Citizen participation is critical

By Tomas Ohlin, Sept 26, 2005

Citizen uninterest in democratic participation is one of the most severe problems for democracy in the 2000 century. It can be asked what can be done to counter this. Can modern technology help? Surely there are a number of models and theories about new forms of citizen participation, but much of this has not been tried empirically yet. The reason is often that it shows to be difficult to get political support for experiments that try to divide political power, move some influence towards the citizen.

However, looking at the concept of citizen participation, we find several possibilities. Participatory democracy can contain:

- Acquisition of knowledge

- Discussion about the decision process

- Citizen initiatives

- Participation in agenda setting

- Deliberative dialogue concerning alternatives

- Influence on arguments

- Participation concerning alternative proposals

- Dialogue concerning proposals

- Concern for minorities

- Participation in preparatory decisions

- Deliberative participation and changes

- Actual decision making, built on representativeness

- Citizen participation in analysis of effects of the decision

- Feedback, relations to coming decisions

In a number of these, the citizen can participate more or less. It has shown to be likely that clear citizen influence generates citizen satisfaction. Such participation need not cover heavy and longterm type decisions, on the contrary it may be quite local and limited in scope. The mere fact of presence in decision making, although small in scope, often generates citizen satisfaction. This in turn tends to avoid later problems of dissatisfaction, and therefore may well be socially gratifying, and perhaps even profitable in a social sense. If so, it is recommendable for politicians to try this kind of distribution of decision making power.

Citizen influence can be increased on both sides of the actual representatively organized decision. Many of the planning sessions before decision making contain space for participatory citizen presence. In fact, the citizen in several ways can come very close to the decision (if she comes infinitely close, she in fact participates ....).

ICT can support such citizen presence in several ways. Some of these are:

- Distribution of background knowledge
- Simplified access to initiatives and discussions
- Simplified participation in agenda setting
- Easier formulation of alternatives
- Online support for deliberative sessions with dialogue and change
- Participation in preparatory decision making
- Participation in analysis of effects and feedback related to the decision

It is amazing that so few of these possibilities are being tried practically and empirically in European countries at present. Planners seem to be frightened to approach the topic.

Politicians are not unaware of reform possibilities. At a meeting with the European Council in 2004 in Barcelona, a number of possibilities were presented. Among these were:

- Support for citizen initiatives

- Encouragement of citizen participation

- Warnings around citizen passiveness

- Organizing and financing of citizen panels

- Definition of local space for citizen decision making

- Intelligent registering of political participation

- Smart voting (voting on issues with preprepared alternatives)
  and much more.

Such alternatives surely exist, and it is astonishing that so little is tried practically. Some observers talk about the need for organized citizen movements to get the ball rolling.

One of these activities mentioned above concern citizen participation in agenda setting. Here, an empirical project was carried out in 2003 in Stockholm, Sweden. Such agenda setting was made part of a European Commission supported research project that originally concerned the need to develop more secure software for electronic voting. The project was called Cybervote.

This Cybervote project (www.eucybervote.org) was a research project (partly funded by the European Commission) that included representatives from seven European countries. The

project was carried out from the year 2001 to the spring of 2003. Participants represented users, researchers and providers of technology. The focus was originally placed on the development of secure Internet voting software, and this focus remained central to the part projects for most of the participating countries during the duration of the main project. However, in the Swedish version, this was complemented by an interest in participation, discussion and agenda setting. Such a social approach differed from the other nations' part projects, that mostly concentrated on technology.

There were three "user" part projects in the main project, one of which in Sweden. This was carried out in Kista, a northern suburb of Stockholm. It concentrated on citizen involvement in city planning. A unique aspect of the Kista part of the Cybervote project was that it only engaged elderly citizens, in an attempt to deal with the "digital divide" between the oldest and the younger generations.

With the help of local organizations of the elderly, it was distributed quite general invitations that said: "Do you want to join in the shaping of history?" It was mentioned the use of new technologies and the participants to be was told that they would be instructed in how to use the equipment. This was a general appeal to the senior citizens to get involved in helping develop a part of a new city plan for where they lived.

A sizable group turned up for the first meeting where the discussion centered on a variety of possible project topics to be addressed later. Through this process a list of about a dozen topics emerged as a discussion result. The next step was to get a smaller sample of the participants to use new communication and voting technology to go through the list and establish their own priorities. This included deliberation, plus testing new and more secure software.

The topics that was agreed on were: (1) Local planning: parks or commercial; (2) public transportation: trams, buses or trains: (3) art and culture: a cultural centre or not. These

priorities were then disseminated through printed materials and via the Internet. Two young researchers carried out a specific study of this part of the project. This showed that these elderly citizens did encounter certain practical problems in using these for them new PC´s, particularly in the voting aspects, but that they appreciated the possibility to take part in the agenda setting.

The main Kista trial project then took place in January 2003. Everyone who had pre-registered was invited to come to discuss and vote. 236 elderly participants showed up, not enough for any severe statistical analysis, but more than enough to show an interest in being able to participate in and discuss such an exercise, particularly one with a technological focus. Each person who came was given a password that they could use once at the final vote via the Internet. Their choices concerned the 3 topics listed above, from the earlier agenda setting process. There were discussion facilities available. The final electronically supported voting could be carried through without major problems. The qualitative voting results showed majorities for a green environment, a new train line, and a cultural center. In fact, the participants were very pleased with their project experience, and several indicated that they would like to do it again in the future.

Such participation in agenda setting is but a simple application of increased citizen influence towards a more democratic society. It seems evident that much more of this type is needed, if we are not going to move towards a more lonely and individual society. Expanded deliberative experiments are strongly needed in order to find ways to break today´s political isolation. At least in a social sense, and as it may show perhaps also economically, such projects very likely are profitable for our modern society.