
FRAMING OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE GREEK CONTEXT



Alexis Kokkos

The Current Situation

The perception and corresponding practice of participatory democracy among Greek citizens remain low.

Citizens are overwhelmed by negative feelings regarding their quality of life. These emotions primarily include insecurity (49.9%) and disappointment (44.3%). This is mainly attributed to their negative perception of the country's economic situation (49.1%), demographic decline (36.7%), and climate change (20.5%).

At the same time, citizens distrust the political and social institutions responsible for improving the quality of democracy. Positive opinions do not exceed 9% for institutions such as the government, parliament, municipal authorities, political parties, and trade unions.

The Traditional Culture

Moreover, one the most important obstacles to the development of participatory democracy has to do with cultural factors, e.g., the domination of a social culture environment that resists change, as well as an inability to recognize the value of participatory processes.

This culture is characterized by introversion and mistrust towards innovation, change, and collective synergy. The satisfaction of personal expectations is a fundamental characteristic and creates strong bonds with a small number of people (the in-group) among whom a relationship of interdependence exists.

The creation of an in-group has its roots in the centuries when Greeks were vassals of the Ottoman Empire. A great deal of commitment and solidarity existed between in-group members. On the contrary, the relations with out-group members were characterized by a great deal of suspicion and antagonism.

This situation becomes even more fixed due to the problematic functioning of public authorities (state, local government) which are characterized (with only a few exceptions that have to do with specific brief periods of time) by dysfunction, bureaucratic rigidities, and resistance to reform.

However, over the years, a new culture has emerged, although not dominant.

It has a positive stance regarding reformations with a democratic prospect, and aims at decreasing the power of clientelism and corporatist practices. People who adopt this culture are inspired by the model of a responsible citizen who contributes toward social development and economic growth.

ACTIVITIES OF THE INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL TRAINING (of PASOK), 2004 -2012

The Institute had two objectives: the first was to educate PASOK members on current political issues. The second was to provide training on intra-party participatory democracy, a matter of great importance for PASOK at that stage.

To achieve these objectives, 300 officials were selected as Political Education Advisors (5-6 in each regional unit of the country) to implement the activities locally.

The issue of participatory decision-making within the party was prioritized because, until then, the party's culture and operation were highly centralized. Decisions were made at both central and local levels by a small circle of officials. Furthermore, during decision-making processes, the floor was almost always dominated by high-ranking officials.

To promote participatory decision-making, the Institute officials, who had expertise and knowledge of participatory adult education methodologies, developed educational material and trained the 300 Political Education Advisors. Among these Advisors, those skilled in experiential, participatory educational practices trained the party's officials and members nationwide. The other Advisors supported those taking on the educational role.

Advisors' training was conducted face-to-face over two weekends and included a comprehensive theoretical framework, experiential exercises—particularly role-playing and scenario simulations—and presentations of examples and best practices.

A key characteristic of these training programs, as with all Institute programs, was their highly participatory approach.

In this way, political education settings could act as microcosms of democracy, equipping participants with the skills of active democratic citizenship and teaching them how to apply these skills within their political party and communities.

The programs on participatory decision-making were well-received by PASOK officials and members, particularly those involved in local government.

The knowledge of participatory democracy gained by many officials and members enabled them to apply it within PASOK and other activities.

A Case Study

The DVD, «Facilitating a meeting», includes parts from a role-playing exercise on decision-making in a municipality. The scenario focuses on the operation of a Children's Creative Engagement Center within the municipal framework.

The first part of the DVD depicts a confrontational decision-making process, while the second part presents a collaborative approach.

Educational Practice Followed

In the decision-making seminars, including the aforementioned one, participants first watched the DVD twice. Then, the facilitator led a process consisting of four stages:

Stage 1

Watch the first part of the DVD "Facilitating a Meeting" (first version of the meeting). Then, reflect or discuss the following (it might help to write down your answers):

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- What are the main elements in the "Vice Mayor's" behavior, as the discussion facilitator, that could potentially hinder or facilitate participatory democratic dialogue?
 - What are the cumulative consequences on the groups' behavior?

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- What should the “Vice Mayor” have done step-by-step to make the discussion more creative and effective? What should the other participants have done?
 - How do you assess the "rules" he sets at the beginning of the discussion?

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- How do you evaluate the time and turn allocation?
 - How do you assess his argumentation?
 - How do you judge the non-verbal elements of the meeting (body language, tone of voice, space arrangement)?

Stage 2

Then, watch the second part of the film (second version of the meeting) and reflect or discuss the following:

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- What aspects of the “Vice Mayor’s” behavior improved compared to the first part? Can you identify at least five points?
 - What were the consequences of these improvements on the behavior of other participants?

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- How do you assess the "rules" he sets at the beginning of the second version?
 - How do you evaluate the time and turn allocation?
 - How do you assess his argumentation?

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- How do you judge the non-verbal elements of the second part?

Stage 3

Now, form working groups in order to read and discuss the text "Tactics for Democratically Structured Meetings." Then, identify the main points in this text that remind you of the film. Revisit the questions you answered in Stages 1 and 2, and enrich your thoughts drawing inspiration from what you read in the text. Each group will be asked to present its ideas to the plenary.

Stage 4

Connect (individually or in groups) all of the above to your experiences:

- Do they remind you of any fruitful or possibly dysfunctional approaches you've taken or observed in others during your participation in political discussions?

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- If you recalled any dysfunctional approaches, what alternative actions could have been taken?
 - How do you plan to contribute (as a potential political discussion facilitator or as a group member) to ensure a constructive political discussion in which you will participate in the coming weeks?

The Accompanying Educational Material

Participants in the seminars were provided with guidelines for conducting proper and effective meetings.

They were also equipped with methods for using the material.

A new project of Participatory Democracy in the city of Athens

Recently, the Municipality of Athens entrusted the Hellenic Adult Education Association, with a project aimed at fostering participatory democracy by involving both citizens' organizations and individual citizens in decision-making processes that affect them.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!