

# Pragmatic Citizens – A Bottom-Up Perspective on Participatory Politics

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Across established democracies, concerns about citizens' dissatisfaction with the way politics works are regularly voiced in the scholarly and public debate alike. The deficit in perceived democratic legitimacy is reflected in low levels of trust in political institutions and politicians, more specifically, lack of public compliance and cooperation, strong support for populist and protest parties, and a general feeling that politics is out of touch with ordinary citizens. In this context, policymakers and scholars have experimented with the establishment of participatory processes – ranging from nationwide referendums to small-scale deliberative citizen panels – that are expected to counteract this deficit in perceived legitimacy. But is it actually working? Can participatory processes tackle resentment and strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy?

Hannah Werner's doctoral dissertation *Pragmatic Citizens* provides insights into these questions by focusing on citizens' perceptions of participatory processes. She argues that past debates on the merits of participatory decision-making are shaped primarily by normative democratic thinking that

often disregards the perspective of citizens. Rather than reasoning about democratic institutions like political philosophers, citizens are embedded in specific political and personal contexts that will shape their view of participatory politics. Hence, Werner proposes that we should not consider more participation as desirable *per se*. Rather, we should ask what participatory processes can deliver *for citizens*. The main argument of the thesis is that citizens think about participatory processes in a pragmatic fashion. If citizens think these processes can solve a particular problem, for instance the delivery of a certain policy outcome or addressing deficits in the representative relationship between citizens and politicians, they will support the use of such processes and consider them more legitimate.

Concretely, Werner tackles two timely research questions, namely (1) *What explains citizens' support for participatory processes?* and (2) *Do participatory processes produce more perceived democratic legitimacy than representative processes, especially among those who are dissatisfied with the decision?* To address these questions, Werner a)

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develops a theoretical model to explain citizens' support for participatory processes and b) complements the existing theoretical framework on the relationship between participatory procedures and legitimacy perceptions. These new arguments are tested on the basis of an impressive multi-method approach that relies on secondary cross-national data, original cross-sectional surveys, panel surveys, experiments as well as qualitative in-depth interviews. In doing so, Werner combines the study of two real cases (a referendum in the Netherlands and a small-scale participatory process in Belgium) with the study of citizens' general preferences and reactions to hypothetical scenarios.

With regard to the first research question that revolves around explanations for citizens' support for participatory processes, Werner finds that support for referendums is driven by pragmatic considerations. She finds that while dissatisfaction with politics represents a consistent driver of referendum support, citizens do not naively prefer referendums out of frustration with the political system. In fact, citizens consider referendums pragmatically as a tool that can solve only some problems that they perceive in the current functioning of democracy. More specifically, dissatisfaction with the government *not listening to citizens* drives support for referendums, whereas dissatisfaction with the government *not leading well* is associated with less support for referendums. Dissatisfaction with the government not leading well is argued to arise for citizens for whom government responsibility is more important than responsiveness. These citizens think the government should be free to follow its

own initiatives during the legislative term rather than public opinion. Notably, the association between government *not listening* and referendum support varies across countries, and it weakens with an increased use of referendums. It seems as if citizens in countries that rely more frequently on referendums became disillusioned with its capabilities. Werner, furthermore, shows that citizens are more supportive of decision-making by means of referendums when they believe that the majority of the populations share their opinion on a specific issue – another manifestation of their pragmatic reasoning.

So, while pragmatic considerations play an important role in citizens' referendum support, some citizens turn out to be more principled than others. *Pragmatic Citizens* shows that populist citizens hold more principled attitudes towards referendums and base their support for this decision-making procedure less on instrumental considerations as compared with non-populist citizens. Also, populist citizens turn out to be more gracious losers than non-populist citizens, being more willing to accept the outcome of the referendum, even when they lost.

Finally, with regard to citizens' preferences for participatory processes, this doctoral dissertation shows that process preferences are not stable but vary across issues – yet another indication of citizens' pragmatic reasoning. However, the finding is more nuanced because general preferences do play a role as well. In fact, both general ideas about democracy and policy-specific considerations affect support for a specific referendum independently. So, while citizens appear largely pragmatic in their reasoning, norma-

tive ideals also partly explain their process preferences. On the basis of these insights Hannah Werner suggests a new model of process preferences in which general attitudes (driven by normative views of democracy or a general resentment towards politics) represent only *one* component of process preferences. In contrast to the existing literature, this model, additionally, takes instrumental considerations, dissatisfaction with specific aspects of the functioning of democracy as well as populist attitudes into account. Process preferences are hence represented as a multilayered *composite attitude*, consisting of various layers that are partly stable and partly volatile.

With respect to the second research question that revolves around the legitimacy strengthening potential of participatory processes compared with representative processes, the study shows, in line with previous research, that the potential of participatory processes to strengthen legitimacy depends largely on outcome favourability. Decision losers exert lower levels of perceived legitimacy than decision winners. However, *Pragmatic Citizens* also shows that, compared with representative decision-making, small-scale participatory processes can strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy even under circumstances in which the outcome is unfavourable and the topic is highly controversial. Importantly, this finding holds even for citizens who did not participate in the small-scale process themselves but who merely heard about the process, indicating that the legitimacy generating effect of participatory processes can even transcend to a larger public.

Finally, Werner suggests a second mechanism – in addition to outcome favourability – that can explain the legitimacy strengthening potential of participatory processes, namely the relational mechanism. *Pragmatic Citizens* suggests that citizens appreciate relational aspects of citizen involvement and consider respect and recognition by politicians as the most important element for positive evaluations of these processes. Hence, both instrumental and relational mechanisms can explain why participatory processes produce more perceived democratic legitimacy than representative processes.

This dissertation contributes theoretically by proposing a pragmatic perspective on participatory processes, considering those as tools that can offer specific solutions to particular legitimacy-related problems. *Pragmatic Citizens* skilfully connects insights from participatory and deliberative democracy theory with psychological theories on procedural fairness to propose two mechanisms that can explain why participatory processes can strengthen perceptions of democratic legitimacy: instrumental and relational considerations. By theorising about the tension between process and outcome effects, Werner also contributes to the discussion on how participatory processes should be evaluated – a discussion that is also societally highly relevant. In addition to the theoretical contribution, *Pragmatic Citizens* adds empirically to the literature by studying citizens' perspectives on participatory processes from various angles and by relying on different kinds of data and methods.

An important limitation of the thesis is that referendums and small-

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scale participatory processes have not been studied simultaneously, as Werner herself points out. Hence, it is possible that certain mechanisms are particularly suited to certain types of participatory processes: possibly, referendums activate more instrumental considerations than small-scale participatory processes, and relational considerations might be more important in small-scale participatory processes. Although this question cannot be answered on the basis of this dissertation, it presents an interesting avenue for future research.

All in all, Hannah Werner's *Pragmatic Citizens* provides a nuanced picture of participatory processes that are not a 'one-size-fits-all solution' for political resentment. However, when employed cautiously they can foster perceptions of democratic legitimacy even for citizens who were not directly involved. The dissertation contains an impressive synthesis of literature from political science and social psychology, particularly organisational and legal psychology. It also stands out by the skilful application of various research methods. The dissertation is particularly convincing through its continuous theoretical and empirical innovation. It is therefore a must-read for scholars and practitioners interested in direct, participatory and deliberative democracy. It is no wonder that the members of the examination committee attested to this dissertation as being of exceptional quality (within the top 10% of the discipline) and awarded the highest distinction – *cum laude*.