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The European Patterns of Political Participation: Towards the Issue of Convergence

ABSTRACT:

The central question addressed in the paper is the question of convergence especially between the old and the new European democracies as far as the patterns of political participation are concerned. Representative democracy that includes (the right of equal) political participation has been strongly related to the modernisation processes of the functional differentiation and specialisation. On the other hand, the very same growth of the societal functional differentiation may make any authentic political participation increasingly complicated and hardly compatible with truly face-to-face and/or all-inclusive forms of political interactions. The institutions at the national and the trans-national level may be highly responsive for a wide variety of NGOs but only as far as the latter are able to apply quite sophisticated forms of communication with those institutions, provide a high level of expertise, operate within very complex sets of rules etc.

These facts imply that when participating within the NGOs, the citizens require a high level of competence on their own and/or have to rely on their professional activists, experts, even classical bureaucrats ('contracting out' the participation function). It is questionable, however, to which extent can one generalise the trends in participation such as the decline of the classical forms of political participation (such as voting and party membership) and/or the rise of the new ones. Instead, there may be significant differences between various participation patterns in European democracies, not only between the old and the new ones but also within both categories.

Using the voting turnout and other statistics, the survey data on the relevant behaviour and attitudes provided by the World/European Values Studies and some other databases, one may try to identify the most typical patterns. The application of the hierarchical cluster analysis enables one to distinguish between the following patterns of participation in Europe:

- 1) The western pattern characterised by medium levels of all types of socio-political participation
- 2) The northern active democracies characterised by intensive social and political participation of all types

3) The passive democracies with relative lack of all types of active participation.

Some common European (or even global) trends may be identified, especially in the long run. The old social divisions and identities, mostly based on class, have decreased in significance, participation forms have become more individualised, the new issues and new forms of organisations have received increased interest. The extends to which these trends have taken place, however, vary considerably and significant differences remain even in the long run and under the seemingly similar European/global conditions. Consequently the convergence hypothesis may only be confirmed to a very limited extend and with great caution.