

Student Engagement in Higher Education: Participation in Greek Student Elections

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Abstract

The paper analyzes student participation in student elections in Greece in the period 1982-2012. It explores the relationship between the framework that regulates university governance, the public mission of the university and the development of actual student engagement. To this effect, we compare two different modes of higher education governance and discuss the way they influence the development of actual student engagement. Drawing from Bourdieu and Habermas, higher education is viewed simultaneously as a relational field and a public sphere and the public mission of the university is analyzed vis-à-vis Olsen's typology of universities, as "internally organized democratic communities" or as "enterprises". The paper presents students' disengagement from student elections and discusses the reasons for their apathy towards politics and indifference to participation in university life, a situation that prevails from 1989 till today. It concludes with the need to map power relations in the social and political fields and their refraction in the higher education field in order to understand student behavior and (dis) engagement from politics.

Keywords

Student engagement, student participation, public mission, university

¹ Ms Soroliou's contribution concerns the collection of data on student participation. The views expressed in the text are the sole responsibility of the other two writers.

Introduction

Historically, the university has been the par excellence locus for the discussion of public issues and the formation of citizens. However, the civic dimension of higher education has not been adequately addressed, despite its importance for a fully rounded education provision and the maintenance and development of a vibrant democratic society (Taylor 2007: 3). In this paper, we argue that the conceptualisation of the civic dimension of higher education strongly relates to the current dominant discourse concerning the mission of the university and the modes of higher education governance. Universities' capacity to foster civic engagement depends both on students' agency and the opportunities provided by the civil society and social institutions for democratic participation. Drawing on Habermas (1991), we highlight the importance of universities when functioning as public spheres for the promotion of students' civic engagement and the strengthening of democracy in society. In this paper, we discuss the development of Greek students' participation in student elections in the period 1982-2012, as an instance of student civic (dis)engagement. To explore the issue at hand, we examine the public mission of the university and how different modes of university governance foster or hinder student engagement. We argue that an institutional framework that provides for student participation in university governance and the development of a relevant institutional strategy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for student engagement; that the formation of students as active citizens is constrained by cultural and political factors that influence the construction of the field of higher education and the position of students within it.

The Public Mission of the University

The public university for a long period of time has functioned as an institution that fulfils social demands for equity and justice and provided access to education to an expanding proportion of young people. However, a growing body of literature suggests that the state funded public university is now obsolete and in need of urgent modernization. The discussion of the public mission of the university usually makes reference to an understanding of knowledge and education as public goods. This conceptualisation of higher education as public good has been prominent in the Greek discourse. Drawing on Samuelson's analysis of public expenditure, Marginson (2006: 49-51) defines public goods as non-rivalrous, i.e. as goods that can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted, and non-excludable, since the benefits cannot be confined to an individual buyer; he maintains that higher education can be organized either as public or as private good. Universities can be free, open to all and focused on research designed to solve social problems, or they can be costly, closed and focused on the provision of privately valuable degrees and technologies sold to the highest bidder. Thus, it is the character of production that determines the nature of the goods and not vice-versa. This is a distinction that draws on the field of economics and emphasizes the politics of economic distribution at the expense of the democratic dimension of education.

From another perspective, drawing on the tradition of political philosophy, the public mission of the university is primarily related to the ways democracy is experienced in the everyday life of the academic community and expressed by the projects through which universities conduct their work 'in public ways'. Community, social awareness and a critical perspective might provide a platform for the regeneration of the public

university. This meaning of the public mission of the university extends to a communication with a broader public sphere beyond the university, where public academic work is shaped by and shapes the broad public discourse and more specialized policy making by public agencies. This suggests the terrain opened up by Habermas's public sphere, which provides for a non-violent form of social integration based on discourse rather than power or money (Marginson 2006) According to Habermas (1994: 121-122), the legal order is legitimate when it safeguards the autonomy of all citizens to an equal degree. The citizens are autonomous only if the addressees of the law can also see themselves as its authors. And its authors are free only as participants in legislative processes that are regulated in such a way and take place in forms of communication such that everyone can presume that the regulations enacted in that way deserve general and rationally motivated assent.

Probably very few bourgeois societies have developed a public sphere in Habermas's sense (Kellner 2000), as Western societies were polarized by class struggle. Street demonstrations and back room, brokered compromises among private interests replaced the reasoned public debate about the common good. With the emergence of welfare-state mass democracy, society and the state became mutually intertwined; publicity in the sense of a critical scrutiny of the state gave way to public relations, mass-mediated staged displays and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion (Fraser 1990: 59). We agree with Bauman that postmodern societies seem to have lost areas, spaces, places and opportunities where private worries can be translated into public issues; spaces where problems can be resolved through collectively managed levers, powerful enough to lift individuals from their privately suffered misery (Bauman 1999: 2-3).

However, one could argue that the university has the potential to function as a public

sphere, providing space for reasoned argument and contending values. The university has functioned in the past as a locus of debate that gave birth to the significant social and political movements of the 1960/70s, such as student movements on both sides of the Atlantic, advocating for student power and grass-roots democracy. The university as public space could overcome some of the limitations of the traditional public sphere elaborated by Habermas, given that it has a viable credentialing system that ensures that the participants in the public debate are qualified to contribute and has no requirement for homogeneity of interest or view (Marginson 2006: 52).

One might think that animating the public sphere is obviously the function of the university. Nevertheless, in the current conditions this function is difficult to fulfil, due to the increasing commercialisation and responsiveness of universities to market demands, government interference over academic freedom and autonomy, the deliberate erosion of public debate, the increasing scepticism about reason and rationality as the basis for public policy-making and the political polarisation and intolerance, whipped up by unscrupulous politicians and their servants in the media (Edwards 2007: 15-16). The crucial issue is whether universities are able to sustain their democratic function, overcoming dominant traits in university governance, as expressed in the vision of the university as a 'service enterprise' (Olsen 2007). The mission of the public university concerning the formation of students is subordinated to market competition and weakened by consumer subjectivities. The university in the public sphere suggests a double act. The problem is to both recover autonomy from state and market-driven heteronomy, persuading government that it is in its interests to free the university from the intrusive steering mechanisms of recent years, while reconfiguring the university in a larger democratic setting (Marginson 2006: 46, 54).

Marginson's analysis provides a direct link to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the social world as relational. Higher education is one of the relational autonomous fields, whose complex interrelationships constitute society. A field is defined as a configuration of objective relations between positions and follows regularities that are not explicit and codified. These positions are objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of power/capital whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions. In highly differentiated societies, the social world is made up of a number of relatively autonomous social microcosms, i.e. spaces of objective relations that are specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). The relations comprising a field are not limited to interactions between agents, as agents may be positionally related in terms of lower/higher status to agents they never meet or know. Therefore, any field, including the higher education field, must be examined in terms of its functions as a relatively autonomous field within the field of power and its evolution in time. Moreover, one must analyze the internal structure of the higher education field, as a universe obeying its own laws of functioning and transformation, meaning the structure of objective relations between positions for legitimacy (Bourdieu 1996). In this paper, the university as a public sphere is examined not only in its consensual perspective, but also in terms of potential conflicts amongst the members of the academic community in the struggle to occupy better positions or to increase their own capital. The outcomes of any conflict should not be considered as predetermined, as well as the ways the broader economic and political field relates to the field of higher education in a specific historic and socio-

cultural context.

Modes of governance and the civic dimension of universities

The public mission and the civic dimension of higher education, along with related concepts, such as citizenship, community and student engagement are highly contested both in academic literature and in the public/political sphere. Although there is a growing acceptance of the importance of promoting active citizenship and student engagement, there are various perspectives on how universities can respond to this role.

The communitarian aspect of universities' civic dimension appears to be prominent in the US context. The emphasis is put on institutional strategies that incorporate in the curriculum practices such as volunteering, community based research and, especially, service learning that combines community-based civic experience with systematic classroom reflection on that experience (Mac Labhrainn and McIlrath 2007: xxi-xxii; Galston 2001). Such a strategy is seen as promoting students' opportunity to experience democracy in their everyday life. Students should be involved in research projects that address important issues in a democratic, diverse society, in co-curricular activities and in for-credit service-learning courses. Simultaneously, faculty should participate in consultation and research that involves and improves communities (Checkoway 2001). The promotion of active citizenship in higher education appears to be related to what is termed "the third mission" of the university. It would make knowledge more accessible to the public, reward faculty for their efforts in drawing upon their expertise for the benefit of society and build collaborative partnerships with communities. The development of strategies at the institutional level seems to fit especially US

universities, since their governance system is characterised by a decentralized distribution of power and autonomy, due to the absence of a centralized (at the federal level) authority for education and a strong tradition of lay citizen governing boards. In Europe as well, several higher education institutions have adopted such a communitarian approach in order to strengthen their civic dimension and, as universities continue to shape their civic identities and define their public purposes, they adopt strategies of engagement that transform university life (Saltmarsh, Zlotkowski and Hollander 2011: 302).

In Europe, where national legislation often defines the relationship of the state with higher education institutions, the development of a legal framework that provides for student participation in university governance is advocated for by various analysts and organizations involved in policy-making. However, the establishment of such a framework, although a necessary condition, does not guarantee *actual* student engagement. This is also indicated by the limited research that was commissioned by the Council of Europe on the issue of student engagement and affirmed in the Bologna Process, where the European Student Information Bureau highlighted the importance of student involvement in university governance. In the Prague Communiqué (2001), Ministers of Education for the first time affirmed that students are full participants in the organization and content of education at universities, marking the official recognition of student engagement in higher education governance. In the Berlin Communiqué (2003), Ministers noted that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place, and called on the institutions and student organizations to identify ways of increasing *actual* student involvement in higher education governance. Ever since 2003, student involvement has grown and has been unanimously

accepted as a principle among all stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area (Popovic 2011).

Actual student engagement in higher education governance, as well as the potential of the university to defend its public mission and to function as a public sphere depend, amongst other things, on the dominant “vision of the university” to use Olsen’s terminology. Olsen distinguishes between the vision of the university as an interest group “representative democracy” and as a market-driven “service enterprise”. During the 1960s and 1970s the vision of the University as a representative democracy was reinforced by student revolts and their criticism of overcrowded universities with very limited access to professors and the repressive authority of universities and government, the younger faculty members' struggle against senior professor dominance, and democratic developments in society at large. In this ideal-type, the university is based on a scheme of internal checks and balances of power that allows representation on governing boards to all categories of employees, as well as students. Decision-making is organized around elections, bargaining, voting and coalition building with a view to accommodating multiple interests. It is linked to enhancing democracy in society at large, while internal democracy and external autonomy are justified by reference to a mix of principles and concerns. Workplace democracy and co-decision are seen as improvements compared to antiquated formal hierarchies. Giving more power to younger faculty and reducing the sovereignty of senior professors are assumed to improve scholarly competence. Giving power to administrative and technical staff is justified by their contribution to the performance of the university. Student power is related both to the significant impact universities have on their lives and to ‘realpolitik’, given the students’ ability to cause difficulties in the operation of universities and

societies (Olsen 2007: 32).

This mode of governance has been criticised, as its key ideas were never fully reconciled with the commitment to intellectual excellence or with the observation that faculty historically has shown little enthusiasm for using their participatory rights (Olsen 2007: 35). It is indisputable, however, that such a vision leaves more room for active student engagement in university life, in contrast to the conceptualization of the university as market-driven service enterprise. In the latter, the university operates in regional or global markets and it is governed and changed by its sovereign 'customers'. Research and education are commodities to be sold in a free market. Competition, profit and the achievement of individual gain are key-processes. Information and knowledge are private strategic resources for competitiveness and survival, not a public good. Market competition requires rapid adaptation to changing opportunities and constraints, which again requires strong, unitary and professional internal leadership. The University has more freedom from the state and political authorities, as New Public Management ideas and techniques are introduced (Olsen 2007: 32). However, greater organisational autonomy also drives non-governmental stakeholders to become more scrutinizing; the response is a greater emphasis on externally monitoring output quality and performance (Salerno 2007: 120). The general tendency is towards the creation of managerial infrastructures parallel to academic ones, where students are less represented or not at all. New public management suggests a distinct organisational culture, which conceives of students as 'customers' or 'clients' and solicits student participation for the purposes of feedback for improved quality performance (Klemencic 2011: 78). The university is to be understood through the concepts of money, position, and institutional and personal gain. Public service does not sit easily with entrepreneurialism or

individualism. The idea of the civic university is in difficulty, not because the university is an ‘ivory tower’, but because it is too much bound into society on terms that run counter to the very idea of the civic university (Barnett 2007: 25). However, if students are to play a role in governance, they need to be positioned not as clients but as partners in the academic community with a long-term commitment to democratic principles and practice (Boland 2005: 200-201).

In this paper, we argue that, although these two modes of university governance have a different potential to promote student participation in university governance, legal regulations do not guarantee their actual engagement in university life. Greek Universities, for instance, have operated for more than 30 years under a legal framework that corresponds to a vision of the university as representative democracy (Act 1268/82), providing for student participation, without inspiring student engagement for a long time. Equally, when the legal framework was replaced in 2011 by an Act that hampered student participation in the election processes for decision-making bodies, no significant student protests were organized to resist the change. Thus, under both regimes, student engagement and voter turnout in student elections remained low, indicating persistent student disinterest in university life. This indicates that the root of the problem does not lie only with the mode of governance per se – or an “appropriate” legal framework.

To understand the reasons for student (dis)engagement, the role and the responsibility of universities in the democratic socialisation process should be examined, especially whether democracy is experienced through the various levels of decision-making processes. If universities are to effectively prepare students for active citizenship, democracy should be experienced from the “boardroom to the classroom” (Boland

2005: 200-201).

Student participation in student elections is (or at least should be), a crucial moment as through this process students elect their representatives in university governance. As Bergan (2004) argues, some important issues arise at this point: To what extent are students allowed to participate in governance? To what extent are “political” student organisations, affiliated with political parties, allowed? Is the general student body sufficiently active and interested in providing its representatives with legitimacy? Are student representatives effective once elected, or are they helping institutions fulfil the formal requirements of representation without having any real influence on institutional policies? (Bergan 2004: 18) The latter question relates to how students perceive their influence on university decision-making processes and to what extent abstention from student elections can be seen as reflecting disengagement with the political process. Another related issue concerns the mechanism through which student representatives are elected or appointed.

The Greek Student Movement: Modes of Governance and Student Engagement

We maintain that the political context and environment of the country strongly influence the organisation and activities of universities as sites of citizenship (Plantan 2004: 93). To this effect we analyse abstention rates in student elections over the period 1982-2012 (data presented in Figure 1) vis-à-vis significant moments in the Greek socio-political context. The selected period is marked by two education Acts that introduced different modes of governance of higher education. Act 1268/1982 provided for student participation in university governance and the election process of decision-

making bodies for the first time, while Act 4009/2011 assigned a minor role to students, by excluding them from the election process of university decision-making bodies. In Greece student organisations are “political”, i.e. directly connected to and influenced by political parties and function as a major channel for the political socialisation of the student body.

Act 1268/82 altered the established power relations in higher education that were based on the authority of full professors, holders of Chairs. It introduced a mode of governance that conflates with Olsen’s vision of the University as internal democracy. As Kladis (2014) argues, during this period there was high social demand for the redistribution of power in higher education. Thus, educational reform was in line with social dynamics. The Act introduced the US model of university organisation, setting the department as the basic academic unit and its general assembly as the major decision-making body at the department level. Ultimate decision-making power for academic, economic and administrative matters resides with the Senate, led by the Rector. It allotted considerable power to the students, providing for student participation in university governance through indirectly appointed student representatives. The election of the university decision making bodies, (Rector’s council, Deanship and Chair of the Department) was based on the total number of the faculty whose vote had a significant weight (50%), and on the vote of the other interest groups that participate in university governance, undergraduate students (40%), postgraduate students (2,5%), administrative personnel (2,5%), technical personnel (2,5%) and lab assistants (2,5%). Thus, for the first time, students could promote their demands for equity and social justice against the arbitrariness of the professoriate. Therefore, participation in student elections became of paramount importance, since student representatives were

appointed by student organisations in accordance with the votes they won. Such a mode of governance appears to leave more room for active student engagement in university life. Indeed, in the first five years after the introduction of the Act, the highest participation rates in student elections was recorded. In 1982, approximately 40% of the student body abstained from student elections. Five years later, the abstention rate dropped to 19%. This was a highly politicized phase of the student movement, as in 1981 the first socialist government was elected.

It is noted that in many European countries, higher education legislation shows appreciation for the idea that higher education should play a role in preparing students for life as active, responsible citizens in democratic society (Klemencic 2011: 74). However, while formal provision for student participation is generally assured, there is a problem with actual student commitment to participating and raising sufficient interest in the student body to actually bring most students to cast a vote (Bergan 2004: 9). This is also the case in Greece, where the legal framework failed to sustain high participation rates. To interpret this failure, one should take into account the power structure of the higher education field, as established by Act 1268/82. The initial democratic intention to empower the subordinate student body was overridden, as what actually happened was the empowerment of students' organizations and appointed student representatives. Thus student organisations (affiliated with political parties) were in a position to bargain with academic candidates for university decision-making bodies, by ensuring a block of favourable electors (Lamprianides 2004). The public mission of the university was undermined, as candidates competed with each other for the support of student organisations. This would not be troublesome, if support was granted on the basis of candidates' merit or the proposed university policy. However, more often than not,

these bargains formed part of petty party politics that had nothing to do with university policy and favoured the personal agendas both of student representatives and candidates for university governance. The situation was further aggravated during periods when a weak student movement or an inactive and apathetic student body could not hold student organisations accountable for their actions, failures or omissions (Lamprianides 2004). In contradistinction to student vote, which became of paramount importance, the importance of faculty vote in the election process diminished, as faculty constitutes a heterogeneous, not easily manipulated group, which rarely offers a block of electors to the candidates. Ultimately, the provisions of the Act led to a situation where academic and political networks were closely interwoven, allowing for a refraction of the social and political field in the higher education field. Soon enough, the dominant clientelist structure of the Greek society and economy (Mouzelis 1987;1999) spread in university life.

Since 1989 one may note a steady decline in participation rates. It is of interest that 1989 (known as the “dirty 89”) was a year of substantial political turmoil when the prime minister of the country was accused of corruption and bribery, led to trial and finally acquitted. This was an altogether exceptional circumstance that required the formation of a “special court”. This period is characterized by a generalised public mistrust and allegations of corruption that led to student disengagement with and aversion to politics, as the majority of the student body realized that student leaders used their popularity and power as a springboard to pursue either an academic or a political career. However, mistrust regarding student politics is not a uniquely Greek problem. As has been pointed out the link of student representatives to political parties has always been a contested aspect of student politics. Ensuring the independence of

student representation is paramount, not only as a value in itself, but also because perceived political bias leads to further mistrust among students and thus to further political apathy (Klemencic, 2011: 80). In Greece, a survey conducted in 1996 among 700 students of the National Technical University of Athens, concluded that 75% of the students disagreed with the affiliation of student organisations with political parties and the manipulation of their vote. It should be noted that 63% of the students expressed the opinion that the mode of student representation should change (Ta Nea 1996).

In the years 1997-1998, the abstention rates rise again to approximately 70%. The educational reform in 1997, which was never put into effect, provided for changes at all educational levels and a new admission system in higher education. The reform met with the strong resistance of the academic and educational communities. Despite a long series of rallies and demonstrations and conditions of sustained protest that lasted more than three months, student mass participation in politics was not triggered anew. Most students remained apathetic and disengaged from university life. It is worth-noting here that the period 1999-2000 was marked by a major crisis in the Greek stock market that led to a huge loss of wealth and to a breach of trust between the government and its constituency. We don't argue that student abstention rates are directly connected with the wider socio-economic and political processes however, in the long run, the lack of social trust affects all aspects of the public sphere. In the years 2000-2001, student abstention rates reached their higher level, almost 78%. In such cases, questions are raised regarding the legitimacy of student representatives in university governance (Bergan 2004: 9). The introduction of the Act 3374/2005 concerning Quality Assurance in higher education provokes yet again student protests, this time against what was perceived of as a commercialization of education. Under these conditions, in 2005

student abstention rates rise again in relation to the period 2002-2004. Act 3549/2007 provided for the first time for direct universal student participation in student elections, aiming at the disentanglement of student organizations and candidates for the decision-making bodies (Sotiropoulos 2010). Despite the efforts to combat bargaining between student organizations and the candidates, student participation rates did not increase. Once again, it seems that Greek youth is blindly protesting policies without being in a position to actively participate in order to change the rules of the game.

Act 4009/2011 introduced major changes in university governance, drawing on new public management principles. Universities are granted more autonomy from the state. Democratic organization and individual academic autonomy are viewed as hindrances to timely decisions and performance, to be replaced by strong management and interdisciplinary organization. University Councils, comprising both internal (academics) and external (lay) members, are introduced, in an effort to bridge the gap between universities, society and the economy. The authority for the development of institutional policy and fiscal management is transferred from the Senate to the Council. Accountability towards the state and society is achieved through quality assurance mechanisms, while performance is for the first time linked to budget allocation. With a view to improve university finances, incentives are provided for excellence in research, creation of spin-off companies and patents. The Act introduced a new mode of governance in higher education, excluding students from participation in the election process of decision-making bodies (Rector, Dean, Head of the Department). It attempted to introduce a New Public Management organizational culture, conceiving of students as customers and soliciting student participation in quality assurance processes through course/programme evaluation. The underlying model of student representation

tends to be characterized by a depoliticised student government which concentrates on providing student services that complement the institutional quality agenda (Klemencic 2011: 78). Student exclusion from the election process of decision making bodies did not meet again with significant student protests, thus leading to the conclusion that political apathy and indifference is the current dominant stance of the student body.

Discussion

Instead of asking what universities should do, one should pose the question of how universities should be in order to promote democratic citizenship, and how democratic citizenship is cultivated within existing governance structures, internal practices and processes, relationships with different stakeholders, especially students, and the wider social and political fields.

As we have stated, the field of higher education is relational to the social and political field. In the Greek context, universities refract the distortions, the clientelism and the power relations of these fields. These are coupled with a prevailing breach of trust amongst the members of the academic community, but also between universities and society. Such a breach is not particular to the higher education field, but is apparent in other social institutions as well, and constitutes a structural characteristic of modern Greek society. Therefore, in any mode of governance and irrespective of the enforced institutional framework or whether education and knowledge are defined as private or public goods, we need to establish “new rules of the game” within the higher education field, as well as in its relation with the social and political field. To understand the disengagement of the student body one should be able to fully comprehend the reasons

why Greek youth consider themselves incapable of intervening in the political game and how this dominant perception has been constructed.

Within the higher education field these new rules should encompass transparency and fairness in faculty-students relations, empowering students and allowing them to occupy different (higher) positions in the field. Drawing from Bourdieu, in the Greek context students are not equal players in the field. They occupy subordinate positions in relation to the faculty and the central administration. When Act 1268/82 was introduced, the faculty was in a position to determine the academic future of students, through the arbitrary and non-explicit criteria of assessment of student achievement. They were also in a position to use their academic capital to influence the positioning of specific students, sometimes of students representatives, in the higher education and social field. Theoretically, students' position in the field of higher education was empowered in relation to their professors, as they became players in faculty members' promotion through the ranks through their participation in evaluation processes. However students' disengagement persisted even after the enforcement of Act 4009/11, which accorded them the power to assess the faculty's academic ability.

Finally, of paramount importance is the strengthening of the autonomy of the higher education field in relation to the political field. Two closely interdependent aspects of university autonomy should be safeguarded; autonomy of academia from political intervention, especially regarding faculty appointment and promotion through the ranks and autonomy of academic from political networks; autonomy of student organisations from political party influence. Trust will not be restored unless the student body is convinced that its representatives defend student interests serving the common good and do not exploit their privileges to further their own personal agendas.

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