

A black and white photograph of a crowd of people, with several hands raised in the air, suggesting a public gathering or protest. The image is framed by a thick, bright yellow border that is partially cut off at the bottom right corner. The text is centered in the upper half of the frame.

**Inclusive Citizenship
in a world in
Transformation:
Co-Designing for
Democracy**



Citizens
Reinventing
Democracy

Policy synthesis #1: Democratic innovations for sustainability

Authors: Francesc Cots, Jeremie Fosse, Ines Campos, Roberto Falanga, José Duarte Ribeiro, João Moniz, Vanessa Buth, Bernd Schlipphak, Caner Simsek, Oliver Treib, Doris Fuchs, Shaoni Wang, Wander Jager, Petteri Repo, João Limão, Sandra Oliveira, Eugenio Barchiesi

September 2024

The EU-funded project 'INCITE-DEM : Citizens Reinventing Democracy' aims at enhancing inclusive participation and civic engagement, while expanding democratic innovation and dynamic feedback mechanisms between citizens and institutional actors in Europe. <https://incite-dem.eu/>

Partners:



1 Context and goal of the policy brief

This policy brief draws on the preliminary research results of the deliverables and case studies of the first year of the EU-funded [INCITE DEM project](#), with the goal of sharing the main policy insights to improve participation and engagement in the European policy context.

Public debates about the crisis of democracy have focused on the idea that public support for (representative) democracy is declining and that citizens are less and less willing to participate politically, thus calling for more direct channels to influence political decision-making.

In this regard, theoretical and empirical evidence emphasises how Democratic innovations (DIs)¹ offer transformative pathways for civic engagement, bridging such gaps between citizens and decision-makers. In this context, one of the goals of the INCITE-DEM project is to intersect Democratic Innovations with sustainability, emphasising the importance of citizen involvement in crafting socially and environmentally sustainable policies.

2 Democratic Innovations - State of the art

By fostering a participatory environment, Democratic innovations (DIs) such as deliberative mini-publics (DMPs); participatory budgeting (PB); and collaborative and participatory governance (PG&CG)², enhance democratic legitimacy and contribute to societal cohesion ensuring relevance and effectiveness in addressing contemporary issues, thereby reinforcing the social fabric and improving governance structures.

The project's results also reveal that DIs have been instrumental in engaging citizens in environmental sustainability initiatives, aiming for more inclusive and effective policy outcomes and facilitating greater social inclusion and equity.

1 DIs “encompass institutions or processes that employ deliberative and/or participatory means to increase and diversify citizen’s participation in the policy cycle with the overarching goal of improving the quality of democracy by tackling specific contextual deficits” (Falanga et al, 2024)

2 DMPs are representative small groups of citizens engaged in quality deliberations to provide informed judgments; PB provides mechanisms for ordinary citizens to engage in budgetary decision-making processes; and PG&CG emphasise citizen involvement in policy and decision-making on a wide range of domains.

Figure 1. Number of publications on Democratic innovations and social & environmental sustainability

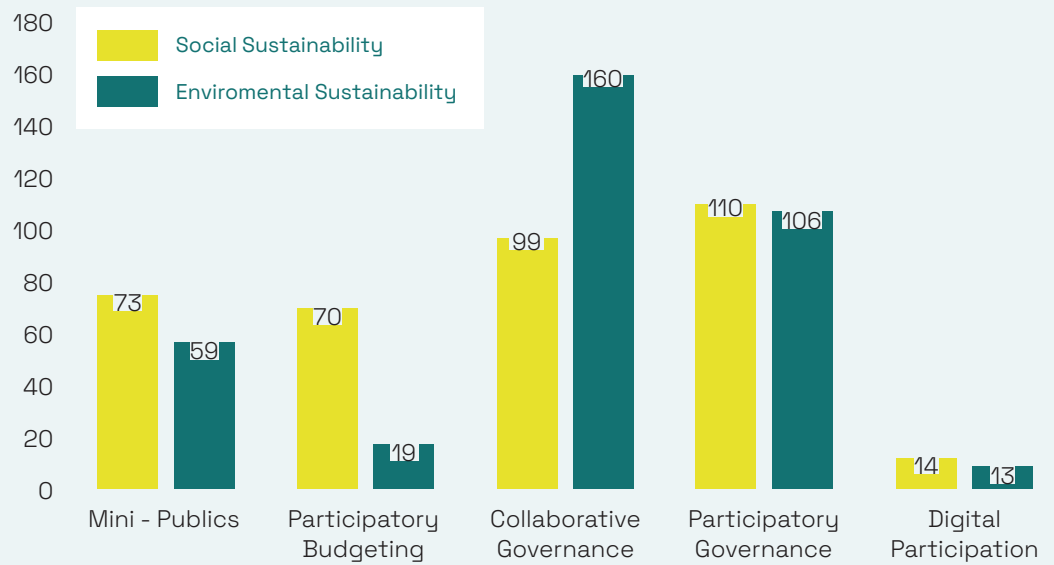


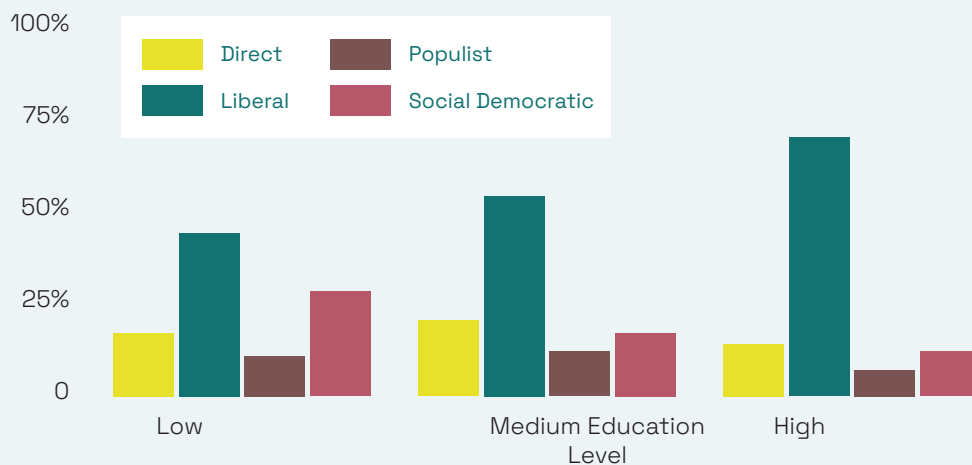
Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of research analysed in the Scoping Literature Reviews among different categories of DIs, with PG&CG owning the most followed by DMPs and PB. PG&CG exhibits loose institutional designs involving multiple actors, while CG emphasises environmental and climate issues due to its multi-stakeholder nature. DMPs are more aligned with social sustainability, despite growing interest in climate issues, with the climate assemblies gaining traction in the literature. PBs show a lesser focus on environmental sustainability compared to social issues, reflecting literature on their redistributive nature.

However, public authorities and stakeholders often struggle to ensure that DIs are inclusive, maintain citizen motivation and engagement, achieve tangible impacts and are embedded within the public administration; and assume a more continuous and routinised role within public administration based on evaluation and improvement.

a) Inclusivity

The project’s results show that more highly educated and more well-off individuals report higher levels of participation and a preference for a liberal concept of democracy, while a substantial share of less educated and poorer citizens both participate less and are more likely to link democracy to the concept of the welfare state (social democracy). So, if inclusivity is not mainstreamed in deliberative procedures, there is the risk that more participation keeps reinforcing the influence of those that are better off without addressing the needs of the vulnerable.

Figure 2: Citizens' educational background and their concepts of democracy (ESS data, 9 selected countries)



The figure shows that in overall terms, liberal democracy is the most popular concept of democracy among all educational groups. However, citizens with a low level of educational attainment display the strongest support for the concept of social democracy, which ties democracy to the reduction of social inequality.

Another factor and pre-requisite of inclusivity is accessibility, which is not respected when entry requirements demand excessive professional skills or even a network of supporting entities, such as the case of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) demands 1 million signatures from a certain percentage within seven EU countries allowing only the use of the EC's central signature collection system.

b) Motivation and engagement

Maintaining citizen engagement and keeping their motivation during the whole participatory process requires continuous dynamization and facilitation skills. It is important to inform the participants beforehand about the goal and purpose of their involvement and about the limitations of the process, while trying to ensure that the proposals they can/will formulate are implementable in a feasible and timely manner (for instance, without the need of changing EU treaties), to avoid creating false expectations and undermining citizens' trust in the impact of the initiative.

c) Tangible impacts

On the one hand, the achievement of tangible impacts is related to the level of visibility of the initiative, which has to do with communication strategy and media coverage.

Initiatives such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) or the Spanish Citizens Climate Assembly have shown very low levels of visibility among the general public.

On the other hand, tangible impacts have to do with embedding DIs into political frameworks and planning the post participation process.

In the Bologna Climate Assembly, a public statute clearly defined the institution's duties, including deadlines and a post-implementation schedule. Also, Ireland's Parliament committed to consider the recommendations of the assembly through a joint committee of both Houses.

To avoid political alienation, or the perception that DIs will not have a significant impact on the political system, scholars also emphasise the importance of considering the broader implications of these DIs and how to insert them in a more comprehensive set of systemic changes, since DIs cannot be presented as a one-size-fits-all approach to current wicked problems of democracy.

Finally, the relationship between DIs and civil society organisations seems to be a critical factor of success of their integration into public governance.

A common strategy observed in climate assemblies in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Scotland, and Germany to involve civil society organisations was the creation of multi-stakeholder advisory bodies in order to integrate competing interests into the process.

d) Follow up and evaluation

Constant monitoring and re-evaluation of DIs will contribute to ensure their effectiveness and inclusivity in diverse political landscapes, as well as their adaptation to keep pace with changing societal and environmental contexts.

As good practices, the Bologna and the Spanish Climate Assemblies created respectively a Monitoring Committee and a citizens association in charge of following up the citizens' recommendations.

3 Policy recommendations

To integrate DIs in the heart of European policy, these 6 policy recommendations should be incorporated both in the design of European public policies oriented to improve public participation and DIs in general (such as the ECI, CoFoE, European Citizens' panels, petitions to the European Parliament, etc); but also, in the hearing procedures of the European legislative processes, so that these practices are routinised and applied broadly.

a) Promoting inclusiveness in the design and implementation of DIs:

Policy makers should prioritise the design and implementation of DIs that are inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all segments of society. This entails addressing socioeconomic disparities, ensuring diverse representation, and providing necessary support mechanisms to facilitate broad participation (compensation for participation, computers and equipment, IT support, accessibility support, etc). It also implies facilitation teams which address the existing power imbalances (gender, age, ethnic groups, education, experience, IT skills, etc.) and the use of online technologies to involve citizens and communities which are otherwise hard to reach. However, when the needed budget is not available, innovative forms that promote inclusion should be promoted using creativity, existing networks, and persuasion skills.



b) Designing DIs for vulnerable or other specific groups:

DIs that focus primarily or even exclusively on the views of vulnerable groups should be promoted. This could be done for instance via reinforcing the influence in public policies of special



panels of citizens composed exclusively by vulnerable or marginalised groups. Other groups that could be prioritised in order to ensure sustainability and intergenerational equity are youth and future generations, considering the long-term implications of decisions.

c) Keeping citizens motivated providing sense to their engagement:



This can be done by increasing interactions of citizens with decision makers, informing about the potential impact of their proposals in simple language and introducing innovative tools, such as social simulations, that allow citizens to view the issues at stake from another angle (including the ongoing social dynamics), promoting more vivid discussions.

The Dialogue Tool created in the INCITE-DEM project can be used in a context where citizens are being invited and trained to collaborate with communities in democracy labs, reflecting on social dynamics in democratic processes, and becoming more sensitive to possible risks for community cohesion.

d) Communicating well to expand impact:



Organisers should strive for a broad and comprehensive media coverage of the DI. This should be strategically planned in anticipation, using the available communication tools (traditional and social media), and addressing the right target groups to increase both the quality and quantity of information. This will contribute to reaching a greater number of participants, as well as improve the impact and credibility of the initiative, since greater visibility means higher citizens' confidence levels in it.

e) Impacting policy processes through the integration of citizens inputs:



Political leaders and institutions should demonstrate genuine commitment to integrating DIs within existing political frameworks and planning such integration already during its design. This involves institutionalising mechanisms for citizen input and engagement across all levels of governance, embedding DIs as integral components of governance processes and coordinating better policies that promote public participation. With this regard, the existing European participatory tools (such as the ECI, CoFoE, European Citizens' panels, petitions to the European Parliament, etc) need a more coordinated approach, so that they can reinforce each other's legitimacy and results and therefore increase their visibility and impact.

f) Embracing a culture of learning and adaptation:



Governments and stakeholders should prioritise the continuous evaluation and adaptation of DIs to ensure their effectiveness and relevance. This involves establishing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, collecting feedback from participants, keeping citizens updated of the follow up of their proposals and incorporating lessons learned into future initiatives. By embracing a culture of learning and adaptation, policymakers can optimise the impact of DIs and address evolving societal needs and challenges.

4 References

R. Falanga, J. Ribeiro, J. Moniz, V. Buth (2024), Report and timeline of (e)participation and engagement practices, Deliverable 1.1 for the project INCITE-DEM. Grant Agreement 101094258

B. Schlipphak, C. Simsek, O. Treib (2024), Report on perceptions and attitudes toward democracy, Deliverable 2.1 for the project INCITE-DEM. Grant Agreement 101094258

S. Wang, W. Jager (2024), Dialogue Tool based on the HUMAT Framework and Instructions for Users. Deliverable 3.1 for the project INCITE-DEM. Grant Agreement 101094258

