Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Opinion 232 (2001)[1]

Participation of citizens in local public life

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly considers participation in public life to be one of the most important political aspects of democracy. The active and responsible involvement of citizens in democratic structures and their participation in representative institutions are decisive in guaranteeing the legitimacy, credibility and operation of the democratic systems which form the joint heritage of Council of Europe member states

2. Local democracy is one of the basic components of the democratic system and allows individuals to exercise, as directly and as close to home as possible, the right to play a part in managing public affairs, while also giving them a better understanding of the workings of democratic institutions

3. Reduced voter turnout in elections at various levels and public dissatisfaction with the functioning of democratic institutions are necessitating a period of reflection and action from the Council of Europe, which plays a fundamental role in the protection and strengthening of democracy in Europe through its standard-setting activities and its co-operation and assistance programmes for member states.

4. The Assembly has been asked to give an opinion on the Committee of Ministers' draft recommendation to member states on the participation of citizens in local public life, and, in these circumstances, it considers this initiative to be both highly important and particularly timely.

5. The Assembly notes with interest the analysis of current trends in public attitudes to representative institutions and structures for participation in public life, and largely accepts its conclusions and proposals for action to be taken at various levels to promote individual involvement in community affairs, while respecting the subsidiarity principle and the special features of local situations

6. The Assembly attaches the greatest importance to respect for the individual's right to have access to information of public interest, and to communication between public authorities and citizens, and refers in this connection to its Recommendation 1430 (1999) on access to information, public participation in environmental decision-making and access to justice – implementation of the Århus Convention.

7. For representative democracy to function effectively, the Assembly believes that a balance must be struck between the official exercise of political responsibilities and direct citizen participation in the decision-making process, and refers to its Resolution 1121 (1997) on instruments of citizen participation in representative democracy.

8. In this context, it attaches great importance to the widest possible participation in local consultations and referendums. In certain cases, instead of being confined to citizens who have the right to vote, these procedures could be opened up to long-term residents and young people aged 16 or over. Furthermore, if the right to vote in local elections has not been granted, special arrangements should be made for the representation and consultation of all communities, including settled migrant workers.

1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly,on 8 November 2001 (see Doc. 9265,Doc. 9265, report of the Committee on the Environment and Agriculture, rapporteur: Mr Briane).

9. The Assembly considers that exchanges of information between Council of Europe member states on the best approaches to citizen participation, particularly the fair representation of women and men and the participation of children and young people, can help to consolidate the acceptance of democratic values throughout Europe, and it encourages the Committee of Ministers to commit the Council of Europe more fully to such activities

10. The Assembly therefore supports the draft recommendation to the member states of the Council of Europe on the participation of citizens in local public life, and recommends its adoption by the Committee of Ministers.