From "they don't take me seriously" to "we like to shake things up"

Towards a Bourdieusian understanding of (non-)participation in citizens' initiatives among less-educated citizens

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Citizens with less educational credentials are underrepresented in citizens' initiatives. This essay summarizes the study that aims to understand this underrepresentation, drawing inspiration from the sociologist Bourdieu. The research shows the relevance of the concepts 'feelings of entitlement' and a 'taste for politics' for understanding different forms of (non-)participation among less-educated citizens. These insights may inspire governments and other actors on how to enhance the democratic potential of citizens' initiatives.

Introduction

In recent decades, governments across the globe have experimented with increasing citizens' opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence, therewith aiming to actively engage citizens in policy decision-making and implementation. An epitome of this trend can be witnessed in the Netherlands, where the "do-democracy" is propagated: citizens are stimulated to (co-)create the public sphere, not by deliberating, voting or bargaining, but by realizing concrete public projects or initiatives.

Thus, local governments actively invite and stimulate citizens to develop citizens' initiatives – also oftentimes called community initiatives - that for example maintain public green spaces, take over public facilities or organize neighborhood festivities that foster social cohesion. Many of such initiatives aspire to contribute to social change towards more sustainable and just societies, often in response to contemporary socio-economic challenges.

Although this trend is frequently praised for its democratizing force – said to give "power to the people" - various scholars warn that less-educated citizens are substantially underrepresented in those initiatives, which hampers the latter's democratic potential, and makes them potentially socially divisive.

This underrepresentation is predominantly attributed to a lack of time, money, social capital or political knowledge. However, policies aimed at reducing those barriers and to strengthen social connections and political knowledge have thus far been unsuccessful in stimulating equal participation of less-educated citizens in initiatives. So how can we better understand the underrepresentation of less-educated citizens?

Towards a Bourdieusian understanding

To shed light on that question, I drew on Bourdieusian ideas highly relevant for analysing stratified patterns in the political field, yet thus far not used for understanding the underrepresentation of less-educated citizens in citizens' initiatives. I was especially interested in the role of cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital is a form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. It refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes and credentials, that one acquires through socialization within the family and educational institutions. Education is referred to as an institutionalized form of cultural capital. Hence, a low educational level mostly coincides with a low amount of cultural capital. Cultural capital signifies one's ability to appreciate, understand and demonstrate the lifestyles of the elites, i.e. the legitimate culture. In this way, cultural capital serves as a status marker, to indicate one's position in the social field. In my research I found two ways in which these cultural processes of inter-subjective meaning making enable and constrain participation.

The research is based on in-depth interviews with 15 citizens with less than tertiary education in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Because I wanted respondents to feel free to speak their minds, the interviews were held in a place that the respondents could choose and would make them feel comfortable. During the interview I encouraged respondents to reflect on three examples of citizens' initiatives. Inspired by the Bourdieusian theorizing, I paid attention to respondents' perceived social position, their affinity with politics or politicians, and the social boundaries they experience and draw.

Feelings of entitlement

My findings show the importance of feelings of entitlement, i.e. the feeling of being a legitimate agent in the political domain, a sense of having the right to speak and being entitled to participate in society's dominant institutions. Or, to use Bourdieu's words, one needs to feel "socially recognised as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even modify their course."

The low status related to having less educational credentials decreases people's sense of entitlement: they perceive themselves as less legitimate societal actors. The feeling that one is a socially recognised, legitimate agent in the public domain proves to be an important precondition for respondents' participation in citizens' initiatives. Several of them stipulated that they lack these feelings, because of two reasons.

Stigmatisation

Firstly, they perceived themselves as less legitimate societal actors because they experience stigmatisation and/or insufficiently master the legitimate style of speech and knowledge. Several respondents stipulated that they feel condemned because of their level of education: "They think I must be retarded" or neighbourhood of residence: "They immediately think I'm white trash." Respondents who experience stigmatisation sense that the authorities will not take them seriously: "They see me as less educated [...] I think they think I don't have the right knowledge, because I'm less educated, or that I don't have an interest [in public issues]."

Insufficient mastery of culturally legitimate knowledge and language

Secondly, a lack of feelings of entitlement is related to respondents' impression that they lack the 'right' capabilities to participate fully in the public domain. Many respondents stressed the importance of a kind of theoretical or expert knowledge needed to successfully set up a citizens' initiative. They emphasised that they are "merely practical", and implied that their self-labelled "practical knowledge" is inadequate when it comes to having a say in the public domain. Additionally, various respondents referred to the significance of language. They are insecure about the "way" they phrase their ideas when communicating with the local government: "[I'm not] raised in a posh way. [To be taken seriously by the authorities] I might need to be a bit more decent."

A taste for politics

I also saw that respondents display a distaste for politics. The political field, just like other fields, is a field of cultural and symbolic production. And just like a taste for cultural objects like high arts or French haute-cuisine does not arise spontaneously, a 'taste for politics' is not naturally given and equally distributed among each person. Based on their tastes, less educated citizens distinguish themselves from the political domain with its politicians. As Bourdieu states: "[In] matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror and visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the taste of others." In line with this postulation, I found that respondents set themselves apart from the political field and its formal and informal rules of the game, and actively draw boundaries between their own lifestyles and the political field for three reasons.

Dislike and contempt for red tape

Firstly, a recurring theme was the excessive red tape of bureaucracy. Some respondents expressed a dislike for red tape and feel discouraged by it: "all these damn rules and regulations [...] they want to make things complicated for you, just to discourage me." Others expressed contempt for red tape and for a focus on seemingly trivial matters.

They contrasted this with their own lifestyle: they value hard work, having a hands-on mentality and practical knowledge. These respondents looked down on government officials, as illustrated by opinions such as "they failed in business and then go work for the government" and "that's a profession you wouldn't reveal to others.

Lack of affinity and contempt for politicians

Secondly, another recurring idea was that government officials "just come from a different background". This was described as "from rich or good families", "frat guys" and "highly educated." For some respondents this resulted in a lack of affinity with and disinterest in anything related to politics and the government. Others expressed strong contempt for this "whole different world" officials come from and live in. These respondents also made moral judgement, valuing being "down-to-earth" instead of highbrow lifestyles.

Contempt for politics

Thirdly, multiple respondents described politics as a performance – more precisely, as a dirty play –because competence is not seen to be important and government officials are thought to do anything for power, including defeating others and changing their opinions. Various respondents consider this to be morally disgusting. Given that respondents value fair play and honest people who stay true to themselves, they see the political field as "just a performance" one should not take seriously.

(Non-)participation in citizens' initiatives

The above mentioned (sub-)dimensions occur in different combinations, yielding four ideal types of (non-)participation: retreating non-participation, rebellious participation, potentially cooperating participation and pragmatic non-participation, as table 1 depicts.

	Lack of feelings of entitlement		Distaste for politics				
	Stigma	*Insufficient mastery*	*Red tape and an occupation with unimportant business*		*Government officials come from different backgrounds*		*Politics as a dirty power play*
			Contempt (opposing)	Dislike (accepting)	Contempt (opposing)	Disinterest (accepting)	
Retreating non-participation	■	■		✕			
Rebellious participation			■				■
Potentially cooperating participation		✕				■	
Pragmatic non-participation		✕	■		✕		✕

Table 1: Sub-dimensions of a lack of feelings of entitlement and a taste for politics (columns) and the ideal types of (non-)participation. The black boxes indicate that the sub-dimension is a leading principle for (non-)participation, while the dotted lines signify that the sub-dimension is present but not leading.

Retreating non-participation

Retreating non-participation is characterized by a strong lack of feelings of entitlement. Respondents experience that government officials and other citizens look down on them and will not take them seriously: "Usually, I've got a sharp tongue, but with those kind of people I think "never mind" . . . because I'm afraid I would embarrass myself or that they just won't take me seriously anyway." Their feeling of being excluded results in a retreat from the public domain and, therefore, non-participation in citizens' initiatives.

Rebellious participation

Rebellious participation is characterized by a strong distaste for politics. Based on their tastes, respondents set themselves apart from the political domain. They oppose and disregard politics. This strong distaste for politics does not result in refraining from participation, but instead inspires it, albeit in a rebellious way. In the rebellious participation ideal type citizens' initiatives provide respondents an opportunity to rebel against a system they despise: "We like to mess up the system, or at least to shake things up."

Potentially cooperating participation

Potentially cooperating participation is characterised by an intertwinement of a lack of feelings of entitlement and a distaste for politics. The lack of affinity with politics goes with ignorance of the possibility of citizens' initiatives. However, when introduced to examples of citizens' initiatives, responses within this ideal type are very positive, revealing a willingness to participate. Nevertheless, they do not feel totally entitled to participate because they perceive to lack the necessary expert knowledge. A potential solution these respondents thought of is cooperation with others who have that knowledge: "It would be nice if you'd have a small group and you can take the initiative together."

Pragmatic non-participation

Most salient for pragmatic non-participation is contempt for bureaucratic red tape, inertia and the focus on seemingly unimportant business. Respondents prefer to do things their own, more efficient and effective way, by avoiding cooperation with the authorities: "If I want to organize something for my neighborhood, I would just ask my friends for help, not the municipality."

Conclusion

This research shows that a cultural, Bourdieusian understanding of (non-)participation in citizens' initiatives by the less educated, provides a meaningful addition to current dominant explanations. The perception of one's position in the social field and inter-subjective meaning making, matters in explaining (non-)participation.

Our findings have implications for governments and social movements aiming to advance sustainable and just cities by stimulating citizens' initiatives. If these initiatives remain to be populated predominantly by higher educated citizens, they might become socially divisive, reproducing and reinforcing existing inequalities and creating inequalities between and within communities.

Governments should realize that non-participation does not necessarily mean apathy towards the democratic process or public cause. On the contrary, citizens with less educational credentials may feel subordinate, be unfamiliar with and/or have no taste for the prescribed forms and hidden scripts, which undermines their participation or inspires various kinds of informal or rebellious participation.

Our findings may inspire governments aiming to enhance the democratic potential of citizens' initiatives. It is clear that aiming to reduce time and costs of participation, or to boost social capital or political skills and knowledge, will not be sufficient. A Bourdieusian inspired approach teaches us that one must take into account the deeply ingrained cultural repertoires of less educated citizens and strive to break the cultural divide that they perceive between themselves and the public and political field. Within a wider discourse of meritocracy and the rise of 'diploma democracies' this becomes all the more important if we want to promote cities that are both sustainable and just.

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