

**Discussion of the text « Main benefits of eParticipation
developments in the UE » by Simon Smith
(European ePart project)**

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The text « Main benefits of eParticipation developments in the UE » is the first draft of a deliverable about the **benefits of eParticipation in policy making at the European scale**.

The main purposes of this paper are:

- To advocate the need to contextualize the benefits of Part and ePart with reference to democratic norms associated with governance regimes
- To propose a typology of three modes of governance associated with different goals and democratic norms
- And then specify “what is (e)Part being asked to do at the European scale” given the main modes of governance of the EU.

The author begins his article with several lists and categories of potential benefits and actors of Part & ePart.

He writes that evidence is lacking on the benefits of Part and ePart, notably because of difficulties in establishing reliable measures of the benefits attributed to individual projects (vs living in a participatory culture)

Then, partly following Irvin & Stanbury (2004), the author claims that modes of governance have consequences:

- on the potential to start and maintain participation activities
- on the types of benefits targeted by Part projects
- and thus on the viability of particular participation method, including eParticipation tools

Most central is the second claim: governance context has to be analyzed first to establish the “normative preliminaries for project evaluation”. More precisely, the “instrumental” benefits (cost reduction, increased accountability or deliberativeness, etc.) have to be considered in their governance context, whereas the intrinsic benefits of Part (skills and experiences acquired during the participation process) are “largely independent of their governance context”

To characterize governance contexts, the author proposes three modes:

- the market-based mode that corresponds to referenda or social service shaping via “quasi-market institution”, ePart is being asked to help citizens have interests represented, for instance with eVote or ePolling
- the hierarchical mode that corresponds to most European nation-states governance system in which ePart is being asked to help representatives to “pick up concerns and background knowledge” of citizens, for instance with eMail, ePetition or Q&A chat
- and the network mode that corresponds to some local and European governance in which ePart is being asked to diffuse deliberation and consensus building between strong publics and policy networks (stakeholders, lobbies ?)

Then Simon Smith compares the participative potential, the governance mode trends and thus the benefits of participation expected at local, national and European scale, with an assumed bias towards UK experience.

He concludes with a focus on the European scale which is mostly characterized by a network mode of governance, and secondly with elements of market-based and hierarchical modes. The author adds that given the “problems caused by language and the fragmentation of the European public sphere” (p.13), Part should not only support consensus building between policy networks, but also support deliberation between cultural or linguistic enclaves. More empirical evidence of the potential benefits of ePart at European scale is announced in subsequent versions of this deliverable.

A few questions and comments (in the order of the text):

1. “Evidence is lacking on the benefits of ePart and Part per se” (p.5)

= *Admittedly there are “difficulties in establishing reliable measures of the benefits attributed to individual projects”, but we can find in the literature several evidences of Part and ePart benefits:*

- *Increased knowledge, opinion quality, social trust, political efficacy, etc. have been attested in dozens of Deliberative polls, NIF or Citizen juries (Gastil & Levine, 2005)*
- *Influence in policy making, increase acceptance and facilitated monitoring of the policies adopted have been observed in some citizen juries, participatory budget or urban planning procedure (Gastil & Levine, 2005; Fourniau, 2006; Röcke & Sintomer, 2005; Hartz-Carp, 2005, etc.)*
- *And numerous structured evaluation of participation processes have been described by Rowe & Frewer (2004)*

Evidence of benefits close to DP or CJ benefits have been observed in ePart experiences like OLDelibPolls (Iyengar & al., 2003) or “quasi” OLDP (Price & Cappella, 2002; Min, 2007) and the inclusion of new public in participation processes has been observed by Coleman (2004) or Monnoyer-Smith (2006) in her study of the Paris 3rd airport debate.

2. “There certainly is demand for participation from the states” (p.7)

= *This demand is clear in official declarations and recommendations, but is there an effective demand for deliberation between citizens and for citizen participation to the decision process? Numerous works (Cf. Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002 or Blatrix, 1998 for France) show that most participation procedure are not deliberative and generally don't influence even partially the decision making at the local scale (“Conseils de quartier”), for infrastructure localisation (CNDP), or for educational (“Débat sur l'école”), environmental (“Grenelle”) or technological choices (Consensus Conferences).*

3. “Instrumental” benefits have to be considered in their governance context, whereas the intrinsic benefits of Part are “largely independent of their governance context” (p.7)

= *Ok about the degree of dependence, but some intrinsic benefits have also to be considered in their governance context. First because some governance contexts are barriers to some intrinsic benefits: gains in knowledge, political efficacy or social trust are difficult in hierarchical context that promotes participation and never use its outputs...*

Second because some intrinsic benefits are more or less important according to the governance context (deliberation skills and social trust are less important in market-based and hierarchical modes than in policy-network modes)

4. Typology of governance modes + benefits of Part and ePart related

= Ok en general

= But is “the market-based mode that includes the possibility for citizen to exercise choices (e.g between social service or education providers)” is a real form of participation? In this “mode of governance” citizen choice is sometimes highly constraint, considering that price and obligation rules often influence deeply choices and profitability of alternatives (e.g. French hospital)

= Do you consider that “policy networks of strong publics” are lobbies (“NGO elites” p.12)? If these are lobbies, the difference with the hierarchical mode is mainly the “consensus building” but not the number or representativeness of participants?

5. During the comparison of participative potential and governance mode trends at local, national and European scale, the author claims:

- that “Local government decision-making has arguably always been relatively more participative” (p.8)

- that “the case for participation is weakest at the National scale” (p.10)

= Admittedly the author clearly admits that he as an “assumed biased towards UK experience” and that these comparisons are illustrative, but as the author program is to “explore some cross-national differences in governance arrangements”, I would like to start a discussion on these claims:

- About the potential of local scale:

= It is probably also the case in France but only for a few decision making process (sometimes for water management planning, rarely for urban planning or budget allocation) and for a limited number of citizens, mostly stakeholders. For the rest of citizens, the “Enquête publique” procedures are neither participative nor deliberative and don’t influence decision making in general (Blatrix, 1998)

= What are the level and types of participation to “community plan”?

Several supports for the claim of a more participative decision-making at the local scale have also to be questioned: “public is likely to be more receptive to offers of participation for issues that impact immediately on their lives”

= Ok in general, but only if the “direct impact potential” of an issue is clear, which is generally not the case for most of European scale and Territorial planning debates which are complex, under-promoted and linked to long texts and procedures (e.g. Water planning impacts directly activities and housing possibilities but is widely unknown even by “concerned citizens”)

The “Aarhus convention encourages participative planning”

= Ok it encourages, but is the participation of the “public concerné” really different (in size and representativeness) from “stakeholders” lobbying of government at national and European scale?

« Environmental democracy » is necessarily participative and deliberative because goals cannot be achieved through regulatory decision alone »

= Is this really specific to environment? In environment much daily choices are made by a few organisations and are thus easy to control (e.g. carbon emission), and it’s probably more efficient if teachers or small businesses “buy into” the goals of education, immigration or tax policies.

= Furthermore, the importance of daily choice is a framing of environmental issues that is highly controversial (Combes, 2008), it aims at substituting individual responsibility to massive “political-allocative” choices (externality taxes, emission norms, transport policies, etc.)

- About the national scale:

= It is clear that participation in the decision-making process is weakest and has less potential since “representative democracy dominates”. But if we consider participation in general (organized or not by government and parties and supposed or not supposed to influence policy making), the national scale is probably the most important participative scale in France or US, especially before elections and referenda. The case of UK is probably specific as emphasized by Ward & Lusoli for the 2005 election

6. “Part should not only support consensus building between policy networks, but also support deliberation between cultural or linguistic enclaves.”

= I agree with this point if it is linguistic enclaves, but in Sunstein (2003, 2007) work:

- the enclaves are more ideological than geographical or linguistic
- and these enclaves are not only anti-deliberative but also generally produce polarization and extremism

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