

Committee: Special Conference on The Rise of Populism (SPECON)

Issue: Towards strengthening political participation

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INTRODUCTION

With the Ancient Greek philosophers being the first to support the participation of man in public affairs, the concept of political participation has been present for centuries and is now more debated than ever. The democratic spirit of the contemporary world condemns the rule of a minority and sets the people as the source of power which has the right to interfere in the political sphere and have an impact on governance. This concept is named political participation and is a notion of a wide nature. Being generally aware of current affairs and solely exercising voting rights does not constitute the full participation contemporary societies need. Being politically active means being a real part of politics and of the political life, as political participation extends far beyond formal procedures.

Casting a vote, being a member of an organization, signing a petition or filing an objection are plain examples of political participation. Briefly, every single activity of a citizen with even a minimum impact on the political life is considered political participation, which is voluntary and cannot be ordered by a ruling body or be obliged under a legislation.

High political participation is positively related to governance, which appears to be more effective when a larger amount of citizens is interested in the political life. In detail, high political participation leads to a more efficient policy and management, little to no chance of corruption, while the interests of all are better mediated and the administration of public services is better. Be that as it may, all social groups are vital for the strengthening of civil participation, which is positive for both the state and its socioeconomic development.

Nowadays, the domain of civil participation is considerably strong and calls for immediate empowerment, as the idea of equality unites minorities that have been excluded

from the exercise of their fundamental rights, has been found to improve living standards and affects the world as we know it today by each and every one of us.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Political Participation

In spite of the fact that no official definition of the term is universally accepted, political participation can be defined as all the activities of a citizen which affect the government, including its policy and actions, intentionally or not. The citizen might directly influence the political sphere, for example via affecting the state's policy or indirectly by participating in the selection of the government. Generally, political participation covers almost every activity, which is linked to the political area, in a local, regional or even global level from voting and political campaigns to even terrorist attacks and crimes. Through these activities, the citizen exercises his/her political rights and makes his political opinions and ideas known, either by supporting or protesting against a policy, a political group or ideology.

Populism

In its wider sense, populism is defined as a "political program or movement that champions the common person, usually by favorable contrast with [...] elite"¹. As a combination of elements of the left and the right, populism strongly criticizes individuals and groups with supreme political and/or economical power, called "privileged elite" and aims at raising the "common man" against this elite, which has an unfair domination in the political field. Populism is strongly connected to political participation, since the supporters of this political movement, also referred to as "populists", encourage people to participate in politics in a number of ways. Thus, populism is in favor of the strengthening of political participation.

Voter Turnout

Guided by the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the voter turnout is the "percentage of the registered population that

¹ Munro, André. "Populism." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 14 Oct. 2015. Web. 15 June 2017. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/populism>>.

voted during an election”. The higher percentage is more desirable in democratic countries, as it proves that the government represents the will of a wide part of the society and enjoys almost full legitimacy, since more citizens have expressed their preference.

Civil Engagement

According to Thomas Ehrlich, civil engagement “means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference”² and “promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”³ Even though civil engagement is usually referred to as a synonym of political participation, the latter encompasses activities with a link to the political sector, while the first term covers activities that do not necessarily affect the political life. That being said, a part of civil engagement is the act of participating in the political field and hence, states with high percentages of political participation also appear to have high percentages of civil engagement.

Means of Political Participation	General Description
registering to vote	completing necessary forms to be added to voting rolls
voting	choose elected officials; make decisions about ballot initiatives; etc.
protesting	make opinions known by marching, signs, or other symbols of opinion
petitioning	writing a letter to a public official; blogging; emailing; using social media to express opinions; etc.
electioneering	volunteering for a campaign; donate time and money; posting a political sign on your property; making phone calls; etc.
jury duty	participate in an essential part of judicial procedure
attending a government meeting/hearing	make opinions know by speaking, questioning, etc.
join an interest group	associating with other individuals or entities that share similar opinions on issues/policies; donate time and money
join a political party	associate with a group that shares similar political goals; ideological perspective; policy objectives; donate time & money
run for office	become a direct participant in the policy making process
initiative/proposition	law passed directly by citizens of a state; bypass legislature & governor; subject to review by courts
referendum	citizens directly confirm or repeal government decision; legislature of a state may present a law directly to voters for ratification/confirmation
recall	citizens directly vote to remove a government official from office

Ehrlich, Thomas. Civic responsibility and higher education. Phoenix, Ariz: Oryx Press, 2000. Print.

³ Ehrlich, Thomas. Civic responsibility and higher education. Phoenix, Ariz: Oryx Press, 2000. Print.

Picture 1 Analysis of participatory activities²

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historic Background

The concept of political participation traces its roots in Ancient Greece, with the well-known funeral speech of Pericles, forming democracy by underlining the importance of the ordinary man in political affairs. Despite democracy was present from the ancient years, the next centuries were characterized by the rule of an individual or few people, with people having their rights and freedoms suppressed and public participation being condemned. It was soon that several revolutions arose, depicting the struggle of certain to be granted some rights, with the most known being the American and the French Revolution. After these remarkable events, movements for the female suffrage arose and some countries granted women the right to vote, after many negotiations, with the majority, however, being negative to this idea.

By the mid-twentieth century, representative democracy had thrived and the struggle for universal suffrage had already started. As a result, leaders understood that political participation would soon be demanded. During the next decades, political participation was being formed and solely included voting, campaigning and party membership. By the 1960s, contacting government officials was allowed and the context of political participation was defined as voting and being active in the political institutions. For the next two decades, rapid sociopolitical development brought along a wider sense of participation that was not restricted to only accepted actions. Protesting was soon a trend spreading worldwide, due to the upcoming New Social Movements, usually by minority groups. This form of activity, which opposed the social norms, was called unconventional and was regarded as an elite-challenging form of participation. As government expenditures arose, civil engagement was strengthened and voluntary associations promoted civil activities and volunteering as an alternative for state intervention.

At the same time, political change of 1989 enabled people of the former communist bloc to act within the politics and obtain an administrative role in the political affairs. The first political parties and movements arose, with the view of solving political and social problems, while they formed the foundations of the civic society. Entering the 21st century, the democratization of Internet and technology made political participation easier and

accessible to everybody and the list of participatory actions expanded to such an extent that the empowerment of political participation of all became a goal more and more states wished to accomplish.

Types of political participation

Over the last decades, technology has lead to newer, personalized and more creative modes of participation, with the list of participatory actions being infinite, including actions not used for political purposes. Consequently, a division to conventional or institutionalized modes and unconventional ones is now necessary.



Figure: Political participation can be conceptualized in a hierarchical manner. Political involvement is understood in terms of different levels (adapted from Milbrath, 1965: 18)

Diagram 2 Participatory activities in a hierarchical list⁴

⁴ political-participation-11-638.jpg. Web. 18 June 2017.
<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/politicalparticipation-150906075345-lva1-app6891/95/political-participation-11-638.jpg?cb=1441526075>.

Conventional Forms

Routine behavior of citizens that is acknowledged by the state and directly influences or intends to influence the political life, also referred to as formal, including:

- Voting in electoral procedures
- Contacting public officials
- Wearing or possessing signs (posters, stickers etc) with political context
- Donations to political parties or individuals
- Running or holding public office
- Volunteering
- Participation in organizations

Unconventional Forms

Uncommon behavior of citizens to express their views, legal or not, to which the youth shows preference, with some examples being:

- Signing petitions
- Terrorist attacks
- Protesting and demonstrating
- Suicide protests
- Boycotting
- Guerilla gardening

Participation in democracy

For democratic states, political participation is an indispensable and fundamental feature. Democratic states, aiming at empowering their democratic character, are defined by the continuous expansion of the available modes of participation and strongly support the participation of all citizens in the political affairs. In the contemporary world, almost all democratic states are in favor of the civil participation of all, since democracy is based on freedom to act and on the transparency of political acts. Needless to say, differences among democracies exist, with some being closer to participation and some accepting only few parts of it. In the final analysis, in democracy, people participate in politics, since, directly or

through representatives, they vote and influence decisions and from that point, each democracy grants them with more or less freedoms.

Participation in non-democratic states

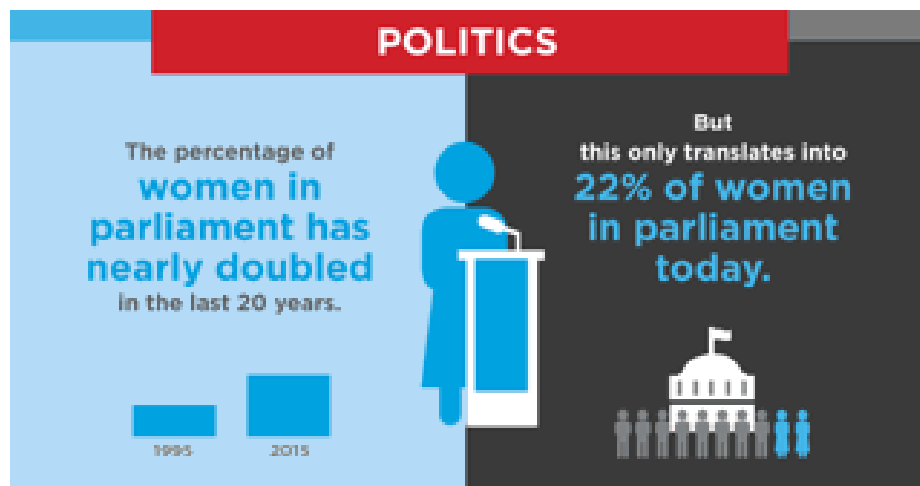
While democracies function in similar ways, regardless of all the variants, each non-democratic state is unique and based on its form of government, views concerning political participation vary. Generally, citizens are not self-governing and their freedoms and rights are under threat, since they depend on the will of the governing body or individual, which represent personal interests. Their governance is usually authoritative and social inequalities occur from the complete power they have to make any decision and law. Other than that, leaders prohibit free media and organizational activity and dominate economy. Therefore, political participation is certainly not facilitated in non-democratic states, yet in some states is also strictly prohibited.

The role of the media in political participation

Media favor political participation in a number of ways, directly and indirectly and are used by both citizens and governments. One of their main roles is to inform citizens concerning politics, ranging from candidate's campaigns to government's policy and political events, enabling them to form an opinion and act. As positive as this may sound, propaganda, meaning the biased or misleading presentation of an information or event is not a rare phenomenon and deeply questions the objectiveness of media. In some other cases, citizens and particularly young citizens use media to air their views, by filling online petitions, uploading relevant context on their personal accounts and proving government and officials with a kind of feedback. Nonetheless, their role is even wider, as governments have started using them to inform citizens and promote participation in electoral procedures. Beyond any doubt, media have particularly contributed to the information of the youth, as well as the provision of voting rights to certain social groups and mainly to women in non-democratic states, through spreading revolutionary ideas, such as the gender equality.

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Picture 2 Women holding office remain less than men⁵

As a key determinant of the empowerment of civil participation, women have been granted the right to vote and run for office in the majority of states, after immense and heroic efforts for their suffrage, named women’s suffrage, meaning their voting right in elections. During the 19th century, this right was recognized by only a few countries and thanks to movements coordinating the efforts to gain their voting right, women have managed to be considered as equal to men in all political processes, under the global standards. In practice, women face more difficulties than men when it comes to voting, especially in societies with ideologies that place women below men and in post-conflict areas, where respect of their human rights is usually absent. In the view of ensuring the political participation of all women in all member-states, networks and unions have to collaborate with governments and cope with any issue and limiting factor that does not

⁵ "Low Representation of Women in Politics Hampers Development." Low Representation of Women in Politics Hampers Development. Magdalene, 16 July 2015. Web. 22 June 2017. <<http://magdalene.co/news-507--low-representation-of-women-in-politics-hampers-development.html>>.

favor equality, including the political dominance of a male elite and the political corruption. A vibrant example, the UN Women recommends, through meetings and programs, constitutional amendments and legislative reforms, in the view of ensuring woman’s equality within the political sector, as a voter, a candidate, a MP and a civil service member.

Youth Political Participation

Representing one fifth of the global population, the youth, defined as all people aged between 15 and 25, are vital for the political participation and can determine the quality of governance. Bearing in mind that this age group is the generation that will be called to govern in the future, lack of interest of young citizens is undoubtedly alarming. Even though they appear to be active when it comes to activism and other informal types of participation, the majority abstains from electoral procedures and is not represented in political institutions. Mistrust in governments and the feeling of incapability to offer are two leading reasons for low participation of the youth, while their negative opinion and disinterest concerning the formal political procedures could potentially threaten the political culture of several countries.

According to data provided by the UNDP, the vast majority of countries set 18 years as the minimum voting age, with the following exceptions:

Minimum Voting Age	Country/ies
16 years	Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua
17 years	Indonesia, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Timor-Leste
19 years	Republic of Korea
20 years	Bahrain, Cameroon, Japan, Nauru
21 years	Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Samoa, Singapore, Tonga, United Arab Emirates

Table 1 Minimum voting age in states that do not have 18 years old as the minimum

Political Participation of Refugees and Displaced People

When it comes to displaced people, legislation is quite vague and under global standards, a person has the right to exercise voting rights only to the country of their nationality. Yet, in the wake of the refugee and the migrant crisis, people who are forced or chose to live to another country must have the right to express their opinion concerning the country they live in and cannot be ignored. Displaced people have the right to participate in unconventional forms, in that they can be members of an association or volunteer, but they cannot formally air their views via voting in electoral procedures. With this thought and the current situation in mind, crucial decisions are to be made that might call for a reform of the current legislation.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

France

Since the French Revolution, France fought for equality and recognition of political rights to all human beings, spreading revolutionary ideas and forming democracy as known today. Being a representative democracy, France has always been supportive of political participation and according to OCDE (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the rate of gender inequality is relatively low at 1,02 and the average voter turnout is higher than the OCDE average of 68%. However, the latest parliamentary elections that took place on May 2017 had a voter turnout at 48,7%, the lowest voter turnout in the modern history of France, with the winner being Emmanuel Macron.

Australia

According to the OCDE, Australia is the state with the higher voter turnout at 95% and the higher civil engagement and political participation on an international level. In the latest election, the voter turnout was at 93,2% and was partly thanks to the action of the Australian Electoral Commission. Australia is particularly interested in youth participation and therefore the abovementioned commission runs numerous online and offline programs, in order to foster youth participation in electoral procedures. Examples of this action are the “Enrol to vote Week”, the “Rock Enrol” concerts, radio programs and the campaign “Famous People Vote Too”.

Saudi Arabia

In the municipal election of December 2015, women were granted the right to vote and run elections for the first time in the history of the country, a move that was viewed

positively by the global community and which was considered a first step towards greater political participation. Taking into consideration the little to known recognition of human rights to women and other social groups, the brutal violations women face daily and their limited role set by religion, the grant of voting rights was a huge step towards the emancipation of woman and her consideration as a citizen. Nonetheless, discriminative practices and laws are still enforced, with gender inequality being still present and with Saudi Arabia being a strict authoritarian state.

China

The political report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) of 2007 underlined that "We must ensure that all power of the state belongs to the people, expand the citizens' orderly participation in political affairs at each level and in every field." With this statement, the level of the orderly public participation in politics was upgraded and the sense of citizenship was strengthened, showing some primary steps towards democratization and stronger political participation, regardless of the authoritarian character of China.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
594 - 593 BC	The foundation of democracy in Ancient Athens by Solon
508 BC	Democracy is established in Ancient Athens, thanks to reforms of Cleisthenes
479-431 BC	Golden Age in Ancient Athens, with the leader being Pericles. Direct participation of free Athenian male citizens in the creation of laws, on the basis of majority rule
1450-1550	The rise of New Monarchies
1700-1800	Age of Enlightenment which brought along revolutionary ideas with a democratic character and encouraged people to fight against the privileged and gain political power
1762	The Social Contract by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: supported the

	absolute "general will" that reflects the common interests of all citizens in a nation
1776	The United States' Declaration of Independence
1789 – 1799	The French revolution
1789	The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is adopted
1792	The Vindication of the Rights of Women is written by the British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and supports that women are human beings that deserve the same rights as men
1869	The National Women Suffrage Association (NWSA) is founded in New York City
1893	New Zealand becomes the first state to grant women the right to vote in electoral procedures
1903–1917	Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the leading militant association supporting Women's suffrage in the United Kingdom
1945	Adoption of the United Nations' Charter Freedoms and rights are recognized to all people
1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted by the UN General Assembly
1952	The Convention on Political Rights of Women
1976	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Events

- Women's Political Participation Day: a meeting of women, belonging to labour parties of Africa, the Middle East, Western Balkans and United Kingdom, which was organized by the UK Labour Party, in the view of the International Women's Day. The main aim of this event was to establish better relations among nations, in order to adopt more efficient practices on the issue of women's political participation.
- International Day of Democracy: first held in 2008 it is a UN-observed event which annually takes place on September 15 and aims at raising public awareness

regarding democracy, while numerous celebrations concerning democracy happen worldwide.

Treaties and Conventions

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): a multilateral treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 16, 1966 which took effect 10 years later. Its 169 parties are committed to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, their right to life, their freedom of religion, speech and assembly, as well as their electoral rights and rights to due process and a fair trial.
- Article 7 and 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which recognize “measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations”⁶

UN Resolutions

- UN General Assembly Resolution on Women and Political Participation (A/RES/66/130) adopted on December 19, 2011: recognized the equality of men and women within the political sector and condemned all discriminatory laws.
- UN Security Council Resolution on Youth Participation (S/RES/2250) adopted in 2015: urged member-states to increase the representation of youth in decision-making at multiple levels

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Empowering political participation is an issue concerning humanity for decades and numerous organisations, including the UN, have attempted to deal with it. Some vibrant examples are the United Nations Development Programme, with its public awareness programs for the youth and women. In addition to that, the UNDP has also published a review of good practices that can found on the following link: http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/Electoral%20Systems%20and%20Processes/ENG_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf. The UN Women and the UN

⁶ “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”. N.p., n.d. <<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>>.

have been supporting member-states that wish to become democratic and have been working on several resolutions and conventions.

Other than that, member-states and unions, such as the European Union and the African Union, have also acted in a number of ways to strengthen political participation either by granting the right of vote to women, as Saudi Arabia did in 2015, limiting the age for voting or running for office or via awareness campaigns that promoted participation and other actions of the political life. Similar good practices, especially concerning youth participation, can be found in the link mentioned in the previous paragraph, as reviewed by the UNDP. Finally, media and social media, in particular, have helped into the information of citizens and have promoted civil engagement of all in a considerable degree.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Having reached the end of this study guide, it is obvious that political participation covers almost every activity that is linked to the political life and governance and is, therefore, a matter of wide nature that should and must be dealt with measures in various levels. Bearing in mind all the abovementioned and the information provided, you are expected to conduct further research and seek for solutions that address to all modes of political participation and all groups that are being excluded from civil participation. In order to help you, you are presented with some suggestions and categories, in which it would be useful for you to depend and elaborate on.

Measures to combat electoral fraud and mistrust

- Support a free telephonic line, with continuous operation, for all the voters that are being threatened, bribed or manipulated, in order for them to report anonymously any incident relevant to electoral fraud and significantly contribute to the action of authorities
- Adopt a declaration named Declaration on the Rights of Voter, with special articles on equality, freedom of choice and protection
- Regularly update the voting lists and registration databases, to avoid impersonation of deceased citizens
- Organize formal debates/discussions among candidates, in order for citizens to be correctly informed and in order to prevent the disclosure of false information and accusations

Measures to expand the political participation of women

- Encourage the meeting of young girls with representatives of UN Women and other organizations, in the view of making them understand that their opinion matters and their right to participate in the political life
- Encourage other states to follow the example of South Arabia and enable voting to some, if not all, electoral procedures, as well as to pave the path for female politicians to be accepted by the society.
- Require that candidate lists of political parties are gender-balanced or include a certain proportion of women.

Measures to encourage the youth to participate

- Attract the first-time voters via online voting systems and campaigns
- Review the legal framework for youth participation, in collaboration with non-governmental organisations such as UNDP

Measures to deal with ideologies which do not support political participation

- Reconsider the minimum voting age and minimum age required for running for office
- Roundtable discussions on the issue of political participation of women in political life, especially in the Middle East region and in African countries, where the gender inequality index is concerning
- Multilateral discussions regarding the religious or general beliefs that are opposite to equality of all

Measures to use media as a means of strengthening political participation

- Public awareness campaigns on the vitality of voters for an effective governance
- Creation of online platforms to facilitate voting for people with special needs, displaced people, hospitalized people etc
- Use of social media to project results and events that concern the political life

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