

# Report on Messina Democracy Lab

WP5 – Dissemination and Exploitation

Part of D5.3 – Lessons learned from lab events



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822337.



**Populism and  
Civic Engagement**



## About this document

**Task Lead:** RVK

**Contributors:** DS

**Date:** November 2019

This document outlines the outcomes and lessons learned from the Democracy Lab that took place in Messina, Italy on 29 September 2019. The Democracy Lab in Messina is part of a series of engagements the Populism and Civic Engagement project 'PaCE' is carrying out to ensure constant exchange with citizens across Europe. The outcomes and lessons learned will be relevant for the development of future Democracy Labs and they can also serve as guidance for other consortia or organisations engaging citizens in their research as well as project work. This document is feeding into the official

Dissemination Level		
PU	Public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	<input type="checkbox"/>
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	<input type="checkbox"/>
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	<input type="checkbox"/>

The working language of this document will be English (EN), as required for reporting purposes by article 20.7 of the Grant Agreement.



# Table of Contents

<b>ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 ABOUT PACE</b>	<b>4</b>
1.2 CONSORTIUM	4
<b>2 STUDY DESIGN</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 RESEARCH AIMS, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES	5
<b>3 EVALUATION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4 DEMOCRACY LAB MESSINA</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5 DISCUSSION</b>	<b>9</b>
5.1 QUESTION 1 – WHICH INFORMATION DO YOU THINK IS VALUABLE TO KNOW BEFORE MAKING A VOTING DECISION?	9
5.2 ADDITIONAL RELEVANT POINTS	10
5.3 QUESTION 2 – HOW DO YOU EVALUATE WHICH INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST?	11
5.4 ADDITIONAL RELEVANT POINTS	11
5.5 QUESTION 3 – WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ENSURE INFORMED VOTING?	12
5.6 ADDITIONAL RELEVANT POINTS	12
<b>6 FEEDBACK BY PARTICIPANTS ON THE DEMOCRACY LAB</b>	<b>14</b>
7.1 MEDIA	15
7.2 INTERVIEWS	15
7.3 SOCIAL MEDIA	15
<b>8 REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS</b>	<b>17</b>



# 1 About PaCE

Across Europe there is a rise of political movements that claim to challenge liberal elites and speak for the 'ordinary person' - movements that can be loosely categorised as 'populist'. Many of these movements have undesirable tendencies. The Populism and Civic Engagement project (PaCE), with others, aims to better understand and respond to the negative tendencies of populist movements, to build upon the lessons of positive examples (such as Reykjavik), and hence play a part in constructing a firmer democratic and institutional foundation for the citizens of Europe.

PaCE will analyse, in detail, the type, growth and consequences of such movements in terms of their particular characteristics and context. From this, it will analyse the causes of these movements and their specific challenges to liberal democracy. In particular, it will focus on transitions in these movements (especially changes in leadership) as well as how they relate to other kinds of movements and the liberal reaction. PaCE will propose responses to these challenges, developing risk-analyses for each kind of response, movement and transition. To this end, it will employ the agent-based simulation of political processes and attitudes to allow for thorough risk analyses to be made. Throughout the project, it will engage with citizens and policy actors, especially groups under-represented in public affairs, face-to-face and via new forms of democratic participation appropriate to our digital age to help guide the project and to comment on its outputs.

The project will develop new tools, based on machine-learning algorithms, to both identify and track populist narratives and aid online consultation. It will result in specific interventions aimed at the public, politicians, activists and educators. It will look further into the future, developing new visions concerning how different actors could respond to populism and it will warn about longer-term trends.

## 1.2 Consortium

#	PARTICIPATING ORGANISATION	CODE	COUNTRY
1	Manchester Metropolitan University ( <b>coordinator</b> )	MMU	UK
2	City of Reykjavik	RVK	Iceland
3	The Centre for Liberal Strategies Foundation	CLS	Bulgaria
4	The Paris-Lodron University	PLUS	Austria
5	The Technical University of Dresden	TUD	Germany
6	The Democratic Society	DEM	Belgium
7	Trilateral Research	TRI	Ireland
8	University of Helsinki	UH	Finland
9	Citizens Foundation	CF	Iceland

## 2 Study Design

Understanding and combating populism can only take place if the public's attitude to and aspirations for democracy are properly understood. The goal of the overall engagement with people for the PaCE project is to ensure the widest democratic engagement throughout all stages of the PaCE project. This includes but is not limited to the planning, research, and dissemination stage of the PaCE project. A programme of half-day local Democracy Labs across the European focus member states during the course of the programme will both complement and disseminate the research.

The Democratic Society will carry out a total of 6-8 Democracy Labs and a final European Democracy Lab throughout the duration of the project. The Democracy Labs specifically aim at creating opportunities for people from different countries of the European Union to become involved in the PaCE project and inform its decision making. The location selection of the Democracy Labs will align with the selection of the project's case studies. The Democracy Labs will be transparent, open and welcoming of participation. By involving people's voices throughout the project, especially those of minorities, the PaCE project will be able to strengthen the process, contribute to the understanding of research findings, and legitimise its results.

### 2.1 Research Aims, Goals, and Objectives

The Democracy Labs are in line with Objective 2 of the Populism and Civic Engagement project:

*Objective 2. Study the general and the specific causes of the three modes of populism (illiberal, nativist and anti-democratic) in European democracies – distinguishing between demand and supply side, internal and external causes.*

The PaCE project will analyse the type, growth and consequences of populist movements in terms of their particular characteristics and context. From this, it will analyse the causes of these movements and their specific challenges to liberal democracy a possibilistic analysis to complement statistical approaches. In particular, it will focus on transitions in these movements as well as how they relate to other kinds of movements and the liberal reaction.

Key part of the project is to understand citizen's attitudes towards democracy are shaped across Europe and how they derive at a specific voting decision. In addition to the statistical analysis, the Democracy Labs will provide us with an opportunity to discuss with citizens in different European countries their considerations for taking a certain decision, what informs their thinking, and their ideas for strengthening democracy in Europe.

Therefore, the aim of the Democracy Labs is to understand how citizens' attitudes towards democracy are shaped across different countries in Europe.

A key goal of the Democracy Labs is to better understand how people seek and analyse information, and how it influences their voting decisions.

#### Objectives

The Democracy Labs aim at reaching the following objectives:

- To produce rich qualitative data around the perceptions of power, trust, and democracy;
- To better understand the way in which traditional and social media influence and shape political and social opinions;



- To better understand the way in which community interactions influence and shape political decisions;
- To think through, with participants, the ways in which they might want to be involved in making and shaping decisions that affect their lives; and
- To test emerging research findings, the language and concepts that chime with people, and to keep the research programme continuously connected to the lived experiences of participants.

### Research Question

We therefore propose the following research question:

**How does information influence people's voting decisions?**

The Democracy Lab will provide the opportunity to discuss a series of questions in World Café style groups. The following questions will guide the sessions.

### Questions for Sessions

1. Which information do you think is valuable to know before making a voting decision?
2. How do you evaluate which information you can trust?
3. What do you think needs to be done to ensure informed voting?

As per the methodology developed, a suggested definition of those leading concepts was discussed with the participants.

## 3 Evaluation

As per the Grant Agreement and per the methodology developed for the Democracy Labs, a key component of the Labs is that results will feed into the overall research and into the development of interventions to counter populism in Europe. The Labs will be standalone events designed to make participants feel that they have had a complete experience, but results will continue to feed into other research and innovation programs.

The Democratic Society will produce a concise report of each Lab. This will summarise the discussions of the day, and anything else that was heard, as a record. We suggest that this is produced in accessible language, and produced in easy-read formats.

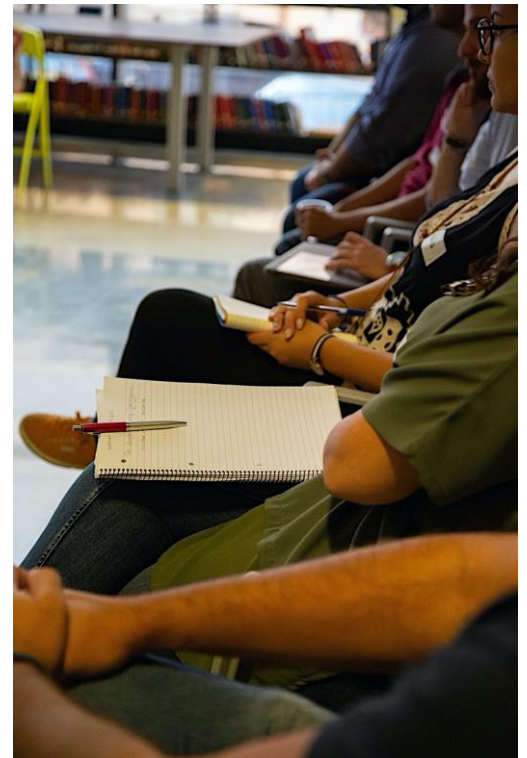
It is critical that the different research streams and the results of the PaCE project intertwine. Hence, the locations and design proposal for the Democracy Labs will be shared with the PaCE consortium for input and feedback. The report of each Democracy Labs will be shared with consortium partners and the wider public as well. In addition, the Democratic Society is working on presenting research findings at events and conferences to be able to feed it into wider research efforts.

Short video clips and pictures of the day can then be shared online and used as a visual record of the day's events. This is also true of using photos of any materials produced by the participant, as part of the ideas wall or otherwise. A specific consent form has been shared for participants agreeing with the recording.

### Indicators

Indicators will guide the evaluation process and assess the success of the Democracy Labs across Europe:

- At least 25 participants attending each Democracy Lab;
- At least a 30:70 ratio of under-represented participants;
- Levels of agreement or disagreement between participants – measured by targeted questions of the moderator;
- Media coverage by at least 2 local/regional traditional media outlets before, during, and/or after the event;
- 3 additional social media channels share information about the event and its findings; and
- Participants' satisfaction with the event and its discussion measured via a survey.





## 4 Democracy Lab Messina

The Messina Democracy Lab took place in the afternoon on September 29, 2019 in the public library of the city of Messina, Italy. The specific location was chosen to ensure a neutral and familiar meeting space for participants of all backgrounds and affiliations.

The Democratic Society team worked with two local partners to ensure the project is tapping into local resources and ensuring continuity for the citizen engagement projects that have taken place before and are planned for the near future. The local partners are the following:

- **Associazione Ionio Messina;**

For more information please visit their Facebook page: <https://it-it.facebook.com/associazioneionio/>

- **Startup Messina;**

For more information visit their Homepage: <http://www.startupmessina.org>

The local partners were briefed ahead of the event about the PaCE project itself, the aspirations and goals of the project, data protection details, as well as the potential risks and challenges the event might carry. The



partners received the methodology that was developed for the event and were able to discuss the details with the Democratic Society to ensure that all partners align behind the same goals and are aware of the ethical as well as social risks of this project.

The Democratic Society has worked with both local partners before for the Agora di Messina project. Agora di Messina was a 12-month programme to develop public spaces and participation opportunities for citizens in Messina, Italy funded by the Open Society Foundation. It looked at creating sustainable spaces for citizen participation in Messina that would be carried on after the end of the project. Taping into these spaces and local connectors, the Democracy Labs continued to build on citizen participation experiences.

The Democracy Lab Messina registered about 60 people that voiced their interest in the Democracy Lab ahead of the event itself. During the day itself, 15 local participants joined the Democracy Lab in Messina.

Invitations were shared widely in the community via traditional and social media outlets, as well as through targeted outreach to certain under-represented groups in the community, online and offline. There are certain



groups in a community, predominantly white and male, that are more likely to be heard compared to under-represented groups. Targeted invitations to under-represented groups, with a special gender-components, reduces the likelihood of only the ‘usual participants’ to attend these events and voice their opinions. Together with the local partners in Messina, the Democratic Society reached out to different members of the community, including under-represented groups.

## 5 Discussion

The participants were welcomed to the workshop and had time to get to know each other over refreshments. Most of the participants did not know each other but were familiar to the local partners in Messina. After an introduction to the topic and the PaCE project by the Democratic Society, the participants were asked to join discussion groups in teams of 4-5 participants. Each table was asked to determine one note taker and timekeeper, the local partners



did moderate and host the discussion on each of the tables. Each discussion group debated for 20 minutes the same question before randomly joining another table with different participants to discuss the second and final debate round. The event was carried out in Italian. The following are the main outcomes of the debates that were presented at the final concluding presentation and discussion round of the day.

### 5.1 Question 1 – Which information do you think is valuable to know before making a voting decision?

During the discussion, the following main points emerged answering directly to the question of the session:

- Need for **clarity on what is being voted on** is necessary. Infographics and/or easy-to-use documents (online/offline) would be helpful to enable the various sections of the population to understand the details;
- Awareness of the **repercussions of the vote**: what negative impact might the vote have, such as in the case of a referendum. And what powers will those elected have after an election;
- Is the **electoral programme trustworthy**? Is there an option to clarify if the elected person has the power to do what s/he promises?
- Discussants debated if it is possible to ‘challenge the voter's point of view’ to make voters **aware of the impact their voting decision has on the local communities**. An example that was discussed by the participants was the short-term benefit of a promised infrastructure development compared to the long-term negative impact of potential higher taxes and economic losses;

- Information should be understandable and highlight **past actions and votes of the candidates and their parties**; and
- The group agreed on the need to focus on **education on vote**. While it is important to make electoral programmes, candidate histories and voting effects accessible, the citizen must also be clear about the importance of voting and that voting is an expression of democracy: it must be in the interests of everyone and not in the interests of immediate gain.

## 5.2 Additional relevant points

In addition to the direct question, the participants discussed the following points:

### Types of information provided

From the discussion between participants emerges a certain disillusion with the modalities of information distribution before an election. The participants considered the following information essential before an election, such as news, social media posts, television debates, electoral programmes, etc.

Most participants noted that articles in traditional media outlets, television debates, and postings on social media were not considered to be useful to support informed decision-making processes. Citizens believe that information conveyed by the media has partisan interests, especially reflecting the interests and political affiliation of journalists, outlets or news presenter. Participants believe that access to information, especially voting programs, is influenced by political ideologies. This does not help the individual to find out about the different aspects of suggested policies. Participants suggested that including opinions of citizens when discussing election programs would be an interesting approach to question certain assumption and the political system in general.

### Differences between elections



Another critical point emerged is the degree of importance given to the various elections of different levels, such as at the local, national and European level. The different degree of relevance given at the various levels influences the degree of commitment and time that citizens are willing to give to inform themselves. From this derives a more or less high election participation or, otherwise, even an uninformed vote. The discussion highlighted the difference between the generations as well. Older generations are more likely to value

the local elections, the younger generations tend to focus on all elections.

### Access to information

Until recently, access to information was limited to: newspapers, election programs, schools, party circles and rallies. Especially political parties and rallies allowed citizens to seek information themselves, intervene directly, as well as make oneself heard and discuss opinions. Nowadays, the participants feel that these physical spaces for deliberation and discussion are shrinking and are being replaced by new technologies. For example, participants agreed that citizens can be easily influenced through social media channels or catchy headlines of newspaper articles. The proliferation of fake news or news with uncertain or unreliable sources can have an influence on the choice of vote.

### Civic education

The relevance of civic education and the role of the school as an educational opportunity for citizen was also discussed. Both are seen as the most important gym for citizens, encouraging critical thinking during the election period.

## 5.3 Question 2 – How do you evaluate which information you can trust?

During the discussion, the following main points emerged answering directly to the question of the session:

- Relevance to draw on **different sources** of information, e.g. online/offline, different newspapers;
- Looking at **personal connections**, it is based on the opinion or preference of those you trust, e.g. long-time friends, family, etc.;
- The electoral programme is compared with the **candidate's past behaviour and actions**;
- Participants ideally **examine the actions and behaviour** of the candidate during their whole term in office;
- Assessment of whether the promised objectives in an **election programme are realistic**; and
- The discussion revealed a **general distrust of electoral campaigns and sources of information**. There is little belief in the importance of voting or in electoral programmes. The latter are seen as "proclamations and promises" rather than as a true programmatic reference for the candidate/party. There is a sense of mistrust of social networks, which, as a result of recent scandals, are identified as sources that are not always reliable or are even seen as manipulative.

## 5.4 Additional relevant points

### Critical thinking

Participants raised the point that nowadays we are continuously exposed to information at multiple levels (local, national and international), this is however not matched by strengthening of civic education in schools. The new generations, in particular, are therefore unable to find their way around when it comes to voting and have difficulty finding reliable information.

Participants discussed the need for critical thinking, for example, through the consultation of more than one newspaper. This provides citizens with the skills to analyse the information provided to them before an election. Participants said, however, that they digested less and less information through newspapers, admit focussing only on the headlines. They prefer sources of information that are not filtered by other actors, such as

assessments of candidates on the TV, public meetings, or comparisons with peers or family members. Social networks are certainly a source of information. It is pointed out that social networks suggest content based on algorithms that help to identify content that otherwise would not have been identified.

### Lack of trust



There is in general a generalised lack of trust to all sources of information. In addition, participants perceived that with the disconnect between civil society and political actors, the concept of voting slowly loses its relevance. The most important thing about the concept of “Malapolitica” (bad politics) is that citizens themselves have distrust in other citizens, democratic institutions and, consequently, towards universal suffrage.

## 5.5 Question 3 – What do you think needs to be done to ensure informed voting?

During the discussion, the following main points emerged answering directly to the question of the session:

- Encourage people to draw on **different sources**;
- Spread the conviction that it is necessary to **go beyond the headlines** of news, reading also its content;
- **Empowering people to seek information themselves**, providing information tools that vary according to social background and skills to ensure equal understanding and accessibility of the electorate;
- Highlight the **feasibility** of suggested electoral programmes;
- **Address the impact of voting** in schools: citizens need to be understand how to analyse not only the past but also the economic repercussions of government actions on the local, regional, and national level that are aimed at the immediate well-being (e.g. less taxes) impacting the future (e.g. less services to citizens); and
- Participants voiced a **general distrust** of the electoral programmes and, more generally, of the importance of voting. The ease of access to information in the election phases is - according to the group - essential to guarantee a conscious and informed vote.

## 5.6 Additional relevant points

The participants considered it as fundamental to know its own community. Living in a community should entail knowing its problems, the potential that it offers and to feel part of it.

In terms of the election campaign, participants noted the need for clear electoral campaigns, focusing on feasible and coherent programmes. Candidates should strive to adopt a clear language that can be understood by the general public. Candidates should also restrain from using verbal attacks against political opponents.



To ensure the exchange between politicians and citizens, participants suggested to hold public debates in the community squares and on television. This would provide an opportunity for citizens to learn about the candidate and its political programme. In addition, there was a general feeling within the group that citizen participation opportunities should be encouraged through civil society organizations that work in the community. Participants believe that citizen participation can improve the living conditions in a community and impact the trust levels between institutions and its citizens.



## 6 Feedback by Participants on the Democracy Lab

### Final conclusions from participants

1. Participants clearly voiced the need for similar workshops in the community, for example in the form of a *forum* or periodic civic meetings;
2. More time devoted by school programs to civic education in schools, such as fundamental formative moment of a critical conscience able to scrutinize the news, the electoral programmes, rallies, etc;
3. To sensitize the new and the old generations about the conscious use of new technologies. Through the web we have the opportunity to have access to all kinds of news, given economic and social statistics, etc. Educating in the critical comparison of sources can help citizen to orient themselves, to form their own opinion, functional to the direct debates with the or with institutional representatives;
4. To stimulate the curiosity of the citizen towards the surrounding world, for example towards the history of the of their own territory. Guaranteeing the right of citizens to express their own potential and their own their passions through work that is the fruit of their educational experience. The protection of the development of the human person is a guarantee of harmonious participation of the individual to the material and spiritual progress of the community in which he lives and of which he is a part integral and foundational;



5. Newspaper news and constant information on political developments are considered important, and economic aspects of public opinion formation, the participants have expressed the need for constant moments of direct confrontation with the representatives of the and with the candidates.

The open-ended reflections either in the open forum and via anonymous voting on the satisfaction of the Democracy Lab showed that there was a strong level of

satisfaction with participants with the process and the discussion.

Participants views on politics were collected at the beginning of the Democracy Lab to engage participants in a discussion while they enter the location. Some quotes they shared:

*"Politics is everyday life!"* – One Messina Democracy Lab participant

*"Politics is the instrument with which citizens can be protected and represented even if politicians do not represent us at all."* – One Messina Democracy Lab participant

*"Politics it's the opportunity to grow up, meet and share ideas, and building together the common good."* – One Messina Democracy Lab participant



## 7 Media

The following provides an overview of the engagements on social media and local media engagements.

### 7.1 Media

<http://www.letteraemme.it/2019/09/23/impegno-civico-e-democrazia-al-palacultura-il-workshop-di-associazione-ionio-e-startup-messina/>

<http://www.letteraemme.it/2019/09/29/come-rendere-la-democrazia-piu-forte-a-messina-lunico-workshop-italiano-di-the-democratic-society/>

<http://normanno.com/attualita/messina-unica-tappa-italiana-progetto-pace/>

<http://ilcittadinodimessina.it/news.asp?idz=5&idsz=0&idn=60204>

### 7.2 Interviews

General clip Messina Lab: <http://popandce.eu/2020/05/19/messina-democracy-lab-september-2019/>

Or on YouTube: [https://youtu.be/sAcJ\\_xRxvaU](https://youtu.be/sAcJ_xRxvaU)

### 7.3 Social Media

Most of the engagement on Twitter came from the local partner [Startup Messina](#) that received a good amount of retweets and likes for its posts. The following is a selection of the Tweets of that day.





## 8 Reflections on the Process

At the end of the Democracy Lab, participants were asked for feedback on the workshop via an interactive survey. On a scale from very satisfied to not satisfied at all, participants were asked to anonymously note down their satisfaction levels. All participants (15 of 15) noted full satisfaction with the Democracy Lab. In addition, participants were able to leave anonymous comments, in case there was an interest.

What did participants say about the Democracy Lab Messina:

**Individual interviews with the participants Nei, Saro, Marcello, Noemi and Monia can be seen on the PaCE website:** <http://popandce.eu/2020/05/19/messina-democracy-lab-september-2019/>

Comparing with the set indicators for the Democracy Lab, the Messina Lab shows the following criteria:

General indicators for the Democracy Labs	Democracy Lab Messina	Notes
At least 25 participants attending each Democracy Lab	15 participants attended the Messina Democracy Lab	More participants registered in advance, however, the day of the Democracy Lab turned out to be extremely hot, likely reducing the number of attendees.
At least a 30:70 ratio of under-represented participants	Good gender balance in the room and participants with migration background and of the older generation.	Hard to measure if participants do not use Eventbrite. A lesson learned for the next Democracy Lab
Levels of agreement or disagreement between participants – measured by targeted questions of the moderator	The discussion at each table was summarized by the host of the table and discussed by the participants. Participants discussed in an appropriate manner without any visible conflicts.	-
Media coverage by at least 2 local/regional traditional media outlets before, during, and/or after the event	Coverage by 4 traditional media outlets	-
3 additional social media channels share information about the event and its findings	Next to the PaCE social media account, the Democratic Society and the 2 local partner organisations engaged on social media.	



Participants' satisfaction with the event and its discussion measured via a survey	Participants voiced a strong level of satisfaction with the event and its discussion	-