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Vitalizing Democracy Through Participation

Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011

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Preface

"Democracy is not just a system; it must be lived.
It relies on the democratic participation of people
taking responsibility for shaping their own communities."
Reinhard Mohn

In recent decades, representative democracy in Germany has proved a stable and successful model of governance. At the same time, every society is subject to constant change, and the circumstances in which we live and work undergo continuous transformation. These dynamics have an effect on our democracy and political decision-making processes. Indeed, the political and social environment of the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany can hardly be compared with today's circumstances.

One of the major changes observed across the globe in recent years has been a significant growth in the amount of influence citizens wield. In an era of daily opinion polls, their views and attitudes are gaining currency. Populations as a whole, as well as the individuals who make them up, have become more important in contemporary politics, and the interests of specific groups no longer necessarily dominate. We are encouraged by the fact that an ever greater number of citizens are trying to get involved in decision-making and consensus-building processes. This development reflects an increasingly confident population, and it clearly signals people's desire to play a more active role in our democracy. This is a fundamentally positive development that demands an open and constructive response. Indeed, greater civic engagement, participation and involvement are consistent with a representative democracy. All elements within a society must work together and complement each other in order to expand and strengthen their shared democracy. Engaged citizens can be extremely helpful to the government and public administration bodies in securing a broader and more sustainable foundation for political decision-making.

As traditional forms of participation lose ground, citizens are searching for new ways to get involved. Since many feel that parties and politicians no longer represent their needs, there is a widespread sense of discontent with political parties. However, there is little evidence to back up the frequent claims that disenchantment with politics—or even with democ-

racy itself—is on the rise. On the contrary, people are simply looking for new forms of partic-ipation. In fact, in Germany alone, there have been more than 6,000 petitions calling for a referendum in its municipalities and federal states since 1990. Many of these initiatives and the activities accompanying them are born not of a reaction *against* something but, rather, of a reaction *for* something, and they are characterized by positive and practical goals. Indeed, people get involved when they believe their actions can have an effect on their immediate en-vironment. They approach issues and problems constructively and with a level head, fre-quently suggesting creative and unconventional solutions and strategies.

Our founder, Reinhard Mohn, was profoundly influenced and impressed by the matter-of-fact way in which people in the United States shape and contribute to their communities. During his time as a prisoner of war there, and on many return trips, he observed several examples of this kind of civic engagement—and he always kept an eye out for ways to plant similar seeds in Germany. For Mohn, citizens represented not only the thing that makes up a society, but also its driving and binding force. For these reasons, I am very pleased that the first-ever Reinhard Mohn Prize is devoted to civic participation.

The prize was established to commemorate Reinhard Mohn as a citizen, entrepreneur and founder and to nurture his ideas, attitudes and vision. It is within the spirit of these goals that we have sought out effective strategies across the world in order to learn from the ideas and approaches of its inhabitants.

For this premier edition of the Reinhard Mohn Prize (2011), "Vitalizing Democracy Through Participation," the Bertelsmann Stiftung searched the globe for government-affili-ated programs or institutions that have successfully involved citizens in political decision-making. Through their example, the finalists testify to two things: first, that participation in-creases the acceptance of policy decisions and the quality of political decision-making; and, second, that it also engenders a greater sense of responsibility and identification among citi-zens. What's more, these developments in turn help to significantly reduce the gap between citizens and government.

The first Reinhard Mohn Prize has been awarded to the city of Recife in Brazil for its out-standing efforts in vitalizing democracy. At the heart of the Recife project is a participatory budgeting process granting citizens comprehensive decision-making powers. Every year, more than 100,000 individuals, young and adult, are actively engaged in decisions affecting the future of their schools and city. Now ten years old, the project involves citizens in shaping the Brazilian city's development through meetings and by using the Internet. Citizens, who bring suggestions and help set priorities, have initiated nearly 5,000 measures and influenced the direction of some € 220 million public expenditure over the past ten years. Compared to many of the participatory budgeting processes in Germany, the Recife model stands out for the ways in which it facilitates civic engagement. By involving citizens of a major city in its budgetary decision-making process, the Recife project powerfully demonstrates how civic leaders can effectively diminish the gap between government and citizens through broad co-operation and participatory measures.

The Reinhard Mohn Prize will be used to identify innovative solutions to contemporary challenges facing societies around the world. The finalists of this year's competition demon-strate the value of looking beyond our own backyard. Representative democracy can be vital-

ized, citizen participation in the political process can be strengthened—and Germany can learn from these examples!

Gunter Thielen
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011 Process

Sarah Brabender, Alexander Koop, Daniela Röß, Christina Tillmann

The Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011 is awarded to a government institution whose projects serve to stimulate democracy, incorporate underrepresented groups and involve citizens in political decision-making through innovative activities and techniques. "Vitalizing democracy through participation" is our guiding principle and one we wanted to remain faithful to in our search for and selection of the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011 winner. In a deliberate departure from traditional processes (e.g., having expert panels make decisions behind closed doors), we actively involved citizens in scouting out potential prize winners. Indeed, all phases of the process were transparent and took place with full public participation—from the submission of proposals to the discussion, comment-gathering and evaluation phase for nominated projects, to the decision on the final winner.

Phase 1—Proposal Submission, Discussion and Evaluation

In June 2010, the Bertelsmann Stiftung began its search for a winner of the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011, which includes a prize sum of € 150,000. This search took place worldwide, with the participation of the public. Up until August 22, 2010, interested parties could use an Internet-based platform (www.vitalizing-democracy.org) to submit, discuss and evaluate proposals for potentially prizeworthy projects. More than 123 projects from 36 countries were submitted, reviewed and vigorously discussed. Since they were often very detailed and accompanied by background materials, these high-quality project proposals provided a solid foundation of information leading into the next phase. Overall, this was an incredible response, allowing us insight into a huge diversity of exciting and informative projects.

Phase 2—Selection and Evaluation of Projects to Create a Short List

In August 2010, the Bertelsmann Stiftung collaborated with a group of international experts in selecting 20 of the project proposals to be placed on a short list. As a basis for selection, the group used the citizen evaluations submitted via the website and the following seven criteria:

- Problem-solving capacity and impact: How did the project contribute to solving a specific problem? To what extent did the project have an impact on decision-making processes?
- Scope and representativeness: Did the project involve a diverse selection of people that was representative of all intended target groups?
- Democratic capacity: Has the project encouraged democratic conduct among citizens, politicians and other stakeholders?
- Inclusion of disadvantaged groups: To what extent was the project able to involve disadvantaged groups in the process?
- Efficiency and sustainability: Was the project implemented efficiently and sustainably? Could it be repeated?
- Degree of innovation: How innovative was the project?
- Transferability: Is the project's approach transferable to Germany?

Phase 3—Selection of Finalists

In October 2010, a working group made up of members drawn from the German political, academic and civil-society communities nominated seven finalists. These finalists came from five different countries and had successfully engaged citizens in a variety of subject areas and ways. The finalists were:

- British Columbia, Canada—Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform: The provincial government in British Columbia successfully involved citizens in the processes of formulating and approving a new electoral law.
- Belo Horizonte, Brazil—Participatory budgeting and cooperative governance: Every two years, Belo Horizonte carries out a comprehensive participatory budgeting process. In addition, the city regularly organizes conferences, forums and citizens' councils on issues such as health, education and the arts.
- Geraldton, Australia—A vision for a sustainable city: The city council in Geraldton used an innovative, deliberative process to develop a sustainability strategy and strategic plan for the region.
- Hampton, United States—Deliberative governance and citizen participation in all areas: The city council in Hampton created a comprehensive participation process that is particularly aimed at engaging young people in political decision-making.
- La Plata, Argentina—Participatory budgeting through SMS: As part of La Plata's participatory budgeting process, citizens can submit urban-development proposals and vote on them at polling stations or via SMS (text-messaging).
- Portsmouth, United States—Portsmouth Listens: In Portsmouth, citizens convene in so-called "study circles" to develop solutions to controversial and complex issues, which are

then published in the local newspaper and communicated to the city council for consideration.

- Recife, Brazil—Town and school development through participatory budgeting: In Recife, citizens introduce urban development proposals, monitor their implementation and define priorities in various policy areas.

Phase 4—Choosing the Winner

In the fall of 2010, a team from the Bertelsmann Stiftung visited each of the seven finalists on location. As part of this in-depth research, the team interviewed representatives of all groups involved in the particular project as well as numerous citizens—including both advocates and critics—in order to develop the most comprehensive picture possible of each project. Working with scholars and a film crew, case studies and documentary film portraits were created for each of the finalists. This information was then provided to a representative selection of 12,000 representatively chosen citizens in Germany. In this way, the citizens were able to develop a balanced view of each of the seven finalists. The citizens were also asked a number of questions, and address various questions such as which projects offered approaches that could help vitalize democracy in Germany and which project they might themselves participate in if implemented in Germany. It was the votes of these citizens—and these citizens alone—that determined the winner of the Reinhard Mohn Prize 2011, who was then honored at a formal ceremony in the Theater Gütersloh.

Adapting to Change Instead of Heading for Crisis— Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy in Germany

Jörg Dräger, Roland Roth

> *"Democracies are not permanent orders but, rather, are better thought of as experiments that institutionalize a process of ongoing change."*
> James Bohman, 2007

First, the good news: Since antiquity, democracy has been considered a stable yet especially adaptable form of political rule. Political equality—the equal chance for all to participate—is its normative center. Civil liberties (freedom of assembly, expression and association) and periodic free elections create a political public that elected governments must answer to. This keeps governments sensitive to new social challenges and the changing demands of its citizens. While democracies can claim to rely on the "wisdom of crowds," authoritarian governments place trust in repressive instruments of power ultimately guaranteed by military force. For them, it represents the opportunity to ignore the need to promote institutional learning or participatory processes. The consequences of this aloofness became impressively clear in some North African and Middle Eastern countries in early 2011.

Democracies must solve the important problems in our society and win public acceptance for decisions that have to be made. Declining trust in politics and the public's rising desire for participation show that we must expand the discursive and deliberative dimensions of our democracy. This means we must get citizens involved at an early point in the process of discussing new political ideas. An increase in citizen participation should not be seen simply as a complement to parliamentary democracy but, rather, as an opportunity. Early participation gives citizens a voice, builds trust and leads to deeper identification with political decisions.

Dr. Jörg Dräger
Member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Executive Board

However, albeit in considerably weaker form, this tendency also exists in democratic regimes. At least for a while, even they can ignore undesirable trends and protests, block necessary reforms, diminish the political arena and place trust in wholesale forms of legitimation that lost credibility with the citizenry long ago. In the long run, though, democracies that do this undermine the foundational substance of democracy. There are many signs indicating that this situation currently obtains—in different ways—in nearly all of the "old" Western democracies. Indeed, there needs to be an initiative for democratic renewal.

Challenges for Democracy in Germany

Democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany is also due for a process of renewal. To be sure, its capacity for learning and change are underestimated when there is talk of an ostensibly unalterable "free democratic basic order." After all, as Dieter Grimm notes, by the end of 2010, the Basic Law—the equivalent of Germany's constitution—had doubled in size to include a total of 58 amending acts, and only 83 articles retain their original wording (Grimm 2010). Nonetheless, this prominent former justice of the Federal Constitutional Court identifies in many of these amendments a trend toward a fossilization of the political system, which leads him to recommend that fundamental democratic reforms be undertaken (e.g., initiatives and referendums, independent advisory councils and citizen forums). We are not facing a general—and much less a final—crisis of democracy. After all, discontent among citizens and their escalating expectations for political participation are primarily driven by a desire for more democracy. A revitalization of democracy is therefore possible and called-for. However, democracy in Germany faces at least three major challenges that it must overcome in order to retain its ability to respond in an agile way.

1. The Corrosion of Representative Democracy as a Model

Current criticism centers on the postwar version of liberal democracy, which has relied almost exclusively on political representation in the sense of a "rule of democratic elites." Citizens regard this as relieving them of personal engagement, and they see themselves as having hardly any direct influence on political decisions. As they see it, decision-making processes and lobbying are matters for a corporatist system of parties, associations and trade unions whose leaders can depend on having a largely passive and compliant membership.[1]

There is multifaceted discontent with this constellation. Superficially, this is an issue of the following things: the oft-lamented aloofness of politicians and the self-centeredness of parties; electoral campaigns that are short on substance and that merely reduce the "sovereign" to the votes they can deliver; and the staging of competitions between parties that lack

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1 This can also include the occasional willingness to strike or protest at the behest of the organization when it seems opportune for successful negotiations.

positions that can be distinguished from one another. The fact that many people now only reluctantly put a minimal amount of trust in elected officials for a few years, which they then revoke at the next opportunity, speaks to a deep-seated loss of faith in and legitimacy of central political institutions. Indeed, there is a great deal of survey data on declining levels of trust in politics and its eroding reputation. These developments primarily affect political parties and their personnel, but they also affect the parliaments and governments they serve in. The overall decline in citizens' willingness to join political parties is part of this picture, as is the drop in voter turnout. Reports by top interest associations of similar participation problems dovetail with this trend as well.

> The primary challenge in the development of political participation in Germany lies in integrating today's civic participation potential with the structures and processes of representative democracy. Political activists should construe their participation in political life not primarily as a fundamental right of opposition to political institutions and actors but, rather, as a challenge to take part in a democratic process of consensus-building and decision-making, constructively working with political decision-makers toward improvements in the quality of political decisions and decision-making processes. This implies that political participation is an element in every phase of the political decision-making process, from the first exploration of a problem to the implementation of a final decision.
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> Prof. Dr. Oscar W. Gabriel
> *Professor of Political Science, University of Stuttgart*

Three causes can be identified for these developments. First, only under specific circumstances does the political trade-off of the voters' blanket support for a general acceptance of binding decisions—which is the basis of the representative process—yield satisfying results that are recognized as legitimate. On the one hand, this requires citizens to place enormous, generalized trust in the responsibility and performance of central political institutions (e.g., parliaments, parties, governments, etc.) and their supervisory bodies (e.g., the Federal Constitutional Court, the judiciary, etc.) since a referendum—which, in individual circumstances, would return a controversial decision to the citizenry itself—is not provided for. Generalized political trust is not permanently disappointment-proof, and it is tightly bound to the perceived effectiveness of governance. Due to today's widespread abandonment of a broad-based culture of participation, it is also the case that this trust cannot be renewed through citizens' experiences of participation. On the other hand, its necessary precondition is a durable economic recovery, which can hold out a plausible prospect of compensation and redistribution for those negatively affected by decisions. This "brief dream of perpetual prosperity" (Lutz 1984) is Germany's postwar history. Today, both the positive and negative consequences of political decisions for one's personal lifestyle are perceived in highly differentiated terms. Few are still won over by the empty promise that they will be compensated for any disadvantage over the medium term (Embacher 2009: 54 ff.). In recent decades, this has led to an increase

in citizens' initiatives and protest groups challenging individual decisions. Indeed, modernity, the future and progress are no longer concepts that foster trust; instead, they have become contested concepts themselves.

Second, social causes are also behind the corrosion of the representative model. These include the far-reaching dissolution of compact social milieus sharing common values, which formerly justified the formation of political camps. Their cohesive force has suffered greatly along with their "political standpoint." As a result, political parties are very limited in their ability to fulfill such duties as contributing to general political decision-making, ensuring acceptance of concrete governmental decisions and developing feasible alternatives. Today, only a quarter of the electorate is sufficiently committed to a political party for it to count on their votes (ibid.: 73). With the modernization of social structures under postwar conditions of prosperity (the so-called elevator effect), and despite all the effects of individualization, new milieus and lifestyle groups have emerged. Still, instead of being clear-cut, their political positions are constantly being re-contested. Without a voter-granted "political dividend," individual decisions are increasingly disputed. Policymakers can no longer convincingly base the legitimization of their decisions on election results. If these decisions are to be robust, participation must be as broad as possible, and they must be improved through additional procedures.

Third, new media enable new forms of participation that entail new citizen demands. New forms of communication have expanded access to information, and—for better or worse—the speed at which information spreads has rapidly increased. As a result, citizens' demands for transparency have grown. Indeed, the new media instantaneously disseminate news of politicians' misconduct, broken campaign promises and unwelcome reforms. Likewise, new avenues of mobilization have emerged that allow interested citizens to organize more quickly—including against political decisions already taken—and to thereby exert direct influence on politics at the municipal, regional, national and even global levels. All these developments challenge politics to react faster to both social changes and citizens' changing expectations for participation.

2. Social and Political Exclusion

A democracy's survival depends on a promise of equality. Today, we are steadily distancing ourselves from that promise. At the dawning of the postwar era, British sociologist Thomas H. Marshall formulated a political vision that seemed to hold true for social development in Western Europe until the 1970s (cf. Marshall 1992). He saw a close, mutually reinforcing interlinking between civic, political and socioeconomic citizenship rights, and he predicted an emerging dynamic that would lead toward full citizenship for the entire population. The state's guarantees of a good educational system and social security were supposed to enable all citizens to participate equally in society and politics. This broad participation, in turn, was meant to ensure that the inclusive character of social citizenship rights would constantly undergo a process of political renewal. Or at least that was the expectation.

In retrospect, the driving force of the welfare state lost traction at some point in the 1970s. Today, we must recognize that numerous social groups have been excluded from full citizenship, which in any case was tailored to the "male breadwinner" in its original version: