

Bridging participation and democracy: The correlation between Participatory Mechanisms and Democratic Performance

Abstract

This article examines the correlation between the implementation of participatory mechanisms and democratic performance, as measured by leading democratic indexes. Through a comparative analysis of European nations, the findings suggest that countries which have adopted a greater number of maturely developed participatory mechanisms consistently achieve higher scores in democratic performance metrics.

Introduction

The global political landscape, but especially the European one, have witnessed worrisome trends of democratic backsliding, rising authoritarian trends, and public disengagement from political processes. These phenomena have sounded the alarm for the erosion of the quality of democracy; an increasingly debated issue in political science.

Amidst these challenges, and alongside the advancements in technology in our digitalized era, we observe the emergence of participatory mechanisms, as tools to enhance citizen involvement, improve transparency, and strengthen the rule of law. However, the actual impact of such mechanisms on democratic performance remains contested.

Methodology

The effort to investigate whether there is a correlation between participation and democracy remains a challenge. In this study we attempted to examine whether there exists a correlation between **participatory mechanisms** and **democracy index scores** in countries across Europe, through a constructive comparative analysis.

This study looks at several forms of participatory mechanisms including e-petitions, e-consultations, and participatory budgeting mechanisms, access to information and data and town hall meetings. The goal is to examine whether the countries which employ the most numerous and well-developed participatory mechanisms tend to score highest on democracy indexes, and vice versa.

Participatory Mechanisms: In order to investigate the maturity of these mechanisms, we have attempted to compare several characteristics that make up each participatory mechanism's idiosyncrasy. These criteria were unique for each participatory mechanism and include amongst others: data of establishment, public usage (scale & participation), institutional backing, whether it was implemented at a national or municipal level and perceived impact.

Democratic Indexes: The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (2024 report), the [V-Dem Institute](#) Democracy Report (2025 report), [Freedom House](#) (2025 report) and the [Reporters without Borders' World Press](#)

[Freedom Index](#) (2025 report), assessment of the countries' democratic performance were used to comparatively evaluate the democratic functioning of European Countries.

Analysis: High-performing democracies

It is evident from our findings that Nordic countries employ robust participatory mechanisms, such as strong e-petition, e-consultation frameworks and participatory budgeting models, which, to a large extent, date back to the early 2000s, at the same time, consistently rank high in democratic indexes. Conversely, countries with limited participatory opportunities often demonstrate weaker democratic performance. This evidence supports our hypothesis that there exists a correlation between participatory mechanisms and democracy index scores.

Norway: The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), categorized Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Switzerland and Finland as the top five countries in overall scores, with Norway, leading the ranking with an overall score of 9.8. The index looks at five categories: *pluralism*, *functioning of government*, *political participation*, *political cultural* and *civic liberties*, to assess an overall democratic performance. More specifically, Norway scored 10.00 in *pluralism*, *political participation* and *political culture*; assessors which as one may argue, out of the five, are the ones mostly linked to participatory democracy, either directly or indirectly.

Norway, which also ranked first in the Reporters without Borders' [World Press Freedom 2024 Index](#), employs a well-developed [e-consultation](#) platform, through its [official government platform](#), legally mandated for draft legislation consultations which is open to all stakeholders, however participation tends to favor organized interests.

A notable example of the effectiveness of public consultations is Norway's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government conducted extensive consultations with health experts, civil society organizations, and the general public, which [enhanced](#) the response's effectiveness and strengthened public trust in government actions. This trust played a key role in successful crisis management, reflected in 80% of citizens expressing satisfaction with healthcare, 12 points above the OECD average.

Contrastingly, Norway does not employ a centralized e-petitions platform. However, like other Nordic countries, it employs a more [decentralized](#) political system. The [Norwegian Local Government Act \(2018\)](#), for example, establishes platforms for public input during planning and decision-making processes. For instance, municipal councils are required to hold public hearings and consult citizens before approving major development projects and vote on budgets through online platforms like [Smartby Trondheim](#) as part of its [smart city](#) and open governance strategies . Thus, as evident, the decentralized system employed by the Nordic countries, like Norway [provides ground](#) for the implantation of participatory democracy. By employing a system where the citizens feel that they exert more influence, it manages to bridge the gap between citizens and politicians and create a positive feedback mechanism for civic engagement and further implementation of participatory democracy.

Finland: Finland which scored 9.2 in the EIU Index , employs a well developed [e-petition](#) system where if a petition collects 50,000 signatures the petition is submitted to the Finnish Parliament. It also employs an [e-consultation](#) system which dates back to 2014. Moreover, its [demokratia](#) platform which combines multiple participation tools in one accessible site.

Denmark: A 2023 academic study noted [high response rates](#) in the Denmark e-consultation, with ministries and stakeholders regularly engaging- often with dozens to hundreds of written responses per consultation. Moreover, in Denmark 300-400 e-petitions are submitted per year through the [borgerforslag.dk](#) where 5-10 to date have led to actual law and 50-70 reached parliament.

Unlike Sweden and Finland, Denmark and Norway, however, do not employ a robust participatory budgeting mechanism which is seen as a crucial and highly successful mechanism of participation. Additionally, Sweden lacks a centralized petition and e-consultation mechanism, which can be partly explained due to the role of the ombudsman. Sweden was the first country in the world to establish the office of the [Ombudsman](#) in 1809.

Key Insights: As evident, the findings highlight that the existence of participatory mechanisms is influenced by the broader structural political history and character of a nation. More importantly, a nation's democratic performance in Europe is not solely influenced by the existence of participatory mechanisms; they are just a tool that, along with other factors, contribute to the success of the democratic process.

Analysis: Low-performing democracies

Cyprus: Countries like Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Croatia and Greece score much lower in democratic performance level. Cyprus was categorized by this index as a flawed democracy, with a score of 7.38, slipping three places ranking 10th out of the 167 countries, in 2024. Its biggest flaws are *political participation, culture and functioning of government*, scoring 5.36, 6.88, 6.67 respectively.

This can be explained by evidence on the absence of robust participatory mechanisms in Cyprus. Although Cyprus has launched an [e-consultation](#) platform in 2024, its observed use is limited. Moreover, it lacks an institutionalized e-petition system, participatory budgeting, and other forms of participatory democracy like access to government information and data.

Despite this, there is limited evidence to support that the low democratic performance of Cyprus is directly and utterly linked to the lack of participatory mechanisms. In 2024, the two categories that registered the biggest declines according to the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), were: *functioning of government* and *electoral process and pluralism*.

It seems that the poor democratic performance in Cyprus is a result of a merging between several limitations and phenomena. The [exclusion](#) of the public from having a role in the democratic process, generates a growing disconnect between citizens and their governments. This disconnect erodes trust, fosters political apathy, and can even provoke backlash against institutions. At the same time,

widespread apathy allows corruption to persist unchecked, which in turn deepens public disengagement. As civic participation declines, political elites face less pressure to adopt participatory mechanisms, further entrenching the cycle. This self-reinforcing loop where lack of participation fuels corruption and corruption discourages participation explains how participatory mechanisms are neither universally beneficial nor inherently detrimental, rather they are a result and an influence on a broader democratic structure.

Italy: Although in Italy, the right to petition to parliament exists, there is no dedicated national e-petition portal exists; and no permanent national e-consultation engine exists either. It is one of five '[dismantlers](#)' causing 'democratic recession' in Europe. Giorgia Meloni's government had drafted proposals to give [open-ended powers](#) to the justice ministry over prosecutors, which would increase political control over the judiciary. This threatens the rule of law and undermines judicial independence. Moreover, the unprecedented levels of interference in public service media and the [cancellation](#) of the author Antonio Scurati's 'anti-fascist manifesto are signs of declining civil liberty in Italy and the rise of authoritarianism. The creeping erosion of civil liberties in Italy, which has negatively affected the rights of minority groups, immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as Italian citizens of foreign origin as a result of the current government's anti-immigration policies and legislation restricting LGBT+ rights point to a likely [downgrade](#) of Italy's performance in democratic indexes.

Greece: Greece does not employ any formal national e-petition system, however it runs the [OpenGov](#) platform, which offers a range of public engagement opportunities including an e-consultation hub, where citizens can comment on legislation.

Key Insights: Evidently, the erosion of democracy lies in the threatening of the rule of law and the declining of civil liberties. Thus the low democratic performance of these countries is evidently related to other, more direct reasons, however the absence of participatory mechanisms provides evidence for their indirect relation to the low democratic performance of these nations.

Findings

As evident from these case studies and as illustrated in figure 1, the countries which employ a greater number of participatory mechanisms, are the ones who score higher in democratic index scores. Of course there are certain outliers, which illustrate that democracy is not only tied to the existence of participatory mechanisms, rather it is a product of several factors that make up the democratic idiosyncrasy of a nation. A notable example of this is Norway, which constantly ranks high in democratic indexes, ranking first in the EIU 2024 report, however, it lacks robust participatory budgeting and a centralized e-petition system. However, its decentralized system and active local governance comes in to fulfill these central gaps through activating local public participation.

Relationship Between Participatory Mechanisms and Democracy Index in Europe

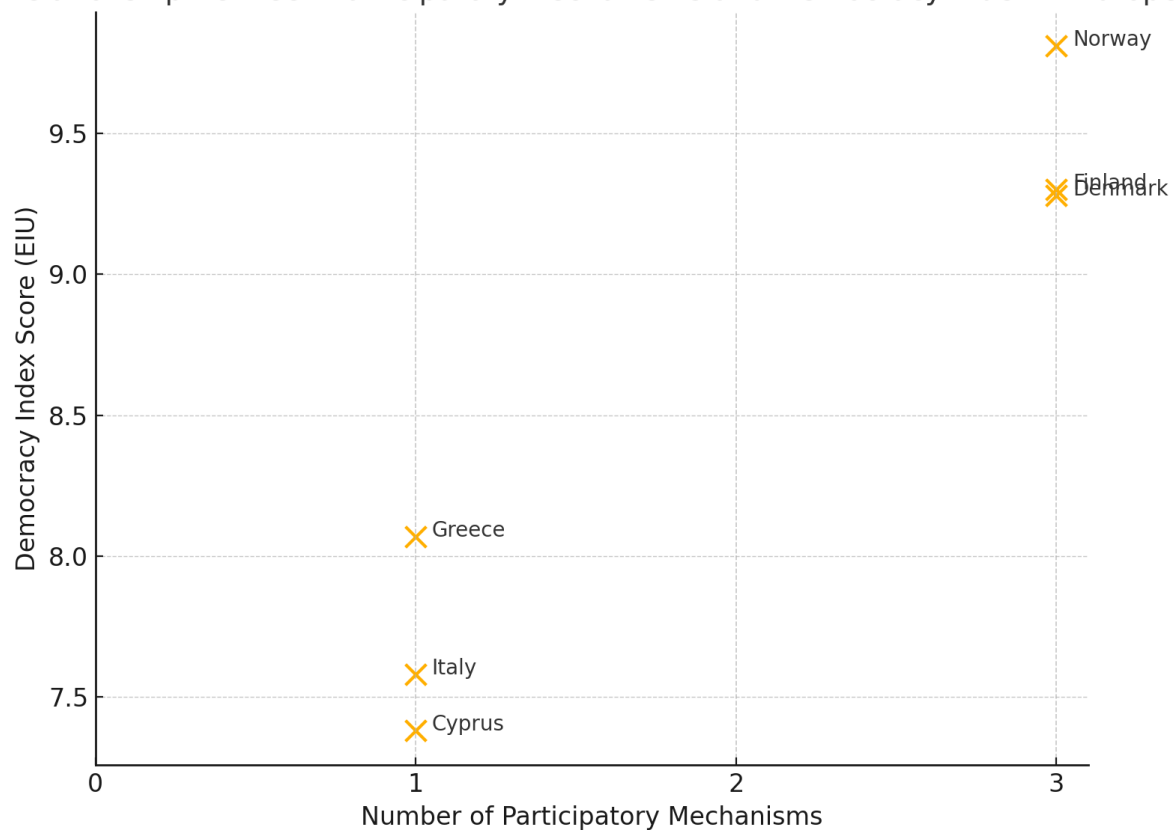


Figure 1: Exhibits the relationship between the Number of Participatory Mechanisms and Democracy Index scores (EIU) across six European countries. It is evident from the figure that countries with more mechanisms generally exhibit higher democracy scores.

Concluding remarks

Citizen participation is therefore beneficial because it enhances public trust in government and increases legitimacy in the decision making process, helps public authorities in their daily activities to take better decisions and provide services and policies that respond to citizens' needs. This practice leads to better policy results that take into account citizens' experience and knowledge to address their most pressing needs.

Sartori in *Participation and Democratic Theory* argues that the absence of meaningful participatory mechanisms is the [root](#) of political apathy. He highlights that meaningful democratic learning happens when people are actively involved: through mechanisms discussed in this appear such as participatory budgeting, suggesting and co-producing policies, deliberating, and holding leaders accountable. Therefore, the existence of such participatory mechanisms is crucial for the creation of a meaningful incentive of citizen engagement in politics.

Democracy is a [means for human development](#), as apart from a mechanism and a practice is a process of emotional and moral development and cultivation. This is significant because it points out that through fostering a democratic "culture", our institutionalized democracy has the capacity to become 'naturally' accountable in the long term as it will be driven through the very moral compasses of a democratically

incentivized society. Thus, this illustrates that through the existence of participation mechanisms, a democratic culture is built that comes to self-regulate the democratic process and subsequently eliminate democratic challenges like corruption, populism and rising authoritarian trends.

To conclude, it is evident that participatory mechanisms are a crucial tool in the creation of a fertile political ground that will allow a fruitful democratic ground to breed within a broader society. However, their effectiveness is undoubtedly context dependent. It is therefore significant to implement such measures, through the development of clear frameworks, and encouraging civic education to empower citizens to use participatory tools effectively. Along with the digital infrastructure to expand e-participation opportunities we can achieve the development of a democratic culture, which will provide a resilient ground for a self-regulated resilient democratic system.

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The blog is also available at <https://nomopress.cy/bridging-participation-and-democracy-the-correlation-between-participatory-mechanisms-and-democratic-performance/>