

Why are people with lower levels of education less likely to participate in citizens' initiatives?

Previous research suggests that people with lower levels of education are underrepresented in citizens' initiatives. Drawing on new research in the Netherlands, Vivian Visser, Willem de Koster and Jeroen van der Waal show that 'feelings of entitlement' and a 'taste for politics' are crucial for understanding the non-participation of these citizens.

In recent decades, governments across Europe have experimented with increasing opportunities for citizen participation, deliberation and influence, thereby aiming to actively engage citizens in the making and implementation of policy.

An archetypal example is the so called 'do democracy' approach in the Netherlands. This intends to stimulate citizens to create a public sphere, not just through deliberation, voting and bargaining, but also by realising concrete public projects and initiatives. Local governments have thus actively invited members of their communities to develop citizens' initiatives which, for example, maintain public green spaces, take over public facilities, or organise neighbourhood events that foster social cohesion.

Although this trend is often praised for its democratising effect, various scholars have warned that citizens with lower levels of education are substantially underrepresented in these initiatives. This hampers their democratic potential and might even make them socially divisive.

This underrepresentation has predominantly been attributed to a lack of time, money, social capital or political knowledge. However, policies aimed at reducing these barriers and strengthening social connections have thus far been unsuccessful in stimulating equal participation. So how can we better understand the underrepresentation of citizens with lower levels of education?

Evidence from the Netherlands

To shed light on this question, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 citizens in Rotterdam who each were educated below the tertiary level. Because we wanted respondents to feel free to speak their minds, each participant was allowed to choose the location of the interview to make them feel more comfortable. During each interview, we encouraged respondents to reflect on three examples of citizens' initiatives. Inspired by the work of [Pierre Bourdieu](#), we paid attention to respondents' perceived social position, their affinity with politics or politicians, and the social boundaries they experience and draw.

In line with previous research, respondents initially tended to explain their non-participation by referring to time constraints, a lack of local social connections or the difficulty of completing the required paperwork. However, when we dug deeper, it appeared there was more to the story than these well-established factors. Even if the respondents had enough time, connections and relevant political knowledge, many would still be unlikely to participate.

It is here that we saw how social status affects non-participation in citizens' initiatives. Our analysis uncovered that 'feelings of entitlement' and a 'taste for politics' are crucial for understanding their non-participation. These dimensions, each having sub-dimensions, occur in different combinations, yielding four ideal types: retreating non-participation, rebellious participation, potentially cooperating participation, and pragmatic non-participation.

Retreating non-participation

Retreating non-participation is characterised by a strong lack of feelings of entitlement. Respondents perceived themselves as being less legitimate societal actors because they experience stigmatisation and/or insufficiently master legitimate styles of speech and knowledge. Several respondents stipulated that they feel condemned because of their level of education ("they think I must be stupid") or neighbourhood of residence ("they immediately think I'm white trash").

In addition, a lack of feeling of entitlement is related to respondents' impression that they lack the 'right' capabilities to participate fully in the public domain. Many respondents emphasised that they are "merely practical" and implied that their self-labelled "practical knowledge" – as opposed to what they labelled as "theoretical" or "expert" knowledge – is inadequate when it comes to having a say in the public domain.

Additionally, various respondents were 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." As a consequence, respondents feel that government officials and other citizens look down on them and will not take them seriously. Their feelings of being excluded result in a retreat from the public domain and, therefore, non-participation in citizens' initiatives.

Rebellious participation

Rebellious participation is characterised by a strong distaste for politics. Citizens in this category 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 politics. They oppose and disregard politics, which some of our respondents described as a performance – labelling it "morally disgusting" and a "dirty play" – because competence is not seen as important and government officials are thought to do anything for power, including defeating others and changing their opinions.

Given that these respondents value fair play and honest people who stay true to themselves, they did not see politics as something they should take seriously. Moreover, these respondents looked down on government officials because of red tape and their focus on seemingly trivial matters. This was illustrated in comments stating that government officials "failed in business and then go work for the government" and the description of politics as "a profession you wouldn't reveal to others." But this strong distaste for politics does not result in these citizens refraining from participation. Instead, it inspires participation, albeit in a rebellious way. Citizens' initiatives provide these individuals with an opportunity to rebel against a system they despise.

Potentially cooperating participation

This category of participation is characterised by the combination of a lack of feelings of entitlement and a lack of taste for politics. A recurring idea from respondents in this group was that government officials "just come from a different background". Government officials were viewed as coming from "rich or good families", "the highly educated", and being "frat guys", which resulted in these individuals having a lack of affinity with and disinterest in anything related to politics and the government.

This lack of affinity with politics is associated with a lack of awareness about the potential of citizens' initiatives. However, when introduced to examples of citizens' initiatives, responses within this ideal type were very positive, revealing a willingness to participate. Nevertheless, they did not feel completely entitled to participate because they perceived themselves as lacking the necessary expert knowledge. A potential solution these respondents thought of is cooperation with others who have that knowledge.

Pragmatic non-participation

Pragmatic non-participation is marked by contempt for bureaucratic red tape, inertia, and politicians' focus on seemingly unimportant business. Although we observed that respondents in this category did not feel completely entitled because of a perceived lack of "expert knowledge" and that they saw politics as a "dishonest power play", this is overpowered by their aversion to time-consuming bureaucracy.

Respondents contrasted this with their own lifestyle: they value hard work, being down-to-earth, and having a hands-on mentality and practical knowledge. These respondents do not participate in initiatives because of "the whole idea of bureaucracy. A form here, ticket office there and 'we call you back but [you] will never be called,' well all that kind of red tape." Consequently, respondents prefer to do things in their own, more efficient and effective way, by avoiding cooperation with the authorities.

Key lessons

Our findings have implications for contemporary politics and democratic innovations. Governments should realise that non-participation does not necessarily mean apathy towards the democratic process or public causes. On the contrary, citizens with fewer educational credentials may feel subordinate, and be unfamiliar with or have no taste for prescribed forms and 'hidden scripts', which undermines their participation or inspires various kinds of informal or rebellious participation. Our findings might ultimately inspire governments aiming to enhance the democratic potential of citizens' initiatives by breaking the cultural divide that citizens with fewer educational credentials perceive between themselves and the political world.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying open access paper in [Current Sociology](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Dylan Gillis](#) on [Unsplash](#)
