

## **Call for Papers: Democratic renewal in times of polarisation. The case of Belgium**

The Leuven Centre for Public Law (LCPL) and RIPPLE (Research in Political Philosophy Leuven) are pleased to launch the present call for papers for the conference **“Democratic renewal in times of polarization. The case of Belgium”** which will be held in Leuven on **19-20 September 2019**.

Today, it has almost become commonplace to say that democracy is in “crisis”. This has created a strong push towards experimentation with new forms of citizen participation which have colloquially become known under the term “democratic innovations”: institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process. In Belgium too, democratic innovation and renewal has long been on the political agenda. Yet, although numerous proposals have been made over the years, little has come from them. Academic debate and international political practice did not stand still, however. We now have a growing number of real-world examples where democratic innovations have been used to make policy (sometimes of the highest constitutional importance). As a result, this is a good time to take stock of democratic innovations around the world, to draw lessons from their successes and failures, and to ask how these lessons can be applied to the case of Belgium.

For these reasons, we welcome papers dealing with questions of democratic innovation and citizen participation from the perspectives of political philosophy, political science and (constitutional) law. Papers do not have to focus on the Belgian case in order to be considered. In particular, we invite papers which focus on one or several of the following issues:

### **1) Democratic innovations: what’s in a name?**

Despite the growing spread of new forms of citizen participation and attention for democratic innovation over the past two decades or so, our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon remains limited at best. There is still disagreement about central questions, such as the purpose these new forms of participation ought to fulfil, or how these innovations should interact with existing democratic institutions. Is the ultimate goal to confer democratic innovations with direct decision-making powers, thus replacing existing parliamentary institutions, or is their role merely supplementary? Without a clear answer to these basic issues, the literature risks talking past each other.

### **2) Democratic innovations: empowering citizens, or much ado about nothing?**

While the growing use of new forms of citizen participation by governments is greeted with jubilation by many commentators, there are notable critics. In particular, the point has been raised that these democratic innovations fail to empower citizens, but should instead be seen as public relations tools in the hands of governments. This begs the question, can democratic innovations even fulfil their basic democratic promise, and if so, what conditions need to be in place for this to be the case? Are certain design choices better positioned to realise these conditions than others?

### 3) Democratising Belgium: opportunity or utopia?

Finally, the conference tackles the question to what extent these innovations can take root in a politically divided or polarised society such as Belgium. On the one hand, there is the belief that divided societies are best governed when *representatives* of the different societal segments sit together and strike a compromise, the so-called consociational approach. Too much direct citizen participation – especially in the form of referendums or popular initiatives - could upset this delicate balance. On the other hand, examples such as the G1000 or the Irish Citizen’s Assemblies show that under certain conditions, citizen participation can have the exact opposite effects and allow citizens (*and* elected representatives) to discuss public issues across linguistic or political divides. This raises the question, should citizen participation be seen as a threat or as an opportunity for divided societies?

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**Submission Details:** Paper abstracts (500 words) and short CVs (200 words) should be sent to [ronald.vancrombrugge@kuleuven.be](mailto:ronald.vancrombrugge@kuleuven.be) by **1 May 2019**. We especially invite junior researchers (PhD candidates and postdocs) as well as early-career scholars to apply. Selected paper presenters will be informed by 15 June.

**Conference Format:** The conference will bring together junior and senior scholars and practitioners from various disciplines, including constitutional law, political philosophy and political science.

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