Democratic Participation? The Involvement of Citizens in Policy-making at the European Commission

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Abstract

In recent years, the European Commission has increasingly promoted citizens' participation and has linked it to participatory democracy. The article analyses whether recent apparently participatory citizens' projects qualify as participatory democracy in the normative theoretical sense. Being aware that the European Union's, and therefore the Commission's, understanding are much less demanding, it also asks to what degree the Commission's own objectives were met. For this purpose, both the normative concept based on secondary literature and the empirical concept based on an analysis of the pertinent EU and Commission documents and communications will be introduced as points of reference for the discussion of the citizens' projects. By analysing online documentation of the projects, the article will show that the projects neither meet normative standards nor the Commission's own objectives and that participatory democracy in the EU faces important practical constraints.

Keywords

European Union; European Commission; Participatory democracy

DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS, THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION HAS BECOME increasingly active in the field of citizens' participation. Citizens have been invited to take part in policy-related projects at the European level. Prominent examples have been the Deliberative Opinion Poll *Tomorrow's Europe*, which polled some 3,600 citizens on the future of Europe, inviting 300 of them to deliberate in Brussels, and the *European Citizens' Consultations*, which involved 1,800 citizens. In addition, multi-media websites such as *RadioWeb Europe* or the online forum *Debate Europe* were launched in 2006 and 2005 respectively.

These, and other projects, resonate with the European Union's (EU) strategy to strengthen democratic participation, demonstrated for example by the introduction of the principle of participatory democracy in the Treaty of Lisbon (TEU). The Commission in particular has brought citizens' involvement to the forefront, in *Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (European Commission 2005b). The title of *Plan-D* suggests that the Commission is making

a connection between the citizens' projects and the strengthening of democratic participation.[1] External observers, too, seem to perceive the EU's recent activities as instances of participatory democracy (Boussaguet *et al.* 2008: 153).

In order to answer the question of whether the recent activities of the Commission are indeed instances of participatory democracy, the following questions ought to be asked. First, what does participatory democracy mean in the normative-theoretical sense? Second, how does the EU understand participatory democracy, and third, which opportunities exist? Once the EU's framing has been outlined, the question arises how the Commission interprets this framework and uses it in order to organise citizens' activities. Finally, it is important to question whether individual projects are suitable to fulfil normative expectations as well as the EU's and the Commission's objectives.

Not surprisingly the EU's, and thus the Commission's, understanding of participatory democracy deviates significantly from the normative theoretical concept. On the one hand, this concept is rather demanding for the citizens (Offe 2003 [1997]), and has been developed more for the local level (Lindner 1990: 15), with its applicability beyond this level being contested. On the other hand, a simple look at the institutional setting outlined in the TEU with a regularly elected parliament shows that the EU political system is based on representative democracy. Still, participation at the Commission should not be regarded as being completely detached from normative considerations, as the phenomenon of getting citizens involved at the European level may raise certain expectations not only within the scientific community but also among the citizens themselves. Thus, in order to analyse and evaluate the citizens' projects in a meaningful way, both a normative perspective and the EU's and Commission's understanding of democratic citizens' participation are needed. This empirical concept has to be reconstructed on the basis of pertinent documents and communications, the most prominent of which is the TEU. The Commission's understanding is outlined, for example, in the White Paper on European Governance (European Commission 2001b), in its annual Work Programmes and in certain programmes of the individual Directorates General (DGs).

The article is structured as follows. First, it will introduce the theoretical concept of participatory democracy and delineate it from other theories of democracy. Secondly, with the normative definition in mind, it will develop the EU's and Commission's concept of citizens' participation by analysing key documents and communications. It will then outline how this empirical concept is translated into programmes and actual participation projects and discuss the projects' participatory value both from the empirical and from the normative point of view.

The empirical data consist of a set of projects by which the Commission has provided opportunities for ordinary citizens to become politically active at the European level. It contains projects that had started or had been announced before 2009 and were documented on the Commission's websites.[2]

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[1] But see below for a detailed discussion of Plan-D.

[2] These were identified by analyzing the websites of the EU policies section and the 'Working for you/Commission at work' section, as well as the websites of all DGs for activities related to citizens' involvement. The list does not contain projects that started in 2009 or later such as the second round of the *European Citizens' Conference* or the *Europolis Deliberative Opinion Poll* because it was still too early to analyse them at the time of writing.

Theoretical background

At the outset of the article, the normative theoretical concept of participatory democracy is outlined and delineated from other concepts in order to develop a normative point of reference that will further guide the analysis. One of its most dedicated proponents (Schmidt 2000: 254), Benjamin Barber, defines participatory democracy as "self government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of the citizens [which includes] agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation" (Barber 1984: 151). In other words, it means that citizens take part directly in the decision-making process.

The literature on participatory democracy is mainly concerned with procedures and prerequisites[3] and there is some debate on the relationship between these two aspects. 'Procedures' refer to how participatory processes can be organised. Barber (1984), for example, proposes a model of "strong democracy", as he terms it, in which face-to-face meetings of citizens take place in neighbourhood assemblies and broader communication and decision-making is facilitated by electronic means. In the context of 'prerequisites', three aspects are regularly discussed: first, sufficient information on the decision at hand (Barber 1984; Cohen 1989; Pateman 1970), second, a "sense of political efficacy" (Pateman 1970ff.), which can only be acquired in a learning-by-doing way, such as by participation in the political sphere or outside (for example, the workplace), and third, what has been termed 'civic competence' (Dahl 2005: 196), like the ability to deliberate and to listen.

The discussion of the relative importance of procedures and prerequisites is aptly summarised by Elster (1986) in his discussion of the purpose of political activity for which he distinguishes two opposing views.[4] The first one, which he associates with the writings of Tocqueville (1969), Mill (1962 [1859]) and especially Arendt (1958, 1973), views political activity as an end in itself:

> The political process is an end in itself, a good or even the supreme good for those who participate in it. It may be applauded because of the educative effects on the participants, but the benefits do not cease once the education has been completed. On the contrary, the education of the citizen leads to a preference for public life as an end in itself. It is the agonistic display of excellence, or the collective display of solidarity, divorced from decision-making and the exercise of influence on events (Elster 1986: 128).

In this view, acquiring the ability to participate and engaging in participation would be legitimate ends of participatory democracy in themselves.

The opposite view, which Elster (1986: 128) adopts, draws on the work of Finley (Finley 1981, 1981 [1976]). It states that participation or the acquisition of participatory skills are not ends, but means to reach a political decision:

> Political debate is about what to *do* [emphasis in the original] – not what ought to be the case. It is defined by this practical purpose, not by its subject-matter. Politics in this respect is on par with other activities such as art, science, athletics or chess. To engage in them may be deeply satisfactory, if you have an independently defined goal such as 'getting it right' or 'beating the opposition' (Elster 1986: 126).

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[3] There is also an important body of literature on social capital, *e.g.* the prominent study by Verba *et al.* (1995). This literature differs from the normative theoretical literature relevant for the present article in so far as first, it is empirically asking who participates how and why and second, the point of interest is not the design of a system in which citizens can take part in the decision-making process, but the participation within existing representative democratic institutions.

[4] Elster also discusses a third aspect, namely voting as a means of voicing preferences. However, for the purpose of the present paper, only his discussion of individual participation beyond voting is of interest.

The question of whether participation should be viewed as utilitaristic or not is a normative one and can only be answered normatively. The present article is, therefore, based on the premise that democracy, including participatory democracy, is centrally concerned with the question of who rules, that is, who has the power to make decisions. Any educational effects, as desirable as they may be, are therefore considered as side effects and not as ends in themselves.

Closely related to participatory democracy is the theory of deliberative democracy. Both emphasise decision-making by citizens themselves. However, theories of deliberative democracy are much more concerned with the quality of the procedure. Whereas for theorists of participatory democracy it is important that everyone can take part in the decision-making process on equal terms, for theorists of deliberative democracy it is important that this process be deliberative (see *e.g.* Cohen 1989). For a participatory democratic decision, it is strictly speaking not necessary that it is based on the best argument. Still, both strands of theory overlap to a certain extent and deliberative democracy is occasionally even considered as a sub-type of participatory democracy (Fuchs 2007: 40ff.; critically Mutz 2006). Nevertheless, this article limits the normative perspective to participatory democracy as outlined above, because it is not in every case possible to evaluate the deliberative quality of the citizens' projects due to the lack of data.

Theories of participatory democracy are to a considerable extent based on the idea of system transformation. The EU democratic system, however, which is the empirical point of interest of this article, is obviously representative, imperfect as it may be considering the debate on its so-called 'democratic deficit' (Follesdal *et al.* 2006; Majone 1999; Moravcsik 2002). Representative democracy has been described as much better suited to the requirements of a large polity like the EU than participatory democracy, for example by liberal theorists. Both liberal and participatory theorists agree that it is desirable that as many citizens as possible, ideally all, take part in the decision-making process (Dahl 1989: 24ff.). This sets them apart from economic theories of democracy, which also advocate representative democracy but on the grounds that citizens as profit-maximising individuals lack resources such as time and interest in politics (Fuchs 2007: 40f.; Lindner 1990: 160f.; Schmidt 2000: 214ff.). Liberals and participatory democracy differ in so far as liberals such as Mill (2004 [1861]: 34ff.) and Dahl (1989) maintain that this ideal can only be realised in rather small political communities, so that representation beyond the local level becomes necessary. According to Dahl (1994), in large political units, participatory decision-making will inevitably be ineffective, a situation for which he has coined the term "democratic dilemma".

Despite frictions between participatory and representative democracy, models and instruments have been developed trying to combine both types. These range from participatory democracy with some representative elements on the one hand to representative democracy with participatory elements on the other, so that participation in large political systems would become possible. It is this theoretical and empirical context in which the EU citizens' projects have to be placed. Five theoretically or practically well established models and instruments will be introduced briefly (for further models and discussion see notably the edited volume by Fung *et al.* (2003)).

One model of participatory democracy with representative elements is Barber's (1984) above mentioned "strong democracy". It suggests a system where decision-making takes place mainly in neighbourhood assemblies and by electronic means, but which for the sake of efficiency has some representative institutions such as representative town meetings or office holding by lot. Much closer to representative democracy are Renn and Webler's (1995)'s "Cooperative Discourse" and Dienel's (1997) "Planning Cell", participatory procedures in the course of which citizens produce normatively binding recommendations for

decision-makers for specific decisions in an otherwise representative system. Also discussed in the context of participatory democracy (Hüller 2010) are Ackerman's *Deliberation Day* (Ackerman *et al.* 2004; Fishkin 1991, 2009). Ackerman suggests that a deliberation day for citizens take place prior to important elections so as to produce informed and responsible voters. Fishkin has developed a method to determine what people would think if they were informed. As a more sophisticated version of an opinion poll, a sample of people is polled on certain issues, then a socio-demographically representative sub-sample of them is provided with information, given the opportunity to deliberate in small groups and to put questions to experts and politicians and finally polled again. The result does not take the form of policy recommendations by participants, but of a final poll, with scientific analysis and ideally extensive media coverage. Their link to decision-making is much weaker[5] compared to the other instruments so that they are the least participatory of those introduced here.

To sum up, participatory democracy is concerned with citizens taking part directly in the decision-making process. So, in the remainder of this article, when discussing the EU's and Commission's understanding of participatory democracy, as well as the citizens' projects, from a normative point of view it will question first, in line with Barber and Elster, whether citizens can participate in the political decision-making process or second, in accordance with Renn and Dienel, whether it can at least be plausibly assumed that the results of their involvement are normatively binding for decision-makers.

However, before turning to the EU's and Commission's concept of participatory democracy it needs to be pointed out once more that this article is strictly concerned with citizens' participation in decision-making processes or EU politics. The repeated emphasis is necessary because, for some scholars of the EU system, the term 'participatory democracy' has acquired a different meaning, namely that of 'associative democracy', the inclusion of civil society associations in the political process (Janowski 2005; Saurugger 2008; critically Greven 2007 and Warleigh 2006: 128f.).

The EU's and the Commission's concept of 'participatory democracy'

As has been pointed our earlier, the EU is not a participatory, but a representative democratic system. Therefore, the EU's concept of citizens' participation is expected to be different from the normative theoretical concept. The following sections outline how the EU in general, and the Commission in particular, frame participatory democracy. As the Commission is an EU institution, knowledge of the EU's concept is necessary in order to understand the Commission's concept. The EU's perspective is outlined in the TEU. First and foremost, in Article 10, it is stated very explicitly that the EU is based on representative democracy. Article 11 contains various provisions complementing the representative system: clause one gives citizens and associations a right to voice their views on EU politics, clause two sets out a dialogue between EU institutions and civil society associations, whilst clause three is devoted to the EU consultation regime (Quittkat *et al.* 2008) with the "parties concerned" and clause four is devoted to a new instrument, the citizens' initiative, the purpose of which is to make the Commission initiate legislation. Such a petition would need at least one million signatures from a "significant number of Member States". This instrument is novel and seems to be a step in the direction of increasing citizens' participation. However, as the threshold of the necessary signatures is rather high, its practicability remains doubtful. Apart from that, according to clause one, citizens are merely given a voice,

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[5] See for example Fishkin and Luskin (2006) for an evaluation of the policy impact of the Deliberative Opinion Polls.

and they may be a "party concerned" in a consultation, but this very open term also applies to companies, civil society associations and other corporate bodies.

Thus, according to the TEU, citizens' involvement in the decision-making process is restricted to voice and consultation, but in contrast to civil society associations (clause 2) they have no guarantee that they will be listened to. Also, the institutions are not committed to feel bound by citizens' input. Therefore, when turning to the Commission's understanding, it would be surprising if it went beyond noncommittal voice and consultation.

The next few sections explore how the Commission understands citizens' participation by analyzing the *White Paper on European Governance* (European Commission 2001b), annual work programmes and special programmes of three pertinent DGs. The 2001 White Paper is the standard reference for the Commission's position on democratic participation. Participation is identified as a principle of good governance and it is stated that "the quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies depend on ensuring wide participation throughout the policy chain – from conception to implementation" (European Commission 2001b: 10). However, the White Paper does not state explicitly who is to participate and how participation should be enacted.

Still, the White Paper does indeed refer directly to citizens, but only in the sections on local and regional democracy, and civil society. In the former section under the headline "Reaching out to citizens through regional and local democracy", the authors observed "a stronger engagement of people and grass root organisations in local democracy," (European Commission 2001b: 12), so that getting closer to the citizens could be achieved by better cooperation with local and regional political institutions. In the latter context, civil society is supposed to "giv[e] voice to the concerns of citizens and deliver […] services that meet people's needs" (European Commission 2001b: 14). Hence, citizens are to be given a voice via civil society.

A second source of how the Commission understands participation is the annual work and legislative programmes, which also indicate how the Commission's understanding has developed over time. From 2000-2010 roughly three periods can be distinguished. Until 2004, the Commission mainly aimed at better communication vis-à-vis the citizens (European Commission 2000: 16, 2003: passim) and rather vague involvement "in the European project" (European Commission 2002: 5) or in "future stages of integration" (European Commission 2001a: 9). From 2005 onwards, most likely sparked off by the failed ratification of the Constitutional Treaty, demands for citizens' participation become more pronounced. In 2005, the Commission intended to "stimulate active civic participation" (European Commission 2005a: 6), in 2006 "to make the widest use of existing tools to involve citizens in the decision making process and [to] encourage new forms of consultation, such as citizens' panels" (European Commission 2005c: 11) and in 2007 to involve citizens "in the policy process at all levels" (European Commission 2006: 19). Up to and including the current (2010) work programme, the importance of citizens' participation for the Commission has been decreasing again. What seems now more important is the improvement of policies *directed at* citizens (European Commission 2007: 5, 2008: 6, 2010: 7). Nevertheless, approximately from 2005 to 2007, there seems to have been a general, if vague, openness towards citizens' participation, but it must be kept in mind that this has to be put in the perspective of a rather restrictive EU framework of participation as voice and consultation.

The next few sections examine how individual DGs within the Commission translate citizens' participation into programmes, which should be more specific as they are supposed to be the basis for the actual citizens' projects. Such programmes outline a DG's policy in a certain field, usually for more than one year. In section four, the projects organised under these

programmes will be analysed, whereby one project (*e.g.* the aforementioned *RadioWeb Europe* project) may make use of one or more instruments of citizens' participation (*e.g.* focus groups or online forums).

In recent years, only three DGs have run programmes with explicit reference to citizens' participation: DG Education and Culture (DG EAC), DG Communication (DG COMM) and DG Research. In 2005, DG COMM initiated *Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (European Commission 2005b), DG EAC followed suit in 2006 with a *Europe for Citizens* programme, which is running until 2013 (Decision 1906/2004/EC), and DG Research attributed citizens a role in its Sixth Framework Programme for Research (FP 6) in section 2.4., "Science and Society" (Decision 1513/2002/EC).[6] An analysis of the programmes shows that their objectives vary so that each DG seems to understand citizens' participation somewhat differently. *Europe for Citizens* provides the widest range of objectives. They include "developing a sense of European identity, based on common values, history and culture" (Art 1.2.b, Dec. 1904/2006/EC), "bringing Europe closer to its citizens by promoting Europe's values and achievements" (Art. 2.d, Dec. 1904/2006/EC) but also "bringing together people…to learn from history and build for the future" (Art. 2.a, Dec. 1904/2006/EC), "giving the citizens the opportunity to interact and participate in the construction of an ever closer Europe" (Art.1.2.a, Dec. 1904/2006/EC) and last, but not least, "fostering action, debate and reflection […] through close cooperation within civil society organisations" (Art.2.b, Dec. 1904/2006/EC). The main objective of DG COMM's *Plan-D* is "to seek recognition for the added value the European Union can provide" (European Commission 2005b: 4) by means of a wider debate in the short-term and by enabling citizens to participate in the decision-making process only in the long-term (European Commission 2005b: 2f.). However, the DG also writes that "*Plan-D* is an exercise for listening and dialogue. The ultimate objective of the Commission is to be able to draw lessons from the concerns expressed by the citizens" (European Commission 2005b: 10). DG Research finally focussed on "informed dialogue between researchers, industrialists, political decision-makers and citizens" (Dec. 1513/2002/EC).

Thus, in accordance with the European framing, citizens' participation is restricted to promoting discussion among citizens and giving them a voice vis-à-vis the institutions in a general way, and without explicit commitment by the DGs to feel bound by the results. Only DG COMM writes that the Commission *would like to be able to* act upon them, which is far less than a commitment to actually *do* so. In addition, even though Plan-D speaks of the Commission, it is doubtful that this statement is truly representative of all DGs, given that the other two programmes analysed here contain less ambitious objectives, whilst all the other DGs have not become active in the field of citizens' participation at all. Apart from that, it is noteworthy that, by initiating participation, the DGs try to improve the EU's image in the eyes of the citizens. Also, civil society organisations are to be involved in organising the discussion process. This raises the important empirical question of how plausible the citizens' projects effort is to facilitate discussion in a multi-lingual, multi-level system with roughly 500 million inhabitants.

As could be expected, the EU's and Commission's idea of participation necessarily qualifies the applicability of the normative concept. When it comes to decision-making, the legal framework would at best allow citizens' participation in very early stages, such as agenda-setting or estimation (in the sense used for example by DeLeon 1999) because only in these stages voice and consultation matter. However, it must be kept in mind that the involvement in a specific decision-making process is not mentioned explicitly. Also, it must be stressed once more that the obligation of the EU institutions to listen to citizens can only be a moral

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[6] Note that the current Framework Programme 7 (Decision 1982/2006/EC) no longer makes any reference to citizens' involvement.

one as there are no other legal provisions. The normative question can thus only be how close the citizens' projects come to decision-making and whether their results are in any form normatively binding for decision-makers.

The citizens' projects at the European Commission

The previous sections have shown that the EU in general and the Commission in particular have a particular understanding of citizens' participation as voice and non-committal consultation, which do not have much to do with normative ideas of participatory democracy. The next few sections explore how the DGs' programmes are implemented and discuss the citizens' projects from the EU's and Commission's as well as the normative point of view. In order to do so, the procedures of the projects will be briefly described.

However, before doing so, a few remarks are required here on what will not be part of the analysis. There are some opportunities for citizens to get involved with the Commission that exist independently of any specific programme. These are first informal exchanges, such as blogs of Commission officials, chats and various forms of "letter writing" (letters, emails, phone calls) (Nentwich 1998: 129). Despite their professional design and their obvious purpose of providing for "personal contacts […] between the citizens and Commission" (Nentwich 1998: 129), these opportunities cannot be seen as participation policies of the EU or of the Commission, because their main purpose is to increase transparency, *i.e.* to answer citizens' enquiries.[7] The Commission has set up the *Europe Direct Contact Centre* for more general enquiries and subject to occasional restrictions the DGs can also be contacted individually.

It is more difficult to decide whether or not to include the Commission's consultation regime (Kohler-Koch *et al.* 2007: 206), such as online consultations, hearings and conferences, as an opportunity for citizens' participation. Online consultations, for example, come in different formats. Hüller (2008: 10) distinguishes between *open* consultations, which are directed at the European public in general, and *restricted* ones, for which the Commission defines the circle of participants. It was finally decided not to include the consultations, because they seek first of all to gain expertise whereas enhancing input legitimacy comes second, as Hüller (2008) shows in his quantitative analysis of EU online consultations. Due to its hybrid character, the EU consultation regime cannot be considered an indisputable instrument of citizens' participation.

Having narrowed down the object of research, the article now turns to an investigation of citizens' projects. The programmes analysed in the previous sections were implemented in 14 projects. The projects were organised mostly by national and European civil society associations, either individually or as multi-national consortiums. An overview of organisational details of these projects is provided in Table 1.

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[7] Of course it may well be that citizens try to use letter writing opportunities to get access to the decision-making process. This is, however, not their main purpose and there is no data available on how systematically people try or on how the Commission deals with such attempts.

Table 1: Citizens' projects according to programmes and DGs

DG	Framework	Project Title	Instrument	Main organising body	Duration
COMM	Plan-D	Our Message to Europe	public discussions interview films	Deutsche Gesellschaft e.V.	02-06/2007
		RadioWeb Europe	focus groups online forum multi-media messages interview films	Cenasca Cisl	12/2006-12/2007
		Tomorrow's Europe	Deliberative Opinion Poll	Notre Europe	10/2007
		European Citizens' Consultations	Citizens' Consultation	King Baudouin Foundation	late 2006-mid-2007
		Our Europe – Our Debate – Our Contribution	public discussions interview films	Europa Haz	2007
		Speak up Europe	public discussions online forums	Mouvement Européen	11/2006-late 2007
		Debate Europe	online forum	DG COMM	2005-02/2010
EAC	Pilot projects for the 2007-2013 Europe for Citizens Programme	European Citizens' Panel "What roles for rural areas in tomorrow's Europe"	citizens' panel	European Association for Information on Local Development (AEIDL asbl)	2006-2007
		Eur-Action: Citizens' Panels Acting for Europe	citizens' panel	Association des Agences de la Démocratie Locale (LDAA)	01-05/2007
		European Residents in Regeneration Network	forums	Quartiers en Crise - European regeneration areas network (QeC-ERAN)	2007
	Europe for Citizens' Programme	Raise Plus	citizens' panel	DG Education	2005-2007
Research	FP 6	Raise	citizens' conference	Institute for the Integration of Systems (ISIS)	01.10.2004-31.03.2006
		Meeting of Minds	citizens' conference	King Baudouin Foundation	1.11.2004-31.10.2006

Sources: see websites as indicated in the references.

In the projects, two groups of instruments were used. The first one was open for everyone and participants were not specially selected. Most of these were online-based. The second group includes face-to-face instruments with restricted access for participants and different selection methods.

Of the first group, three projects, namely the Commission's *Debate Europe* website, *RadioWeb Europe* and *Speak up Europe* made use of the 'online forum' instrument. After registration they provided unrestricted access for citizens to discuss topics suggested by the forum organisers. With regard to the topics discussed, *Debate Europe* was the most flexible one with initially four quite general main threads: *Climate Change and Energy*, *Future of Europe*, *Intercultural Dialogue* and *Miscellaneous*, which were later complemented by *Consumers and Health*, *European Elections*, *Women and Politics* as well as *Financial Crisis and Development*. Within these threads registered users could post their own topics. The forum was run in all official languages of the EU in parallel without translation. Unsurprisingly, the English version was the most active one with finally 171,373 posts. A random sample of users shows that they also included non-native speakers, as well as non-Europeans. The French version was the second most active, with 13,581 posts, whilst the Greek version - the third most active - received 7,681 posts. These numbers, however, have to be put into perspective since the forum had only 6,620 members. The *RadioWeb Europe* forum had a different, more restrictive format with twelve pre-set threads on rather concrete EU policies such as *Enlargement* and *Mobility*, which gave the participants almost no opportunities to start a discussion on a new topic. Contributions were possible in every language, but the questions were given in English. From its launch in 2006 until the end of the project in 2007, there were only 21 posts altogether, so the forum was not very active.[8] In the *Speak up Europe* forums the choice of 13 threads clearly signalled the Commission's intention to promote a positive image of the EU. They included essential achievements such as *Peace* or *Environmental Protection*, but also more tangible material benefits such as *Safer and Cheaper Flights*, *Protection of Intellectual Property* and last but not least *Cheaper and Better Phone Calls*. There were forums in 20 languages without translation, accessible from localised web portals. They were not particularly active either. For example, from its launch in 2006 until the end of the project in late 2007, only twelve messages were posted (plus those from the moderator) in the English version.

The actual number of participants, especially for *Speak up Europe* and *Radio Web Europe*, was rather low compared to *Debate Europe*. For the relative success of Debate Europe a number of reasons seem plausible. One might be that more general and political topics (*e.g.* the *Future of Europe*) provide more potential for debate than specific and rather non-political topics (*Cheaper and Better Phone Calls*). Another important point may have been that *Debate Europe* was the 'official' online forum of the EU so that potential users may have considered the likelihood 'to be heard' greater than in the other two forums, which were organised by civil society associations.

Closely related to online forums are so-called 'interview films', jointly produced by *Our Message to Europe*, *RadioWeb Europe* and *Our Europe – Our Debate – Our Contribution*, and what may be termed 'multi-media messages'. The term is used here for the opportunity on the *RadioWeb Europe* website for everyone to upload their own audio, video or text files on European issues on the internet. In interview films, actually short interview montages, apparently 'ordinary citizens' are interviewed by project representatives on European issues. All video clips can be watched and could for some time be commented on the *RadioWeb Europe* website, where they appeared among other video clips such as cartoons or short documentaries on European issues. In practice, it is often not possible to tell apart with certainty the input from the organisers from the input from ordinary citizens. The purpose of

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[8] Another one was added in late 2009, when the forum was still open but the project long finished.

the clips was apparently to initiate debate via the comment function. However, response was rather limited. Of altogether 191 clips[9] only 27 per cent (52) received a response at all, only twelve per cent (23) more than one. No video clip received more than five comments (and only one per cent of the clips (two) received that many). The clips are in different languages and no translation is provided.

The third type of instruments with unrestricted access were public discussions, which were part of *Our Message to Europe*, *Our Europe – Our debate – Our contribution* and *Speak up Europe*. From the *Our Message to Europe* discussions (21 in five countries) it is known that it was experts who discussed in public and then citizens could ask questions. The procedure of the other discussions is not documented systematically but the *Speak up Europe* website lists 43[10] rather heterogeneous events in eleven countries.

The second group of instruments includes those with some form of pre-selection of participants, all of which requiring face-to-face meetings. Focus groups, workshops, citizens' consultations, citizens' panels[11], (face-to-face) forums and citizens' conferences, a group of very similar instruments, were used by the *European Citizens Consultations, Raise, Raise Plus*, the *European Residents in Regeneration Network, Meeting of Minds, RadioWeb Europe, Eur-Action* and *the European Citizens' Panel.* The topics discussed were too numerous to be described in detail and as diverse as, for example, brain science (*Meeting of Minds*), urban development (*Raise Plus, European Residents in Regeneration Network*) or the EU's role in economic, social and welfare issues (*European Citizens' Consultations*).[12] Most of these face-to-face participatory instruments have a particular approach in common. They bring together citizens to discuss political issues in a structured way that often leads to issuing recommendations. The procedure can be summarised as follows. The organisers select socio-demographically and/or geographically stratified random samples of participants for regional or national meetings. There, the participants deliberate with the support of facilitators. They then send delegates to one or more meetings on the European level. There, the deliberations continue, and the delegates agree on recommendations to policy-makers. Usually, the organisers provide the participants with information that they (*i.e.* the organisers) regard as important, necessary or helpful (though there are exceptions in which the participants decide themselves which sources of information to use).

In their procedural details the projects vary somewhat. A few striking differences include the fact that, first, in most cases the agenda (*i.e.* the topics for the deliberations) is set by the organisers, but for the *European Citizens Consultations* this was done by participants as part of the overall procedure. Secondly, some instruments have a multi-level approach as outlined above, but others are limited to one level only. *Raise* and *Raise Plus*, for example, took place only on the European level and the forums of the *European Residents in Regeneration Network* took place only locally. Thirdly, different procedures may raise different language barriers. At the *European Citizens Consultations*, for example,, simultaneous translation was provided, whereas at the *Raise* conference the working language was English. A methodology with a slightly different approach is the Deliberative Opinion Poll (DOP) (see section two above) used in *Tomorrow's Europe*, which was developed by James Fishkin (Ackerman *et al.* 2004; Fishkin 1991, 2009). *Tomorrow's Europe* dealt with economic and social reforms, enlargement, the EU's role in the world, and the degree of EU integration.

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[9] One more was added in 2009 when the project was long finished.

[10] Plus an unspecified number of AEGEE discussions all over Europe.

[11] Sometimes the term »panel« is used differently, for example by Klages *et al.* (2008). For them, a *Bürgerpanel* (citizen's panel) means repeatedly polling a stratified random sample of citizens without deliberation in between.

[12] There is no information available for the *RadioWeb Europe* workshops and forums.

Having described the instruments of citizens' participation, the article will now discuss them in the light of the normative and the empirical (Commission's) concept of participatory democracy. Normatively, the question to be answered is how close the projects came to (the early stages of) a real decision-making process or whether the results of these projects were normatively binding for decision-makers. Empirically the article will discuss to what degree voice, debate and consultation were possible in the multi-level environment of the citizens' projects.

From a normative point of view, the first striking insight is that via the citizens' projects citizens could not take part in any stages of the decision-making process because, first, they were not linked to any specific decision. As a matter of fact, in some cases connections to specific policies of the Commission seem more plausible than in others. It makes sense when DG Research sponsors a participatory event on neuroscience (*Meeting of Minds*). Enlargement (*Tomorrow's Europe*), in contrast, does not even fall within the legal competences of the Commission. Even in the first case, however, the connection to the DG's decision-making process seems to be much less tangible than the usual consultation procedure (Hüller 2008; Kohler-Koch *et al.* 2007; Quittkat 2008).

A second point that makes a connection to decision-making or even to Commission policies somewhat unlikely is the fact that a number of projects were only sponsored by the Commission, but organised and carried out by civil society associations. Even though the analysis of the Commission programmes shows that the involvement of such organisation was intended, it means in practice that there is an additional mediator between the citizens and the Commission. At first sight, this seems to sideline some of the legal restrictions on participation because legally EU institutions are generally urged to engage in dialogue with civil society associations. So maybe citizens could engage in dialogue with the Commission via organised civil society. This would be, however, an optimistic view. First of all, such organisations are imperfect agents. They may very well have agendas of their own and cannot be held accountable.[13] Secondly, in the programmes discussed here, the dialogue aspect did not play a particularly important role.

Nevertheless, it may have been possible that decision-makers felt normatively bound by the results of the projects anyway, if not with respect to specific decisions then maybe with respect to general policies. *Plan-D* projects, for example, culminated in a synthesis event in Brussels in December 2007 (*The Future of Europe — The Citizens' Agenda*). This may have ensured some degree of publicity at least in the Brussels circles. To what degree decision-makers took notice of this event or of the final reports that were issued by many other projects has not been documented. That reports from civil society associations sponsored by certain DGs of the Commission may have had any moral binding force maybe even for other DGs or EU institutions seems doubtful, however.

Empirically, of course, much less than contributions to real decision-making were to be expected. The projects were supposed to give citizens the opportunity for discussion and voice, without any commitment by the institutions to actually feel bound and a rather doubtful commitment to listen. From the point of view of whether, and to what degree, discussion was possible, three aspects of the instruments applied merit special attention: online versus face-to-face instruments, the level of governance at which they were applied, and languages used.

First of all, it can be noticed that there were instruments both online and requiring face-to-face meetings. There can be no doubt that with most face-to-face instruments, discussions among citizens did take place, even though it can be assumed that those instruments

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[13] See section two for a discussion of and literature on associational democracy.

involving citizens as actual participants provided better opportunities than those involving citizens more as spectators than as discussants (*Speak up Europe*). The biggest problem these instruments faced was probably their limited scope. Even 3,600 participants as in *Tomorrow's Europe* are only a small minority of the EU's 500 million inhabitants. A possible solution to the scope problem might be media coverage. According to Bucy (2005: 113), it can actually activate other citizens by providing a "surrogate experience … [which] reminds viewers of their own democratic role and civic identity". In order to have that effect, debates would have to be broadcasted on TV or on the internet. Even though this was the case with some extracts, for example from *Tomorrow's Europe*, broadcasting did not take place in a systematic way. Even if it had there would still have been the question of whether it would have attracted many viewers. Bucy's argument that broadcasted town-hall meetings prior to presidential elections in the US command wide public attention seems convincing, but in the case of the EU projects there was no focussing event such as an upcoming election or an important political decision. So even though discussion did take place, in terms of scope it was not particularly effective.

Online instruments may provide a solution to the scope problem of face-to-face instruments as they can, in principle, reach many more people (Tomkova 2009). However, their general usefulness for broadening political debate is disputed. According to the most optimistic view, the 'media participation thesis', the use of new media has democratising effects because more citizens can get actively involved in 'participation' and political debate (Bucy 2005). Pessimists argue that the new media can have negative effects because it creates isolated citizens in front of a computer screen without connection to the community that is vital for participation (Hildreth *et al.* 2005). Some authors take positions in between the two extremes. Whereas Fuchs (2007: 47) argues that online discussions create a fragmented public unsuited to "constitut[e] a common will of the demos" because political issues are discussed within thematically focussed communities, Lindner (2007) demonstrates empirically that real-world communication, participation and power structures are merely replicated online ('reinforcement thesis'). Testing these hypotheses for the online forums under consideration here would go beyond the scope of this article. However, the numbers of participants in the forums alone suggest that participation was rather limited and included only a tiny minority of Europeans.[14]

Secondly, it can also be noticed that especially face-to-face projects took place on different levels. Discussion will have taken place in any case, but for those taking place only at local level it may be assumed it was necessarily confined to this level. Discussions in the European public sphere can actually only be expected at European level, which not all face-to-face projects included. To be sure, the DGs did not require that projects take place at European level or that participants come from different states. However, the general purpose was to get people involved in European politics and projects with a European dimension much better suited to fulfil this general purpose than for example local projects.

A third important point for participation both face-to-face and via online instruments alike is the question of the language(s) used. As could be seen, some instruments, for example the online forum *Debate Europe*, were divided by language and thus restricted discussion to the respective language community, consisting of native and competent non-native speakers. Others such as *Raise* used English as a working language and again others made it possible for citizens to use their native language and provided translation (*e.g. European Citizens Conferences*). There is some debate in the literature on the importance of language in public discussion. Rose (2008) argues that language diversity in the EU is an obstacle to

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[14] Note that not all of the members were Europeans but came also for example from the US or Northern Africa. The potential virtual boundlessness raises the interesting though probably still hypothetical question of the possibility and consequences of virtual political public spheres that are not congruent with real-life political spheres.

participation and that, despite the general trend towards English as *lingua franca*, only about one-third of Europeans actually speak it. Doerr (2009), in contrast, shows convincingly that, providing sufficient translation, sophisticated deliberation is possible in multi-lingual environments. As long as translation is not provided, however, discussion must necessarily remain restricted to the respective language communities (and cannot, therefore, be truly European) or is additionally open only for a rather small section of non-native speakers of the respective languages and is thus highly exclusive and biased. Only a few face-to-face projects could tackle this issue adequately, but only at the price of limited scope. As it seems, scope and language are a zero-sum game.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article has discussed recent citizens' projects at the European Commission from the normative point of view of participatory democracy and the empirical perspective on participation of the EU in general and the Commission in particular. Only the combination of both perspectives made a meaningful discussion of the projects possible because, even though the Commission's understanding deviates significantly from the normative ideal, the projects raised certain normative expectations. These expectations were that citizens could take part in a political decision-making process or at least that decision-makers felt normatively bound by the citizens' input.

The application of participatory procedures in the EU representative democratic political system is faced with certain practical problems stemming from legal restrictions and the multi-level and multi-lingual nature of the Union. The Commission's approach to participation has been to run or sponsor selected projects which encourage citizens to engage in discussion and consultation, especially in the period from 2005 to 2007. These projects, however, fell short of the normative ideal of participation because they were not connected to a specific decision-making process and because the citizens' input was often mediated by civil society organisations. In addition, there is no evidence that decision-makers felt normatively bound by the results.

Even the practical objective of discussion and (very general, unspecific) consultation could not be met satisfactorily for three reasons. First, face-to-face projects, which can necessarily involve only a limited number of people, were very few given the overall EU population of 500 million inhabitants, and online based projects could not attract great numbers of participants either, despite their technical potential. Second, not all instruments had a truly European dimension and some were confined to the local or regional level only. Third, all projects were faced with the problem of language. Only some projects provided adequate translation, but only at the price of a limited number of participants. Translation is costly, but no translation is exclusive. All these problems seem to be structural rather than accidental. So even if the EU in future treaty revisions would show more openness towards participatory democracy, its feasibility in this huge and diverse society remains doubtful.

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