Chapter 6

Connecting Citizens to the European Parliament: E-Consultations as a Tool for Political Representation

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a number of e-participation projects have been implemented with the objective to strengthening the relationship between European citizens and members of the European parliament (MEPs). This chapter investigates the most extensive of these projects, the European Citizens Consultations (ECC), with a focus on the relationship between citizens and MEPs. Two potential functions of e-consultations for strengthening political representation are analyzed, the connectivity function and the inquiry function. The results indicate that the ECC project fall short of offering a functional tool for strengthening political representation. Participating MEPs are shown to express disappointment with the project and participating citizens show signs of a growing dissent with the European parliament following their participation. This analysis suggests that the shortcomings of the ECC project are due to an insufficient understanding of political representation and the role of MEPs in the design of the ECC project. Three lessons of the ECC project are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

The European Commission (EC) has, during the last decade, employed several measures for enhancing the communication between citizens and EU-policy makers (COM, 2001; The Lisbon Treaty, 2008). Decaying trust in EU-institutions, decreasing voter turnouts in the European parliamentary (EP) elections in many member states, and the Dutch, French and Irish referendums putting plans for a European Constitution at a standstill have fuelled the debate about a democratic deficit and a widening distance between citizens and policy-makers (COM, 2001; COM, 2005, p. 3). In order to address these negative trends and bridge the gap between institutions and citizens, a set of strategies for public participation has been initiated. These strategies has been spearheaded by the Commission and focused on involving citizens in EU affairs (COM, 2005; COM, 2007;
COM, 2008). The search for new ways to interest, mobilize and involve citizens has increasingly led the EC to support and implement participatory projects making use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (COM, 2007; Karlsson, 2010a).

The European Citizens’ Consultations (ECC) 2009 is the most extensive of a long line of participatory projects initiated to inspire citizen participation and political debate in Europe. ECC 2009 was a transnational project initiated in all 27 EU-member states in order to stimulate the political debate in Europe in the run-up to the elections for the European Parliament in June of 2009. The overall aim of the ECC was to create a set of policy recommendations for the European parliament, answering the question “what can the EU do to shape our social and economic future in a globalized world?”. MEPs and candidates running in the 2009 EP elections played a prominent role in the ECC project as participants in online discussion forums and panel debates, and were the recipients of policy recommendations shaped and decided on by the citizens participating in the ECC.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the function of the European Citizens Consultations as a tool for communication between MEPs and citizens within representative democracy at the EU-level. The European parliament might be the parliamentary institution in the world most in need of such tools, given the absence of clear-cut party politics (Marsh & Norris, 1997) and lack of supervision by national media (Follesdal & Hix, 2006, p. 538), as well as the vast distances to cover between represented and representatives (Shahin & Neuhold, 2007). Did the ECC process offer useful tools for citizens and MEPs to exchange experiences and strengthen the trust in between represented and representative? Can citizens’ consultations become a viable form of e-parliament tool used to strengthen political representation in Europe? The empirical investigation of these questions is carried out by way of a case study of the ECC project, focused on attitudes and behaviors among MEPs and citizens, as well as the ECC process as a whole.

BACKGROUND

In this section, the subject of this chapter will be related to the debate within democratic theory surrounding citizen participation and political representation. Two functions that the ECC project aims to perform for political representatives are identified and rooted in the theoretical debate. Thereafter, a short methodological discussion presenting the different empirical materials of the study is presented. The section ends with a broad description of the ECC process, explaining how this project was carried out and what role MEPs were given in the project.

Theoretical Framework

The existence of a distance between elected and voters in representative democracy is an inherent consequence of the up-scaling of democratic systems of government to mass democracies. The implications of this distance within a representative system of government have been interpreted in different ways throughout the history of representative democracy and, in recent decades, have been problematized more than ever before. In almost all western democracies, converging trends of weakening civic engagement and public trust in political institutions, as well as increased feelings of remoteness from political representatives among citizens, has troubled governments and scholars of democracy. In recent years and at a pace with its increasing political power, the EP has been heavily criticized as an insufficient parliamentary institution. The EP has been characterized as “a failure as a representative body” (Farrell & Scully, 2007), and as the central node of the “crisis of representation in Europe” (Hayward, 1995). Although the EP has been given more power with each European treatise since its
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