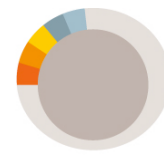


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Communication, Participation and Transparency

Elisabeth G. Sledziewski, Lecturer, Strasbourg Institute of Political Studies, Robert Schuman University, France

In a famous speech --as a matter of fact, a funeral oration-- to his fellow citizens, as reported by Thucydides in his *Peloponnesian War*, the great athenian leader Pericles declares : "our ordinary citizens, though occupied with their private business, are still fair judges of public matters; unlike any other nation, we consider a man who takes no interest in the state not as harmless, but as useless; although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge at all events, and, instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to acting wisely."

The lesson we were taught by Pericles little more than twenty-four centuries ago sounds to be still accurate. In our modern democratic society, none of the actors of the civic community is supposed to remain uninvolved in public matters, whatever they might be. It also means that every civil instance regarding the people's life is a political opportunity given to citizens to fulfill their rights and to concretize democratic values. The basic rule guiding the production of legitimacy and the use of power in democratic political systems is that the people's will is sovereign and unrestricted. A limp evidence which although means at least three different things, and possibly much more.

First, that government power must be legitimized by the consent of the governed, whose competence is, however, insufficient to let them play a leading role in making decisions for the whole community.

Second, that the people *are* the government and consequently, that citizens have to experience the responsibility of legislating and governing themselves directly... even if they have no specific competence allowing them to participate in decision-making.

Third, that the people are the only subject and the only object of the political association. Any decision, as sophisticated as it might be, that could be made in order to organize society, concerns their own lives immediately and concretely. All at the same time, the people are those who "come together in cities in order to live, but remain together in order to live the good life", as Aristotle wrote, and those who wear the crown of thorns. If that is not enough to give them a technical competence, it gives them the right to get information, to give a testimony, as well as to decide, and

constitutes a sufficient basis to justify their permanent intervention in the process.

These different interpretations are a matter of some controversy which has existed for centuries and which has not to be revived now, at least in theoretical terms. But it appears that we, who are aiming to apprehend the issue of citizen participation in the process of preparing for a pandemic, cannot get rid of the political dimension of this question. Which only means being aware that the burning public health issue we have to face in this context is not to be defined as a technocratic one, but also as a political and an ethical one. Whether one stands in any of the great democratic traditions or in any of the camps of political ideology, it has to be recognized and at the same time emphasized that modern society cannot remain a democratic one if it tends to be, as Georges Bernanos prophesied in *France against the robots* (1944), "an aggregation of technical problems which have to be solved". Is the ancient axiom about people's participation still available when public matters are directly connected with technical decision making and health emergency planning ? What kind of involvement, what level of social responsibility can allow people to express their own citizenship ? How can people be considered not only as a population, but as citizens, although they are not and have not to become experts ? Is that competence required from all, or only from some of them, and from whom exactly, selected under what criterions ? These are the questions we now must ask.

It has also to be emphasized that experts and lay-people have vastly different perceptions of collective pain, and especially of health threats : while the former sharply anticipate a pandemic attack and aim to develop a global approach to the disease, the latter often underestimate or even deny the danger as a realistic possibility, but simultaneously fantasize about it, reviving the spectre of ancient curses or medieval scourges spraying misery, mourning and mayhem among the population. Such a discrepancy, also comparable to that, so often discussed now, between "Wallstreet" and "mainstreet", indicates that the democratic ideal of citizen competence has to be linked to the concrete conditions of exercising sanitary vigilance and sanitary responsibility. If public participation in health decision-making related to an influenza pandemic cannot be spared by nowadays democracy, under pain of dangerous regression, it also requires non-demagogic implementation, based on the search for balanced combination between expert testimony and real people's experience. It can mean that a panel of citizens might question a panel of experts at a conference and present requirements or formulate objectives. But it never can mean that citizens might present themselves, or be presented by populist politicians, as experts.

Who are those lay-people, where do they speak from ? Far from being taught enough about the social-medical aspects of the pandemic to be able to speak as experts, they cannot even realize what is technically going on and what the stakes are when a global health-crisis bursts out. That is why they often tend to demand everything and its contrary, because they can at the same time think that all risks should be taken to preserve their lives as well as their comfort of life, and want nothing to do with anything that isn't a sure thing. Nothing can therefore be done without them, not as experts, but as care-demanding patients and information-expecting citizens. Their frailty and their claim must both be viewed as integral parts of what can be called the post-democratic context. It must thus not be forgotten that most of our questions about citizen competence in the context of an influenza pandemic emerge and develop in reaction to a particular social and political context, that of a general crisis of technocratic politics in contemporary democracies. In this way, citizen participation in the process of preparing for a pandemic seems to be a challenge not only for democracy as an abstract system, but for democracy at our historical and critical moment.