

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND INDIFFERENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC STATE

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Abstract. In this paper I will refer to civic participation and indifference in the democratic state, beyond the ideology of ever-changing parties, beyond the quarrels between those who constitutionally hold power. Civic participation (either in local actions, or in general elections, or in protests) based on knowledge or the free decision not to participate activates citizens' self-esteem and a sense of dignity, which leads to the maintenance and consolidation of a real democratic regime.

Keywords: *Citizen; Participatory Democracy; Passivity, Civic Culture; Civic Attitudes in Romania*

Political Paradoxes: The Power of the Citizen, Personal Emotions and Collective Emotions

Following the history and philosophy of citizenship, we find that behaviours and attitudes cultivated in any human organized community by rules and principles of law, including learning and challenging them are related to political participation of individuals in the community. How citizens relate to political power, awareness and enforcement of rights and obligations, generally express political culture, and in contemporary democratic regimes, by widespread application of participatory connotation, it indicates the level of civic culture.

In connection with the direct or indirect political participation of the individual in the life of the community, or with the non-participatory attitude, it was observed that: "Coming to terms with the multidimensionality of civic and political engagement implies analysing it in a comprehensive manner: not limited to conventional modes of expression, nor to dichotomic perspectives or observable acts of participation. Studies in this field tend to overlook cognitive and emotional dimensions as types of engagement which, alongside with behaviour, constitute citizenship"¹.

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¹ Carla Malafaia, Pedro D. Ferreira, Isabel Meneses, "Democratic Citizenship-in-the-Making: Dis/Engagement Profiles of Portuguese Youth", *Frontiers in Political Science – Political Participation*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2021.743428/full>, accessed on 9 April 2022.

Based on this general observation of the authors of the study I quoted above, I think it is useful to understand civic participation and indifference in the democratic state, beyond the ideology of ever-changing parties, beyond the quarrels between those who constitutionally hold power.

If the purpose of power should be to solve the problem of “political good or political evil” (Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*), even within the best of all possible political worlds, the democratic one, the political game is more interested in the conquest and preservation of power. But the “scene” of power is also the main place where the citizen, the individual, the political subject can express his dissatisfaction with the way the elected respond to the aspirations of the voters, and this is an expression of the autonomy gained by the individual in the modern age. The paradoxes of the political universe, Ricoeur observed at one point, are related to the characteristics of “politics” to divide (and this has been clearly seen in Romania in recent years) and also to the specifics of “politics”, as a coagulant principle², as a form of the existence of the state, of the unchanging “essence” of the fact that people gather more in one place to become stronger and establish rules and laws in order to fulfil the purpose of their existence in public space.

Thus, in a democratic regime, the separation of powers can also mean a diminution of power, a phenomenon that can be observed in recent years. Those who are in the exercise of political power are addicted to behind-the-scenes games, and authority is often demystified by images of the weaknesses of leaders about which citizens are informed by the media. In this respect, paradoxically, as the political power itself decreases, the power of the ordinary citizen increases: either because he understands the mechanism of power and allows himself to be indifferent, or to take action when he deems it appropriate; either because he, the individual, understands nothing of politics and lives his life peacefully, while those at the top of the political pyramid (from where, in the democracies, some participatory comfort is ensured for all members of society) fight to keep this place.

Instead, no matter how powerless the individual may be as a person in the irrational manifestations of economics, politics, and geopolitics, he is so powerful as a free spectator, as a protester, or as an abstinent. Maintaining this status as a civic subject of a democratic society belongs to the dignity of the citizen, and this value leads to the feeling of a full civic existence, as Philippe Braud argued in *Le jardin des délices démocratiques. Pour une lecture psycho-affective des régimes pluralistes* (1991).

In everyday speech, Braud recalls, “being a citizen” is one of the expressions that concentrates the symbolic potential of democracy to reactivate self-esteem, favouring legitimate identification with the political system. Even if its concrete status remains very different from one political regime to another and from state to state, the psycho-affective dimension is the same at the individual level, and the way in which the citizen perceives himself emotionally in democratic political life makes this notion should still be effective, for example, in electoral discourse:

² Paul Ricoeur, “Le paradoxe politique”, in *Histoire et Vérité*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1964.

“Even artificial and intermittent, the identity of a citizen brings a non-infinitesimal compensation to the prices of inequality suffered in real life. For a time (that of the attention devoted to election campaigns and the statements of politicians), in the consciousness of those ‘badly placed’ in the social hierarchies prevails the impression of existing more, of being more recognized”³. Beyond “Their concrete identities of producer (subject to the instructions of another), consumer (with a weak purchasing power), resident (living in discomfort)”, the rhetoric of the citizen “brings on the political scene a certain ‘self-relaxation’, i.e. a momentary calming of social frustrations, by forgetting (denying) the real inequalities or inferiorities”⁴. Forgetting his personal worries, in such moments “the citizen reaches an awareness of issues of general interest (...) and forgets his immediate concerns”⁵ thus becoming easy its social integration and at the same time the proximity between the political scene and everyday life.

At such times of the election, the belief that individual voting matters, activates the belief in individual “power” that is important from the perspective of the rulers. The feeling of civic and human dignity thus activated also implies the hope that the public desires things will be fulfilled.

The democratic disappointment (which does not imply subliminal acceptance of another regime than democracy) begins when the voter realizes that no matter which political party wins the parliamentary majority or which person will hold the presidency, the polarization of society will deepen, under the “spell” more or less explicit neoliberal slogans which make democracy in poverty a kitsch. But if lawmakers’ legislative proposals were primarily aimed at regaining self-esteem and esteem for others (laws that would make it possible to raise living standards and restore the middle class), I believe that absenteeism at the polls or other forms of absenteeism would be diminished.

However, the freedom to express one’s choices or to abstain, or to be indifferent, is a democratic “gain”, and it should not be underestimated, even if the participation of the citizens in the political decision-making in Romania dominated by the party system is still limited to the only fulfilment by vote.

The Democratic Significance of Absenteeism at the Polls

Of course, absenteeism is quite embarrassing given that political or cultural figures appeal to the civic conscience of the voting population, some relying on the authority of personal example, others on the playful force of paradox (“(...) If all politicians annoy you, go to the polls!”), but it is no less true that in the logic of democratic consolidation what matters most are the tendencies, the socio-cultural aspirations, the political choice and the efforts of the elected to honour the trust of those who voted for them, and not so much the turnout of as many citizens as possible.

³ Philippe Braud, *Grădina deliciilor democrației. Pentru o lectură psiho-afectivă a regimurilor pluraliste* (*The Garden of the Delights of Democracy. For a Psycho-Affective Reading of Pluralistic Regimes*), translated by Adriana and Mihai Mitu, Bucharest, Globus Publishing House, 2001, p. 67.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

Moreover, absenteeism does not always indicate the population's distrust of the system or disappointment, the tacit reaction of indifference to the fate of a political class that has deceived the expectations of citizens. In a country that for fifty years has been ruled by representatives of a political regime in which the voting of imposed leaders was formal and compulsory, this electoral behaviour may as well express either a gesture of administering one's political freedom, as everyone thinks it appropriate, or the certainty that the system has started to work so well that it no longer needs to be pushed before all those "fit" to vote.

On the other hand, a study about the problem of citizen indifference in democracy is signed by Stefania Varnero Rawson and it argues that "there is a causal connection between sovereign state interest and the pervasive influence of indifference among citizenry". According to Stefania Varnero Rawson, "political indifference is the result of precise dynamics that gradually dissolve the democratic foundations of the state and impose a stronger authority", but "yet within processes that remain 'democratic' in form if not substance"⁶.

It is clear that no party can ever and nowhere solve the truly important problems of each individual or of humanity: life and death, love and faith, emotional and mental turmoil. All this has to do with other powers than politics. What political power can administer in man's relationship with himself is the boundary between the harm he can do to himself (being "sentenced" to freedom) and the harm he can do to others by making unlimited use of his freedoms.

What else can the political power do in the order of the always current values and the psycho-moral health of the individuals, is to contribute to the increase of the capital of hope in a better life, of the feeling of security and balance in the internal public space and in the international relations. Most of the citizens, especially during the elections, have the hope that the parliamentary majority will propose social welfare measures that the government in which it finds itself will even make real.

No political party can work miracles, but it is better to be a citizen in a country where parties alternate in power than in a country ruled by a single state party. It is better to stay in a place where the powers of the state are limited to each other, than in a utopia where a "charismatic" leader makes abusive decisions on his own. It is better to have the freedom not to go to the polls (for various reasons) than to be forced to vote for system-imposed leaders.

No matter how complicated the postmodern electoral systems would be (sometimes inaccessible to the understanding of ordinary citizens), electoral participation in the free election regime remains one of the expressions of democracy.

Psychologically speaking, the idea cultivated by all means, especially in election campaigns, that the outcome of elections which express the future

⁶ Stefania Varnero Rawson, "Democracy and the Dynamics of Indifference", *Perspectivas – Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 12, 2014, <https://revistas.uminho.pt/index.php/perspectivas/article/view/174>, accessed on 10 April 2022.

direction of government depends on the choice expressed by the voter, should bring a kind of civic well-being or at least a sense of dignity. If this is not the case, it is not because only some of the participants in the electoral game can be winners, but also because very few of the electoral promises are kept.

Who Is Afraid of the Spirit of Direct Democracy?

Being a culture of freedom, the participatory political culture (equivalent to civic culture) is also a “tool” by which the citizen probes the depths of politics, but also an “apparatus” through which he sees himself better in life policy.

For example, a mature democracy provides the framework for civilized protests, which beyond any manipulation, are the expression of the action of the citizen who with a minimum respect for civic dignity goes out into the street voluntarily – and it is offensive to him to claim that he would be obliged to participate by any institution, any group, any firm, any individual.

As the authors of the article “Democratic Citizenship-in-the-Making: Dis/Engagement Profiles of Portuguese Youth” point out, regarding the civic and political engagement, about the behavioural, emotional and cognitive components, “was assessed through political interest and political information as dimensions related to being attentive to and interested in political affairs, classical predictors of participation (e.g., Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., and Brady, H.)”⁷.

Also, as Peter Dobkin Hall shows, contemporary debate on civic engagement has directed attention to the associational life of communities as an indicator of the vitality of civil society. Some, like Robert Putnam, argue that declining membership in such traditional voluntary associations as bowling leagues, fraternal societies, and “mainline” religious congregations is symptomatic of diminished civic capacities. Others, like Peter Drucker, say the remarkable growth in the population of non-profit organizations, which they see as creating new “spheres of effective citizenship” in which individuals can “exercise influence, discharge responsibility, and make decisions,” indicates a renewal of civic vitality. Still others point to churches and other religious organizations.⁸

One can even talk about the new spirit of democracy as civic participation, and in this respect Jeffrey M. Berry states that a strong tradition in political theory values participatory democracy over representative democracy: “To the most feasible degree possible, we should engage in face-to-face democracy, working with our neighbours to govern ourselves rather than relying on elected representatives to make decisions on our behalf. Face-to-face participation will make us better citizens by educating us about our communities and teaching us to be tolerant and cooperative. These benefits from participation do not come

⁷ Carla Malafaia, Pedro D. Ferreira, Isabel Meneses, *quoted work*.

⁸ Peter Dobkin Hall, “Vital Signs: Organizational Population Trends and Civic Engagement in New Haven, Connecticut, 1850–1998”, in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Theda Skocpol Morris P. Fiorina Editors, Brookings Institution Press, 1999, pp. 211-248, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctv86 dhdr>, accessed on 10 April 16:25.

just from what is overtly political but from all types of cooperative civic activity where the goal is to make the neighbourhood or city a better place to live".⁹

Concerning the situation of the meaning of participatory political culture in Romania in recent years, it can be said that the process of developing well-grounded options that allow every citizen rational choice is later than in other countries. Instead, as social networks show it, it evolves and refines itself on the level of an increasingly large sample of a population from different social backgrounds, the language of civic culture: that of contesting, approving, supporting, commenting, claim. The frequent and virtual encounter of such language creates attitudes and manifests itself through attitudes, which implies a culture of participation in the life of the community, whether it is narrower or wider. Unlike the meaning of culture in general that can be individual despite being formed within or with the help of social "messages", civic culture is not an individualistic, solitary one, but one of communion and collective resonance, of broad-based broadcasting. Once the rules have been internalized, they must be externalized. But to do this, the post-revolutionary enthusiasm of the reconstruction is needed (like the first years after 1989, when the first steps were taken to move from a totalitarian to a democratic regime), to rid the apathy, the disgust, the despair of those who feel stolen, deceived, exploited by the wild capitalists who create their own political culture of egoism, cynicism and resentment towards the opposing potential.

Any revolution, after destroying an old system, built another new one. Historical examples abound. The Romanian Revolution in December 1989, we can say, has the reputation of being just destructive – at least economically and socially. If politically, apparently, things are good from a democratic point of view, in terms of economic life, productive infrastructure and social level, forces are polarized between wealth and poverty. On this background, it is difficult, but not impossible, to abandon the feeling of nonsense that leads to apathy in favour of a culture of involvement, knowledge and recognition of own interest, proper to the free citizen.

Thus, for example, the January-February 2017 protests in Victory Square in Bucharest against the 13th Government Emergency Ordinance of the Government of Romania expressed the peaceful revolt of those who came out to express their disagreement with those who give the tone of corruption and abuse in all institutions, against a spirit of arbitrary and discretionary leadership, against a feudal mentality of the rulers, against those still committed to robbery, and who were expecting from a crooked law the freedom to steal even more, to deceive even more, to lie more and more, to be even more unjust, defended by such a law.

It is also about the cultural practices of the free citizen after 30 years of democracy, of finding the civic spirit that does not restrict the participation and the illusion of its own power to the "ideal" level of the virtual debate. The numbness and even the "sleep" of the civic sense have been knowingly maintained and even cultivated by political leaders, "managers" of institutions or opinion

⁹ Jeffrey M. Berry, "The Rise of Citizen Groups", in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy, quoted work*, pp. 367-394.

formers, who have all the interest of governing a population or some employees dominated by fear and mistrust.

That is why those who protested in January 2017 express the ideal of civic participation that illustrates the explicit part of the deliberative democratic culture, more or less “agonistic”, more or less classical. The oscillation between the obligation and the freedom to be “civic” engaged, between duty and the right to be indifferent is thus resolved by the practical demonstration that the Romanian citizen exists and he (or she) is interested in the fate of the community and finally of himself, that he counts, despite his landlessness.

Even if the “critic” activity of the individual is not very much taken into account by the political power, if an injustice is taken into account in any state institution only if the “reactionary” is supported by someone strong, it is a normal democratic phenomenon, and we can see only those who are eager for power at all costs, those lacking in the spirit of justice, sincerity and humankind, those who have hidden dishonest facts are afraid of direct participatory democracy.

Civic participation is shaping, active and open to creation at the collective level, belonging to the synthesis of the spiritual life of a people and contributing, at this level, to the realization of the cultural condition that politics shares in democratic systems. In his book *Le nouvel esprit de la démocratie. Actualité de la démocratie participative*, Loïc Blondiaux shows that contemporary democracies are looking for a new spirit, new foundations, and this because, despite the survival of the classical forms of political representation, their legitimacy “narrows” and their effectiveness is declining¹⁰.

If the traditional structures of representative democracy are weakened in today's world, instead, the project of “democracy itself” does not seem to suffer, but on the contrary, as Blondiaux noticed: “On the scene of the frequent political conflict, the ability of simple citizens to mobilize, to resist, to interfere with authorities outside traditional political circles and organizations has undoubtedly never been so strong”¹¹. Thus, the echo of these multiple manifestations is the “increase of the word's power in the public space” manifested through “blogs, forums, participatory journalism” which gives the impression that “today the material and symbolic costs of access to public political power reached the point where whoever is allowed to make his voice heard”¹².

Although participative value is independent of the deliberative one, the contemporary participatory views of democracy underline, as we have seen, the importance of deliberation. As in the deliberative view, participatory democracy as seen by Benjamin Barber, can be conceived in the classical values of values: self-government, political equality, rule of law. Against the distributed and delegated institutions, Barber argues that “citizens must take part directly, not

¹⁰ Loïc Blondiaux, *Le nouvel esprit de la démocratie. Actualité de la démocratie participative*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil et La République des Idées, 2008, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 7.

necessarily at every level and in any circumstance, but quite frequently, and especially when deciding on basic policies and when the power that matters is implemented”¹³.

Regarding the participatory status of citizenship, beyond the rights and their “redistribution”, in *Citizenship and Identity*, signed by Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, citizenship is described as a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a series of rights and obligations (civil, political and social) that define the quality of individual membership in a political system¹⁴.

Citizen participation in community life is an indicator of a strong, deliberative, direct democracy, but it is possible in the conditions of civic knowledge, which “promotes support for democratic institutions and values, builds trust in government and elected officials, and contributes to greater civic involvement in important areas including voting and volunteering”¹⁵. According to political scientist William Galston, civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values (starting with tolerance), promotes political participation and it can alter opinions on specific issues, such as fear of immigrants their impact on the host community¹⁶.

Knowledge and civic participation lead to “democratic innovations or processes enabling citizens to influence decision-making on important social and political issues” and thus “European democracies are making more consistent use of direct democratic processes, such as referendums and initiatives, that are popular among majorities of citizens”. As a recent study shows, “an example of such processes is the deliberative ‘mini-public’ (DMP), or a body of citizens selected by lot to reflect the characteristics of the general population, which gathers to deliberate and decide on specific policy issues”¹⁷.

In conclusion, only the leaders of a political regime that move away from democracy can fear the spirit of direct, participatory democracy or the indifference of citizens who have their own freedom-based reasons for this attitude.

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¹³ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy. Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 151.

¹⁴ E. F. Isin and P.K. Wood, *Citizenship and Identity*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd., 1999, p. 4.

¹⁵ R.J. Coley, Andrew Sum, *Fault Lines in Our Democracy Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior and Civic Engagement in the United States*, ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education Research and Development, Princeton, 2012, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁷ Rojon, S.; Pilet, J.-B., “Engaged, Indifferent, Skeptical or Critical? Disentangling Attitudes towards Local Deliberative Mini-Publics in Four Western European Democracies”, in *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 10518, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910518>, p. 1, accessed on 10 April 2022.

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