



## Resolution 1121 (1997)<sup>1</sup>

# Instruments of citizen participation in representative democracy

Parliamentary Assembly

1. A truly living democracy depends on the active contribution of all citizens. Their participation in political life and their co-operation within political institutions are thus a decisive factor for the smooth functioning of democratic institutions.
2. The poor rate of participation in legislative elections, as well as in referendums held in member states and, in general, citizen dissatisfaction with the functioning of pluralist democracies call for a debate on the phenomenon, which is hardly surprising since democracy is a permanent quest demanded by new circumstances and changing attitudes.
3. The causes of this phenomenon are many: the contrast between the complexity of political terminology and the simplification and dramatisation of media presentations of the issues at stake; the fact that information can be communicated instantly while politicians are assumed to be slow in reaching decisions; the fact that people do not understand the complexity of the problem and expect quick, apt solutions; the discrepancy between election promises and their implementation.
4. The anxiety generated by this state of affairs creates a need among citizens to participate more in political decision making with a view either to preventing a deterioration in their situation or to improving it.
5. The Assembly therefore considers that the opportunities for direct citizen participation in political life offered by the representative system must be enhanced to correspond more closely to citizens' aspirations.
6. A prior observation is necessary to prevent a misunderstanding, with potentially weighty implications, and which tends to set direct democracy against representative democracy. The harmonisation of mostly contradictory and conflicting needs of citizens or groups of citizens, dictated by the general interest, can be achieved only through parliamentary deliberations. The use of direct democracy must be regarded as a complement. Even in Switzerland, an exemplary country in the area of direct democracy, 95% of decisions are taken by parliament.
7. However, before developing forms of direct democracy - for example, interactive communication facilities on information networks and referendums - we must consider their viability and possible adverse effects.
8. Information facilities, however sophisticated, would not be able - at least not in the foreseeable future - to extend the bilateral dialogue between one elected representative and one citizen to a dialogue between one elected representative and a number of citizens; the electronic forum is not yet fully tried and tested.
9. The national referendum is written into the constitutions of representative democracies but varies from one country to another in terms of its objectives, its subjects and its means of implementation. Referendums run the risk of becoming plebiscites when they are used by the executive to reinforce its own power.
10. This risk exists in democracies consolidated over time, particularly in those countries with large populations which are therefore more difficult to govern than small countries. The risk is even greater in new democracies which are therefore more fragile.

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1. Assembly debate on 22 April 1997 (11th Sitting) (see [Doc. 7781](#), report of the Committee on Parliamentary and Public Relations, rapporteur: Mr Columberg). Text adopted by the Assembly on 22 April 1997 (11th Sitting).

11. Implemented in relatively small communities for practical issues, regional and local referendums cause less concern and are recommended.
12. Nevertheless, the Assembly realises not only the drawbacks but also the positive aspects of consulting the electorate directly, such as the fact that it enables a minority of citizens to express their opinion and be heard by government and can stimulate a democratic debate either legitimising a decision taken by the government or approving a decision rejected by the government.
13. Abuse of referendums must not obscure their real aim which is to render representative democracy more participative and in so doing to consolidate it and to serve as an antidote to the current malaise undermining it.
14. The Assembly therefore believes that it is important to lay down parameters for referendums to ensure that, where they are held, they conform as far as possible to best practice and strengthen democracy and civil society.
15. Consequently, the Assembly invites the member states:
  - 15.1. to improve their system of representative democracy by striking a balance between the exercise of responsibility of political power and the role of citizens in the decision-making process. Without such a balance, we will be unable to prevent either the erosion of confidence in the representative system or the rash use of frequent referendums which would make any long-term policy based on fundamental options random, ineffective or even impossible;
  - 15.2. to regard all subjects as suitable for being submitted to a referendum, with the exception of those which call in question universal and intangible values such as the human rights defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights, and the basic values of democracy in general and parliamentary democracy in particular;
  - 15.3. to take account in their thinking of the distinctions to be made between the subjects suitable for a referendum, the result of which is binding, and the subjects suitable for a consultative referendum, the result of which enables political leaders to improve their programmes and decisions;
  - 15.4. to make provision for referendums designed to repeal existing laws as well as for referendums offering the choice between various options;
  - 15.5. to envisage rules to ensure that citizens are properly informed about all the issues involved in the referendum and that questions and proposals are worded completely unambiguously;
  - 15.6. to limit the number of subjects per referendum to be held the same day in order to clarify the debates on the documents subjected to a vote and to help citizens to reach a decision;
  - 15.7. where appropriate, to create organs responsible for applying these rules and guarantee the independence of such organs;
  - 15.8. to lay down rules and guiding principles which, in order to prevent any misuse of the referendum:
    - a. enable a referendum to be set in motion by citizens, whereby the number of signatories should be fixed by each state in accordance with a threshold considered to be significant compared with the total electorate;
    - b. ensure that the referendum is preceded by a debate in parliament;
    - c. fix a quota for participation in the ballot which discourages abstentionism while guaranteeing a minimum rate of participation enabling the result obtained to be regarded as representative and valid;
    - d. enable the parliament to present its own alternative to any proposal by the citizens.