the first round, compared to 33.5% in 2008), and in the 2010 regional elections reached a new record high for local elections under the Fifth Republic (since 1958), with 53.6% of electors choosing not to vote.

The exercise of local citizenship is hampered by the lack of comprehensibility of the institutional context. Despite the transfer of powers from central to local government (decentralisation) and the implementation of public-relations and information policies, the various tiers of local government and their respective functions (with the notable exception of those of the mayor) remain poorly understood by the general public. This complexity, hardly conducive to identifying responsibility for decisions, is one of the factors behind a growing "nationalisation" of municipal elections that has a negative impact on the democratic discussion of local issues, at a time when the specialisation of political arenas – a dominant tendency in Europe – actively calls for local issues to be taken into account more effectively. There is a disconnect between electoral politics and issue-led politics, and between representational territories and decision-making territories. Local government is not immune from the major trends that characterise democracies as a whole, such as political professionalisation.

Participatory democracy absorbed by representative politics

Although decentralisation has opened the way for real local government and brought citizens closer to the decisions that affect them (in accordance with the principle of making administrative acts more accessible and more widely publicised), it has not fundamentally made local government more democratic, and has even reinforced the power of local leaders. The holding of multiple offices – a French speciality that continues to this day – contributes to an oligopolistic regulation of local political competition and fosters electoral irremovability (Sadran 2010). The technocratic class (midway between administrative and political decision-makers in local authorities) has become more professional and exercises its power on a new basis (reinforcement of local public relations, emerging legitimacy of projects and expert knowledge, etc.). This professionalisation has led to a transformation of the dominant sociological profile of elected officials, with ever greater numbers of university-educated senior executives dominating local elites (Koebel 2006). From this standpoint, local democracy is less and less socially representative,[5] although gender parity and awareness of "diversity" have had a marginal impact on the profile of politicians.

In the face of considerable inertia in organisational terms and with regard to the way local power is devolved, the development of participatory measures has so far produced only cosmetic changes. The division of labour in the world of local politics has not been greatly challenged, and participatory democracy cannot be considered independently of representative democracy. It is hard to disagree with Cécile Blatrix when she says that "participatory democracy measures are an integral part of representative democracy. They are literally assimilated, in that the very substance of the former is converted into the latter." The development of a new range of participatory measures does not therefore radically change the local political scene, which remains overly oriented towards the representative.

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5 See Koebel, Michel. 2012. "Do local councillors represent the people? A sociological portrait", *Métropolitiques*, 28 November. URL : http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Les-elus-municipaux-representent.html.

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