

The Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association

Recipes for democratic participation during the pandemic: From anti-lockdown protest to a participatory system

15 MAR
2021

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AGORA

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One of the biggest effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns on our daily lives has been the reconfiguration of spaces: kitchens turning into offices and meeting rooms, bedrooms into classrooms, and Zoom cameras blurring the boundaries between public and private are now

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highlighting pressure points in democratic systems.

In this blog post we consider the wave of anti-lockdown protests around the world and offer three recipes to enable meaningful political participation.

Lockdown protests during COVID-19

The start of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 saw a surge in **participatory activities** to help affected communities. Acts of dissent have also maintained a strong presence and have taken **many forms**, the most visible of which has perhaps been anti-lockdown protests. The causes behind these protests vary with many rooted in structural and material inequality. In India, **migrant workers protested** after being left stranded, with no work and no financial support from the government. In the Netherlands sex workers have not been allowed to return to work and have **protested their treatment**. Other anti-lockdown protests have taken a more fundamental position against the lockdown measures, sometimes denying the existence of the virus. Some of these protests have led to violence and rioting.

Despite the variety in motivation, intention and form, most of these protests have in common a surge of pent-up energy with little to no meaningful outlets for constructive democratic engagement. Contemporary democracies are not well prepared to sustain participation during crises. This is compounded by a discursive pressure for unity and solidarity during times of crisis, where dissent is more easily condemned by those in power as detracting from the **collective effort to 'get through this together'**. This manufacture of consent de-validates dissenters and risks further alienating already disaffected or marginalised groups. In doing so, it also enables a sidestep in accountability, where decision-makers are relieved of the need to meaningfully respond to protesters.

Creating spaces for participation, connection and accountability

How can contemporary democracies harness and sustain the participatory energy generated during the pandemic? The idea of different democratic spaces offers a useful starting point. We envisage a **participatory system** which is composed of as a series of **interconnected spaces**, including the public and private spheres, and empowered space where decisions are made. The purpose of this system is to create and strengthen multidirectional connections between different spaces of participation; it is not only a one way street for public views to be communicated to decision-makers. The construction of such a system is a massive undertaking and needs to be put in place before crises such as COVID-19 occur. Here we present three participatory interventions that could be implemented now as feasible steps towards a pandemic-resilient participatory system.

First of all, as lockdowns in some form continue to feature in our lives, it is imperative to ensure sufficient space for public discussion as well as channels connecting them to political

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themselves, they do not require a large time, resource or technology commitment. Feedback from conversations can be submitted to a government portal. Kitchen table conversations can also be valuable community building tools. They contribute to the development of critical and reflexive thinking from a place of convenience and comfort for participants.

Secondly, standing virtual citizens' panels should be convened to deliberate on medium to long-term challenges and policies. These formal processes typically comprise a randomly selected group of citizens mandated to consider recommendations for government policy. They are provided with digestible information and access to a range of knowledgeable people with different perspectives and backgrounds. It is essential that such bodies are given the resources and training to attempt longer-term thinking and planning, including rotating membership over longer periods of time. This is no simple undertaking and requires considerable resources, not least ensuring that all participants have internet access and receive financial compensation for their time. Moreover, such panels need to be in close communication with the broader public sphere, including input from other forms of participation such as protests.

Thirdly, it is important to create stronger mechanisms for accountability. This can mean simply creating more channels for meaningful and direct interaction between publics and decision-makers. In the **US** and **Australia**, new initiatives connecting citizens to their representatives are already underway. In some contexts, however, democratic institutions function poorly and trust is justifiably low. Here, methods such as **community-based monitoring** equip civil society to independently monitor the provision of government services. Community organisations play a key role as the intermediary in connecting citizens with decision-makers, advocating with and for communities to hold leaders to account.

The three recipes we offer here can help to establish a more connected participatory democratic system that is resilient during the pandemic. This system is not going to rid the world of protests, or the causes of protests which are often **deep rooted and structural**. Nor do we *want* to rid the world of protests – they are a valuable and vibrant expression of democratic participation that spotlights inequality and creates pressure for action. The participatory system we have in mind makes more direct connections within and between public and empowered spaces – not to mollify or co-opt protesters, but to create meaningful ways in which protesters can hold representatives to account. The participatory system we propose here could also offer a constructive way forward for formulating new responses to future crises.

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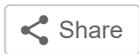
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