IPS

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The French experiment

France's democracy is in crisis. There's a growing desire for radical alternatives in the form of direct citizen participation

Read this article in German.

Emmanuel Macron's "Grand débat national", which he launched to find a way out of the crisis highlighted by the *gilets jaunes*, draws to an end. What are your preliminary conclusions?

The Grand débat can be considered a "formal concession" where the government offers the demonstrators a space to participate – but without any concessions with regard to substance. For the president, who is said to maintain a monarchical style and distance from the people, the main point is to show that he's listening. From the beginning, the Grand débat has been perceived as a strategy to distract and weaken the *gilets jaunes*, who also didn't want to participate. In this regard, the strategy seems to have been successful so far, as according to polls the government's approval rating has increased somewhat, and it has managed to gain a bit of time and the push the *gilets jaunes* a bit over to the sidelines.

But the Grand débat can also be interpreted as a powerful and unexpected collective expression of opinions. With 1.7 million signatures to an online petition and 10,000 local gatherings, the Grand débat is a success in terms of civic participation. Initial surveys show that the participants tended to be more from the urban, male, older and well-educated population. There was scarcely any participation on the part of young people, those of immigrant backgrounds, and the working class. Observers were astonished by the large number of people who came to a political gathering for the first time in order to put forward an idea and discuss it with others. Although the sociological makeup of the participants differs from that of the *gilets jaunes* movement, which definitely represents the working class to a greater degree, the desire to participate in the political decision-making process is the same.

Under what conditions can the Grand débat end up a success?

If the political response to the debate falls short of expectations, there could be great frustration and the whole idea of participatory democracy might be permanently damaged. It's quite possible that only marginal political concessions will be made, and that the government will take up only those proposals from the contributions to the debate that are in line with its neoliberal policies.

Otherwise, considering the scope and diversity of the information gathered during the Grand débat (answers to the online survey, open contributions on the platform, minutes of local information events, lists of complaints compiled by the mayors of the rural communities, results from regional citizens' conferences, letters from individuals, etc.), I cannot see how this could possibly be summarised. The sum of the myriad individual statements or opinions doesn't make a policy. The mechanisms of artificial intelligence and the algorithms that process citizens' contributions will certainly not provide a clear and unambiguous idea of what the French people want.

New instruments of participatory democracy, such as citizen meetings with participants drawn by lot, are sometimes presented as *the* solution to the crisis of representative democracy. What does that reveal about the current state of French society?

It's striking about the current democratic crisis in France, but also in the entire Western world, that instruments such as the sortition-based community meetings, where participants are selected at random, are spreading so successfully, and that such democratic innovations are generating high hopes. Who would have thought that political actors would advocate the idea of a third parliamentary chamber, determined wholly or partly by lot, or even the idea of replacing the Senate with a similar process? This interest in sortition attests to the great disrepute that traditional institutions of representative politics have fallen into. The same also applies to the "RIC" (*référendum d'initiative citoyenne*) promoted by the *gilets jaunes*, which aims to enable both citizens' initiatives in constitutional and legal matters and the repeal of laws and the dismissal of elected representatives.

How do you explain the high expectations people have of these participatory instruments?

Nowadays, the usual representatives are considered incapable of faithfully representing the people in their diversity and their interests. This applies to the parliamentary assembly, which is considered to be costly and unnecessary (ultimately, the executive branch decide on

laws anyways), to political parties, the media and other intermediary bodies.

The sortition process and citizens' initiatives appear as possible solutions in many respects, if not even as panaceas. They can succeed in at last allowing the people to be actually represented again or to be able to express themselves directly. Believing that democracy can do without any form of representation amounts to an illusion. But the crisis and mistrust are so great that only solutions like these seem plausible.

Nobody believes anymore that the system can reform itself. Among the *gilets jaunes* is a conspicuous intransigence and radicalism in the matter of democracy. They demand a "true democracy" modelled after the "indignant" protest movement in Spain, the Occupy movement of 2011, and the somewhat smaller "Nuit debout" movement of 2016. More and more people believe that we are not living in a democracy. They're trying to develop a different political model.

Is this Macron's way to strengthen a direct link with the people at the expense of other representative institutions? Or is it already part of a more general consideration: how much citizen participation does it need to make France a unique democratic test-laboratory in the future?

Emmanuel Macron's policy since 2017, but also the policy pursued earlier by Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, consisted in delegitimising the intermediary bodies (in the name of necessary reforms), and to adapt the French society and economy to the demands of globalisation. Intermediary bodies, primarily the trade unions, were perceived as "slowing down" the "modernisation"; the government's entire strategy was to avoid what's called "social dialogue" in France and to implement reforms by means of legislation.

Macron's presidency has exacerbated this tendency, which has led to a kind of "technocratic" or epistocratic way of thinking prevailing in politics. According to this logic, there's no need at all to discuss the measures, as there is only one possible policy, namely the one required by the euro and the international financial markets. Furthermore, on an ever more frequent basis, the executive branch uses (primarily digital) tools to interview citizens. Even before the Grand débat, the government announced its intention to involve citizens in the decision-making process. But this is mainly for the sake of appearances and political communication more than expressing the genuine desire for participative democracy.

What model would you recommend to create structures of horizontal and representative democracy in France?

I believe that "pure" horizontal or direct democracy without representatives could only be implemented in groups of several hundred people. As soon as it goes beyond that, there's a need for mechanisms to pool interests and settle conflicts, and this presupposes a certain form of representation. Today, there is a growing debate over Murray Bookchin's "libertarian municipalism," in which political power is built from the bottom up around autonomous and democratic communities where citizens regain power over community ownership. But how is it to be implemented from above so that all municipalities manage themselves in this way? How are conflicts between the municipalities to be treated? How are problems (especially environmental issues) or external threats to be addressed that require coordination at the national, if not global, level?

Do you recommend a mix of representative and participative elements?

In my opinion, it would be highly complicated to break completely with the institutions of representative democracy in order to change our society, while at the same time maintaining the solidarity systems that support them. I therefore endorse various strategies, similar to those of Erik Olin Wright in his important work *Real Utopias*: wherever possible, one should try out initiatives in which citizens, in the free spaces which are not regulated by capitalist and state systems, can experiment with new forms of democratic life or cooperation. Also, "symbiotic" approaches that attempt to change existing economic and political institutions and organisations should be supported.

If we want to change things and make our democracies more democratic, we also have to make use of political parties and elections. This is precisely because today, national and European politics are dominated by forces that in no way want things to change or the system to be transformed; consequently our democracies are heading toward the abyss. Citizens must be able to exert real influence with their votes so that things really change.

The interview was conducted by the FES Paris office.



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