

Public participation is heralded as a panacea approach, overcoming apathy, protecting the environment and rebuilding communities. But is it really up to these ambitions?

by **Richard Wilson**

DOES PARTICIPATION WORK?

DESPITE THE WAR AND HIGH FEELINGS over Europe, no one turned out to vote again last month. Okay, so the turnout was an improvement on the last European and Local elections, but 38% and 34% respectively is hardly an indication of a healthy and vibrant democracy. Or is it? What are the indicators of a healthy and vibrant democracy?

With voting's lack of obvious policy impact and a 'none of the above' option as yet unavailable on ballot papers, abstention is gaining currency as a legitimate form of political expression. Democracy is, however, much more than voting once in a while. Democracy manifests in innumerable ways, through free speech to the products we do or do not buy. The existence of the BNP, the recent paint attack in Parliament by Fathers for Justice and the debates they foster, can be seen as indicators of a healthy and vibrant democracy. Political democracy therefore has many components, from direct action to evidence provided to parliamentary committees. These are all forms of public participation in the political process.

OTHER WAYS

According to the 2003 Citizen Audit, there has been a boom in 'alternative' forms of public participation in recent years. These can be seen most obviously in bodies like the 'Commission for Patient and Public Involvement' and exercises such as 'GM Nation', and less overtly in Local Strategic Partnerships, the New Deal for Communities and more sophisticated forms of government consultation. Such initiatives have emerged due to a recognition that our arms of governance, much of which are centuries old, are ill-suited to complex modern issues and an increasingly individualised and diverse society. But beyond the generalities, the motives driving the participatory movement are unclear and the impacts of their activities are widely contested.

Advocates of participation claim it tailors democracy to a disconnected electorate, 'improves' decision-making and that participation helps people

It would seem that the basket of policies offered by politicians doesn't fit with the emerging discriminatory pick n' mix political culture.



be better citizens. Critics in contrast suggest that participation is at best politically naïve and often dangerous, eroding the accountability of our elected representatives and undermining political leadership and debate.

Peter Barron, Editor of BBC's Newsnight, agrees that politics has become out of sync with society. He explains that we live in a customised world, listening to songs rather than albums on our CDs and I-Pods, and "People have every right to behave politically in the same way, engaging with the issues that most interest them." It would seem that the basket of policies offered by politicians doesn't fit with the emerging discriminatory pick n' mix political culture.

IT'S NOT APATHY

Mr Barron also strongly contests the idea that people are apathetic, a view supported by Ben Page, Director of MORI Social Research: "Just because people don't vote doesn't mean they are apathetic." Indeed MORI have recently undertaken work for the Electoral Commission, which found that 82% of us are very/fairly interested in national issues, with 78% interested in local issues. At the same time, 40% of people do not believe that getting involved in national politics can really change the way the UK is run. Another enlightening statistic is that 58% of the public believe that local councillors put party politics before the needs of local people.

So if people are not apathetic but distrustful of partisan politics, can these new participative processes be used to harness this latent interest and enthusiasm? Mr Page is not sure. He warns against assuming that these findings mean people want to be more involved. Recent polls in Birmingham found the opposite to be true, with only 20% of those surveyed wanting more of a say in what the council does, and 58% just wanting to know what the council is doing without getting involved.

The 2003 Citizen Audit undertaken by Professor Paul Whiteley found that people's involvement in some political activities is actually increasing. The Audit reports that 'it is not so much a case of [political] participation having declined, and

more that it has evolved and taken on new forms.' In particular, the Audit finds that while conventional political activities such as voting have declined since 1984, there has been a significant growth in alternative forms of participation. These alternative forms tend to be more individualised, either expressed in the market through ethical shopping, or on single issues such as the war, GM crops or local planning disputes. This has been supported by developments in ICTs where single-issue groups can come together much more easily, as was demonstrated in the fuel crisis.

LACK OF IMPACT?

The question is therefore not so much whether the processes work in isolation, but how they relate to conventional politics and power and where they have emerged from and why. There is as yet no hard data on where exactly this growth has taken place. There are, though, clear questions being raised as to the legitimacy of these new processes, which create the expectation of impact without necessarily having real influence. There are undoubtedly exceptions, such as the New Deal for Communities, which have sizeable budgets. But for every empowered process there would appear to be many others with no more influence than a Liberal Democrat focus group. This is of grave concern if those getting involved feel they have participated under false pretences, as it will cause further aggravation and fuel their mistrust of politicians and politics.

Another key concern is that decision-makers may use these processes as proxies for their own political leadership. The scenario put forward is that, as opposed to tough decisions being taken by politicians, they are effectively delegated to a participative process, which the politician can then blame if the final outcome is damaging, and take the credit for implementing if it is to their advantage. Such use of these processes would then undermine the accountability upon which good governance depends.

Conversely, some elected representatives see these new forms of democracy as a threat to their own positions and power base, creating community

exec summary

Decreasing voter numbers in European and Local elections is not necessarily due to voter apathy, nor does it mean that people are not getting politically involved. Rather, there are indications that public participation is relatively healthy, but the form such action takes has evolved through the increase in "alternative" participatory processes. But, for every argument about the benefits of more involving processes, there are valid concerns about whether in fact the outcomes of such processes are translated into action. A more critical approach to their development and use is needed if they are to work in creating a more democratic and empowered society.

So if people are not apathetic but distrustful of partisan politics, can these new participative processes be used to harness this latent interest and enthusiasm?



or stakeholder led legitimacy that lacks the simplicity or robustness of representative democracy. Others see participation as simply supporting another elite of those who participate and those who don't or can't, thereby creating greater marginalisation of the genuinely disenfranchised.

WASTE OF TIME?

So, in our search for new forms of political expression, are we opening ourselves up to wasting our time on processes that, although seemingly attractive, are actually disconnected and ultimately disempowering? Should we not accept Churchill's assessment, "that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried," i.e. that democracy is a messy and imperfect system but does work and should be left alone?

Not according to Bernard Crick, who believes that democracy is a constantly evolving system and that participation is an important part of its future. Mr Crick asserts that people who participate in civic life are happier and better equipped for life than those who do not. Mr Crick, who was instrumental in putting citizenship into the national curriculum, believes passionately that all people should be taught how to participate, and be encouraged to participate. Not only will this ensure that they as individuals get on well in life, but will provide the personal relationships, the 'social capital', upon which effective governance depends. Participation provides people with the skills and relationships that enable them to better govern themselves.

GREATER INVOLVEMENT

Bernard Crick is not the only advocate of participation. Professor Tim O'Riordan believes that participation is central to achieving sustainability: "The complexity of environmental policy is such that it requires a far more involving and deliberative form of decision-making." Indeed participation is highly developed in the environmental field, as these pages have testified, in areas such as environmental economics, community development and management of uncertainty, all of which demonstrate how participation is advocated to overcome the limitations of existing governance systems.

Such process discussions are increasingly coming to the fore, as many of the major challenges we face (global warming, the spread of disease, third world poverty) are seen as symptomatic of existing governance systems being part of the problem not the solution. Participation is advocated as an alternative approach that should be judged against the ability to solve specific policy challenges, as opposed to any democratic criteria.

In a similarly results-focused vein, Catherine Staite, Head of User Involvement at the Audit Commission, believes "the only way people are going to get the services they want is through effective involvement." Although she recognises that much that is currently practiced is not always effective, she believes that only by working with communities and individuals are you able to understand their needs and then respond to them effectively. In response, Professor Paul Thompson from Strathclyde University warns that New Labour's drive towards user focussed public services has left behind the public servants, doctors, nurses and civil servants upon whose cooperation the services depend. Professor Thompson believes "a much more genuine partnership form of participation is required."

COMING TOGETHER

Clearly the situation is complex, but a body of thought is emerging, starting with a degree of consensus that there is indeed a mismatch between the conduct of formal politics and society's political energy. There are also a number of issues (e.g. community cohesion, service delivery and technological development), which are suffering as a consequence of this disconnection. It is in response to these challenges that new forms of political participation have been developed, each with their own particular characteristics. For example, in the arena of public services, many of the approaches stem from market research theory, in community development from conflict resolution and in technological development from social research. As a consequence, each process produces different products and interacts with the decision-making environment differently.

If participative processes are going to work, a more critical approach to their use is needed; an approach that recognises both their strengths and weaknesses, and that also has a rich understanding of the context in which they are operating. But before that, we need to agree on what good participation is and what it is not. Is it acceptable to invite people to be consulted and then ignore what they have to say? According to Paul Thompson, "You have to accept that there will always be tensions between participative and representative democracy," and "between the need for leadership and involvement."

The trick therefore is to make that tension a creative one, one that involves people on their terms and generates valuable ideas that are then translated into action. But don't expect quick fixes – as society changes so must forms of participation. Democracy is a messy business but somebody has to do it. ■

LINKS

www.involving.org

RICHARD WILSON IS CONVENOR OF INVOLVE, A NEW INITIATIVE INVESTIGATING WHETHER NEW FORMS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CAN STRENGTHEN BRITAIN'S DEMOCRACY.
richard@involving.org