



CITIZENS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY AND THE DYNAMICS OF CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

This article develops a conceptual discussion of citizen participation in electoral democracy, with particular attention to voting behaviour, civil society mobilisation, and the conditions shaping turnout in elections. It outlines citizen participation as a sequence of activities that includes information seeking, preference formation, decision making, and the act of casting a ballot. The text examines how trust in political institutions, social identity, and previous electoral experiences influence the willingness of citizens to engage in elections. It also explores how civil society organisations encourage, channel, or at times unintentionally limit participation through voter education, monitoring initiatives, and issue based campaigns. Media environments and political learning in schools are considered as additional factors that affect how citizens understand elections and evaluate their significance. By treating participation as a dynamic process that reflects the quality of the relationship between citizens and state institutions, the article offers a conceptual framework that may guide future empirical work and assist practitioners in designing more citizen centred electoral practices.

Keywords: political participation, voting behaviour, electoral democracy, civil society, voter turnout, political trust, citizenship education.

Introduction

Electoral democracy is often understood through a procedural lens regarding election schedules, campaign rules, and institutions that conduct voting. However, behind this institutional framework lies the experience of citizens as voters who perceive elections as part of their everyday political life. For some citizens, election day is an important moment to express preferences and expectations regarding the direction of government. For others, elections merely pass as routine events that do not provoke emotional or intellectual engagement. This variation in experience is evident in how people talk about elections, access political information, and weigh the benefits and risks of involvement (Consultant, 2012). In family conversations, workplaces, and digital media, enthusiastic, hesitant, apathetic, or skeptical attitudes coexist. Thus, citizens' political participation in electoral democracy cannot be understood solely as turnout numbers at polling stations, but as an expression of how citizens perceive themselves as members of the political community.

In an election-based democratic system, citizen participation through voting is considered the primary means of converting individual preferences into collective decisions (Harrison & Munn, 2007). Voting procedures are designed so that each vote is formally recognized as equal, regardless of economic background, education, or social identity. However, this formal equality meets layered social realities. Some citizens participate in elections with adequate information, capable of evaluating candidates' programs and track records, and have access to various information channels. Others face limitations in political literacy, distance from institutions, and distrust of political processes. This diversity affects how citizens make choices, decide whether to participate, and assess the meaning of their electoral involvement. In other words, voter behavior is the result of the interaction between institutional structures and citizens' subjective experiences.

Civil society movements add an important layer to the picture of political participation in electoral democracy (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020). Beyond political parties and state institutions, there are organizations and groups that strive to raise citizens' awareness about voting rights, election integrity, and the importance of monitoring electoral processes. They conduct voter education, facilitate public discussions, monitor campaign

practices, and promote transparency agendas. Some movements focus on groups historically marginalized in the political process, such as youth, women, or certain minority groups. Through various forms of collective action, civil society seeks to connect citizens' everyday experiences with the electoral arena, which often feels distant. Citizens' engagement fostered through these movements can take the form of turnout at polling stations, participation in public discussions, and voluntary monitoring activities.

Voter behavior in electoral democracy is also influenced by social environment, political culture, and the quality of information circulated (Cisneros & Parr, 1990). In communities with strong traditions of participation, encouragement to vote often comes from close contacts, local leaders, or community-based organizations. Voters may feel that participation is part of a collective identity that binds them. Where collective awareness and citizen engagement increase, the effectiveness of actions taken is enhanced (Gautama et al., 2021; Herisasono et al., 2021). Conversely, in environments filled with disappointment in political institutions, distrust easily emerges. Citizens who feel disconnected from their representatives or witness political practices perceived as dishonest tend to question the value of voting. Direct experience with fair and responsive services builds trust, so citizens feel that their vote matters (Rojak, 2021). Direct experience with public services, the behavior of officials, and government responsiveness to community aspirations also influence the belief that one's vote is meaningful or not. Therefore, voter behavior reflects a complex interaction between psychological, social, and institutional factors.

Political participation of citizens in elections is also influenced by the institutional design of electoral democracy. Regulations regarding voter registration, ease of access to polling stations, the quality of election administration, and vote-counting mechanisms will affect the extent to which citizens feel that the process can be easily followed and trusted (Van Ham & Garnett, 2019). Complex electoral systems, complicated administrative procedures, or a history of prolonged disputes over election results may reduce citizens' confidence in the significance of their presence in the voting booth. Conversely, transparency of information, clear procedures, and accessible complaint mechanisms provide a foundation for citizens to engage with greater confidence. Thus, the design of the

electoral system does not merely regulate the technical aspects of vote counting, but also shapes the psychological and social climate that accompanies citizens' decisions to exercise their voting rights.

The main problem often highlighted in studies of electoral democracy relates to the phenomenon of declining citizen engagement in electoral processes, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitatively, decreasing turnout at polling stations is often viewed as a signal of weakening ties between citizens and democratic institutions. Qualitatively, high turnout does not always correspond with careful consideration when determining electoral choices (Talpin, 2019). Some voters determine their choices primarily based on emotional attachments, social pressure, or short-term incentives. Another phenomenon is participation inequality, where groups with higher economic and educational resources find it easier to attend and express their preferences, while poor, less educated, or geographically remote communities face greater obstacles. These issues raise concerns that election outcomes may not fully reflect the aspirations of all citizens.

Another problem arises when citizens' spaces for political participation in elections are overshadowed by elite domination and unaccountable political practices (Parvin, 2018; Sundberg, 2019). In some cases, citizens feel that electoral processes are determined by networks of power and resources that are difficult for them to influence. Money, media influence, and organizational strength can create imbalances in the arena of political competition. Under such conditions, some citizens develop attitudes of resignation or cynicism, assuming that their vote will not bring meaningful change. This decline in trust can trigger withdrawal from electoral politics, even though the right to vote formally remains. Another symptom is the emergence of pragmatic participation, where turnout in elections is driven more by momentary considerations than by commitment to democratic values. All of these problems indicate a gap between the ideals of electoral democracy and citizens' lived experiences.

The urgency of developing a conceptual study on citizens' political participation in electoral democracy lies in the need to understand in a more structured manner the relationship between voter behavior, the dynamics of civil society movements, and the factors influencing the level of electoral participation. Understanding basic aspects first often helps in

constructing a clearer picture of complex phenomena (Darmawan, 2013). Amid changes in the media landscape, the increasing use of digital platforms, and shifting patterns of relationships between citizens and political institutions, traditional understandings of participation may no longer be sufficient (Robles-Morales & Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). A focused literature review can help identify relevant categories of participatory behavior, explain the role of civil society organizations in encouraging or restraining participation, and outline psychological, social, economic, and institutional factors that influence participation. Such understanding is important as a foundation for the development of empirical research as well as for the formulation of democratic policies that are more sensitive to citizens' experiences.

The purpose of this writing is to develop a systematic conceptual explanation of citizens' political participation in electoral democracy by emphasizing the interconnection between voter behavior, civil society movements, and the factors influencing levels of electoral participation. Specifically, this paper aims to identify forms of citizens' political participation within the electoral framework, explain the role of civil society organizations in shaping voter attitudes and behavior, and formulate categories of factors contributing to variations in participation levels. From a theoretical perspective, this study is expected to provide a more structured foundation for further research on citizens' political behavior. From a practical perspective, this explanation is expected to serve as a reference source for election administrators, policymakers, and civil society actors in designing initiatives to strengthen participation that are more aligned with citizens' experiences.

Method

This study employs a qualitative literature approach to examine the conceptual understanding of citizen political participation in electoral democracy. Within methodological traditions sensitive to diverse perspectives, research is not limited to collecting empirical data but also involves critically engaging with ideas and theoretical arguments developed by previous scholars. Through this approach, research functions as a way to interpret, compare, and organize knowledge found in existing academic works. Therefore, this study does not use interviews

or field observations but relies on a directed and critical reading of books, journal articles, and scholarly documents discussing voter participation, citizen political behavior, electoral democracy, and civil society movements (Scheurich, 2014).

The qualitative literature method in this research follows a systematic and structured process. The study begins with the formulation of keywords and initial analytical categories related to citizen political participation and electoral democracy. These keywords guide the selection and classification of relevant literature sources. After the sources are identified, the materials are analyzed qualitatively by grouping similar ideas into thematic categories in order to identify patterns of arguments, differences in scholarly emphasis, and possible conceptual syntheses. Through this analytical process, the study is able to organize various perspectives in the literature into a coherent framework that helps explain the dynamics of political participation in democratic contexts (Beins, 2017).

In the analysis stage, the researcher also emphasizes logical consistency, conceptual clarity, and reflexivity in interpreting the literature. Maintaining consistent definitions and arguments is important so that the discussion remains systematic and academically accountable. At the same time, researchers must be aware of their own interpretive position when engaging with texts to avoid bias in interpreting ideas. Based on this framework, citizen political participation is positioned as the central focus of the study, while the literature is examined to explain voter behavior, the influence of civil society movements, and various social and political factors that shape participation levels. Through this approach, the study aims to produce a concise yet comprehensive normative explanation based on coherent reasoning and a critical synthesis of relevant scholarly ideas (Scheurich, 2014; Beins, 2017).

Result and Discussion

Citizens' political participation in electoral democracy refers to the active involvement of individuals or groups of society in the entire political process related to general elections as the primary mechanism for legitimizing democratic power, starting from the stage of forming political preferences to concrete actions in determining leaders and the

direction of public policy through legitimate electoral procedures (Oser & Hooghe, 2018). This concept reflects the level of political awareness, civic responsibility, and trust in the democratic system, which is manifested not only through the exercise of voting rights but also through activities such as political discussions, campaign participation, monitoring of the electoral process, and involvement in community political education. The level of political participation in electoral democracy can be measured through indicators such as voter turnout in elections, citizen involvement in political socialization and campaigns, the intensity of access to and use of political information, participation in public forums or democratic dialogues, participation as volunteers or election observers, the level of political literacy in society, and the consistency of voting behavior as a form of continuous expression of political preferences. This is similar to how individuals play an active role in workplaces or organizations, where participation and contribution from each person can strengthen performance and create a positive collective atmosphere (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2012).

According to Halder and Campbell-Phillips (2020), citizens' political participation in electoral democracy can be understood as the involvement of individuals or groups in activities directly related to elections, including preference formation, information seeking, decision-making, voting, and monitoring electoral processes. In this perspective, participation does not only occur on election day but begins long before citizens arrive at polling stations. People often develop political preferences through exposure to media, public discussions, and social interactions that shape their perceptions of candidates and political issues. Therefore, electoral participation should be understood as a broader civic process in which citizens gradually construct their political understanding and position within the democratic system (Halder & Campbell-Phillips, 2020).

Voting is indeed the most visible and measurable form of participation, but it represents only one part of a wider range of political activities carried out by citizens. Political conversations within families, participation in campaign meetings, engagement in community discussions, and involvement in voter education initiatives are all examples of activities that influence how individuals interpret elections and make political decisions. These activities allow citizens to exchange opinions,

evaluate information, and develop collective awareness regarding political choices. Active participation in such activities reflects a willingness to invest time, attention, and energy in collective affairs, while limited or passive engagement may indicate a weaker connection between citizens and the political system (Deth, 2014).

Voter behavior is therefore an important dimension in understanding political participation in electoral democracy. When individuals enter the voting booth, they often rely on a series of considerations shaped by political knowledge, social identity, and personal experiences. These considerations may include evaluations of government performance, identification with political parties or candidates, or influence from trusted individuals within their social environment. Some voters evaluate political choices rationally by comparing policy programs and performance records, while others are influenced by narratives, symbols, or charismatic leadership. This diversity in decision-making processes illustrates that participation in voting reflects not only institutional procedures but also how citizens interpret politics as part of their everyday social and political life (Dalton, 2018).

One crucial dimension in voter behavior is the level of trust in political institutions and the electoral process. Citizens who believe that their votes are recorded honestly and contribute to determining the outcome tend to be more willing to attend polling stations (Halder & Campbell-Phillips, 2020). This trust is shaped by past experiences, the reputation of election organizers, the quality of law enforcement, and perceptions of the neutrality of authorities. If citizens repeatedly hear about or experience practices perceived as fraudulent, reluctance to participate may grow stronger. On the other hand, the presence of transparent and open mechanisms can foster a sense of security and confidence that the electoral process is not entirely beyond citizens' oversight. Thus, institutional trust becomes one of the important foundations of participation.

Social identity factors also influence voter behavior. Individuals often position themselves within certain groups based on ethnicity, religion, region, gender, age, or social class (Dekker, 2014). These identities influence how they receive political messages, evaluate candidates, and determine their attitudes toward elections. In

communities with particular historical experiences, calls for participation may be linked to narratives of struggle or solidarity. On the other hand, groups that feel underrepresented or whose political aspirations are frequently ignored may develop distance from elections. Strong identity can encourage participation when elections are viewed as a means to advocate for group interests, or conversely restrain participation when elections are perceived as unlikely to change the group's position.

Civil society movements serve as a bridge between citizens and the electoral system (Satriadi et al., 2021). Community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, election monitoring groups, professional associations, and religious organizations often possess the capacity to mobilize citizens who were previously passive. Through voter education activities, the provision of non-partisan information, and the facilitation of dialogue, civil society helps bridge the gap between the technical language of elections and the everyday language of citizens. Such movements also strive to create safe spaces for groups that have been historically underrepresented, enabling them to express their preferences with greater confidence. In addition, civil society can act as an independent monitor that provides additional assurance to citizens through oversight of the vote-counting process and the handling of disputes.

The relationship between civil society movements and voter participation is not always linear. On the one hand, the presence of active and independent organizations can increase citizens' interest in elections, because citizens feel that there are companions who are ready to defend their rights if violations occur (Rimmerman, 2018). On the other hand, if civil society movements become too closely aligned with certain political forces, public trust may decline (Toubøl, 2019). Citizens may perceive activities claimed as voter education to actually be disguised campaigns. Therefore, the integrity of civil society organizations becomes an important factor in maintaining the quality of participation. This integrity is reflected in the transparency of support sources, clarity of mandates, and consistency of attitudes in responding to electoral violations.

The factors influencing voter participation levels can broadly be grouped into individual, social, and institutional factors (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020). At the individual level, political knowledge, a sense of political efficacy, and perceptions regarding the importance of elections in

everyday life have significant impacts. Citizens who feel capable of understanding issues and believe that their actions can influence policy directions are more motivated to participate. At the social level, family support, community norms, and the atmosphere of public discussion shape a climate that encourages or restrains participation. At the institutional level, the design of the electoral system, the ease of procedures, and the quality of election administration influence citizens' final decisions to attend or abstain from polling stations. These three groups of factors are interconnected and reinforce one another.

Previous electoral experiences shape collective memories that influence participation in subsequent elections (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2011). If citizens remember elections as events that provide space for expression, produce responsive representatives, and are characterized by fair competition, they tend to repeat their participation. Conversely, if elections are remembered as events marked by violence, manipulation, or empty promises, citizens may develop feelings of fatigue. In some cases, repeated disappointment triggers a shift away from electoral politics toward other forms of participation, such as social movements outside electoral procedures. Thus, participation in electoral democracy cannot be separated from long-term dynamics involving expectations, disappointments, and processes of collective learning (Ujianto & Darmawan, 2003).

Media, both traditional and digital, significantly influence how citizens perceive elections (Omotola & Aiyedogbon, 2012). News coverage, conversations on social media, and online campaigns shape the information landscape faced by voters. Media that present balanced information and facilitate rational discussion can enrich the quality of voter decisions (Mardikaningsih, 2018). However, the spread of biased, provocative, or misleading information can blur the boundary between fact and opinion, making it difficult for citizens to evaluate choices clearly. The presence of excessive information without clear guidance can also create information fatigue, which ultimately reduces citizens' interest in following political issues. Therefore, media literacy becomes part of the factors influencing participation.

Citizens' political participation in elections has a strong normative dimension. Within the framework of democracy, participation is often

viewed as a moral obligation in addition to a constitutional right. Narratives of citizenship that emphasize shared responsibility for the direction of political life seek to cultivate the sense that apathetic groups waste the opportunity to influence policy (Coma, 2014). However, this narrative of obligation needs to be reconciled with the real experiences of citizens who may face injustice, discrimination, or neglect of their aspirations. If the narrative of obligation is not accompanied by improvements in the quality of elections and institutional responsiveness, calls for participation risk sounding empty. Recognizing the challenges faced by citizens helps in designing participation strategies that are more relevant and acceptable (Putra et al., 2021). Therefore, participation in elections needs to be maintained alongside strengthening the integrity of the political system.

Variations in participation levels among social groups and regions reveal that political participation is often shaped by inequalities in access to political opportunities. Citizens who live in remote areas or regions with limited transportation and infrastructure may face practical difficulties in reaching polling stations, which can reduce their likelihood of participating in elections. Similarly, individuals working in informal sectors with long and uncertain working hours may find it difficult to allocate time to engage in electoral activities. These conditions illustrate that participation is influenced not only by political awareness but also by structural conditions that shape citizens' access to democratic processes (Somma & Bargsted, 2018).

In addition to structural barriers, certain groups may also encounter social or political pressures that indirectly limit their participation. Intimidation, local power relations, or social expectations within communities can affect citizens' willingness to express political preferences openly. In some contexts, individuals may feel discouraged from participating if they perceive that their choices are monitored or judged by others. Such conditions show that political participation cannot be understood solely as an individual decision; rather, it is embedded in broader social environments that influence how safe and meaningful citizens perceive their participation to be. Therefore, understanding participation requires attention to the real social contexts in which citizens live and make political decisions (Somma & Bargsted, 2018).

Another important factor shaping political participation is the role of civic education in developing citizens' democratic awareness and competencies. Learning experiences related to democratic values, citizens' rights and responsibilities, and the importance of deliberation can prepare individuals from an early age to participate thoughtfully in political processes. When civic education encourages students to understand political institutions and discuss public issues critically, it helps them develop the skills necessary for informed participation. Such educational experiences foster habits of reflection, argumentation, and responsible engagement with political issues (Weinberg & Flinders, 2018).

Civil society movements often become pioneers of innovative forms of participation beyond voting. Citizen-based election monitoring, reporting violations through digital platforms, and forums for dialogue between candidates and communities are examples of innovations that enrich electoral democracy (Stroh, 2020). These forms of participation provide space for citizens who may be reluctant to engage in party structures but remain concerned about electoral integrity. In this context, initiatives by individuals or small groups can have significant and sustainable impacts on public welfare (Rizky & Udjari, 2021). Here, civil society acts as a space for experimentation with new forms of engagement that align with technological changes and evolving communication patterns. This innovative strength can broaden the meaning of participation from merely attending on election day to sustained engagement.

In electoral democracy, citizen participation through elections also interacts with non-electoral forms of participation, such as protests, petitions, and issue-based campaigns (Bokov, 2019). Disappointment with election outcomes or government policies may encourage citizens to redirect their energy to other channels. These forms of non-electoral participation can be seen as efforts to maintain a balance between public demands and public policy, similar to the balance required in sustainable development (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). In some situations, non-electoral participation acts as a counterbalance that pressures representative institutions to be more responsive to public demands. However, if electoral channels are perceived as ineffective, non-electoral participation that is disconnected from electoral processes risks distancing

citizens from legal mechanisms of power transition. The balance between the two becomes an indicator of democratic health.

Discussions about citizens' political participation also need to address the psychological dimension of belonging to the state and the political system (Parvin, 2018). Citizens who feel their dignity is recognized, invited to participate, and treated fairly tend to develop a positive sense of civic identity. The stronger a person's sense of responsibility and psychological attachment to their community, the greater the likelihood that they will actively engage in democratic processes and broader social life (Darmawan et al., 2021). This identity strengthens the motivation to participate in elections, because elections are viewed as a space for self-actualization as full citizens. Conversely, experiences of discrimination, violence, or exclusion can undermine this sense of belonging. Citizens who feel that the system does not stand for them may regard elections as a mere formal ritual unworthy of participation. Thus, electoral participation becomes a reflection of the quality of the relationship between citizens and the state.

Citizens' political participation in electoral democracy needs to be understood as a dynamic process that is never fully complete. Every election presents new learning opportunities for citizens, election organizers, political parties, and civil society movements. Patterns of participation may change along with technological transformations, generational shifts, and changes in social structures (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020). Therefore, conceptual studies on participation must remain open to renewal and sensitive to emerging phenomena, such as the influence of digital campaigns, the role of influencers, or patterns of disinformation. Efforts to understand citizen participation are not merely about recording attendance at polling booths, but also about tracing how citizens integrate political experiences into their lives as individuals and members of communities.

Conclusion

Citizen political participation in electoral democracy is the outcome of the interaction between voter behavior, the dynamics of civil society movements, and various factors influencing the decision to engage in elections. Casting a vote in the polling booth represents the culmination of a process that involves preference formation, information seeking, discussions within social

networks, and assessments of institutional integrity. Institutional trust, social identity, past experiences, and the quality of civic education have been shown to affect citizens' readiness to participate. Civil society movements enrich forms of participation by providing voter education and oversight, but their integrity must be maintained to preserve public trust. A healthy electoral democracy requires broad, reflective participation that is rooted in citizens' sense of ownership of the political system, rather than merely formal attendance on election day.

The implications of this conceptual study point to the need for institutional design and electoral practices that treat citizens as active subjects rather than passive objects. Election organizers, policymakers, and civil society actors should consider the psychological, social, and institutional factors influencing participation, and design interventions that respect citizens' autonomy. Recommendations include strengthening dialogical civic education, increasing transparency in electoral processes, developing easily accessible complaint mechanisms, and supporting independent civil society initiatives. Further research can empirically examine the various dimensions outlined in diverse democratic contexts, thereby deepening understanding of citizen participation and contributing to the maturation of electoral democracy practices across countries.

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