



CORDIS Results Pack on elections and democratic participation

A thematic collection of innovative EU-funded research results

May 2019



Understanding turbulent political times through innovative EU-funded research

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Editorial

Understanding turbulent political times through innovative EU-funded research

The 2019 European elections will possibly be viewed by future historians as a landmark election for the EU due to the extraordinary political context in which they're taking place and the challenges to democracy this involves. This is why innovative social sciences research is vital in helping us understand the shifting patterns of democratic participation in the 21st century. As such, this Results Pack features 11 EU-funded projects that have been working to help us better understand our complex political world and how citizens view their continually shifting place within it.

2019 is a busy year for democratic elections – in Europe alone, aside from the European Parliament elections, various national elections (local, regional, parliamentary or presidential) will be taking place in at least 15 EU Member States. Further afield outside the EU, elections have already taken place or are still scheduled in Argentina, Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Israel, South Africa, Switzerland and Ukraine to name but a few. The United States will be, by the end of 2019, already gearing itself up for its 2020 showdown election between President Donald Trump and his Democratic opponent. So, measured in terms of electoral processes, democracy appears pretty robust and better than any alternative.

The challenges of the age

At the same time, especially since 2016 several elections and referenda have been characterised by relatively unprecedented misrepresentation and 'fake news' campaigns that undermine the notion of informed participation. More generally, democratic politics has witnessed a surge of protest and so-called 'populist' politics that have redefined the political space in many democratic countries and what it means to participate politically as a citizen. Some of the roots of these political trends can be traced back to the late 2000s' financial and economic crisis which exacerbated inequality levels, drove many governments to pursue austerity policies, led to stagnant living standards and resulted in a strong distrust by many citizens of the supposed 'political elites'.

The role of new technologies in reshaping democratic participation in the modern world is worth special attention. Social media has connected billions of people in ways that were unimaginable a few years ago, allowing news (including 'fake' stories), opinions and messages to spread worldwide in a matter of minutes. Technology is even changing the mechanics of democratic participation, such as the introduction in many countries over recent years of e-voting machines that have replaced the traditional pencil ballot, the increasing popularity of 'direct' forms of democracy that could be facilitated through digital advances and engagement with social media platforms concerning stronger checks on deceptive bots and the spread of fake news.

Innovative research for better understanding, outcomes and policy

In such a turbulent political environment, it is essential that innovative social sciences research can provide facts-based neutral analysis, devise innovative solutions to improve democratic systems for the better, and assist in the formulation of evidence-based policy. The EU's Horizon 2020 programme, including through the European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Curie fellowships, is thus fully supportive of nurturing Europe's most gifted social scientists.

In this Results Packs dedicated to Elections and Democratic Participation, we showcase 11 EU-funded projects that are contributing to a better understanding of the factors and forces that are right now shaping the scope and future direction of democratic participation.

Junk news aggregator aims to restore trust in media and democracy

Developed by the Oxford Internet Institute with EU funding, the junk news aggregator (JNA) interactively displays articles from unreliable sources as they spread on Facebook. Researchers hope the tool will help tackle the growing phenomenon of misinformation on social media.



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Named Word of the Year by Collins in 2017, 'fake news' has slowly moved away from sensationalist and populist discourse to anchor itself in our everyday lives. Fake news, or some would rather say junk news, is now everywhere, starting with our own Facebook walls. They've grown more credible, too: Unless you've been educated to second-guess every article spreading across your network, and have the time to cross-source information, the odds of getting caught up in the fake news frenzy have never been so high.

Introducing the JNA

Luckily for all of us, a group of scientists at the University of Oxford have taken an important step in the systematic evaluation of news credibility on social media. Their JNA was launched in the lead-up to the 2018 US midterm elections. It can track down junk news sources on Facebook and aggregate them on a dedicated online portal, so that none of us can get fooled again.

“Earlier attempts to address misinformation on social media often focused on Twitter only. They did not offer real-time insights into currently popular misinformation and junk news content on social media, nor did they allow the public to examine, filter or search through this junk news content as it spread on social media,” says Dr Dimitra Liotsiou, one of the researchers leading the BOTFIND (Finding Bots, Detect Harassing Automation, and Restoring Trust in Social Media Civic Engagement) project. Her aggregator, however, does it all.

So how exactly does the aggregator work? In the case of the 2018 elections, the team started by identifying tweets referencing these elections on Twitter and extracting included links. From thereon, they categorised the source of each link as junk news as soon as it failed on three out of five criteria: whether the source follows professional journalistic standards; whether fact-checking is done; whether commentary is disguised as news; whether reporting is highly biased, ideologically skewed or hyper-partisan; and whether the source counterfeits the branding of other established news outlets.

Three distinct tools



The aim of this public tool is to make the issue of junk news on social media more transparent, while enabling journalists, civil society groups and all interested members of the public to examine in real time what kinds of junk news are spreading on social media.

The platform consists of three distinct tools: an exhaustive list of posts by junk news sources and their content posted publicly on Facebook, with filters by release date, engagement level and keyword; an interactive visual aggregator of the day's most popular posts by junk news sources; and a 'Top 10' snapshot of the day's most popular posts by these same sources.

As Dr Liotsiou explains: “The aim of this public tool is to make the issue of junk news on social media more transparent, while enabling

journalists, civil society groups and all interested members of the public to examine in real time what kinds of junk news are spreading on social media. This helps raise awareness and improve media literacy, and should ultimately contribute towards preventing users from being influenced by online misinformation and junk news.”

“For each of the top 50 most cited (on Twitter) junk news source websites, all the posts each source uploads onto its public Facebook page are retrieved and displayed on the main JNA tool every hour. The tool displays the content, image or video, link, and all engagement numbers for each post,” Dr Liotsiou explains.

By helping shed light on junk news on social media, the team hopes that the JNA will contribute to restoring public trust in technology and the process of modern deliberative democracy. The tools are open and publicly available, and can help journalists, public policy makers, civil society leaders, politicians and members of the public to access, examine and evaluate news quality online in a timely manner.

PROJECT

BOTFIND – Finding Bots, Detect Harassing Automation, and Restoring Trust in Social Media Civic Engagement

HOSTED BY

University of Oxford in the United Kingdom

FUNDED UNDER

H2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/767454



Bridging the gap between the EU and European youth

Since the onset of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, the European Union has been experiencing many formidable challenges, from economic woes, to the migration crisis, to Brexit and the rise of populist politics in many Member States. To allow the EU and its values to flourish in the 21st century, one project has worked intensely with Europe's young people to encourage their active participation in European politics and EU affairs.

European young people have had a rough ride over the past decade as they have suffered the worst since the 2008-2009 financial crisis in terms of unemployment rates, training and education opportunities, and stagnant wage growth. However, if the EU is to survive, especially in populist times, support for

the European project from young people is not only desirable but essential. This is where CATCH-EyoU's (Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions) research comes into play.



How European youth perceive Europe

"Our aim was to understand how EU and national institutions can be supported to cultivate a generation of informed, competent and critically aware young people as a means to help revitalise the European project," begins Professor Elvira Cicognani, CATCH-EyoU project coordinator.

The project found that many actively engaged young people had various notions about what 'Europe' was and what it meant to them. "To many European young people, the idea of Europe is positive to them – providing education, work and personal opportunities across frontiers," comments Prof. Cicognani. "Indeed, one of our studies found clear evidence that when young Europeans take advantage of cross-border mobility, such as through the Erasmus programme, it has a positive impact on their personal identity as a European and their wider opinion of the EU as a whole."

Education, education, education

Whilst this is indeed encouraging, the project team also found that the role of schools is also crucial for the development of young people's concepts of Europe. In one case study, CATCH-EyoU worked with five schools in five different Member States and worked directly with young people to increase their awareness and engagement on EU issues.

"We first asked them to choose a local issue affecting young people that they felt passionate about and then we worked with them to help them understand how this issue could be addressed at EU level," explains Prof. Cicognani. "By the end of the intervention, students showed increased awareness of EU social and political issues, increased their knowledge of EU issues more generally and developed a more complex, articulated and sometimes critical vision of the EU and active citizenship."

Another project initiative worked with youth organisations across eight Member States to understand the practices of positive active citizenship. "Youth civic organisations are an excellent vehicle in which to help young Europeans become more engaged and active," says Prof. Cicognani. "We worked with organisations such as the Italian Youth Forum and the International Youth Panel who supported the research and provided valuable inputs from the perspectives of young people."



Indeed, one of our studies found clear evidence that when young Europeans take advantage of cross-border mobility, such as through the Erasmus programme, it has a positive impact on their personal identity as a European and their wider opinion of the EU as a whole.

Challenges and moving beyond CATCH-EyoU

Of course, a project such as CATCH-EyoU would not come without its occasional hiccups. "Some challenges had to do with external political and social events, such as the Brexit vote that happened just as we were finalising our cross-national study which included UK youth," says Prof. Cicognani. "Also, the increasing challenges posed by immigration, growing intolerance and xenophobic attitudes in several of the countries in which we were active."

But overall, the project has massively contributed to understanding how to engage young people with European issues and the EU as a whole. "Moving forward, I'm definitely interested in continuing my research on civic and participatory phenomena, particularly in the area of ICT in order to exploit the potentials of new technologies for citizens' engagement in governance processes," concludes Prof. Cicognani.

PROJECT

CATCH-EyoU – Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth: Policies, Practices, Challenges and Solutions

COORDINATED BY

University of Bologna in Italy

FUNDED UNDER

H2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/649538

PROJECT WEBSITE

catchyou.eu



Civici: technology at the service of participative democracy

Decision-making software is on a roll, and civici is one of the most marking success stories in this constantly growing market. Their e-voting technology is bringing the wonders of participative democracy to all interested public authorities, and even proposes specific services for private companies and the education sector.



© Civici

It all started in Spain, with municipalities eager to involve citizens in local decision-making. Civici (The Citizen Participation Platform) was just what they were looking for – a secure, cloud-based e-voting technology for users to make proposals, allowing municipalities to select the best ones and put them to a citizen's vote. At the time, there was no equivalent tool on the market.

Fast-forward to 2019. Civici is now used by over 100 customers across nine countries, partly thanks to support under the European Innovation Council pilot's SME Instrument strand. "Thanks to the EU-funded feasibility study, we first found out that civici could easily be used in Latin America, where no product adaptation is required. Features and language were already perfectly adapted to the market, and there is a great

culture of citizen participation in Central and South America that sometimes is mixed with technology,” explains Aleix Cereto, business developer for civiciti.

For municipalities using it, civiciti has become an integral part of politics. As we were writing these lines, the Spanish city of La Bisbal was just closing a participative process in which citizens had to vote on how to assign a EUR 140 000 budget within a selection of 29 projects, ranging from improvements to the municipal swimming pool to solar energy in public buildings, improvements in green areas and electric car chargers.

Improved engagement, better accountability

The civiciti promise is tempting: improving engagement without skyrocketing spending, and ultimately closing the gap between citizens and governments while regaining the former's trust in the latter. As Cereto points out, there is growing evidence that e-voting techniques increase citizen participation and are mainly used by new participants rather than those citizens who were already mobilised, so it's a real bargain for governments facing increasing pressure for more transparency, accountability and public consultation.

The feasibility study was also an opportunity for the company to validate its diversification strategy. As initially expected, the platform can easily be adapted for use in any organisation, and not only municipalities or public administration.

Civiciti: More than just elections

Two additional categories of customers have been identified. The first is the private sector: companies can use the



We have already deployed pilot portals for universities, schools and private companies and conducted live elections for shareholders meetings.

system, for instance, to consult employees on strategic moves or new product ideas and draw conclusions thanks to a dedicated data system. The education sector can also find civiciti useful to set up a participation space where students, teachers and parents can share opinions and proposals.

“Interest from these sectors became clear after two years on the market,” Cereto recalls. “We have already deployed pilot portals for universities, schools and private

companies and conducted live elections for shareholders meetings. We expect to further expand this segment over the coming years.”

With its phase 1 project now completed, Civiciti intends to continue its expansion strategy in the Americas and Western Europe. The company will keep bringing new features for private organisations while upgrading the ones meant for municipalities, and the platform will soon cover shareholder meetings, political party elections, university elections, schools and professional associations.

PROJECT

Civiciti – The Citizen Participation Platform

COORDINATED BY

Civiciti in Spain

FUNDED UNDER

H2020-SME, H2020-Industrial Leadership and H2020-Societal Challenges

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/828439

PROJECT WEBSITE

civiciti.info



An insight into young people's democratic participation across European cities

Recent youth-led climate protests across Europe and beyond are a serious reminder for decision-makers: Young people are an integral part of our democratic system, and they want to have a larger say in Europe's future. As such participation starts at the local level, the PARTISPACE project investigated its existing forms in eight cities across Europe.



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Existing research suggests that political participation starts with influence and involvement at the local level. But what exactly do we know about this involvement, and how does it differ from one Member State to another? The PARTISPACE (Spaces and Styles of Participation. Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people's participation in European cities) project led

the investigation in eight European cities, to broaden the understanding of local youth participation, identify problems and help facilitate such participation.

"Our initial observation was that most formal forms of participation for youth do not have much weight and are essentially token

gestures,” says Prof. Dr Andreas Walther from Goethe University Frankfurt. “Besides, a clear majority of young people are wary of public institutions, especially when they’ve had negative experiences with formal education. This results in informal public space activities showcasing young people’s aspirations to be a part of society, which should also be seen and addressed as moments of participation.”



A clear majority of young people are wary of public institutions, especially when they’ve had negative experiences with formal education.

Building upon the view that current concepts and understandings of participation are too narrow, the PARTISPACE project analysed the participatory potential of young people’s activities in public spaces – whether acknowledged as a form of participation or not.

applies in all contexts and represents the biggest challenge for supporting youth participation.

Support from adults is cool – just don’t patronise

Besides investigating the state of youth participation, PARTISPACE gave young people the possibility of expressing their views in projects without academic and adult filters. These projects revealed that many young people appreciate support from adults provided that they do not claim to know better and accept young people’s own ways.

Prof. Dr Walther hopes that the study provides enough arguments for policy-makers to start considering young people as co-citizens rather than ‘citizens in the making’. In the case of climate protests, recognition by other societal actors would certainly show young people that involvement and engagement can make a difference.

Local studies in each city

The team conducted qualitative local studies in each participating city. They organised expert interviews and group discussions with young people to understand how they refer to participation. Furthermore, six ethnographic case studies per city were conducted on formal, non-formal and informal settings of participation by means of observation, group discussions and biographical interviews with young people.

The project identified clear differences: “Gothenburg (Sweden) particularly stands out with well-equipped and rooted participation mechanisms at district level,” Prof. Dr Walther explains. “In Frankfurt (Germany) and Manchester (UK) – prior to the terrorist attack in 2017 -, formal representation was limited to either educational campaigns or school-related issues. In both cities, youth policy appeared irresponsive to contextual changes, yet with a larger and more robust youth infrastructure in Frankfurt than in Manchester. In Zürich (Switzerland), youth policy is responsive but there is no formal youth representation. The same applies for the other cities. In Rennes (France), youth policy is organised through associations, which implies selective access. In Plovdiv (Bulgaria) and Eskisehir (Turkey), youth work and youth participation have only recently been introduced through EU integration processes. There is no reliable infrastructure yet.”

The discrepancy between formal, acknowledged and informal participation that tends to be neglected and excluded, however,

Several cities involved in the project have initiated debates around the implementation of a local Charter of Youth Rights, which provides visibility to young people’s claims and rights and reflects how their lives differ from those of children and adults. The team hopes that this process will be taken up at European level.

PROJECT

PARTISPACE – Spaces and Styles of Participation. Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities

COORDINATED BY

Goethe University Frankfurt in Germany

FUNDED UNDER

H2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/649416

PROJECT WEBSITE

partispace.eu



The Great Recession and political conflict in Europe

The EU-funded POLCON project aims to understand the impact that the Great Recession has had on the development of political conflict in Europe.

In the autumn of 2008, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and the dominoes that made up our global economic order began to fall. The result was the decade-long economic crisis known as the Great Recession.

Although much of our post-crisis analysis has focused on the economic fallout of the Great Recession, little thought has been given to its political repercussions. But this could be where

the real impact is felt, with some observers even wondering whether or not democracy itself can survive its grave economic consequences.

The EU-funded POLCON (Political Conflict in Europe in the Shadow of the Great Recession) project is studying the structuration of political conflict in Europe, based on an analysis of political contestation in the electoral arena, the protest arena



and in issue-specific public interactions. The key question being asked is whether the Great Recession and its consequences are changing the long-term trends in the development of political conflict in Europe?

“Our overall guiding hypothesis is that the unfolding of the Great Recession has far-reaching consequences for the development of political conflicts in Europe, which contribute to a fundamental transformation – or realignment – of the traditional political forces,” says Project Coordinator Hanspeter Kriesi.

Regional differences

To accomplish this, the project is comparing the pre- and post-crisis periods in 27 EU Member States plus Iceland, Norway and Switzerland.

The first step is to gain a broad assessment of the political consequences of the crisis in both the electoral and protest arenas, as well as the relationship between the two. To assess the broad patterns of change in these two arenas, researchers are relying on secondary analysis of the existing data sets and on an innovative, semi-automated protest event analysis based on international news wires.

Although research continues, several interesting insights have already been gained, particularly as to how the recession impacted various regions differently. “In terms of electoral outcomes and the structuring of conflicts in the party system, the Great Recession has, at best, accentuated the long-term trends in north-western Europe, such as the inexorable rise of right-wing populist parties,” explains Kriesi. “In comparison, in southern Europe, it has had much more disruptive consequences, leading to the rise of left-wing populism and to the profound reconfiguration of party systems.”

According to POLCON research, in central and eastern Europe the Great Recession’s impact on electoral outcomes and party systems has been weak. “In this part of Europe, electoral volatility has decreased and, if anything, party systems that lacked institutionalisation have stabilised,” says Kriesi. “The driver of this reconfiguration of party systems is a political – not an economic – crisis.”

Kriesi adds that these electoral results have been confirmed by the project’s analysis of protest event data. “At least with respect to the overall magnitude of protest, the Great Recession did not seem to have any impact at all in northwest Europe,” he says. “By contrast, all southern European countries experienced a wave of protest during the euro crisis.”

Don’t jump to conclusions

These findings are important because they remind us that the Great Recession has not had the same impact across Europe. While the south has been hit very hard with important political consequences, the north-west and the east have hardly been affected at all in political terms. “The key takeaway is that we should not generalise too quickly and instead need to examine the political situation in each part of Europe in detail before we draw conclusions,” says Kriesi.



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PROJECT

POLCON – Political Conflict in Europe in the Shadow of the Great Recession

HOSTED BY

European University Institute in Italy

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FP7-IDEAS-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/338875

PROJECT WEBSITE

eui.eu/Projects/POLCON



Politics, the art of the possible – but who chooses party politics and who chooses protest, and why?

One would not be mistaken to assume that traditional party politics has become side-lined by the rise of an angrier, more direct form of protest politics, supercharged by years of austerity following the financial crash of 2008-2009. One ERC-funded project, POLPART, has been dedicated to understanding how and why people become engaged in politics and what this means for ongoing efforts to strengthen and preserve our democracies for the future.



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POLPART (How citizens try to influence politics and why. International comparisons of movement and party politics) has been tracking the trends and movements regarding citizens' political participation in both Europe and Latin America. One of the fundamental questions they wanted to answer was why some individuals are drawn to political participation through the formal political process and why others prefer to engage in protest politics.

The best way to answer these questions was to talk to citizens themselves, which POLPART researchers did in a number of focus groups, covering four democracies they named 'full' democracies (Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK) and four they referred to as 'flawed' democracies (Argentina, Brazil, Hungary and Romania), plus Greece.

The response was amazingly negative and cynical with low trust in political institutions, especially in our 'flawed' democracy case studies.

they are. "This was similar for both 'full' and 'flawed' democracies," explains Prof. Klandermans. "Importantly, anger makes people prepared to engage in movement/protest politics rather than party politics across all issues, whether that means signing a petition or joining a demonstration."

The more people feel that their participation in a specific activity makes a difference, the more they are willing to engage in that activity. "The strongest factor stimulating political participation overall is external efficacy. Interestingly, those who opted for contacting politicians found that strategy to be above average for effectiveness," says Prof. Klandermans. "Apparently the link between effort and effect is strongest for this direct contact with elected representatives."

The citizens are angry

At the start of the focus group sessions, the POLPART team asked their respondents what came to their mind first when thinking about politics. "The response was amazingly negative and cynical with low trust in political institutions, especially in our 'flawed' democracy case studies," exclaims Prof. Klandermans who received an ERC grant to lead this project. "Even in positive evaluations it was more a matter of aspiration and wishful thinking. We received a lot of differing reactions, but they were primarily gut reactions. Although later on in the group discussions, the evaluations became more subtle, the sentiment remained nonetheless negative."

This is hardly surprising. Europe is still struggling with the after-effects of the economic crisis, immigration has become a major polarising issue since the 2015 migration crisis and populist parties of both the left and right have become prominent across the continent, from Spain to Sweden, and Italy to Germany. In Argentina and Brazil, both countries are currently experiencing recession, and inequality has been rising again. Growing discord about traditional party politics there was best captured in the victory of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's president in October 2018 and frequent pot-banging street protests in Buenos Aires against an economic crisis and austerity measures.

To vote or to protest? That is the question

Overall, POLPART found that the angrier people are, the more likely it is that they opt for either party or protest politics. "More cynical people are likelier to vote or sign an official petition, whilst the more internally efficacious people feel they are, the more likely it is that they choose a form of protest politics," explains Prof. Klandermans.

POLPART also saw that party activism in the past makes current party activity more likely. Having been involved in movement activities in the past makes future movement activity more likely. "But interestingly, civic engagement does not influence engagement in politics in a systematic manner," says Prof. Klandermans. "We found civic participation to be either unrelated or negatively correlated to political engagement."

Prof. Klandermans and his team are continuing to work on further POLPART publications, and in 2020 their full data will be made available to the whole academic community.

Voting is still the top choice

But the project did capture some positive news. "The single largest political activity we recorded is still voting (in elections), followed by signing a petition and voting in a referendum," explains Prof. Klandermans. "So, we can safely say that a large proportion of citizens are still actively engaged with and committed to formal political processes, regardless of the current levels of anger and mistrust towards politics in general."

But what is it that drives people to engage in politics in the first place? With only one exception, that being poverty, citizens are more prepared to participate in political action the more aggrieved

PROJECT

POLPART – How citizens try to influence politics and why. International comparisons of movement and party politics

HOSTED BY

VU Amsterdam in the Netherlands

FUNDED UNDER

FP7-IDEAS-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/339829

PROJECT WEBSITE

polpart.org



Young people are instigators of social change – so how can they best be integrated into society?

Democratic participation is a right and duty for every citizen, but it's important that each new generation feels welcomed and respected in the body politic and feels that their contributions are appreciated. Following years of austerity, that have disproportionately affected Europe's young people, encouraging them to engage both politically and socially in a positive manner is crucial. One EU-funded project has been investigating the best ways in which to enable this.



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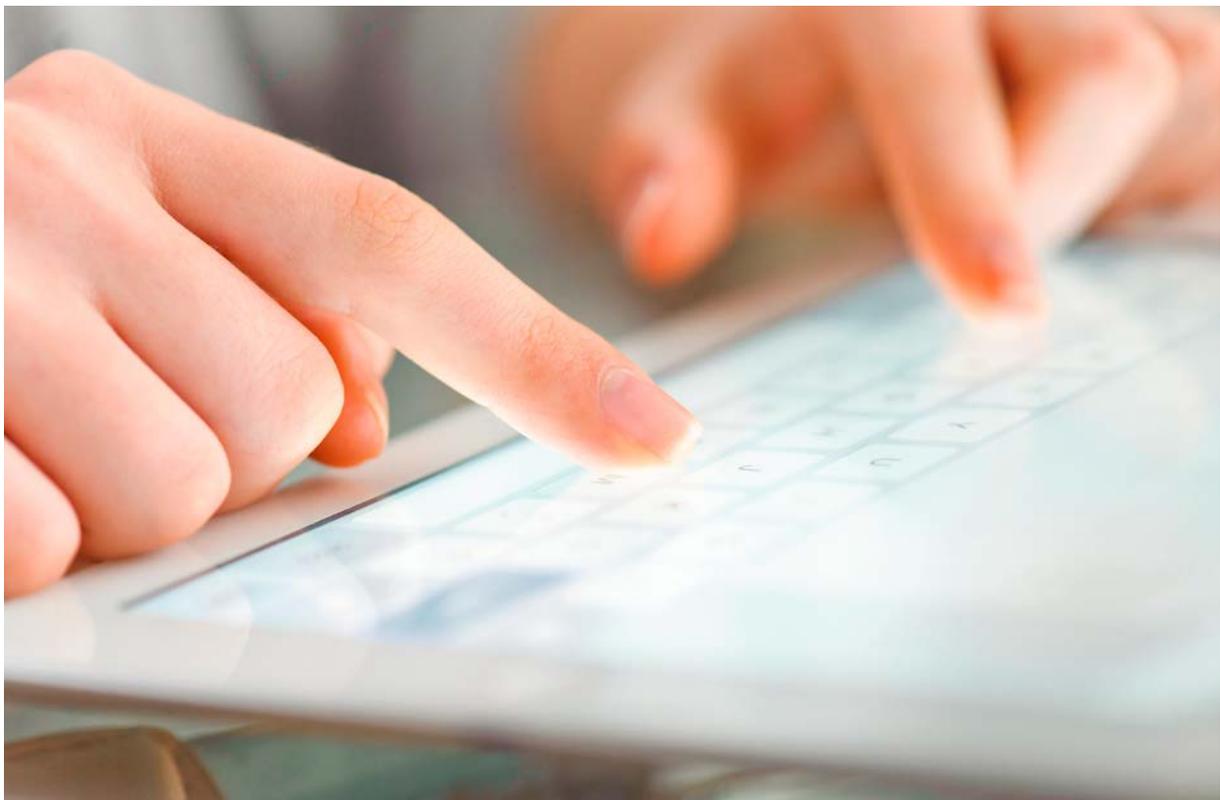
"Young people are instigators of social change, driven, in part, by the challenging circumstances that prevent their social progress: lack of opportunities, resources and respect," begins Dr Jo Deakin, coordinator of the PROMISE (PROMoting youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for 'conflicted' young people across Europe) project. "The aim of our research is to explore young people's responses to these challenges, focusing particularly on youth who encounter conflict with authorities."

Stigma, labelling and stereotypes: A toxic concoction

In particular, the notion of stigma and labelling are key sources of what causes young people to switch off from social and political engagement. "Young people need to feel that they belong in order to truly engage," explains Dr Deakin. "Our research found that a key factor

The (failed?) promise of digital democracy

Political participation platforms are becoming commonplace within political parties. But they have yet to result in scalable direct democracy. Unless the dice were loaded from the start?



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Common positions have always been the glue holding political parties together. But where meetings and rallies used to be essential, the digital era has been shaking things up: a growing number of political parties across Europe – such as Podemos in Spain, the 5 Star Movement in Italy and the Pirate Party in Germany – have been empowering their members like never before with online, direct democracy platforms.

At first glance, these platforms are essentially tools that can help improve internal party democracy while allowing for clearly defined visions and objectives. But is it really that simple?

“Software is too often seen as a value-neutral and transparent means, just waiting to be used. The goal of SCALABLE DEMOCRACY (Can Direct Democracy Be Scaled? The Promise of Networked Democracy and the Affordances of Decision-Making Software) was to demonstrate that each of these software or participation platforms embeds a set of political values and assumptions about democracy, which will necessarily shape the nature of the decision-making process,” explains Dr Marco Deseriis, project coordinator.



Comparing party software

SCALABLE DEMOCRACY set out to demonstrate these biases by comparing how the different decision-making software used by Podemos, the 5 Star Movement and the Pirate Party conceive intra-party democracy, and especially the relationship between the 'ordinary member' and the party elites. Some software is indeed more oriented towards deliberation, while others put a strong emphasis on voting. None of these approaches is ideal: The former pose a threat to party unity by allowing members to exert greater rule, and the latter can be used to reinforce the party leadership and strengthen party unity – but only at the expense of internal democracy.

Participa (Podemos) and Rousseau (5 Star Movement) are the least deliberative platforms. The former renders its forums ineffective by making it impossible for members to advance proposals for initiatives that may be effectively turned into party initiatives, whilst the latter does not embed deliberative features such as forums and wikis. "These two platforms effectively divorce deliberation from decision-making and leave the former almost exclusively in the hands of the party leadership," Dr Deseriis notes.

LiquidFeedback, the participation platform of the Pirate Party, is the most complex piece of software. It contrasts with its counterparts by embedding a deliberative conception of democracy. However, because its adoption was not uniform within the party, the software was ultimately unable to scale deliberation from the local level to the national level, igniting instead a conflict between users and non-users of the platform.

The software is deceiving

This provides for a largely negative answer to the question at the heart of SCALABLE DEMOCRACY: Can democracy be scaled? "Unless we limit ourselves to a liberal, or minimalist conception of democratic participation, such as voting, the impact of these platforms on the institutions of representative democracy appears to be quite limited. Such limitations are primarily of a political nature and only secondarily technological," Dr Deseriis explains. "In all cases, the party in Central Office and the party in

public office tightly control the strategic direction of the parties, consulting the general membership when needed and within certain boundaries."

In this sense, SCALABLE DEMOCRACY's major finding is that these platforms scale direct democracy only under a limited definition of direct democracy as preference aggregation (the model of the referendum). "Although the more challenging task of reimagining direct democracy as a widely distributed deliberative process is technically feasible, such endeavours require a level of mutual trust and a widely shared political vision, which cannot be provided by digital technologies alone, especially within political parties," Dr Deseriis concludes.

SCALABLE DEMOCRACY was undertaken with the support of the Marie Curie programme.

Each of these software or participation platforms embeds a set of political values and assumptions about democracy, which will necessarily shape the nature of the decision-making process.

PROJECT

SCALABLE DEMOCRACY – Can Direct Democracy Be Scaled? The Promise of Networked Democracy and the Affordances of Decision-Making Software

COORDINATED BY

SNS (Higher Education Institute) in Italy

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CORDIS FACTSHEET

cordis.europa.eu/project/id/701513

PROJECT WEBSITE

scalingdemocracy.net

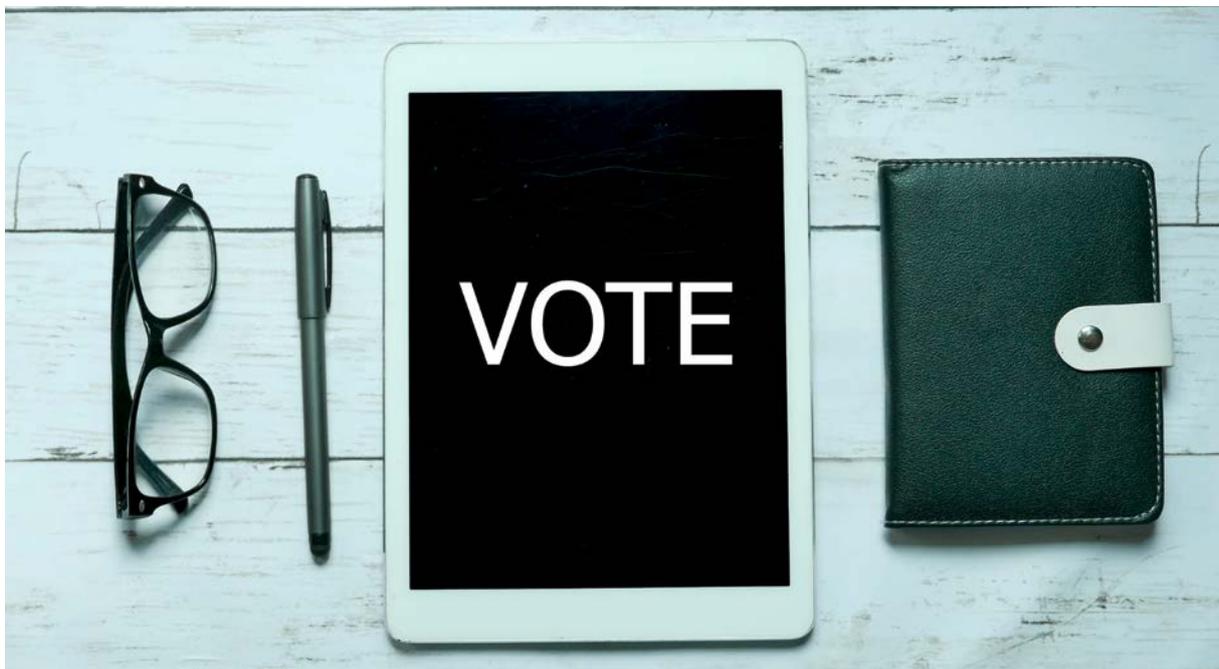


Why the answer to how to strengthen public trust in elections is... SEEV

The traditional pencil-and-paper method to mark your vote in the polling booth has been gradually replaced by electronic voting machines in many countries, in Europe and beyond. Ensuring the security of electronic voting machines and quelling fears of vote-rigging have become ever more important. One ERC-funded researcher has been working tirelessly to develop such an e-voting system through two projects, SEEVS and its follow-up SEEVCA.

We live in politically volatile times. This is an age of social media dominance, fake news and paranoia from many sections of society that the political system is somehow built to be aligned automatically against their fundamental interests. For liberal democracy to survive and flourish, the fundamental premise on

which it is built – regular, open and free elections to choose your political representatives – must be trusted. If election results are questioned, this undermines the credibility of the entire democratic process.



Introducing you to SEEV

This is why Professor Feng Hao, an ERC grantee, now with the University of Warwick (and previously Newcastle University), has been investigating a new type of e-voting systems that are end-to-end (E2E) verifiable, but in contrast to all previous E2E verifiable voting systems, they do not require any trustworthy authorities, called 'self-enforcing e-voting' (SEEV).

"All previous E2E verifiable voting systems require a set of tallying authorities, who are supposedly trustworthy individuals with cryptographic and computing expertise and tasked with performing complex cryptographic operations," explains Prof. Hao. "In essence, the systems we've been developing completely remove the need for any such tallying authorities, meaning that every voter is able to count votes themselves and verify the integrity of an election process in real-time, whilst preserving the privacy of each individual vote."

Prof. Hao asks us to imagine a picture of the Manhattan skyline formed of millions of pixels. Each voter holds the key to one pixel which is their vote. Each pixel is encrypted so it doesn't reveal any private information about the vote, however when all pixels are formed together, a detailed image is revealed, showing the election tally. "If an attacker attempts to tamper with pixel values, or modify the election result, it will be publicly detectable because the mathematical relations between pixels will fail to be verified," says Prof. Hao. "Our experience really shows that by removing tallying authorities, the voting process can be automated and managing an election is almost effortless."

Addressing challenges, finding solutions

There are still some challenges though to iron out before wider commercialisation can be pursued. First, the notion of privacy protection if an electronic voting machine is hacked. "The initial design of a SEEV system works on pre-computing the ballots before an election, but it requires securely storing the pre-computed ballots. We addressed this issue by opting for a real-time computation strategy and built a new end-to-end verifiable voting system without any tallying authorities," explains Prof. Hao. "In this new system, when the e-voting machine is completely compromised, the tallying integrity of an election remains preserved and what the attacker can learn is strictly limited to the partial tally at the time of compromise."



For me personally, the proudest moment was arguably when we showed our system to an election official in Newcastle who responded: 'This is the future'.

Then probably the next fundamental challenge is the human factor: would voters actually accept such a system? "In particular, our system is based on cryptography to enable every voter to verify the integrity of an election system, but ordinary voters do not understand cryptography, and many of them do not bother to perform any verification," says Prof. Hao. "We carefully took into account these human factors in the SEEV prototypes, so that the verification task for individual voters is kept minimal. The point of an election is to convince the loser; hence at least the loser of the election will be motivated to perform such a verification to check if they indeed have lost."

Full steam ahead for SEEV!

Moving forward, Prof. Hao's team also intends to apply their work to India (the world's largest democracy) where, through a new project funded by the UK Royal Society, they will adapt SEEV to cater to the specific conditions in the country. Secondly, they intend to commercialise SEEV for internet voting applications, focusing initially on online shareholder voting, through a project funded by the Innovate UK Academic Start-up Programme. And finally, they plan to extend the underlying cryptographic design principle of SEEV to other applications such as auction and decentralised payment.

Overall, Prof. Hao is most proud of the fact that he and his team actually built concrete systems that could be used in real-life elections. "For me personally, the proudest moment was arguably when we showed our system to an election official in Newcastle who responded: 'This is the future'," he concludes.

PROJECT

SEEVs – Self-Enforcing E-Voting System: Trustworthy Election in Presence of Corrupt Authorities
SEEVCA – Self-Enforcing Electronic Voting For Commercial Applications

HOSTED BY

University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom

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Civil society under growing state control?

State regulation of civil society has grown consistently over the past decade, raising concerns over the eroding role of the latter in shaping democratic decision-making. The ERC-funded STATORG project has investigated this issue across several long-lived democracies, considering country-specific regulations and how these affect civil society organisations.



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Published in 2018, 'The State and Civil Society' provides an unprecedented look into the origins of constraining civil society legislation. Sure, this question had been tormenting researchers for a while, as they tried to find out whether and how democratic governments actually constrain civil society organisations. But so far, their research has been mostly fragmented.

The crucialness of civil society

"This issue had not yet been considered across a wide range of long-lived democracies while considering legislation applicable to different types of organisations," says Nicole Bolleyer, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Exeter.

“With democracy being in crisis all over Europe and many people disengaging from politics, the capacity of civil society organisations to link citizens to state institutions is crucial. And so is the question of how the state itself – by making certain legal choices – intentionally or unintentionally affects this ability.”

Looking at the countless political parties, interest groups and public benefit organisations in Europe, one could be forgiven for



Our findings on the consequences of different forms of state-society relations for organisations themselves are actually more differentiated than initially expected.

thinking that civil society has never been so influential. But behind the scenes, growing state regulation – reinforced in countries facing the threat of terrorism and growing populism – has contributed to the so-called ‘shrinking space problem for civil society’ recently highlighted by the EU, the Council of Europe and various NGOs.

STATORG (State Encroachment on Civil Society? A Comparative Study of Parties, Interest Groups and Welfare-Providing Organizations in Contemporary Democracies) particularly focuses on the claim that increased civil society dependency on state finance and regulation has negative repercussions on organisations’ internal functioning and activities. The project team examined the nature of legislation in 19 long-lived democracies and assessed their consequences on the likes of parties, interest groups and public benefit organisations. They did so by conducting large-scale surveys in four European democracies, generating data on over 3 200 of these organisations.

Key project findings exposed

Project findings so far are split in two. “First, we found that ‘systemic’ tendencies towards adopting more constraining or more permissive regulation depend on countries’ legal and welfare-state traditions as well as democratic history. This is in line with existing literature on state traditions and policy styles that stress the similarities of legal regulation in different domains while challenging research that to date has evolved in separate subfields specialising in party law or charity law, respectively,” says Prof. Bolleyer.

“Then, our findings on the consequences of different forms of state-society relations for organisations themselves are actually more differentiated than initially expected. For instance, we found that being strongly dependent on state funding is associated with members of an organisation being less involved in internal activities. However, this was not associated with lower member control over internal decision-making as often suggested. Meanwhile, access to state funding makes organisations feel more secure and less under stress. Hence, the effects of state regulation are not necessarily negative.”

The finding that central systemic factors such as legal and welfare-state traditions, along with countries’ democratic history, do shape their propensity to adopt constraining civil society legislation also has important repercussions: “It implies that different democracies, depending on historically grown dispositions, are more or less resilient towards eroding civil society space when exposed to pressures such as terrorism, populism or austerity that increasingly invite more restrictive legislation,” Prof. Bolleyer explains.

Once the project is completed, Prof. Bolleyer hopes its results will inform future legal choices. In the meantime, the analysis of the STATORG survey data is still ongoing, exploring aspects such as the role of professional staff within organisations and their concerns over state funding.

PROJECT

STATORG – State Encroachment on Civil Society? A Comparative Study of Parties, Interest Groups and Welfare-Providing Organizations in Contemporary Democracies

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University of Exeter in the United Kingdom

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Studies highlight latent conflict behind different concepts of democratic equality

Whilst democratic consultation is increasingly viewed as a way to improve our democracies, the question of how to use it fairly is still tormenting stakeholders. The UNREP project brings about interesting insights into equal and unequal representation.

Democratic participation, and particularly referendums, have never been so intensely debated. Is such direct involvement in decision-making really good for democracy? Are all citizens equipped to understand the issues at hand especially in a context of growing misinformation campaigns? Should everyone have a say in matters they are not necessarily impacted by?

Of all the questions facing policy-makers, the UNREP (Who Should Have a Say? Preferences for Unequal Representation) project focused on the latter by studying the factors shaping citizen reactions to democratic consultations, and more specifically their stances on equal representation. In Europe in 2016, the Brexit referendum might have made a perfect case study.



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But the project rather focused its investigations on the US, using large-scale survey experiments on the likes of police guideline reforms, changes to the income tax code, and municipal funding for homeless shelters.

As expected in the current political context, surveys on police misconduct towards minorities were particularly polarising. “In many countries, racialised minorities are disproportionately more likely to be the victims of police misconduct. These groups are more affected by the problem than the average citizen and would therefore be more affected by policy changes meant to address the issue,” explains Dr Anthony Kevins, Marie Curie Research Fellow at Utrecht University and coordinator of UNREP.

This simple fact, however, doesn’t guarantee that less-impacted citizens would have been keen on providing such groups with a special weight in relevant public consultations or, for all we know, that they would rather have insisted on having all citizens treated equally. What type of citizens support and oppose giving more of a voice to affected groups, and what factors might increase or decrease opposition to these sorts of consultation measures? By answering these questions, the UNREP project hoped to learn more about how democratic practices might impact citizens and, conversely, be shaped by them.

“Perhaps our most striking results are those looking at consultations on police guideline reforms. The study, co-authored with Joshua Robison, is based on a survey experiment fielded to over 2 000 Americans, and focuses on reactions to consulting African-Americans,” says Dr Kevins. “Half of the respondents read a text in which the politician suggests consulting the community as a whole, while the other half read a text in which he suggests specifically consulting the African-American community. At the same time, the text randomly varied both the politician’s race and his party affiliation.”

Average responses to the two consultation proposals were quite different. Specifically, reactions varied according to respondents’ own party affiliation and to their levels of racial resentment,

which was measured earlier in the survey. Neither the politician’s race nor his party seemed enough to tip the scale.

Taken globally, the project results particularly show that different concepts of democratic equality are likely to conflict, and that these tensions will come out when elected representatives reach out to their constituents. “What’s more, these tensions seem all the more likely when minority groups are being consulted, in particular when it comes to groups that are viewed negatively by certain segments of the population. As my study with Joshua Robison suggests, issues such as racial resentment may play a crucial role in shaping reactions to consultation measures. Depending on the context, democratic consultations may thus end up stoking inter-group tensions and reinforcing pre-existing cleavages. One might argue, then, that the design of consultation measures should consider these sorts of issues at the local level,” Dr Kevins concludes.



Depending on the context, democratic consultations may end up stoking inter-group tensions and reinforcing pre-existing cleavages.

PROJECT

**UNREP – Who Should Have a Say?
Preferences for Unequal Representation**

COORDINATED BY

Utrecht University in the Netherlands

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