

Participation Without Power? Institutional Consequences of Authoritarianism and Policing in Contemporary Democracies

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Abstract

This article discusses the difference between public participation and meaningful political power in contemporary democracies. It describes how consultations, advisory councils, public hearings, community meetings, and digital platforms may increase visible participation without changing agenda control, budget authority, enforcement policy, or final decision-making power. The article mentions managed participation as a technique used in authoritarian and hybrid systems to collect information, display consent, and control dissent. Similar risks emerge in democratic institutions when officials invite public input but retain unrestricted discretion to disregard it. The analysis uses policing as an example, arguing that community consultation becomes meaningful only when participants can review evidence, challenge policies, receive reasoned responses, and observe changes in implementation. It also highlights representation, accessibility, transparency, and institutional follow-up. The article concludes that participation should be evaluated through its consequences for authority, policy, accountability, and resource allocation rather than simply through attendance figures or the number of public submissions.



Amidst the opportunities for participation that contemporary democracies offer consultations, advisory councils, public portals, community hearings, digital feedback one thing remains consistently cryptic: the actual power held by Parliament. In the face of its many opportunities for voting and engagement consultations, advisory councils, public portals, community hearings and digital feedback platforms one aspect of modern democracy remains uniformly elusive: the role of Parliament in realizing change. But February 2025 also poses a more difficult challenge on power. But it can widen participation without opening up any decision-making processes, without changing any enabling or disabling institutions, without decreasing the enforcement responsibilities of disadvantaged groups, etc. Manipulated participation has been a tool of authoritarian government for a long time to gather information as well as show consent. Where voice is lacking, there is a risk of the same issue on a lesser scale occurring in a democratic system.

Political power can become centralized around a small group of people and participation can be extended. Public consultations, advisory boards, listening sessions, chat rooms, and community meetings provide activity but no control over the agenda, control over the budget, or implementation. Managed participation may also be a feature of authoritarian and hybrid systems, where it is a form of being included and holds the promise of being able to demonstrate it while simultaneously collecting information, and emitting anger. The same applies to democratic structures, if consultation is not transfer of influence,

then it is not a transfer of influence.

Constructive involvement involves clearly established decision-making mechanisms, information that is appropriate to involve, selection of decision-makers of a representative nature, the probability of response, and demonstration of how public participation has influenced policy. The number of attendees thus indicates much less than the extent of any resulting authority shifts, or the extent of decision point shifts.

Because coercive power makes its way into daily living long before constitution breaks are anything on the horizon, policing provides an insightful prism on authoritarian drift. Signs of warning are intelligence operations targeting legal activists, the selective application of toleration, the use of force to disperse "undesirable" groups and the lack of penalties or discipline for misbehavior and political pressure on prosecution. If this happens, the authoritarianism of militarized equipment is not enough to determine, nor does the firm policing rule with it be incompatible with democracy. The key point is related to the question of accountability, neutrality, necessity and proportionality. Where enforcement activity regularly benefits allies, disadvantages opponents and is not subject to independent scrutiny, policing is no longer about serving public order as a common good, but is about having an impact upon political competition.

In multilevel institutions the responsibilities are complicated by the fact that the responsibility for international obligations goes through various steps: first the responsibility of the State, then regional, then State, then municipal and then organizational. Each level can reinforce, misinterpret, put off and pass on the right. The additional complexity lies in the fact that a federal system means that despite a treaty's authority being national, the implementation relies on subnational law and administration. International monitoring includes the potential to spell things out but domestic institutions generally decide on budget, staff, solution, and implementation.

For governance to be effective, it must have focal points, it must have reporting mechanisms, it must have common indicators, it must have readily available data and it must have rules and systems to resolve inter-level conflict. If not, compliance can be a series of decidedly stand-alone efforts.

Democratic government can't be achieved by formal law alone. beneath a set of written rules is an informal "operating system" of institutional forbearance, mutual toleration, professional neutrality and acceptance of adverse outcomes. Backsliding runs swiftly and smoothly when all the legal mechanisms are used as instruments, all the vacancies are probed as tests of loyalty and all investigations are partisan devices. Although courts could

cancel illegitimate actions, by that time damage has been done, and they could offer remedies only if the executive complies.

Legislatures have powers to investigate, but power erodes as the result of party loyalty over institutional obligations. Multifaceted protection therefore hinges on the ability of multiple actors to abstain from exploiting all possible benefits at the possible expense of the lasting viability of the right at times when short-term benefit is in opposition to long-term viability.

We use local experiences and link to legal, political and international discussion platforms. These groups report on trends, provide assistance to those affected, explain technical legal proceedings, educate oversight authorities and help to keep the issues on the map after the moving of media attention to other issues. Donor priorities, access restrictions, who is heard and who is not, and security threats can all skew agendas. A set of practices that are: transparent, verified, conflict-sensitive and involve in-depth participation by affected communities enhance credibility.

Recommendations that assess implementing institutions, legal avenues, budgetary consequences and clearly defined, measurable implementation timelines are also best suited to advocacy. Moral urgency is the attraction but institutional specificity is the route for attaining reform.

A solid evidence-based approach is both superficial and detailed, or institutional. Event data can be used to distinguish the timing and geographic location of the events and administrative data can be used to determine enforcement decisions and organizational response. Survey experiments can also be used to measure levels of tolerance among the public and process tracing can be used to reconstruct key decisions. Additional indicators are provided through court opinions, internal guidance, indications of procurement, personnel changes, disciplinary action, and budget changes.

Any single measure is not able to tell of democratic erosion or accountability. It is important to use triangulation, since public rhetoric is often set in a dangerous tone, official statistics may not be accurate (due to underreporting), and supporters of the legal change may not have put in place the means to enforce it. The more there is certainty about the mechanism at all levels of governance, the higher the level of confidence that is built.

Frequently, the rights and the effectiveness of a security policy will conflict with each other; and impunity undermines both of those goals. Unreviewable coercive power

decreases the cooperation of the other side, impairs the quality of intelligence and invites retaliation, and it covers up with poor performance. Rights-protective institutions provide clear mandate, documented authorization, independent review, easy access complaint mechanism and accountability for command responsibility. Oversight needs to extend to policy design as well as to individual “misconduct”, for harmful consequences are possible from the use at scale of seemingly lawful policies.

There are also good safeguards against inappropriate political pressure on officials. Since security agencies are independent and autonomous, with all records being open for review, the agencies can refuse to follow instructions which are of a partisan nature, (which are in the service of an illegitimate public interest).

Participatory institutions should be clear about what decisions are “advisory” and which have a “mandatory” and “budgetary” impact. Policing consultations are meaningful for communities when they are able to look at data, to contest the policy and to get a logic to their recommendations. But in a context where there is no feedback, that symbolic access may lead to greater cynicism as it heightens expectation while simultaneously not changing authority.

Particular care should be taken to understand local variation, as this may mirror focused intimidation, selective law enforcement and administrative failure. A warning system should be credible, should make its criteria clear, and be careful not to engender a “yes, we’re all safe” environment and transform risk assessments into “red, yellow, blue” signaling. Ordinary institutional capabilities like keeping records, normal turnover of staff, routine reviews are also critical to institutional resilience.

Media can magnify incredible events and downplay other rules that have crept into the system that may also influence who can play and who’s complaints are heard. Comparative evidence as a key to danger must not be isolated from state and municipal institutions as well as from national conflict, for national conflict is a phenomenon of American federalism. That is not the standard “full consensus” at the relevant standard it’s “fair competition in consistent rules when political high tides turn to low tides”.

While election workers should be physically secure, and legally protected, such measures should not be enacted to prevent the administration from being seen and lawfully subjected to public scrutiny. To be democratically useful, threat assessment must be based on across-the-board application of criteria in matters of ideology, identity, geography and institutional affiliation. Dehumanization by political leaders contributes to the legitimization of intimidation, making it seem normal, something to be desired, or even

necessary to achieve a political objective.

Civic groups can reduce tensions by providing accurate information, educating legal watchers and dispelling rumors from institutional change. In times of extreme polarization of the national parties, bridging networks from universities, unions, professional associations, and faith communities or the local media can be helpful. Public authorities should specify their grounds for exceptional exercise of their discretion, to prevent a subsequent review identifying urgent needs from opportunist discretion.

Transparency won't stop abuse, but neither will opacity help to advance the identification and correction of abuse, and evidence will be weaker and public suspicion more easily manipulated. Independent courts are very important, but can work effectively when administrators and legislators accept negative decisions without any tactful postponement. Remember measurement does not stop at the national level and should look at both, as a gradual decline might occur within an unchanged annual category.

Nonviolent discipline also helps to ensure that movements are not undermined by provocateurs and the spread of misinformation or the attempt to frame acts of peaceful dissent as generalized acts of disorder.

The overhanging message is that the protection of democracy starts prior to any state of an emergency and that it simply "must not" stop once public attention shifts. Patterns are more important than roused controversy: early signals are both meaningful and not. Scrutineers who are citizens, officials, judges, assemblies, the press, and professional and civic groups add pressure to selective enforcement and incentives for principled restraint. Political opposition will be high and protest will be a disruptive force by design.

Ruikitahi no Rodo does not mean that the streets are quiet, and everyone is in a state of trust. It demands institutions that are able to mediate conflict and turn opposition into disloyalty into no, coercion into routine into no, and gain for the moment into freedom from obligation into no.