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On the Need to Include Passive Citizens in Public Participation Processes

Michiel S. de Vries[1], *Iwona Sobis*[2]

Abstract

Research on enhancing public participation has increasingly concentrated on using novel instruments to collect opinions of citizens in order to inform the decision-maker about preferred policies. This paper argues that these hardly contribute to the achievement of the classic political-philosophical ideals of citizen involvement if only already active citizens become involved and passive ones remain excluded. Based on the newest European Value Study, this paper first proposes a measure to distinguish between passive and active citizens. It shows that passive citizens do have particular background characteristics in terms of age, education, and poverty. Compared to active citizens, they also adhere to different values as seen in their high adherence to materialistic values, the absence of interpersonal trust, and the much lesser importance attached by them to tolerance and respect. The conclusion is that just collecting opinions through the use of social media and polling, and calling this participation 2.0 or "light" participation, as is proposed nowadays, fails to contribute to the original goals of public participation.

Keywords:

public participation, active and passive citizens, European Value Study

1 Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, Netherlands & Kaunas Technological University, Kaunas, Lithuania; University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

2 Gotheborg University, Gotheborg, Sweden.

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1. Introduction

An active and engaged citizenry in politics and social affairs is an indisputable ideal, and non-participation is seen as highly problematic, as the ideal is that nobody should be left behind (Poguntke et al., 2015, p. 4). Such engagement materializes in the public participation in public policy processes. Public participation is defined as "the direct involvement – or indirect involvement through representatives – of concerned stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest" (Quick & Bryson, 2016, p. 1).

Much research has been done in all the varying forms of public participation, emphasizing the who, how, and when of deliberation and co-creation in policymaking (for overviews, see Creighton, 2005; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Bobbio, 2019; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2022). It includes participatory budgeting, deliberative polling, collaborative planning, and co-production. The recent literature emphasizes the desirability thereof. The organization and institutionalization of such participation raises much more discussion. Scholars have made various claims how to select and recruit participants, how to design the process and how to increase the impact of such processes. Recently, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and social media have been main topics in the discussion of how to increase public participation. For instance, Public Participation Geographical Information Systems are developed, enabling stakeholders and the public at large to utter their preferences regarding the importance of values that should be central in planning through the use of ICT.

Dilemmas remain. The dilemma central in this article is that, in theory, public participation is promoted out of democratic ideals, and that the quality of public policies is expected to increase if opposing interests, values, and opinions from the citizenry are considered beforehand. However, practices show that such participation is nearly always limited to a (very) select group, excluding people for whom participation would be especially fruitful out of the democratic ideal, namely those not organized in any political or societal organization.

The question is whether that matters and whether the proposals recently made to solve this problem are adequate. This paper addresses this topic by answering the following questions: Does the passive citizenry differ from the active citizens in terms of its background, basic values, and opinions about concrete issues, and what does this imply for the need to include them in public participation processes?

To answer this question, the paper first addresses it in theory, presenting the arguments to restrict public participation to people already active in society and politics, and arguments favoring the inclusion of people not being a member of any political or social organization. This results in the preliminary conclusion that the exclusion of the passive citizenry is especially a problem when this group differs from other people in their background, values, and opinions. If they do have a different background, different values, and different opinions compared to people being active

in politics and social organization, their exclusion could result in public decision-making neglecting the interests of a significant part of society.

The newest version of the survey on European Value Studies (ESV) allows one to investigate whether such differences are actually visible. The third section elaborates on the nature of the ESV study, the countries involved, and the variables incorporated in the analysis. The fourth section presents the outcomes of multivariate statistical analyses comparing passive and active citizens in 16 European countries. The article ends with a reflection on the implications of the outcomes and a more specified answer to the research question.

2. A review of theories addressing the "public" in public participation

The problem underlying the analysis conducted in this paper is that due to design, political will, and the unwillingness of large parts of the population to engage, public participation in policy-making is most often restricted to a specific group of residents (see, for instance, Biondo et al., 2019; Glimmerveen et al., 2022; Sandström et al., 2020). Whether the process is initiated by (local) authorities or by citizens themselves, the participants are people who represent societal organizations, neighborhood groups, i. e. socially active citizens in general and/or members of political parties, and pressure groups, i. e. politically active people.

There seem to be good reasons for doing so and it seems this has traditionally always been the case. Already in ancient Athens, as well as in the forum in classic Rome, people could utter their opinions, but only the very interested, well-educated, eloquently speaking, wealthy, free, and male citizens. They only participated if they had a stake in the outcomes, had special information and/or a privileged position enabling them to affect the decision made or the implementation thereof. It was not appreciated for the citizenry at large to participate in public decision-making. As Cicero told in those times in his highly acclaimed "Pro Archia Poeta", Humanitas applies only to a select few who appreciate high art and can derive lessons from poetry and literature (cf. Pressman, 2017). Inequality of status was a major criterion for inclusion or exclusion of individuals in the policy process. Participants having a higher status were listened to, men were higher ranked than women, and slaves or barbarians had no say whatsoever. Women were believed to be irrational and incapable of political participation (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_citizenship). The Roman conception of citizenship did not even include political participation (cf. Cuthbertson, 2019).

Through time, the basic dilemma, namely who to include and who not, has not changed. In ancient times authorities distinguished primarily on the basis of hierarchy and loyalty who they would listen to. Through the ages, this resulted in varying

opportunities to affect public decision-making between nobility and commoners, party members and non-members, between property-owning white males versus women and minorities, and between wealthy and poor people.

The famous economist Schumpeter still argued in 1943 that including the passive part of the citizenry is not needed. According to him, the sole role for citizens is to owe allegiance to the republic, abide the law, and risk their lives for the national defense, in exchange for their voting right. In his view, "Citizenship serves its purpose to the extent that there are enough citizens to choose among leaders" (cf. Roberts, 2004). The equally reputed political scientists Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom maintained that the pretty clear answer to the question, "Who must agree … so that political competition and citizen choice among rival leaders is a tolerable system for making decisions?" could only be that, "at any given time only the politically active need to agree. Agreement by the politically passive at any given moment is unnecessary" (Dahl & Lindblom, 1953, pp. 297–298). In 1983, Cuthbertson, writing about the principles of public participation, stated that it "is voluntary and therefore is not expected to be representative of all segments of the general public … Its goal is only to enhance the decision making through providing opportunity for the public to contribute pertinent data [and] to discover the concerns to those who are interested in or may be affected by decisions on the issue" (Cuthbertson, 2019, p. 101).

The arguments to restrict this to actively engaged citizens persisted. From *a participants' perspective*, it is repeatedly reported that representatives of associations dislike the involvement of individuals without organizational ties, since the opinions of those individuals would in their eyes be unpredictable and erratic. As Brown et al. argue, "Agencies believe they have the necessary expertise to make sound technical decisions and they do not believe public consultation will substantively improve the knowledge base for decisions" (Brown et al., 2012, p. 15). Many a decision-maker seems to despise public participation of local, individual citizens without any associational ties. The reason mentioned is that the latter's "local" styles of expression and decision-making conflict with the more bureaucratic style being increasingly imposed by the decision-makers. The implication is that the voices of individual citizens are systematically marginalized as they use "amateurish" local forms of negotiation and rhetoric. In procedural and legal matters, those using local negotiating conventions and rhetorical styles are weakened and become vulnerable to manipulation (Tauxe, 1995).

Participation of individual citizens might also have a detrimental impact on citizens' influence on decision-making, and their participation could increase the power of institutionalized voices. Where community groups and business interests are involved, they are much better able to hold local service providers accountable and to communicate their own views and experiences to decision-makers (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). "Even if the structural impediments to authentic participation by the full range of local interests were to be removed, an invisible cultural selection process

in the institutional practices of planning would remain, a process that selects as serious and legitimate only those discursive expressions with which existing legal-bureaucratic procedures are designed to cope" (ibid.).

The problem for citizens' representatives is to get their voices heard alongside experts and business people who know how to "play the game", possess superior technical knowledge, confidence and negotiating skills (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). Meetings in public participation are quite often confrontational, dominated by vocal minority groups, difficult for the layperson to understand because of highly technical and legal "jargon".

From an *elitist perspective*, individual citizens are not to be trusted and their direct participation is judged to be dangerous, costly, and disruptive, slowing down decision-making without adding anything relevant, resulting in risks, exclusion of non-included, oppressed groups, and although perhaps good for the advancement of democracy, certainly detrimental for stability (Fishkin, 1991). In this view, People are either "too passionate and selfish or too passive and apathetic" to be directly involved (Stivers, 1990, p. 87).

From a *public policy perspective* the aim of public participation is to increase the quality of policies through involving representatives of service users or community groups. Such participation is not about conflicts of interests, but about creating a partnership between local business people, elected councilors, public officials, and other local agencies resulting in sharing information and building consensus, in order to make better decisions (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). According to Habermas, participants need to come to a consensus about the issues at stake through rational argument and not through the loudest voice (cf. Habermas, 1984). Therefore, it is not necessary for as many participants as possible to be included, but only that as many convincing arguments as possible are. Such arguments come mostly from representatives of associations. Individual citizens are often unable to reach out beyond their own particularities, are often less informed, less educated, and less able to contribute information that could alter the decision-making. The result of such thinking is seen in the Effective Decision Model by Thomas (1995). Relevant publics are defined as either those who have information or knowledge useful for the decision or those who have the ability to affect implementation. The model eliminates relevant groups of the public if they do not possess at least one of these qualities (cf. Schlossberg & Shuford, 2005, pp. 19–20).

Out of a *pragmatic organizational perspective*, the involvement of individual citizens would make participation processes costly and complex to manage, especially given the size of the citizenry. It is therefore said that "Direct citizen involvement is a luxury that modern societies cannot afford. It requires skills, resources, money, and time that most citizens do not have" (Roberts, 2004).

For these reasons, many a scholar and practitioner has opted for the so-called Neo-Tocquevillean idea of public participation, focusing on the involvement of

representatives of non-profit organizations (cf. Edwards, 2004, pp. 11 ff). As Edwards argues, "This is because theories of associational life rest on the assumption that associations promote pluralism by enabling multiple interests to be represented, different functions to be performed and a range of capacities to be developed" (ibid., p. 32). Frewer (1999) also suggests an acceptance criterion based on representativeness, the need for participants to be representative of the broader public, rather than simply representing some self-selected group of individuals. The existence of a plurality of societal and political associations is expected to represent civil society as a whole.

Whether seen from the perspective of the actual participants, an elitist, policymakers', or pragmatic perspective, the exclusion of individual otherwise passive citizens is no problem at all and even to be desired.

However, since the 1960s another perspective on public participation also emerged, claiming that it is of utmost importance that individual citizens become involved in the policy process. In this view, the concept of democracy itself is at stake. Direct democracy is a means as well as a goal in itself. In the tradition of Rousseau and Mill, direct citizen participation is seen as educative and has to be learned in practice (Pateman, 1970), and in the tradition of Aristotle, it is intrinsically valuable because it contributes to the development of an active, public-spirited moral character among citizens. Direct public participation ensures that policies are supported by those people affected by them. It also presents a mechanism for those without power to challenge those who have it. Instead of stating that because society is complex, public participation cannot be, the proponents' answer is that because of the complexities, public participation becomes a necessity. Individual people have to get involved as they are sources of information needed to make policies efficient and effective, and their involvement can be a source of innovative ideas and approaches (Barber, 2003).

As for their deficiencies in their relation to decision-makers, proponents argue that not the citizens, but the authorized set of decision-makers is somehow deficient (Fung, 2006). The decision-makers often bureaucratize the process in order to deter participants. It is too easy to blame the participants for the different logics at play (cf. De Vries, 2000). The extent to which public participation can solve the deficiencies depends on the interests included and excluded, the information and competence to make good judgments and decisions, and the responsiveness of participants to the non-participants (Fung, 2006). According to Fung nonprofessional citizens also possess distinctive capabilities that may improve public action.

According to the proponents of including otherwise passive citizens, public participation does not have to be limited to supporting the final decision about a policy, but can also be aimed at deliberating about the basic elements of such a decision. This refers to a deliberation about the alternatives to be included, the criteria to be taken into account, the preferences, and merits of each alternative. Participants can ask for a limitation or expansion of the alternatives considered. They can add criteria to judge alternatives and/or give specific weights to those criteria (cf. De Vries, 2000). They can

even scrutinize the merits attached to alternatives with regard to each of the criteria, thus making the final decision better thought-through and more legitimized.

The proponents of direct involvement of otherwise passive citizens criticize the role played by representatives of societal and political organizations in participation processes. Hambleton et al (2000) found that community leaders tend to represent communities of "place" rather than communities of "interest" (that is, neighborhoods rather than interest groups such as older people or gay residents). They also found limited evidence of links between representatives and their communities to ensure accountability (cf. Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004) and that selected representatives tended to reflect the interests of only a small cohort of groups (cf. Hambleton et al., 2000).

Recently, the proponents have proposed varying ways to make such widespread participation feasible. In their standard work on public participation Nabatchi and Leighninger mention new ways to recruit potential participants through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 246). Public Participatory Geographical Information Systems (PPGIS) have been developed as a technology that could support public participation with the goal of including local and marginalized populations in planning and decision processes (Brown et al., 2012, p. 7). Through such ICT systems, participants can, for instance, mention what values they deem especially important. They can indicate whether specific criteria should be taken into account and what weights should be attached to such criteria. Included in the use of ICT is also the use of social media. Decision-makers can listen in on sites such as Facebook and Twitter to aggregate values and opinions found thereon, to see what the discussions focus on, and use that information in their decision-making. They can create Online Problem Reporting Platforms in which citizens inform the decision-makers about issues to be solved. Decision-makers can also use forms of Crowdsourcing and Contests. In this way, "Participation leaders issue a broad challenge to the public and encourage people to submit their best ideas" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 269). This is seen as a kind of "Participation 2.0". As Mergel (2013) states, "At the core of Participation 2.0 processes are the social media channels that allow bidirectional interactions among government agencies and citizens. Examples include posting comments to blogs and Facebook Fan Pages, using Twitter messages to provide breaking news and information, and allowing the use of public datasets for mashups with other applications, such as Google Maps" (Mergel, 2013, p. 148). Government organizations are also developing websites that allow citizens to identify and alert managers to problems or deficits in their community (for example, CitySourced, www.citysourced.com). The use of ICT is said to be able to materialize all the potential goals of public participation as distinguished by Arnstein in 1969, even citizen empowerment (Mergel, 2013, pp. 148 ff).

A second proposal in recent literature is to decompose the policy-making process according to classic classifications and to have the "public" only participate in a part thereof, i. e. the part that is deemed most useful for participation, for instance, the

agenda-setting, policy development, decision-making, policy implementation, and evaluation (cf. Dunn, 2015). Some propose participation as early as possible, for instance emphasizing its role in agenda-setting and using social media and problem reporting platforms to inform policy-makers about issues the citizenry wants to be handled. An alternative is to have citizens especially involved in prioritization. In this case, citizens are given the opportunity to say what criteria should be satisfied in a policy and which criteria are the most important ones – as in PPGIS. Or citizens participate to make suggestions in what direction budgets should be changed, as in participatory budgeting (Gilman, 2016; Sintomer et al., 2016). A major idea is also to concentrate public participation in the phase after the decision is made, i. e. in the implementation thereof, as is central in the nowadays popular concept of co-production (cf. Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Pestoff & Brandsen, 2013). The difference with earlier proposals is that such participation moves away from deliberation and decision-making as such.

Yet another proposal is the breakdown of participatory processes in an alternating process of participation by representatives of societal and political organizations and the public at large. The latter could have a crucial role in, for instance, agenda-setting. Subsequently the former design a number of alternative policies. Then, the citizenry is asked to comment on the proposals, after which the "experts" design the final policy, the politicians decide, and the citizens are involved again in the implementation.

The last proposal to be mentioned is to broaden the concept of public participation. Scholars claim that asking about opinions and values through polls among the citizenry, or asking them to join a focus group in order to react to policy issues and discuss them, are also meaningful forms of public participation. The outcomes could be useful for the decision-maker, as decisions could become more in line with what citizens need as indicated by such polls and focus groups.

Such proposals do still result in a form of public participation as they satisfy the criteria as specified, for instance, by Van Deth (2014, p. 315). In his view, public participation should be an activity; it is carried out by people in their role as citizens; it should be voluntary; and it deals with government, politics or the state. The criterion that as many people as possible should be involved, or that there should be widespread deliberation, is not part of the criteria. Responding to polls and joining focus groups can suffice to see a process as public participation.

Nevertheless such solutions also have their issues. Brown et al. (2012) concluded about the role of ICT in public participation, "that while PPGIS aspires to improve the quality of decision-making and increase the level of public impact beyond traditional stakeholder and interest groups, the fullest potential of PPGIS has yet to be realized because of a number of social and institutional constraints." Their conclusion is also that "empirically, PPGIS responses from random samples of the general public contain bias toward greater male participation, higher average age, higher levels of formal

education, and underrepresentation of racial-ethnic groups", and that the "biased composition of PPGIS participants is a persistent critique that is difficult to rebut" (Brown et al., 2012, p. 13).

This problem is visible in the use of social media in general, as "citizens participating in online discussions about policy are not necessarily more representative of the general public (and may in fact be less representative) than the organized lobbying groups – or even the 'usual suspects' who show up at conventional public hearings" (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 266). Theocharis (2015) claims that "social media do not only offer opportunities of political participation for people who consciously avoid engagement through traditional avenues, but also for those who were previously inactive" (p. 246). Beate Kohler-Koch (2015) argues that, "the social media clearly fail in the declared objective of being an instrument of interaction … they are almost exclusively used in one-way communications" (p. 212).

The above points out that opinions to include the otherwise passive citizenry in public participation processes depends on one's goals to have such public participation. The first goal could be the improvement of policies in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. Having policy processes based on a deliberation and decision out of a multitude of interests could result in improved policymaking. It would result in a confrontation of countervailing powers scrutinizing the policies, making them more transparent and better argued, and could even result in partnerships resulting in decisions being optimal from the perspective of different interests.

A second goal could be to have an increased legitimacy of the policy, resulting in easing the implementation thereof. When people participate, they will understand why certain decisions are made and will be more inclined to accept those decisions. It could decrease the existing distrust in authorities and institutions. Out of a democratic ideal, widespread public participation could elevate the people, have them trust the democratic system including the political actors, the institutions etc.

If only the first goal is deemed relevant, the exclusion of passive citizens from participating in policymaking processes does not pose a huge problem. That is, if the opinions about actual policies of the people included in participatory processes are similar to the opinions adhered to by the passive citizens. If opinions of those potentially included in participatory processes are different from those automatically excluded because they are otherwise completely passive, this could present a problem. Policy decisions could become biased in favor of the interests of the participants, and the resulting policy could be neglecting specific arguments, preferences, and options of those excluded.

If the second goal of public participation is deemed relevant, the exclusion of passive citizens is automatically problematic, as this prevents the achievement of that goal. This is, however, only relevant, if the basic values of passive citizens are different from the values adhered to by the participating citizens, and inclusion in participatory processes could reduce those differences.

Therefore, whether or not there is a necessity to find solutions for including the passive citizenry in public participation processes depends on whether there are significant differences in their backgrounds, the values adhered to, and the opinions about actual policies. Finding out whether that is the case, is the goal of the empirical analysis presented below. It will conclude whether the following hypotheses can be corroborated or have to be refuted:

H1. Compared to active citizens, the passive ones have specific features in terms of their age (older), gender (female), education (lower), poverty (higher), and ethnicity (more often from a minority).
H2. Compared to active citizens the passive ones adhere to different values.
H3. Compared to active citizens the passive ones have different opinions about actual policy-issues.

3. Methods

We analyze data from the fifth wave of the European Values Study, conducted in 2017–2018. It is a large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey research program carried out under the responsibility of the European Values Study Foundation. The EVS study covers a broad range of topics, including the main domains of life: work and leisure time, family and sexuality, religion, politics and ethics. The project is well documented on the internet (https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/history/).

The fifth wave of the EVS-study includes 33 countries, 16 of which are used for this study: Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Poland, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland. The total N in this study is 22,414 respondents.

In all countries, fieldwork was conducted on the basis of detailed and uniform instructions prepared by the EVS advisory groups. The main mode in EVS 2017 is face to face (interviewer-administered). Representative single-stage or multi-stage sampling of the adult population of the country 18 years old and older was used for the EVS 2017. The sample size was set as the effective sample size: 1200 for countries with a population over 2 million, 1000 for countries with a population under 2 million. The target population is defined as: individuals aged 18 or older that have an address of residence within private households at the date of the beginning of the fieldwork (Gedeshi et al., 2020).

It is important for this study that the survey includes questions concerning perceptions of life, including memberships in voluntary organizations; active or inactive membership in humanitarian or charitable organizations, consumer organizations, self-help groups or mutual aid; desirable qualities of children; moral attitudes; opinions about politics and society: political trust and interest; political

participation; postmaterialism (scale); the most important aims of the country for the next ten years; and demography: sex; age (year of birth); being born in the country of interview; the highest educational level (ISCED); scale of household income (weekly, monthly, annual). The exact formulation of the questions will be given below when they are used and can also be found in the EVS-codebook (Gedeshi et al., 2020).

4. Measuring passivity

We distinguish two dimensions of passivity, namely social and political. The social dimension is indicated by the membership in societal associations. The question in the European Value Study is: "*Please look carefully at the following list of voluntary organizations and say which, if any, do you belong to*?", distinguishing religious or church organizations; education, arts, music or cultural activities; trade unions; political parties or groups; conservation, the environment, ecology, animal rights; professional associations; sports or recreation; humanitarian or charitable organizations; consumer organizations; self-help groups, mutual aid groups; or other groups (cf Kolenović-Đapo, 2020).

Table 1.

Societal, political and total passivity in European countries

Frequency	% in country not being a member of any voluntary organization	% in country that never participated in at least one political action	% in country completely passive	Total N
Iceland (2017)	11.5	32.9	5.2	915
Netherlands (2017)	18.1	40.7	9.3	686
Switzerland (2017)	25.4	30.3	11.0	673
Germany (2017)	27.4	31.4	13.3	1494
Slovenia (2017)	27.1	57.8	17.9	1076
Austria (2018)	37.1	40.2	19.8	1644
Croatia (2017)	41.9	44.0	21.1	1488
Czech Republic (2017)	45.7	56.9	29.2	1812
Spain (2017)	69.1	51.4	39.0	1212
Belarus (2018)	49.7	85.0	43.2	1548
Poland (2017)	72.7	59.2	47.7	1352

Slovak Republic (2017)	76.7	61.5	48.2	1435
Armenia (2018)	73.4	64.7	50.2	1500
Georgia (2018)	84.2	71.2	61.0	2194
Russian Federation (2017)	80.4	80.5	66.9	1825
Bulgaria (2017)	74.8	83.5	67.3	1560

Source: European Value Studies, 2020

Column 2 in Table 1 shows that the percentage of people being societal passive, i. e. those who are not members of any voluntary organization, is much larger in Central and Eastern European countries than in Western European countries. In the Russian Federation, Bulgaria, and Belarus more than half of the population do not belong to any societal association, while in old democracies like Iceland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria less than 40% are not members of any voluntary organizations. The exceptions are Croatia, which has more societal involvement than expected given this explanation, and Spain, which has a lower position in the ranking than expected.

Political passivity is measured through the analysis of the responses to the following question: "*I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never, under any circumstances, do it.*" The four possibilities mentioned are: signing a petition; joining in a boycott; attending a lawful demonstration; joining an unofficial strike.

Column 3 in Table 1 shows a clear divide between the respondents from Western European and those from Central and Eastern European countries regarding these items. The ranking shows that in Western Europe, a minority has never done such things, while in the Central part of Europe, the percentage of respondents saying they have never done that is much higher – with Croatia and Spain again being the exception. In Eastern Europe the percentage of politically passive people is the highest (above 80%).

Complete passivity, i. e. the non-membership in any voluntary association and the nonparticipation in any form of political action, shows the same picture. Less than 20% of all respondents in Iceland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Slovenia report they are societally and politically passive. Over 40% of the respondents in Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, and Armenia say that they are neither active in a societal nor a political way. These are the relatively passive countries. Over 70% of the respondents from Georgia, Russia, and Bulgaria say so. These are the countries with widespread passivity. See column 4 of Table 1.

Although this way of measuring passivity does have face validity, as it measures whether people are active neither in societal associations nor politically, the validity

can be argued further. In order to ascertain that it is a valid measure, two exploratory analyses were conducted, relating this measure of passivity to factors that according to renowned scholars, such as Putnam (on trust) and Inglehart (on materialism and postmaterialism), are related to activity-passivity.

Robert Putnam argued that passivity is a sign of distrust reducing the social capital (Putnam et al., 1994; Putnam, 2000). According to the EVS data, 31% of all respondents mention that in general one can trust people, while 69% say one cannot be too careful. However, only 22% of those respondents classified as passive tend to trust other people, compared to 37% of the active citizens. This difference conforms with the expectations on the work of Putnam (cf. Putnam et al., 1994; Putnam, 2000).

As for the materialism and postmaterialism index (cf. Inglehart, 1990), in general, 28% of the respondents adhere to materialism and 15.7% to postmaterialistic values. However, of the passive people 38.0% adhere to materialism, while only 8.7% adhere to postmaterialism. Compared to the 22.3% (materialistic) and 20.0% (postmaterialistic) within the group of active people, this is a significant and relevant difference that conforms with standing theory.

Most important for the validity of the measure for passivity is whether people we classify as passive are indeed passive. This is seen in their interest in politics.

22% of all respondents are not at all interested in politics. Within the group of (somewhat) active people this sinks to 16.8%, while the disinterest is almost twice as high (31.2%) for the passive people. The data further show that the passive ones are less inclined to follow politics in the media. Although such differerences do not apply to following politics on television, the differences are huge when asked whether or not the respondents follow politics on the radio – 30% of the active people never do, compared to 49.1% of the passive people. 30% of the active people never read about politics in daily papers, compared to almost half (49.4%) of the passive people. Finally, regarding following politics on social media, 35.2% of the active people say they never follow politics on social media, compared to 51.7% of the passive people.

The above discussion results in the conclusion that the measurement of passivity as used in this paper is a valid measure and can be used in the analyses presented below.

5. The background characteristics of passive people

Table 1 suggests that at least part of the explanation of the differences between passive and active people is due to country characteristics. At this macro-level, the frequency of passivity could be explained by the wealth of the country, the kind of political regime, and the political-historical development of the country. Additional analysis is required to find out what the main determinative factor at this macro-level is.

The discussions on public participation emphasize that the exclusion of passive people implies an underrepresentation of the less educated, the poor, ethnic minorities, the young and women. A binary-logistic regression analysis with passivity as the endogenous variable shows that these individual characteristics are indeed relevant in explaining passivity. The outcomes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Impact of background factors on passivity in European countries (Odd ratios)

Frequency	Country effect Reference is Iceland	Level of education Reference is low education	Household income Reference is decile 1–2	Ethnic minority Reference is born in country	Age-groups Reference is group 45–54	Gender Reference is male	Total N
Iceland	---	.678		2.673	.244–.712		915
Netherlands	1.692	.728					686
Switzerland	2.173	.684	.724	6.032	1.08–3.56		673
Germany	2.790	.756	.867	3.549			1494
Slovenia	3.942	.799			.497–2.712		1076
Austria	4.503	.592	.895		1.196–2.060		1644
Croatia	5.202	.779			1.121–2.828		1488
Czech Rep.	8.170	.821	.946			1.339	1812
Spain	9.771	.793		2.349	1.292–4.720		1212
Poland	15.864	.830	.916				1352
Belarus	16.357		.916		1.446–4.673		1548
Slovakia	18.607	.882	.876		1.454–2.937		1435
Armenia	21.527	.911				1.235	1500
Georgia	29.194	.828	.934		1.027–1.607	1.304	2194
Bulgaria	40.587	.740	.922				1560
Russia	41.425	.861	.916				1825
Overall	---	2.016	1.347	1.305	1.124–1.938	1.062	22414

Note: All numbers are significant with p<.05
All empty cells → non-significant effect

Source: European Value Studies, 2020

Three background factors have a significant impact on passivity in nearly all

countries included. It concerns the educational level, total household income, and the age of the respondents. In most countries, people with incomes in the lowest two deciles, an education at a primary school or lower secondary level, and those who are younger or older than between 45 and 54 years are significantly more likely to belong to the passive citizens. Concerning age, there is one exception, namely Iceland, in which people within the 45–54 age group are significantly more likely to be passive.

A couple of effects in particular countries stand out. In Switzerland, passivity is significantly related to ethnicity. Gender is only significantly related to passivity in the Czech Republic, Armenia, and Georgia – with women being more likely to belong to the passive part of the population.

Notwithstanding these effects at the individual level, the main determinants of passivity are not found in the individual background, but rather in national differences. See the second column of Table 2. Taking Iceland as the reference country, the odds of finding passive people are 41 points higher in the Russian Federation and 40 points higher in Bulgaria.

6. The value systems of passive and active people

This section addresses the differences between passive and active people in their adherence to basic values. The question used in the European Value Survey reads: "*Here is a list of qualities which children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which five would you say are the most desirable for a child to have? Please choose up to five!*" Table 3 presents the response categories, the frequency with which these are mentioned in general, and the differences between passive and active respondents.

Some values are only judged to be important by a small part of the distinguished groups (obedience, unselfishness, religious faith). Good manners and responsibility belong to the values that are judged to be important by a majority of the passive as well as the active people.

Table 3.

Importance of basic values

Value	% mentioning it among top 5 values	Difference active – passive people	N
Responsibility	75%	71% – 77%	22202
Good manners	74%	76% – 70%	22284
Tolerance and respect	67%	72% – 58%	22099
Hard work	61%	55% – 72%	22217
Independence	52%	58% – 43%	22187
Determination perseverance	39%	40% – 37%	21988
Thrift, saving money and things	35%	34% – 36%	22030
Imagination	20%	22% – 16%	21860
Religious faith	20%	21% – 23%	21829
Unselfishness	20%	21% – 19%	21884
Obedience	20%	19% – 23%	21858

Source: Authors

The third column shows that passive and active people differ significantly on the importance of the following values. The active ones mention the value of "tolerance and respect" significantly more often (72% versus 58%). The passive ones mention the value of "hard work" significantly more often (55% versus 72%).

When we break down the differences in the importance attached to the values on which the differences between active and passive people seem to be most relevant according to the countries involved, huge differences between countries appear. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.

Differences in value systems between active and passive people by country

Country	Hard work	Tolerance and respect	Total N
Iceland	40%-42% F = 0,100, p = .752	91%-83% F = 3,374, p = .067	915
Netherlands	24%-44% F = 11,929, p = .001	88%-66% F = 25,026, p = .000	686
Switzerland	28%-35% F = 1,397, p = .238	85%-75% F = 5,371, p = .021	673
Germany	36%-59% F = 37,562, p = .000	88%-72% F = 37,393, p = .000	1494
Slovenia	30%-41% F = 9,591, p = .002	72%-68% F = 2,481, p = .115	1076
Austria	14%-25% F = 21,347 p = .000	80%-50% F = 132,793, p = .000	1644
Croatia	61%-69% F = 7,063, p = .008	73%-71% F = 0,670, p = .413	1488
Czech Republic	83%-83% F = 0,029, p = .865	65%-51% F = = 31,188, p = .000	1812
Spain	23%-26% F = 1,245, p = .265	86%-77% F = 15,215, p = .000	1212
Belarus	83%-81% F = 0,948 p = .330	57%-55% F = 0,654 p = .419	1548
Poland	80%-87% F = 1,022, p = .312	81%-78% F = 2,624, p = .105	1352
Slovak Republic	80%-73% F = 9,932, p = .002	35%-28% F = 7,125, p = .008	1435
Armenia	72%-73% F = 0,549 p = .459	56%-55% F = 1,060 p = .303	1500
Georgia	79%-77% F = 1,002, p = .317	58%-56% F = 1,286, p = .257	2194
Russian Federation	80%-77% F = 2,453, p = .118	54%-52% F = 0,393, p = .531	1825
Bulgaria	92%-84% F = 13,671, p = .000	67%-67% F = 0,013 p = .909	1560
Overall	55%-72% F = 698,584, p = .000	72%-58% F = 448,890, p = .000	18768

Note: Upper figures in each cell contain the percentages of active versus passive people in each country mentioning this value as one of the top five values
Lower figures in cells are F-values of the differences between active and passive respondents with the statistical significance.

Source: Authors

Compared to people in Central and Eastern Europe, in Western Europe, fewer people rank the value "hard work" among the top five values. In Western Europe, only a minority judges this value to be central in their value system. In Central and Eastern Europe, the vast majority rank this value among the top five.

The opposite is seen for the value of "tolerance and respect". In Western European countries, this value is ranked among the top five by more than three-quarters of all respondents, while this is much less the case in Central and Eastern European countries. The lowest percentage is found in Slovakia, where only 32% of the respondents rank this value within the top five.

In some countries, the differences between active and passive people are indeed the largest concerning the importance attached to these two values. This is seen in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. The differences are not only statistically significant but also highly relevant.

This can be illustrated by the German part of the survey. 59% of the German passive respondents judge hard work to be among the top five values, whereas only 36% of the active respondents judge that to be the case. With regard to tolerance and respect, 88% of the active Germans see this as a prime value, whereas only 72% of the passive ones judge this to be so. The Austrian part is also pronounced in its differences. Half of the passive people judge "tolerance and respect" to be central in their value system, as opposed to 80% of the active people. In this country, there is also a huge difference between active and passive people concerning the value they attach to the feeling of responsibility. Among the passive ones, 66% rank this value among the most important, while 84% of the active ones do so.

In Iceland and Switzerland, as well as in the Russian Federation, Belarus and Georgia, the importance attached to the two values hardly varies between active and passive people. In other countries, the differences concentrate around one value, such as "tolerance and respect", as is seen in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

The conclusion cannot but be that the answer to the question of whether differences between passive and active people exist regarding their value system depends on the country at stake. In general, these differences concentrate around the values of "hard work" and "tolerance and respect". Passive people adhere more to the former value and active people more to the latter.

7. The opinions of active and passive citizens on policy issues

This section addresses the differences in the opinions about actual policy issues. The question used in the European Value Survey reads: "*Please tell me for each of the following whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in*

between", with response categories from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The issues relate to:

1. Claiming state benefits which you are not entitled to
2. Cheating on tax if you have the chance
3. Taking the drugs marijuana or hashish
4. Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties
5. Homosexuality
6. Abortion
7. Divorce
8. Euthanasia (terminating the life of the incurably sick)
9. Suicide
10. Having casual sex
11. Avoiding a fare on public transport
12. Prostitution
13. Artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilization
14. Political violence
15. Death penalty

When analyzing the differences in the opinions of passive and active people we do find a lot of statistically significant differences, i. e. 71 out of the 240 possible findings (16 countries with 15 policy issues) show significant differences between the two groups. However, the real differences are very small. When the threshold for a relevant difference is set at 0.5 on a scale running from 1–5, only three relevant differences between passive and active respondents are seen. In Bulgaria this is seen concerning homosexuality, with the active part being more liberal. In Germany it is seen in the opinions regarding prostitution, with the active part being more liberal. In Spain it is seen regarding the justification of divorce, with the passive part being more liberal. Finding three significant and relevant differences, when considering 240 of such differences, is what statisticians call capitalization on chance. Therefore, the conclusion cannot but be that, controlling for the country, no significant and relevant differences between active and passive people remain regarding their opinions on policy issues.

8. Discussion and conclusions

This article first discussed theoretical arguments on the need to involve the active as well as passive part of society in public participation processes. Two kinds of arguments stand out. The first is the argument that public decision-making could improve if all interests were taken into account, including the interests of the passive citizenry. The second argument suggests that the inclusion of the otherwise passive citizenry in public participation processes is needed out of a democratic ideal. Both

arguments are based on the idea that passive citizens are different from more active people regarding their background, basic values, and opinions about actual policies.

The outcomes of the empirical research as presented above show that especially in Eastern European countries the percentage of the population that is completely passive is huge, compared to Central European countries and especially Western European countries. Furthermore, passive citizens do differ from active ones. In nearly all countries involved in this study, passive citizens have a lower level of education and belong to the poorest part of society. In most countries active citizens are found especially within the age group of 45–54. Regarding the structure of the value system, this research also points to significant and relevant differences between passive and active people. This concerns interpersonal distrust (cf. Putnam, 1990), adherence to materialism (cf. Inglehart, 1990), the centrality of values like "hard work" and less adherence to the value of "tolerance and respect" among the passive citizenry. Opinions about actual policy issues hardly show any significant differences between the two groups.

These findings impact on the answer to the question whether it is necessary to include otherwise passive citizens in public participation. From a policy perspective, that is making sound decisions, taking varying interests into account, the inclusion or exclusion of the passive citizenry might not be very relevant, as the opinions on actual policies of the passive ones do not significantly differ from the more active citizenry.

However, out of the democratic ideal, the exclusion of the passive citizenry is a serious issue. If one wants the ideals of democracy and democratic citizenship to materialize – also among those people furthest away from those ideals – it is imperative to have more inclusiveness in deliberation processes. Only then might the basic values of the marginalized part of the citizenry and the active part converge. At the moment they seem to conflict, with the marginalized people being hardly interested in politics, distrusting their fellow citizens, being more materialistic and not adhering so much to mutual tolerance and respect.

If one wants this to change, research cannot be satisfied with introducing just new ways to collect opinions from the passive part of the populace. Instead, it needs to focus on how to make inclusive deliberation happen. That is, if such research is to contribute to the enhancement of interpersonal trust, diminishing materialism and increasing tolerance and respect amongst all people.

All this implies that recent proposals to introduce forms of "light" participation, for instance through the use of ICT, social media, polls, and focus groups in order to inform the policymaker about the opinions of the broader public, lack added value from the perspective of democratic citizenry. Active and passive people do not differ that much in their opinions about concrete policy issues but do in their value systems. The recently proposed instruments miss the point concerning the original goals of public participation. If the classic ideals of citizenship are still valid, rather different solutions are needed. Finding such solutions starts with changing the interpretation of

public participation solely from the perspective of the policy maker, in obtaining the information needed to make concrete decisions about concrete issues, to a perspective on public participation out of the classic democratic ideals. It is also important to take the opinions of the otherwise passive citizenry, and especially the arguments behind such opinions, into account by including them in the deliberation process and to make them understand how democratic processes work in practice. This requires the provision of political, administrative and technical support to such citizens to participate in a meaningful way. Probably they need help in transforming their views, which might in themselves not be in line with administrative procedures, into views that conform to such procedures without changing the essence of the content of these views. The political will to do so, administrative support, a well-thought-through design out of the perspective of democratic ideals, and putting much more effort in engaging the people that are normally left out of the equation, are severely needed.

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