



## Poitou-Charentes region (France): Participatory democracy<sup>1</sup>

**Name of the policy:** Participatory democracy in Poitou-Charentes

**Start date:** 01.09.2004

**Completion date:** Ongoing

### CONTEXT

#### GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

##### Regional context

Poitou-Charentes is one of the least populated regions of France (1,700,000 inhabitants). It is a largely rural region, with few large towns. It has traditionally been a territory leaning politically to the right, which changed its allegiance in the 2004 elections. The Region is currently governed by a left-wing coalition led by Ségolène Royal, one of the best-known leaders of the Socialist

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<sup>1</sup> The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** is a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. It contains over sixty case studies on innovative policies for community development, access to basic services, gender equality, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty, among others. The initiative has been developed with the scientific support of Prof. Yves Cabannes from the University College of London (15 case studies) and a team of researchers from the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, which has worked under the supervision of Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (50 study cases). This Observatory aims to identify and investigate successful experiences that might inspire other cities to design and implement their own social inclusion policies.

The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** has been created by the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights of UCLG. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the global platform that represents and defends the interests of local governments before the international community and works to give cities more political influence on global governance. The **Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights** aims to contribute to building a common voice for the cities of UCLG in the areas of social inclusion, participatory democracy and human rights. It also aims to guide local governments in designing these policies and to that end, fosters political debates, the exchange of experiences and peer learning among cities around the world.

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Party, who was its presidential candidate in the elections of 2007. Ségolène Royal was re-elected with almost 58% of the vote in the regional elections in 2010.

The characteristics of this participatory policy (a socialist initiative, although the participatory budgets had been promoted by communist mayors until that point; a figure with a national profile; massive use of lots) provide sufficient guarantees of a relatively high profile for the ongoing experience. The total budget for the region was 567 million euros in 2010 (with almost 50% coming from the French central government, but also from Europe, public lands and regional taxes). Half of the expenditure is allocated to education and training (secondary schools, training courses, universities).

### **Governmental decentralization context**

The Regions are the most recently established local institutions in France: they were established by the 1982 law on decentralization, and the first regional elections were held in 1986. As institutions with a short history, the Regions have a weak political identity, as they are not well known among the population. However, they may have a strong cultural identity, as in Alsace and Brittany. To some extent, the development of participatory policies in Poitou-Charentes and other regions can be seen as a means of providing communities that lack a real image with visibility and a political identity. However, the powers of the French regions have increased over the last 30 years, particularly since the constitutional reform of 2004 (considered Act II of the decentralization process). The unachieved aim of this reform was to make the Regions the most important decentralized level of government. Nonetheless, the Regions are recognized as the most important local and regional institutions for economic development and vocational training and they have competences in the area of secondary education (non-teaching staff and buildings).

If the trend towards decentralization over the last thirty years has therefore been conducive to strengthening the power of the regions, the territorial reform enacted in late 2010, which includes the merger of general and regional councils among other measures, appears to be moving in the opposite direction, towards recentralization. However, it is too early to measure its impact, because this reform does not take effect until 2014.

**Institutional level of policy development:** Regional and secondary education

### **SOCIAL CONTEXT**

Poitou-Charentes region is a rural and agricultural region, influenced by the importance of tourism on the Atlantic coast and a relatively limited industrial tradition. In a relatively poor region, unemployment in 2009 stood at 9.1%, which was more or less the average figure for France as a whole. Nonetheless, unemployment and job insecurity have increased considerably since 2009, as in other parts of France, following the economic and financial crisis.

The Region's participatory policy is not specifically targeted at disadvantaged groups, as it can be considered a universal policy: it is intended for all users. As such, the Schools Participatory Budget affects all secondary school students, and the other participatory policies are aimed at all the users of a public service. Notwithstanding the above, the aim in all cases (see the "objectives" section) is to prioritize the most disadvantaged individuals within these groups, by means of redistributive mechanisms and the promotion of social justice.

**Table 1. Social structure of the population (in %)**

		Poitou-Charentes	(France)
Distribution of the population by age	Population under 20 years old	22.5	25
	Population aged 20 to 64 years old	57	59
	Population over 64 years old	20.5	16.5
Socio-professional structure of the population	Unemployed	9.1	9.1
	Employed	31	29
	Workers		23
	Executive positions	10	16
	Intermediate professions	21	25
	Craftsmen/women, traders, businesspeople	6	6
	Farmers	4	2
Recipients of the RMI <sup>2</sup>		3	2

Source: INSEE Employment Survey, 2005, and Regional Health Observatory, 2010.

## **COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE**

### **Description of the policy {**

The participatory democracy policy in Poitou-Charentes has taken various forms, but is now a coherent whole. It consists of a range of tools and mechanisms designed to encourage citizens to participate in the formulation of regional public policies. This policy first adopted the Schools Participatory Budget format (SPB), which involved debating the allocation of 10% of the region's budget for secondary schools (the main competence of the French regions), i.e. 10 million euros per year. As a result, the 93 public secondary schools organized two annual meetings with the help of the regional services: the first was to encourage collective projects, and the second was to discuss their relevance and to choose the three priority projects (by vote). We will see how this mechanism has had major social effects (redistribution of resources), political effects (democratization of the workings of secondary schools) and administrative effects (modernization and transversality). From 2008 onwards, the success of the experience subsequently led the Region to increase mini-public experiences (citizens' panels and workshops, *e-town meetings*, etc.) using lots drawn from a varied section of the population in order to discuss and evaluate specific public policies (transport, the environment, training, business start-up support). The innovative deliberative methods developed therein provided feedback for the secondary Schools Participatory Budget (SPB), which underwent a major

<sup>2</sup> Revenu minimum d'insertion (Minimum income allowance)



reform in 2011 with the creation of an SPB regional assembly responsible for the collective definition of social justice criteria that would enable improved distribution of resources within the SPB.

### **Background / Origins**

The team currently working prioritised the idea of participatory democracy in its 2004 election campaign, making it its "trademark." However, what this idea meant in specific terms was somewhat confusing. This did not prevent an original experience from being hurriedly implemented, and in just a few months became one of the most promising schemes in France. This was due to several factors.

(1) Two key people in the regional government (Ségolène Royal's chief policy assistant and the head of the government department responsible for secondary schools) are fully convinced of the importance of participatory democracy. The former, whose political background is on the extreme left, travelled to Porto Alegre. The latter is a former trade unionist from the world of teaching. They have both long been interested in the issues of participation and administrative modernization by means of participation, have considerable political and managerial skills and have succeeded in providing the mechanism with considerable efficiency. They ensured the specific impetus behind the process and its day-to-day management during the first year.

(2) These individuals surrounded themselves with external experts who contributed to the credibility of the initiative: university experts (at training sessions and an international congress on the subject of participatory democracy) and NGOs (the ADELS, the leading French organization working in the area of local democracy, was initially responsible for organizing the public meetings).

(3) Segolene Royal understood that consultative participatory democracy was a successful issue and that she could obtain a great deal of symbolic and political benefit ("we are the first region in Europe to apply a participatory budget ..."), in a national situation in which the political system suffered a crisis of legitimacy. Her political commitment to this issue was very strong, and she was willing to put pressure on elected politicians in the Region's government bodies and the traditional management structures of secondary schools (and on their principals in particular).

After her victory in the 2004 elections, Ségolène Royal immediately wanted to begin to implement the promises made during the election campaign and to move towards a focus on participatory democracy in particular. She implemented various consultative initiatives on issues for which the region had competences (employment, environment, agriculture, health) bringing together regional actors (and particularly institutional and economic actors) around the definition of public policy. First of all, she decided to implement a participatory budget, starting with one of the region's main areas of legal competences: secondary schools. This choice was partly due to feasibility issues. Identifying the 93 schools in the Region was easy. It was also due to issues of visibility: secondary schools are part of the core competences of the Region, which saw its authority in this area significantly increased during the most recent phase of decentralization initiated by the government (although the orientation of teaching options and personnel management of teachers remain responsibilities of the central Government, management of the administrative staff now falls within the Region's powers, in addition to its traditional



competences in the areas of construction and maintenance of buildings; the Region can also act beyond the limits of its mandatory powers, such as by fostering school life, projects related to environment, health, etc.).

In an area like this, it is possible to make a considerable difference in comparison with the previous methods of management. What the region calls the "students' participatory budget" is part of a policy aimed at prioritizing a social approach to school life (the creation of a "regional social fund"; the creation of a cheque for 70 euros for books given to families for the purchase of school textbooks, etc.).

### **Policy objectives**

The participatory policy of the Poitou-Charentes region has many objectives. The initial goal was to democratize the workings of secondary schools and to take better account of users' needs. The designers of this policy implicitly felt that consideration of basic needs was a way of ensuring a more effective and fair public spending. A second core objective was to use participation to educate and train citizens, particularly taking into account that part of the target audience was young people. A third objective gradually took shape, to the point where it was made institutional in 2011: the "promotion of social justice." The aim is therefore to make participatory democracy a means for the redistribution of public resources towards disadvantaged social groups and areas. Finally, a last goal also emerged during the initiative: modernization of the government. While this was not a primary objective of the Region's participation policy, it effectively led to (1) increased and more horizontal dialogue between the Region's various services; (2) a faster response to users' expectations.

### **Chronological development and implementation of the practice**

The Poitou-Charentes region first launched a pilot participatory budget in secondary schools in autumn 2004, in half the schools in the region. The mechanism was extended to all the schools the following year. The participatory policy has expanded considerably, and accelerated in late 2007, after the defeat of the Region's president Ségolène Royal in the presidential elections, which led her to renew her focus on her Region. Lot-based experiences have been organized regularly since that date. Citizens' panels on climate change and on transport were organized in 2008. In autumn 2008, in collaboration with Tuscany and Catalonia, the Region organized an e-town meeting (as part of the Ideal-EU project) funded by the European Union, to enable young European citizens to discuss the issue of climate change and to provide recommendations on the subject to the President of the European Parliament's Committee on Climate Change. These experiences were subsequently rolled out in 2009, with the organization of participatory workshops, in a lighter format than the citizens' panels (users who were not chosen by lot were invited). The Schools Participatory Budget is affecting an increasing number of people. If participation in public sector schools increases, the mechanism will also be extended to the 21 private Catholic schools in the Region (on request), and then the Maisons Familiales Rurales (Rural Family Homes) network. Finally, in early 2011, after an assessment that highlighted the sometimes non-redistributive effects of this policy, an SPB regional assembly was established in order to promote social justice and the redistribution of resources through participation. In this context, about 1,000 participants (volunteers and those chosen by lot) spent the day in discussions, in order to define the criteria for distributing resources among the Schools within the SPB. The Region's participatory policy is therefore still ongoing and continues to develop on an incremental basis.

### **Agents involved**

The main actors at the core of the participatory policy organization in Poitou-Charentes are the Region (and particularly the participatory budget department and the head of the mission of the participatory democracy), the boards of directors of the schools, and initially, an association, the Adels, which specializes in participatory democracy, which organized the mechanism. Subsequently, all the participants and users mentioned above are still at the core of this policy, in which the beneficiaries are mainly agents of change.

### **Beneficiaries**

All the inhabitants of the region are beneficiaries. However, different groups are affected, depending on the mechanism. The SPB is particularly aimed at users of secondary schools (students, teachers, administrative staff, parents, etc.). The public workshops, which were created later, were targeted at the users or beneficiaries of some regional policies (transport users, apprentices attending vocational training, recipients of business start-up grants).

### **Participatory processes applied**

The participatory aspect of this policy is paramount. While NGOs and associations have not been greatly affected by this policy, the involvement of users has been enormous. Although the SPB did not initially affect more than a few thousand participants, approximately 24,000 people participated in at least one meeting in 2010. There were not many participants in the citizens' panels and workshops, but the challenge of designation by drawing lots was to enable participation by those who do not usually participate, and by excluded members of the community in particular (the unemployed, immigrants, workers, etc.). The reasons behind interest in participating were different in each case. Those involved in the SPB were interested in participating as the decisions taken at a direct impact on their daily lives. The participants in the lot-based mechanisms aimed to improve regional public policy on a more general basis, and often justified their participation in the grounds of civic involvement and general interest. All the assessments show the immense satisfaction in all cases among the participants in terms of involvement.

The Region's participatory policy has evolved a great deal over time, and has undergone an undeniable learning process. However, this policy could be further improved by increasing the mechanisms' decision-making power, reinforcing the deliberative quality of the discussions (and the SPB in particular), and reinforcing grass-roots participation.

### **Institutionalization processes**

One of the weaknesses of the mechanism is that it has no institutional status, and that it depends on the political commitment of the elected politicians. While it is possible to speak in terms of institutionalization, in fact, given the entrenchment of the participatory initiative in the Region's work, it has not led to substantial legislative changes. This is mainly due to the highly centralized nature of the legislative process in France (the Regions do not have legislative power). This could mean that there is a risk of policy disappearing in the event of the party in power changing.

### **Financing**

The funding for this policy is almost entirely guaranteed by the Region. Between 2004 and



2010, the SPB cost the Region approximately 10 million euros annually (although that figure was not 10 million euros in addition to the current budget for secondary schools, but instead 10% deducted from the budget that had been decided by elected politicians up to that point), as well as the salaries of the 5 staff responsible for this policy (approximately 150,000 euros per year). In 2008 and 2009, organization of the mechanisms cost about 100,000 euros per year. One of the experiences implemented, the Ideal-EU programme, was mostly funded by the European Union. Finally, it should be noted that the budget for the SPB has fallen from 10 to 5 million euros since 2011.

### Key results and achievements

The participatory policy of the Poitou-Charentes region can be considered an achievement and one of the most ambitious in Europe, for several reasons. First, it has enabled mass participation by citizens in the formulation of public policies. Participation as high as in the SPB (24,000 people in 2010, i.e. 15% of those invited) is relatively unique in the world. This policy is also noteworthy given that it has had an impact on public policies. While most participatory policies in Europe are advisory, in Poitou-Charentes citizens can co-decide on key aspects of regional projects (10 million euros is a considerable amount if the sums usually at stake in the participatory democracy field in Europe are taken into account). The participatory policy has therefore enabled: (1) democratization of the workings of the schools and regional public action. The main beneficiaries of this policy are those with little influence on decision-making until that point: students in schools, service staff in secondary schools, working-class people; (2) greater influence to be given to actors who are usually marginalized. This policy has led to a consideration of needs (including social needs) that had previously been then ignored. The needs of the most marginalized actors have been given more consideration thanks to the participatory democracy policy; (3) "a school for democracy" to be provided for its participants, and particularly young people, although conducting a more in-depth survey on the subject would be worthwhile; (4) modernization of the regional administration, reinforcing transversality and dialogue between departments and accelerating decision-making processes.

However, two limitations must be noted. First, the participatory policy only covers part of the regional policies, since 90% of the schools' budget is still decided on a bureaucratic basis and the main public policies are not assessed in a participatory manner. Nonetheless, if the participatory policy is only a small part of the regional initiative, it inspires all the policies in the region. The Region's redistributive policies (aimed at specific disadvantaged groups or areas) have therefore been partially based on the needs expressed within the participatory mechanisms. A second limitation is the fact that grass-roots participation is still insufficient, even when the lot-based mechanisms make a contribution to that end.

### Main obstacles

Two main obstacles can be highlighted. First, the Region's technical services (engineers, architects, etc.) were very resistant to the introduction of participatory politics like this one, which challenged their knowledge and professional identity, and required them to do more work. Without a strong political commitment to overcoming these obstacles, the experts have enough weapons to block the implementation of policies of this nature. Obstacles placed by school principals and trade unions, who had the feeling that they were losing power, also appeared.

Moreover, the introduction of the participatory policy required a heavy mobilization of the



Region's personnel and of the "participatory democracy" department in particular. The increase in the number of meetings in a fairly large area is a human cost that needs to be taken into consideration. The implementation of an effective participatory policy therefore requires considerable human resources to conduct the meetings and to organize the process.

### **Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere**

#### *Prerequisites*

A strong political commitment is essential when implementing an effective participatory policy. Given the obstacles that experts and officials may present, a strong commitment is required to impose the mechanism from above.

#### *Recommendations*

The main lesson to be learned from this experience is that when participatory democracy is implemented at an early stage and with a firm political desire for social transformation, it can lead to mass participation, the democratization of public action and significant redistributive effects.

The replicability of this policy is beyond any doubt, as five French regions (Rhône-Alpes, Ile-de-France, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Burgundy and Normandy), have been partially inspired by it since 2007, and by the SPB mechanism in particular. However, a policy so comprehensive that it covers the SPB, experiences of drawing lots and the search for social justice has not been replicated anywhere in Europe to date. From this point of view, an essential factor - which is not at all related to the specific context of Poitou-Charentes - is a strong political commitment from the regional centre of power. While participatory democracy in France is generally the preserve of elected politicians from small parties with limited powers, a prerequisite of success is that the initiative must come from the centre of political power and be at the heart of all public policies.

## **SUMMARY**

The participatory policy of the Poitou-Charentes region was established in late 2004 with the election of Ségolène Royal, and has continued to evolve and develop since that date. As it can potentially reach all users of regional public services, it seeks to involve the public in regional decisions. It focused first on secondary schools, before gradually being rolled out by drawing lots to other public policies such as transport, the environment and the economy. This policy has recently undergone significant developments, with the implementation of social justice criteria defined by the users themselves, by means of a participatory process, in order to increase the redistributive nature of these policies.

Apart from the promotion of social justice and the redistribution of wealth toward disadvantaged social groups and areas, the policy pursues political, civil and administrative objectives. The primary aim is to democratize regional public action and educational policy in particular - one of the core competences of the region is management of secondary schools - with increasing emphasis on the definition of objectives and the choice of budget priorities. The participatory policy of Poitou-Charentes is also a forum for learning about citizenship and for education about public affairs, and its aim is to foster citizenship through participation, focusing particularly on young people. Finally, this policy aims to modernize the regional government, reinforcing transversality between its departments and accelerating the pace of public decision-making in







order to meet the needs of the population more quickly.

By definition, the workings of participatory policy prioritize participation by users. The core idea of this initiative is that the pursuit of social and political objectives and the reduction of inequalities in particular, cannot be undertaken without the direct participation of citizens, who must express their needs and expectations and who can eventually engage in a process of empowerment. This action, which is supported by the regional government, is not institutionalized from a legal standpoint as the French regions do not have any legislative powers. However, a de facto institutionalization is apparent because the policies implemented undergo a process of routinization and entrenchment in the regional political culture. The Region's participatory policy receives relatively modest financing from the Region, which entails the employment of some territorial agents responsible for organizing participation. However, some projects received financial support from the European Union.

The participatory policy has led to a democratization of regional initiatives, especially in the field of educational policy. One of the most important results of this experience also involves the modernization of the regional government. From the social point of view, the results are more mixed. Although this policy has permitted resources to be redirected towards what were previously less influential actors in the regional decision-making process (particularly young people and the working classes), some counter-redistributive effects were observed, as some actors or territories have succeeded in obtaining resources by means of participatory processes, even when they are in a relatively favourable situation). However, the recent incorporation of social justice criteria in the secondary Schools Participatory Budget should partially solve this problem.

The participatory policy of the region of Poitou-Charentes faces two more difficult obstacles. First, reluctance or even resistance from the experts, whose professional authority was being called into question, and the principals of the schools and trade unionists, who felt that they were losing power as a result of the creation of participatory mechanisms. As a result, only a strong political commitment is able to ensure the progression of an effective participatory policy. Moreover, it is difficult to manage the process in administrative terms, since it requires a heavy mobilization of regional personnel, which obviously entails a cost.

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