



The Puzzle of Political Participation in Modern Europe: New Perspectives on an Old Phenomenon

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Political participation is the mechanism that makes democracy work. If democracy is indeed the government of, by and for the people, it is imperative that the people participate in politics. Yet, what constitutes ‘the people’, and to what extent and in what way they should participate in politics, remain contested questions. Indeed, current discussions about referenda and citizens’ assemblies show that political participation remains a source of controversy. In light of its contentious nature, the role of political participation in historical processes of democratization has gained considerable attention and deserves renewed consideration. Too often, both social scientists and historians write uncritically about the history of democracy as a linear narrative of increased political participation. In this special issue, we show that political participation developed a normative appeal, whose practical implementation has remained essentially contested throughout the history of democracy. In fact, whether political participation meant democratization remains highly subjective.

Historians have studied political participation as the ‘practical’ component in the emergence and consolidation of democracy. Two main lines of research can be discerned in the literature. First, political historians have chosen the organization of the state as their object of study and analysed the history of political participation, most prominently elections, as the interaction with formal institutions of ‘high politics’ in parliament and government. Key players in this literature are the political elites who controlled the access to formal institutions. In other words, political participation was essentially the history of

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the leaders of governments, parliaments and parties.¹ Since the 1990s, a new generation of political historians have pushed for a broader understanding of politics.² Inspired by social and cultural history, they focused on informal practices of politics such as petitions, demonstrations and public meetings.³ Indeed, it was the previously understudied groups of workers, women and peasants who experimented with new forms of political participation to gain access to politics. More recently, this ‘new’ political history has come under pressure from some of its own advocates. Historians of political culture have wondered whether the emancipatory narrative of their work uncritically projects twenty-first-century perceptions of democracy onto historical processes. These historians argue that most historical agents did not follow an explicit democratic agenda. Rather many historical groups aimed at extending the political influence of their own community at the expense of another being excluded.⁴

Taken together, these different approaches demonstrate the diversity of ideas and practices of political participation in European history. Yet, we suggest that the versatility of the literature is also its greatest weakness. In addition to the division between formal and less formal politics, we notice that the historiography is further fragmented along three axes: forms of participation, geography, and period. More specifically, studies on political parties, social movements, and more recently petitions, approach each form of political participation in isolation.⁵ Furthermore, nearly all studies about specific practices of political participation focus on a single nation-state. An unintended consequence is that forms of political participation seem to be determined by the degree of democratization of a specific political system. This effect is further strengthened by the division of studies on political participation into different periods. As the field is scattered, the

¹ Thomas Nipperdey, ‘Die Organisation der bürgerlichen Parteien in Deutschland vor 1918’, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 185, No. 3 (1958), 550–602; R. A. M. Aerts, *In dit huis: twee eeuwen Tweede Kamer* (Amsterdam 2015).

² Ido de Haan and Henk te Velde, ‘Vormen van politiek. Veranderingen van de openbaarheid in Nederland 1848–1900’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (1996), 167–200; Thomas Mergel, ‘Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2002), 574–606; Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge 1990).

³ Anne Engelst Nørgaard, ‘Speaking through Petitions: Peasant Farmers in the Nascent Democracy, Denmark 1830s’, *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2023), 90–109; Margit van der Steen, ‘Housewives in Politics: Local Pioneers in the Netherlands after the Enfranchisement’, *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2020), 264–8; Álvaro París, ‘Royalist Women in the Marketplace: Work, Gender and Popular Counter-Revolution in Southern Europe (1814–1830)’, in Diego Palacios Cerezales and Oriol Luján, eds, *Popular Agency and Politicisation in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Beyond the Vote* (Cham 2023), 55–77.

⁴ Diego Palacios Cerezales and Oriol Luján, eds, *Popular Agency and Politicisation in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Beyond the Vote* (Cham 2023).

⁵ Anne Heyer, *The Making of the Democratic Party in Europe, 1860–1890* (Cham 2022); Eduardo Posada Carbó, ed., *Elections before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (Basingstoke 1996); Maartje Janse, ‘“What Value Can We Attach to All These Petitions?” Petition Campaigns and the Problem of Legitimacy in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands’, *Social Science History*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2019), 1–22.

discussion is still dominated by simplified accounts of the gradual extension of political participation from its contested status in the nineteenth century towards an accepted norm and established practice in the twentieth century.⁶

In this special issue, we directly challenge the idea of the history of political participation as a gradual and ever more inclusionary phenomenon. Inspired by recent innovations in the history of democracy,⁷ we argue that bringing together a broad range of nations and periods is necessary and perhaps imperative to fully grasp the complex and contested nature of political participation. In particular, when considering past forms of political participation, this approach is crucial as political scientists still shape our understanding of political participation as a general phenomenon of democracy.⁸ In their famous definition, Verba and Nie argued that ‘political participation refers to those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take’.⁹ Such a definition proves highly problematic for historical studies. For contemporaries, it was not always clear who belonged to the body of citizens. In fact, changing definitions of who constituted a citizen and who should have the right to participate in politics has inspired a multitude of historical studies. In a similar vein, understandings of which institutions belong to the government and whether government is solely composed of institutions (and not individuals or practices) have changed over time as well.

Most historians are well aware that the dividing line between citizens and government is highly dependent on the specific context. We observe change over time but also detect considerable variety within a definitive period. Hence, this special issue proposes a historical approach to the topic of political participation. Using a flexible approach to cover a variety of practices and actors, this special issue explicitly includes the continuous negotiation by contemporaries about what exactly constitutes political participation. In this sense, we accept that political participation is a moving target whose definition is under constant negotiation.

In order to capture this moving target, the following articles rely on a wide range of primary sources (newspapers, philosophical manifestos, leaflets and pamphlets) and different methodological approaches in political history (intellectual, conceptual, cultural and visual). In this way, we overcome the divide between traditional approaches

⁶ John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York 2005).

⁷ See, for example, Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway, ‘The Politics of Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe: Introduction’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2002), 7–12; Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers and Henk te Velde, eds, *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History* (Oxford 2018); and Martin Conway, ‘On Fragile Democracy: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives—Introduction’, *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2019), 422–31.

⁸ John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York 2005).

⁹ Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, ‘Participation and Democracy’, in *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York 1972), 2. For more recent attempts to move beyond a narrow focus on elite selection, see, for instance, Jan W. van Deth, ‘Studying Political Participation: Towards a Theory of Everything?’, paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Grenoble, 2001, who traces the gradual expansion of the repertoire of participation (campaigning, contacting, protest, civic engagement and some internet-based activities).

to high politics and the agent-centred perspective of new political history. Individual contributions focus on cases that neither fit well into traditional accounts of 'high' politics nor uncritically confirm the teleological vision of gradual emancipation that so often informs more recent studies on political participation. Instead, we study the debates about the interaction with political institutions to show that political participation was continuously contested and assigned different meanings by different groups for different purposes. We find that discussions about political participation did not decline with the establishment of modern nation-states. Rather the struggle over political participation re-emerged, sometimes flared up, and entered new societal domains. We study political participation as a phenomenon that belongs to the history of democracy but is not constrained by narratives of democratization.¹⁰ In fact, this special issue highlights the changing normative dimension that contemporaries assigned to discussions about political participation, depending on the social and political space to which they belonged to.

More specifically, the individual articles bring together the pieces of a compelling puzzle. Anne Heyer's contribution emphasises that as early as the nineteenth century, contemporaries worried about the role of the masses in institutionalized politics but also took them seriously as political actors. Thus, by taking a conceptual history approach, she analyses both discussions of political participation in the period before elections, which became the dominant instrument of democratic representation, and the changing meaning of the term 'the masses' in the nineteenth-century Netherlands. Over those years, popular participation was channelled not only through formal institutions but also through various forms of popular organization such as militia battalions or clubs. Often omitted from this analysis, however, is the role of the press in encouraging the political mobilization of the popular classes to put pressure on local and national governments. In this vein, Jordi Roca Vernet analyses the mobilizing capacity of newspapers and, particularly the satirical press, in Spain under moderate liberalism (1842). He shows how, during the Liberal Revolution, popular political participation in the streets or the militia was encouraged by newspapers, even as the Liberal regime denied these groups the possibility of participating in the electoral processes of the Liberal regime.

In the early twentieth century, universal (male) suffrage was increasingly normalized in many European states. However, alternative forms of political participation started to emerge, challenging the traditional bourgeois liberal and individualistic order, which had been based on restricted electoral suffrage and limited political participation. Valerio Torreggiani's paper investigates some of the reform projects that after 1919 combined corporatist and democratic principles to develop alternative systems of political participation and representation. He argues that the corporatist-democratic answer to the crisis of the legitimacy of the liberal state centered on integrating economic interest groups into the institutional decision-making process. Finally, in the late twentieth century,

¹⁰ Alvaro Paris, 'Popular Royalism in the Spanish Atlantic: War, Militias and Political Participation (1808–1826)', *Contemporanea, Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900*, Vol. 3 (2021), 381–411; Carlos Domper Lasús, *Dictatorship and the Electoral Vote: Francoism and the Portuguese New State Regime in Comparative Perspective, 1945–1975* (Liverpool 2020).


alternative models of political participation were tested and met with fierce criticism within the social movements of anti-nuclear protest. Focusing on Spain and Italy between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, Giulia Quaggio's article addresses the new idea of peace and political participation 'from below' that emerged from the anti-nuclear and pacifist movements.

By combining different examples of both comparative and transnational approaches, the authors cover Britain, the Netherlands and also Southern European states like Portugal, Italy and Spain. In this way, this special issue provides a diverse selection of case studies that re-situate political participation in an interpretative space where conventional and recent innovations of the so-called 'new' political history are combined to develop a more nuanced interpretation of this historical phenomenon in a more extended timeframe and broader geographical scope. This means that we distance ourselves from clear distinctions between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or between the North and South of Europe. While the extension of political rights to new social groups played an important role in the formation of liberal democratic states, the discussions about political participation did not conclude with universal suffrage. Similarly, as the different geographical studies show, it was by no means the case that Southern European states lagged behind discussions in the North. It is particularly the integration of Southern European experiences in this single issue that reminds us of the problems with oversimplified narratives of assumed political progress.

Together these articles show that the standardization of political participation over time was not a linear process. On the contrary, it is a continuously re-negotiated practice whose implementation depends on historical circumstances and is not necessarily bound to formal political institutions. That is, political participation is a historical object and, therefore, it is subject to historical change. In this vein, by integrating formal and informal perspectives, this special issue highlights the extent to which the evolution of the phenomenon of political participation was contingent and non-teleological. As a result, the organizations (formal and informal), the ideas and interpretations, and the very means through which people or specific groups of people have exercised political participation have changed over the years. Thus, the following articles not only focus on the practices, organizations and tools of political participation but also show how the discussions have re-emerged, been adjusted and yet prevailed as an important feature of politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Arguably it is the latter aspect that so far has been neglected in studies of political participation, but significantly contributes to a better understanding of how political transformation came about.

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Carlos Domper Lasús is an Assistant Professor at the University of Zaragoza. His research bridges political history and political science to situate the Iberian dictatorships within the wider landscape of Cold War Europe. From a transnational perspective, he examines the participatory mechanisms developed by twentieth-century European dictatorships and the ways these regimes conceptualized democracy. His publications include *Dictatorship and the Electoral Vote: Francoism and the Portuguese New State Regime in Comparative Perspective, 1945–1975* (2020); 'Political Science, History, and Dictatorships: Linz' Limited Pluralism Theory and the Late Francoist Regime in Spain' (2023); and 'The Francoist Conception of Citizenship in Postwar Spain', in *Reimagining Citizenship in Postwar Europe* (2025).

Anne Heyer is an Assistant Professor at Leiden University (the Netherlands). Her current research focuses on the changing perception and practices of mass politics in the nineteenth and twentieth century. She has published on the history of political parties from an interdisciplinary perspective, including her monograph *The Making of the Democratic Party* (2022) and article *Finding Meaning in the Rules of the Game? German Social Democrats and Parliamentary Debate* (Central European History, 2025), but also on political assemblies in the special issue *Ruling the Assembly* (Parliaments, Estates and Representation, 2024). Her research interests further include digital history, political participation, populism, social movements and democracy in Europe.