

Direct Democracy in Finland - Stagnant Water

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Finland is one of the five Nordic countries. It became independent in 1917 and has a long border with Russia (1,269 km), which is the eastern border of the European Union. The country counts 5,3 million inhabitants and comparatively few immigrants (143,000).

Only plebiscites

There have been 2 popular votes on the national level: 1931 on prohibition, 1994 on the accession to the EU.

There have been 52 popular votes on the local level: 47 about municipal mergers, 2 about road construction, 1 about the change of a province, 1 about annexation of municipal territory, and 1 about the construction of a waste incineration plant.

All these popular votes have been in the form of a plebiscite – that is, they were controlled by the authorities; only the national parliament (eduskunta) or the local parliaments (valtuusto) can decide to call a popular vote.

Strictly speaking Finland has no direct democracy (citizens' initiatives and citizen-initiated referendums). However, there is a right to agenda-initiative on the local level. At least 5% of the municipal electorate can request the calling of a popular vote on a specified issue for which the municipality is responsible. The local council has to decide without delay whether an advisory popular vote will be organized. In the overwhelming majority of cases, agenda-initiatives are turned down by the local authorities. As a consequence the instrument has been devalued and is considered ineffective by the citizens.

Avoiding direct democracy

In the 1930s, after the first experience of a national plebiscite, the Finnish Parliament developed three guiding principles for the use of popular votes: 1. Parliament alone may decide to call a plebiscite 2. The subject matter must be simple enough so that people can understand it 3. A

popular vote is held only as a last resort. In fact, these are guidelines for avoiding popular votes.

The plebiscite was introduced into the constitution in 1987 and carried over into the new constitution of 2000. As neither 1987 nor 2000 represented a break from the traditional thinking, there was no new beginning but only the continuation of public consultation as it had been practiced before. All in all, the prevailing attitude towards direct democracy has been quite stable over time and rather hostile, especially among the establishment and the mainstream media. Direct and indirect democracy have been seen as incompatible opposites by both power-holders and the media.

In the 1990s, with a growing crisis of representative democracy in Finland, the number of those regarding direct and indirect democracy as complementary has grown. Even official reports started to speak of the necessity to complement representative government with new ways of citizen participation. This change is clearly visible, but until now it has been more rhetorical than effective in practice. Old attitudes still prevail.

At present, a reassessment of the constitution of 2000 is taking place and reflections about the “development of direct democracy” in Finland are made. An outcome of these reflections is a proposal to introduce the right to agenda initiative on the national level.

How to break the cycle?

Finland is an example of an indirect democracy which excludes the majority of the people from decision-making. It thereby produces passive citizenship and dependency on leadership, setting roots in the character of the people, in their thoughts and actions. It creates a mindset that says “Politics is not for us. It is something out there, handled top-down by politicians which we elect but do not choose,” and also, “There is no alternative. Our system is better than others. Direct democracy is not only impossible but also bad.”

In my view, the introduction of a right to agenda-initiative would leave things essentially as they are, at least until the rise of a strong democracy movement, which will ask for real direct democracy (like for example Mehr Demokratie in Germany). Only with the help of such a movement can the cycle of indirect democracy and passive citizenship be broken.