

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP & POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE: THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In recent times, Europe has seen a rise in active citizenship, coupled with support at the ballot box for political movements. This reflects a need for traditional political parties to respond to citizens' calls for better forms of political representation. The practices employed by political movements to engage with active citizenship, including their use of technology, can help established political forces regain the trust of citizens. This article analyzes the problems underlying today's evolution of political representation in Europe, discusses political movements as new forms of citizen-led democratic participation, and offers practical recommendations for political parties in Turkey and elsewhere.

Yves Leterme & Sam van der Staak*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Summer 2016

*Yves Leterme is the secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), and former prime minister of Belgium. Sam van der Staak is senior programme manager with International IDEA's Wider Europe Programme.

In the summer of 2013, the occupation of Istanbul’s Gezi Park by thousands of citizens made global headlines for weeks. Triggered initially by a call for larger citizen influence over urban development plans, the occupy movement soon exploded into a broader call for freedom and democracy. Gezi Park seemed to place Turkey within the same trend that had swept European countries and the US just prior to that, namely citizen protests redefining the political marketplace and introducing a new type of political actor in its wake – the political movement. Would this spontaneous outburst of active citizenship fundamentally change Turkish politics and the political parties that dominate it?

Three years later, the Gezi Park protests have not morphed into a political movement of significant political influence. Nevertheless, it is still true that Turkey experienced a social media-fuelled burst of active citizenship and a demand for new forms of political representation, similar to that in other countries in Europe. As elsewhere, Gezi Park mobilized hitherto inactive citizens, many of whom were young and politically inexperienced.

If Turkish political parties were to explore new forms of political representation that better respond to active citizenship, what would they look like? Parties in Turkey may find issues similar to those faced by parties in the rest of Europe and the US. This article describes how parties have been shaped by the emergence of active citizenship, and how new political movements have occupied important space in terms of citizen representation, using new means. If they want to remain relevant, established parties must reposition themselves to where citizens have moved. Parties should become more open bodies of representation and adopt the horizontal traits of representative politics championed by political movements.

The Crisis of Representation

To understand occupy movements such as Gezi Park, it helps to look at what lies underneath the global call for new forms of participation and representation. As far back as Thomas Hobbes, the notion has existed “that citizens must agree to be represented if politics is to work at all.”¹ Political representation exists both for practical and ideological reasons: some level of outsourcing is needed to make the many large and small decisions any government has to make on a daily basis. But representative politics also staves off continuous conflict in societies. It stimulates compromise and prevents citizens from fighting out disagreements on the streets until the bitter end.

Modern politics has seen a renewed discussion about the balance between active po-

¹ David Runciman, *Politics: Ideas in Profile* (London: Profile Books, 2014).

litical participation by the citizens and their representation in politics. Much of this debate centers on a dilemma: too much citizen participation is unsustainable, while too little participation creates a gap between citizens and their elected governments. At a time when more elections are being organized than ever before and democratic institutions are firmly established, citizens around the world are choosing to resort to public protest through street demonstrations, online protest, direct democracy, voter apathy, or by supporting the emergence of populist and anti-establishment parties. The Bulgarian author Ivan Krastev has termed this “participation without representation.”² It is worth taking a closer look at this crisis of representation, which has hit democracies from Rio to Reykjavik and from New York to New Delhi.

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Transformation of Active Citizenship

For some time, political participation on the part of citizens has been in flux. Traditional manifestations of citizen participation in democratic politics have rapidly declined. This has included voting, political party membership, or civil society and trade union membership. Contrary to the popular narrative, this trend had already begun in the 1980s, long before the fall of communism or the introduction of new technologies. This period marked the start of a decline in trust in political and institutional authorities among post-industrialized countries.³ Between 1980 and today, global voter turnout declined from 77 to 66 percent.⁴ Europe has even had a suppressing effect on global numbers, as the decline has been heavier there than elsewhere. The absence of young voters in the political process is especially noteworthy. Among European citizens under thirty, only 43 percent currently vote in national elections.⁵

Political party membership,⁶ meanwhile, has halved in Europe since the 1980s and stands at a mere 4.5 percent of European citizens today.⁷ In Germany, the average

² Ivan Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

³ Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ “Voter Turnout Analyzer,” *International IDEA*, Stockholm, www.idea.int/vt/analyzer

⁵ Flash Eurobarometer 408, “European Youth,” *European Commission*, 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_408_en.pdf

⁶ Ingrid Van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke, “Gone, Going, Gone: Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2012), pp. 24–56.

⁷ Flash Eurobarometer 408.

membership age of the four largest parties is an astonishing 59 years.⁸ At least in Europe, there is clearly a gap between (young) citizens and their elected representatives.

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protests took place globally in 2006, 112 occurred in the first half of 2013, which is a four-fold increase.¹⁰ Many of these were facilitated by the use of social media.

Citizen activism can also mobilize societies in a non-political way, such as around failing service-delivery. In its first year of operations in 2008, Estonia’s “Clean Up Day” managed to involve four percent of the population in a collective trash collection exercise voluntarily, sparking similar movements in countries around the world. Other forms of new active citizenship stem from the much touted sharing economy, which has brought about popular citizen-to-citizen services such as Airbnb, for home exchange, and Uber, for car sharing.

Social media is perhaps today’s best known innovation in terms of facilitating active citizen engagement. Many citizen protest movements of the past decade, from Euromaidan in Ukraine to recent democracy protests in Poland, have been supported by the convening power of Twitter and Facebook. Although online activism has also been criticized for its passive and non-physical way of engaging citizens – sometimes referred to as slacktivism or clicktivism – it may be the most important innovation of the past decade for facilitating active citizenship.¹¹

⁸ “Durchschnittsalter der Mitglieder der politischen Parteien in Deutschland am 31 Dezember 2014,” *Statista*, <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/192255/umfrage/durchschnittsalter-in-den-parteien/>

⁹ “Political Parties and Citizen Movements in Asia and Europe,” *International IDEA*, Stockholm, 2014.

¹⁰ Isabel Ortiz et al., “World Protests 2006-2013,” *Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, New York, Working Paper 2013, http://policydialogue.org/publications/working_papers/world_protests_2006-2013/, 13 April 2016.

¹¹ Evgeny Morozov, *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

To sum up, citizens today are not less active, but active in a different ways: directly instead of indirectly, and increasingly electronically. The marketplace for political engagement has moved away from the traditional bodies of representative politics, and towards a new space of active citizenship. Such active citizenship manifests itself both partly on the streets and partly online. If political parties want to maintain their relevance over the next 10 years, they will need to move to where the citizens are.

Is the Party Over?

Why are citizens abandoning parties and flocking to new forms of active political participation as described above? There are many explanations, and none of them are all-encompassing. At the core lies the fact that political party relations with citizens have changed from predominantly vertical relations to more horizontal ones that reflect the way people work, interact, and live in today's societies. This has affected the traditional political party role of aggregating and articulating citizen interests.

“The rapid emergence of protests-turned-political movements in virtually every established democracy has rocked established political systems.”

But there are also other reasons. One is that citizens today distrust parties more than any other democratic institution. The role of money in politics is an important factor in this distrust as International IDEA's political finance research reveals.¹² In 2014, more than half of European citizens (59 percent) believed that “bribery and the abuse of positions of power for personal gain are widespread among political parties.”¹³ Only around one in five EU citizens (22 percent) think that the financing of political parties is sufficiently transparent and supervised.¹⁴ And a record low of only three percent of citizens trust political representatives to deal with complaints about corruption.¹⁵

In countries neighboring the EU, although data is not as widely available as for the 28 EU countries, political corruption scandals are, if anything, more pervasive. Transparency International's 2015 corruption perception index ranked the EU's Eastern neigh-

¹² “Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns,” *International IDEA*, Stockholm, 2014.

¹³ “Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: EU anti-corruption report,” *European Commission*, Brussels, 2014.

¹⁴ Special Eurobarometer 415, “Europeans in 2014,” *European Commission*, July 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_415_en.pdf, p. 9.

¹⁵ Special Eurobarometer 397, “Corruption,” *European Commission*, February 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_397_en.pdf, p. 111.

bors between 48th (Georgia) and 130th (Ukraine) (Turkey had dropped to a paltry 66th), with political parties almost consistently among the weakest institutions.¹⁶

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A second reason why citizens are drifting is that political parties are increasingly seen as “out of policy control” and unable to deliver. The 2008 European financial crisis, the 2013 eurocrisis, and more recently the refugee crisis have created the perception among large groups of voters that developments at home are decreasingly controlled by domestic politics.¹⁷ Many fear that international bodies such as the EU or IMF, large banks, and multinational

companies have taken over a significant amount of policy control from national politics. This has created the perception that national politicians are no longer in full control of delivering on electoral promises.

The third reason is related to namely the ideological and programmatic convergence of politics. At the center of any democratic system and its elections is the difference of opinion between political opponents. The opportunity to choose is what makes citizens feel represented by the party they support. If opinions become too similar and electoral choice weakens, be it as a result of external policy dominance or the ideological convergence of political elites, that system collapses.

And lastly, citizens have discovered new modes of direct participation, such as social media, which better correspond to horizontal ways of interacting in today’s societies. Advances in information and communications technologies (ICTs) have made it easier to voice opinions publicly without the interference of a representative body. A 2016 survey found that 46 percent of young Europeans believe that online social networks represent “progress for democracy, because they allow everyone to take part in public debate” versus only 27 percent who think that online social networks represent “a risk for democracy, because of the inappropriate use that may be made of personal data.”¹⁸

¹⁶ “Corruption Perceptions Index 2015,” *Transparency International*, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015>

¹⁷ Johannes Lindvall, “The electoral consequences of two great crises,” *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (November 2014), pp. 747-765.

¹⁸ Flash Eurobarometer 408.

The Emergence of Political Movements

Although political parties have been the mainstays of representative politics since at least the early 20th century, they have lost important support in recent times. Whereas some citizens have turned away from representative politics altogether, many others, including the youth, increasingly support political movements. Since both parties and movements have the power to mobilize and articulate the interests of citizens, it is easy for citizens to shift allegiance when they feel their demands are not being met.

What are political movements? Movements are hybrid representative institutions in the sense that they take part in elections, parliamentary politics, and sometimes executive government, while also allowing active and direct citizen participation within their internal decision making structures. Many, although not all, stem from protest movements that were born outside the formal political institutions and that aim to challenge the status quo. The direct participation of citizens in decision making and in protest activities, along with their calls for immediate change, has led some movements to be considered populist by established political parties.

Political movements in Europe include a variety of ideological forces. Those viewed as being closer to the populist left are the Five Star Movement (Italy), *Syriza* (Greece), *Podemos* (Spain), or the Pirate Party (Iceland). These may be the most clear-cut political movements. On the populist right, younger political actors such as *Alternative für Deutschland* or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands in some ways operate more like traditional parties. Many do, however, owe much of their popularity to the traits of political movements: they may stem from protest movements, amalgamate members with non-members, and employ direct modes of citizen engagement. There are also more new mainstream political players, ranging from *Ciudadanos* (Spain), Liberal Alliance (Ukraine), or at the local level Save Bucharest Union (Romania), all of which stem from protest movements. As we will see, these ideological classifications are increasingly blurring.

The emergence of political movements over the past 10 years has resulted in significant shifts in established democracies in Europe and North America. Especially in the three decades between the 1950s and the 1980s, political parties were at the peak of sophistication and were very powerful entities. Admittedly, political parties were never stagnant during these decades and many did in fact collapse, merge, and emerge, including those in Turkey.¹⁹ But in recent times, the rapid emergence of protests-turned-political

¹⁹ Daniel Kselman, "The Evolution of Electoral Accountability in Turkey: Cyclical Evolutions in Programmatic and Clientelistic Politics," *International IDEA, Research and Dialogue on Programmatic Parties and Party Systems – Case Study Reports*, Stockholm, 2012.

movements in virtually every established democracy, and the significant share of the electorates they have won, has rocked established political systems.

The transformation of protest movements into political movements has made the latter resemble political parties. Many movements have taken on some of the traits of traditional parties, such as fielding candidates for elected office and formulating public policies, while abandoning other tasks such as traditional membership recruitment. Their names often reflect this ambivalence between a party and a movement: the Five Star Movement, *Ciudadanos*, or *Podemos* eschew the word “party” but act as one in different ways.

In Europe, political movements today combine the traits of different traditional political ideologies, which also reflects how they have surpassed many of the traditional party dichotomies. Some political movements mix social liberalism with euroscepticism, or anti-immigrant stances with strong support for social welfare. The Five Star Movement in Italy, for instance, is known for some of its left-wing policies, while also sharing a faction in the European Parliament with the eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

The US is currently experiencing similar changes, often from within established parties. Since 2008, the Tea Party has managed to significantly influence and change the leadership of the Republican Party by supporting and funding candidates that are sympathetic to its views. The Democratic Party’s leadership and ideology has recently been challenged from the inside as a result of the primary campaign of Bernie Sanders.

How have the above new forms of active citizenship affected the traditional forms of democratic representation? Not all established parties are endangered species: various established political parties have managed to reconnect with citizens through internal transformation. The Conservative Party in Norway is an example of a party that introduced new modes of citizen involvement, public outreach, and citizen forums – and grew substantially as a result. Most established parties in France are today organizing open primaries, ahead of the 2017 presidential elections. In the UK, the Labour Party managed to gain a large group of young supporters by lowering membership fees.

In short, to keep pace with the evolution of representation and the development of active citizenship, political parties must change. To do so, they should look more closely at political movements. This is especially true of the mechanisms that political movements have employed to embrace active citizenship.

Instruments of Success

What has made political movements successful? First, they stand out for their capacity to mobilize. They tend to rally large and diverse groups, including young and previously inactive citizens. They do so through a mix of horizontal, non-hierarchical decision making, and by using effective modes of traditional and digital communication. Many convene citizens around policy issues with broad popular appeal. They thrive in environments with insufficient programmatic politics, where “catch-all parties” have affected the existence of defined party identities, or where certain programmatic stances have been left untouched by established political parties.

Second, political movements often engage more directly with citizens. They do so via diverse channels, both on the street and online, and throughout the electoral cycle rather than just during election campaigns. Since many stem from or are historically linked to citizen movements, they often have good access to broad unofficial networks. Many are, therefore, able to stage protests or mobilize turnout for referendums, as demonstrated by cases in Italy and Greece. Interaction within political movements and with their allies is often loose and informal, and tends to ignore the difference between insiders and outsiders, members and non-members. The leaders of these movements tend to communicate, live, and even dress differently from their established counterparts.

Third, many political movements, from Spain to Moldova, make an effort to highlight their financial transparency. Quite a few have won elections as a result of their “clean hands” campaigns. They also tend to promote transparency in their internal party decision making. This includes the way in which they select electoral candidates and access to elected office by those without significant financial backing.

Digital Parties and Movements

Political movements and some established political parties have begun to embrace technology in an effort to regain the online space where citizens meet. They realize that technology has created a new relationship between parties and citizens in different ways. First, the use of ICT has blurred traditional lines between members and non-members, insiders and outsiders. Second, technology has made feedback to parties immediate and constant. Third, the round-the-clock nature of social media in particular has made campaigning and the battle for the electorate a constant operation instead of an activity that only takes place during campaigns. Finally, big data analytics and individual targeting has become the new norm. The most successful digital movements and parties seem to be those that use technology for both democratic and electoral purposes. That is, to regain the trust of the citizen and to win elections along the way.

What does a digital movement or party look like? Just having a Facebook or Twitter account is not sufficient, according to many digital movements and parties. Here are some examples. Agora voting is an internet forum through which citizens table proposals, debate them online, and ultimately vote electronically to determine the party's position. Doing so brings the citizens much closer to internal party decision making. Blue Star Digital, used by the 2012 Obama campaign, analyzes big data to better target individual voters' interests, again placing the citizen center stage. Google meet-up, a more basic tool, has allowed parties in Italy and the Netherlands to mobilize citizens in their neighborhood physically and discuss topics of common interest. Many tools thus mix online and offline citizen engagement.

Some movements and parties have developed their own software, while others have made use of existing tools adapted from the private sector. Many of these digital tools have now been collected in International IDEA's Digital Parties Portal, an online repository through which parties can search for the right tool to match their digital needs.²⁰ Importantly, the Digital Parties Portal also shows which parties and movements around the world have used these tools, which helps one understand which success stories have utilized them.

What's Next for Political Parties?

Established political parties around Europe can draw lessons from the way political movements have emerged in the rest of Europe and the US. Turkish political parties that want to reconnect with citizens and evolve their sense of representation would also benefit. They will find a healthier response to active citizenship than shown thus far, and one that respects fundamental freedoms of political equality and freedom of speech.

First of all, political parties need to realize the urgency of change. Turkish protests have thus far not transformed into political movements, but cases from Spain and Bulgaria to the US and Greece show that the potential to do so is momentous. Parties should reposition themselves in the places where active citizenship has moved: on the street and online, through horizontal instead of vertical interaction. All possible forms of citizen engagement should be explored, from open primaries to social media. Political parties should not make unrealistic promises and explain the limits of what they can do for citizens.

Political parties should embrace technology. Although technology is an aid and not a goal in itself, digital parties are better able to reconnect with citizens. Political party

²⁰ "Digital Parties Portal," *International IDEA*, <http://digitalparties.org/>

technology should not only “mobilize the masses” but must also allow the masses to “mobilize politics.” For this two-way street to work, traditional hierarchies within parties must be reformed to enable more direct citizen engagement.

Lastly, political parties should be confident about their own role. Although the lines are blurring, parties should resist the temptation to become political movements themselves.

In the years to come, ruling and opposition parties would do well to invest in becoming 21st century parties. This will be a bitter pill to swallow for some political leaders, who may feel they stand to lose some of their influence, perhaps rightly so. But this is the only way they will be able to withstand another burst of active citizenship and represent what has shown to be a newly engaged citizenry.