

# Institutionalization of Participatory Democratic Innovations: Understanding the Roles of Established and Emerging Actors

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## Abstract

While existing research has increasingly emphasized the need to embed democratic innovations within formal political structures to ensure their sustainability, analytical frameworks are largely rooted in normative democratic theory and often lack tools for understanding the processes of institutionalization of democratic innovations. We draw on the framework developed for analyzing the institutionalization of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), using it as an analogy to better understand the mechanism of these processes, with a specific focus on the roles of the socio-political actors involved. While we acknowledge the structural differences between NHRIs and democratic innovations, we argue that this analogy provides a valuable perspective and theoretical model that could be used for analyzing mechanisms and the roles actors may play in these processes, especially in the context of increasing international support for participatory norms. Ultimately, we contend that successful institutionalization depends on the parallel efforts of state actors, civil society, participation professionals, academics, and international organizations, whose actions may unfold independently yet contribute collectively to the institutionalization of democratic innovations and suggest that the model we propose should be further refined and validated through empirical research.

## Keywords

actors; democratic innovations; institutionalization; National Human Rights Institutions

## 1. Introduction

The increasing spread of democratic innovations such as participatory budgets, citizen assemblies, referenda, town meetings, online citizen forums, e-democracy, public debates, collaborative policy making, etc., reflects a global effort to address a democratic malaise and a widespread sense of democratic disillusionment (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016; Jacquet et al., 2023). This democratic malaise is manifested through eroding participation in conventional political channels like elections and party membership, diminishing public trust in political actors and institutions, and pervasive concerns over accountability mechanisms in representative systems, factors that fuel anti-political sentiment and corrode social cohesion and citizens' sense of political efficacy (Elstub & Escobar, 2019).

To address democratic malaise, researchers, civil society organizations, social movements, governments, the EU, and international organizations, as well as other socio-political actors, are experimenting with various models of democratic innovations aimed at bridging the gap between political institutions and citizens (Jacquet et al., 2023; OECD, 2021). Yet, the mere experimentation and implementation of these mechanisms does not guarantee their effectiveness. Too often, innovations remain disconnected from the core structures of representative systems, leading to limited political impact and short-term existence (Adenskog, 2018). The OECD report on innovative democratic practices, published in 2020 and based on a database of 289 cases, identifies only 14 as cases of institutionalized practices (OECD, 2020). The Democratic Knowledge Database, developed in 2024 within the EU-funded project Network of Networks 4 Democracy, which collects 344 texts that focus on democratic innovations, shows that even though democratic innovations often involved some political authorities, only 17% of the cases were implemented within some kind of legal or strategic framework explicitly mentioned as the basis for the innovation's implementation (Markov et al., 2024). Moreover, more than half of the cases in the database were ad hoc initiatives, lacking any form of existing or planned regularity.

Research on democratic innovations, in fact, warns us that they risk becoming experimental or ad hoc gestures without political impact, unless they are anchored in formal political structures and norms (Fiket, 2023; Fournier et al., 2011; Fung, 2015; Lima, 2025; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023; Smith, 2009). And from a "systemic turn" that has emerged in both theoretical (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Owen & Smith, 2015) and empirical studies (Jonsson, 2015; Smith, 2009), more attention has been placed on understanding processes of institutionalization of democratic innovations. Understanding democratic innovations as embedded within broader political systems, in fact, recently became one of the key topics of the research agenda on democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). However, while existing analytical frameworks address some systemic dimensions (Dryzek, 2009; Mansbridge et al., 2012), they are largely rooted in normative democratic theory (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Smith, 2009) and are not tailored to exploring institutional development (Adenskog, 2018).

By acknowledging concerns that overly rigid institutionalization may constrain the adaptive and experimental nature of democratic innovations (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Niemeyer & Felicetti, 2022; OECD, 2020), this article tries to better understand what roles actors can play not merely as initiators or supporters of democratic innovations, but as key agents in shaping how the institutionalization process unfolds. It should be noted that we do not seek to engage in a normative debate over the desirability of institutionalizing democratic innovations. While we approach this critically in the conclusion, our starting

point is the assumption that the appropriate response to democratic malaise lies in expanding democratic practices, following the reasoning that *the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy*, particularly through enhanced citizen participation. From this perspective, effective democratic innovations serve as mechanisms to deepen democracy and address the perceived disconnect between institutions and the public. We follow Elstub and Escobar's (2019) definition of democratic innovations as processes or institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence. Democratic innovations are new practices that are consciously and deliberately introduced to enhance the quality of democracy, regardless of whether these innovations have previously been implemented in other political systems (Geissel, 2009).

Existing scholarship on democratic innovations highlights that their trajectory depends not only on their institutional design but also on the interactions among the actors who support and seek to embed them within governance systems (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Escobar, 2022). To understand the roles that actors in processes of institutionalization of democratic innovations may play, we draw an analogy with the successful institutionalization of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). Rather than proposing an impossible universal model of institutionalization suitable for all socio-political contexts and types of democratic innovation, we aim to examine the roles that political and societal actors play, or could potentially play, in this process. We understand analogy as a process that facilitates the transfer of knowledge from one domain, the source, to another, the target (Ward, 2011). This means that we are using insights from a familiar context—NHRI institutionalization (the source domain)—to better understand or generate new perspectives in a less familiar one – democratic innovation institutionalization (the target domain). In this sense, analogy enables us to make advancements in one area by recognizing structural similarities with another (Gentner & Smith, 2012). Using the institutionalization of NHRIs as a reference point draws on both the richness of its literature and its conceptual parallels with democratic innovations. Both are norm-driven governance reforms requiring legitimacy, autonomy, and multi-level actor engagement. While not originally actor-centered, the NHRI literature offers strong analytical foundations, particularly on norm diffusion, legal codification, and international-domestic interplay. This allows us to develop an actor-oriented framework that maps the differentiated yet interdependent roles in the adoption and anchoring of democratic innovations, addressing gaps left by broader policy diffusion approaches.

The contribution of this article does not lie in reiterating the normative argument for the institutionalization of democratic innovations, but rather in advancing a conceptual model for analyzing how different categories of actors contribute to this process. Drawing on the literature on the institutionalization of NHRIs, the proposed framework identifies and differentiates the roles of state, societal, and intermediary actors, and explores the dynamics that shape their interactions over time. While firmly rooted in existing theoretical approaches, the framework is offered primarily as a heuristic device, one that can guide the systematic analysis of institutionalization processes across diverse contexts. Its analytical utility lies in enabling a more nuanced understanding of how the interplay among these actors influences the trajectories of democratic innovations, an understanding that can be further refined and validated through detailed case study research.

Our rationale for using the institutionalization process of NHRIs as an analogy for the institutionalization of democratic innovations lies in the fact that both forms of institutional innovation are designed to enhance horizontal and vertical accountability, while also operating at the intersection of institutional politics and

citizen claims-making. Besides, both are normatively anchored in efforts to counter democratic malaise, whether by protecting fundamental rights or by engaging citizens directly in policymaking. At their core, each aims to expand access to rights and participation, improve accountability, and renew public trust in institutions (Dryzek, 2009; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Pegram, 2010; Pogrebinski, 2017; Reif, 2000). It is interesting that the emergence of NHRIs as a global norm, consolidated through the Paris Principles, coincided with another major development in democratic innovation: the institutionalization of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989. These parallel developments—one within the human rights infrastructure, the other within participatory democratic governance—reflect a broader post-Cold War moment of democratic optimism, marked by a belief in expanding both rights and participation as the dual pillars of democratic strengthening (Fung & Wright, 2003; Huntington, 1991; Reid-Henry, 2019). This convergence also aligns with broader shifts in international democracy promotion, which emphasize both institutional restraint and empowerment of citizens in new democracies (Schedler et al., 1999). The NHRI experience thus offers a valuable lens for exploring how democratic innovations might evolve from localized experimentation into enduring elements of democratic governance, particularly in today's context, where participatory norms are increasingly promoted by international organizations such as the OECD, the Council of Europe, and the European Union (Council of Europe, 2017; European Parliament, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Although human rights institutions and participatory democratic innovations differ in their structures, functions, modes of adoption, and the actors involved in their institutionalization—issues we address critically in this article—we argue that the analogy between them offers a useful perspective for examining how diverse socio-political actors contribute to the institutionalization of democratic innovations.

In the following section, we provide a concise overview of the institutionalization process of NHRIs with a specific focus on the literature that elaborates on the mechanisms of the process and the roles of actors involved. In this part, we also critically engage with the limitations of using NHRIs' institutionalization as a reference point for understanding the institutionalization of democratic innovations. In the third section, we build on the framework used for understanding the institutionalization of NHRIs and adapt it to examine the roles of socio-political actors and mechanisms of institutionalization of democratic innovations. In the final section, we discuss the implications of our inquiry for an understanding of the process of institutionalization of democratic innovations.

## **2. Exploring the Institutionalization of NHRIs and the Rationale for the Analogy With Democratic Innovations**

NHRIs, as a specific form of institutional innovation, evolved over decades through United Nations-led norm development and sustained advocacy by a diverse range of actors (Goodman & Pegram, 2012; Pegram, 2010). While initial encouragement came from the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1946, only with the 1991 Paris Workshop and the adoption of the Paris Principles did a formal international standard emerge. These principles set benchmarks for mandate, independence, and accreditation, becoming the foundation for NHRI legitimacy. Their institutionalization reflects a layered, multi-scalar process shaped by international norms, domestic coalitions, and shifting political contexts. As Strang (1991, p. 324) observes, norm diffusion operates through mechanisms in which “prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters.”

While scholarship on norm diffusion has largely focused on macro-level structures, such as the global human rights regime and the Paris Principles, it has paid less attention to the micro-level processes through which norms are interpreted, negotiated, and embedded in domestic settings (Checkel, 1998; Johnston, 2001). Foundational work on norm diffusion by Goodman and Jinks (2004), further developed by Pegram (2010, 2012), offers a triadic framework—*coercion*, *acculturation*, and *persuasion*—to explain the varied mechanisms through which actors influence the translation of international norms into domestic institutions. This framework captures the multiple models and trajectories of NHRI establishment and substantial design variation.

Pegram's empirical research, particularly in Latin America, illustrates that these mechanisms do not operate in isolation. Rather, they are activated through the strategic engagement of different groups of actors working within shifting political opportunity structures (Kim, 2013; Linos & Pegram, 2015; Pegram, 2007). He shows that NHRI resilience depends less on formal norm adoption than on how interactions between actors succeed in translating global norms into viable institutional designs and embed them in domestic governance. This actor-oriented perspective underscores the relational and negotiated nature of institutionalization, offering a valuable example for understanding the establishment of institutional innovations.

Within this framework, coercion refers to norm adoption driven by external pressures, such as aid conditionalities, diplomatic leverage, or post-conflict reconstruction agendas. Acculturation captures the role of peer learning, reputational incentives, and regional identity in prompting institutional uptake. Persuasion refers to the process by which domestic actors come to internalize and accept international norms as valid and appropriate, leading them to establish institutions based on a sincere commitment to democratic principles and accountability.

While this triadic framework offers valuable analytical insight, it should be understood as a heuristic device rather than a rigid classification. In practice, the mechanisms of coercion, acculturation, and persuasion frequently overlap, and few cases follow a single linear path. Institutionalization unfolds as a hybrid and negotiated process, shaped by the sequencing of these mechanisms and the specific interplay of domestic and international actors. In the case of NHRIs, the success of norm adoption and institutional anchoring depended heavily on how global standards were translated into local practice, a process mediated by structural conditions and power dynamics among key stakeholders. At this point, it is important to clarify that in our article, we use the term institutionalization to refer to the process of norm adoption. Institutionalization is a gradual process involving the adoption, anchoring, and potential ritualization of democratic innovations. Adoption marks the initial uptake, while anchoring refers to the embedding of practices into legal, administrative, and organizational structures (Geissel, 2009; Goodman & Pegram, 2012). In the NHRI literature we reviewed earlier, scholars also distinguish between adoption, the process leading to the formal acceptance of a norm, and the subsequent phases of anchoring or embedding, which are crucial for assessing a norm's effectiveness. While we adopt a broader understanding of institutionalization, we acknowledge that the mechanisms involved often overlap and should not be treated as strictly distinct or sequential categories.

### ***2.1. Triadic Mechanism and the Interplay of Actors in the NHRI Institutionalization (Adoption)***

Coercion, broadly understood as indirect or soft pressure, has been central to the diffusion of NHRIs in post-conflict and developmental settings. The primary actors in these processes are international organizations—the UN agencies (OHCHR and UNDP), international financial institutions (World Bank), and bilateral donors (e.g., United States Agency for International Development, German Agency for International Cooperation, and French Development Agency)—which link NHRI establishment to technical assistance, development goals, and post-conflict reconstruction frameworks (Cardenas, 2014; Goodman & Jinks, 2004; Pegram, 2010). These actors shape legal mandates, provide capacity-building support, and embed NHRIs into broader state-building agendas. While these measures are not coercive in a formal legal sense, they exert substantial leverage through conditional aid, peace agreements, and access to international legitimacy, especially in the process of democratization (Schedler et al., 1999). Good examples for such processes are post-conflict cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where international actors used their administrative authority and aid leverage to ensure human rights oversight mechanisms were included as part of state-building and democratization processes (Cardenas, 2014; Pegram, 2010). Iraq is presented as a case with “the strongest instance of coercive state-building” in NHRI diffusion, illustrating how institutional creation was tightly coupled to international obligations and resources (Cardenas, 2014, p. 233). The High Commission for Human Rights was created under the 2007 International Compact with Iraq, a framework that outlined international expectations for post-conflict governance. In Guatemala and El Salvador, transitional justice and democracy assistance programs following civil conflicts explicitly supported the creation of ombudsman institutions (UN OHCHR, 2010).

Complementing institutional pressure, transnational advocacy organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have applied reputational pressure on governments to conform to international human rights norms, often prompting the creation or strengthening of NHRIs (Kim, 2013). For example, Human Rights Watch engaged directly with Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal and publicly urged the kingdom to align with the Paris Principles (Cardenas, 2014, p. 234). Domestic political elites and public officials, though sometimes resistant, are the focus of coercive actions as they ultimately authorize NHRI mandates to maintain access to international resources and credibility.

Acculturation has facilitated the diffusion of NHRIs through horizontal peer learning, regional normative convergence, and reputational incentives. Key actors in this process include regional NHRI networks—such as Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions, European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, and the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions—as well as regional organizations like the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Asia Pacific Forum, and the Organization of African Unity. These bodies promoted NHRI models as regionally legitimate tools of governance and accountability (Cardenas, 2014, p. 135; Pegram, 2010). In Africa, the Organization of African Unity laid the foundation for regional human rights institutions through the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which influenced the creation of both the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1987) and the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, operational since 2007. The Asia Pacific Forum helped shape legislation, accreditation, and institutional frameworks in countries like Mongolia, Pakistan, and Cambodia, often with UNDP (Cardenas, 2014; Renshaw & Fitzpatrick, 2012). In Central and Eastern Europe, both the civil society and state representatives saw human rights issues in the light of the “Europeanization” of their societies, leading to EU membership (Carver, 2012). Their promotion of NHRI



adoption was managed through training programs, legal model dissemination, peer benchmarking, and soft monitoring mechanisms (GANHRI, 2020; Linos & Pegram, 2015; Pegram, 2010).

While these transnational actors create normative frameworks and reputational pressures, the successful institutionalization of NHRIs depends on active engagement from domestic actors. South Korea stands as a good example here: After joining the UN in 1991 and serving on the UN Human Rights Commission (1993–1998), South Korea sought to position itself as a rights-respecting democracy. Early NHRI discussions were led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Korean officials participated in Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions workshops, reflecting a diplomatic rather than civil society-driven push (Cardenas, 2014, pp. 217–220).

Legislators, ministers, and civil servants are crucial in shaping legal mandates and securing operational autonomy (Goodman & Pegram, 2012; Iroanya et al., 2018), while civil society organizations and legal experts play important roles in norm translation, domestic advocacy, and post-adoption legitimacy building (Goodman & Jinks, 2004; Pegram, 2007). Furthermore, once adopted, NHRI leaders act as institutional entrepreneurs, adapting global standards to national conditions and strengthening the NHRI's credibility through responsiveness and innovation (Pegram, 2012).

Persuasion, arguably the most critical mechanism for the long-term sustainability of NHRIs, is driven by normative internalization among domestic actors. Legal professionals (Benin), civil society organizations (South Korea), human rights advocates (South Africa), and reform-minded elites (Saudi Arabia) are central to this mechanism (Cardenas, 2014; Klaaren, 2005; Pegram, 2010). These actors promote NHRIs not as externally imposed structures but as intrinsic solutions to domestic democratic and accountability deficits. Unlike coercion or acculturation, persuasion involves bottom-up mobilization, sustained public legitimacy, and the adaptation of global standards to local needs (Goodman & Pegram, 2012; Pegram, 2010). The persuasive mechanism involves a flexible repertoire of actions, including legal advocacy, petitioning, public hearings, media campaigns, coalition building, and symbolic acts like hunger strikes. Domestic actors also engage with legislators, draft model laws, and localize global norms. Crucially, this process depends on the mobilization of local knowledge and trust. Civil society groups help embed rights discourse within national narratives, while legal professionals and state representatives ensure legal adoption and constitutional alignment. These actors demonstrate that internal motivation, rather than external pressure, can lead to durable and legitimate institutional outcomes.

The involvement of various actors at different levels shows that the institutionalization of NHRIs was not automatic; it involved different mechanisms, different actors, and was the result of complex negotiations and efforts to build legitimacy. The NHRI experience illustrates how institutionalization occurs through mechanisms such as coercion, acculturation, and persuasion, offering a valuable lens to understand how other institutions, such as democratic innovations, can evolve from local experiments into durable elements of democratic governance. Observing that the current promotion of participatory norms by international actors (Fiket, 2023) partly resembles the international consensus that once enabled the formalization of the Paris Principles, we were led to draw an analogy with the institutionalization of NHRIs. However, we recognize that the strength of our analogy depends on the degree to which objects, their relations, and higher-order relationships align across the two domains so therefore, we are aware of the limitations of our analogy, and in the next section, we will discuss it further.

### 3. Understanding Institutionalization of Democratic Innovations: Mechanisms, Actor Roles, and Dynamics

Building on Pegram's (2010) triadic framework, originally developed to analyze the institutionalization of NHRIs, we use this section to discuss the roles of actors involved in the institutionalization of democratic innovations. While we retain the overall structure of Pegram's framework, we adapt it to better reflect the specific conditions surrounding democratic innovations. First and foremost, we observe the process of institutionalization in a context where no formal international norm exists, and where the process unfolds in a more diffuse manner. However, since Pegram's framework refers to the mechanisms of institutionalization of NHRIs in national and local contexts, we find it to be a valuable analogy. Still, the lack of a formal international norm is highly relevant in the case of the role of international actors, who do not apply direct coercion but instead rely on softer instruments, such as conditional funding, political support, or reputational incentives. Therefore, to more precisely capture the differences in institutionalization mechanisms between the two areas, we replace the term coercion with incentivization to reflect how adoption is encouraged in practice. Also, we acknowledge that incentivization, acculturation, and persuasion in practice often overlap and reinforce one another. What may initially appear as a purely financial or procedural incentive (incentivization) can simultaneously convey normative signals that reshape actor preferences (persuasion).

At this point, we find it necessary to underline further that in the case of democratic innovations, we are still largely in a phase of sporadic and flexible institutionalization. In some contexts, full institutionalization, similar to that seen in NHRIs, has taken place. In other contexts, democratic innovations exist without real political power to make binding decisions, though they may still produce important democratic effects, particularly in terms of enhancing citizens' democratic capacities. Therefore, we draw both on the existing literature on democratic innovations and on the mechanisms of institutionalization outlined in the previous paragraph to better understand the roles that socio-political actors play in institutionalizing democratic innovations.

Incentivization (coercion) in the area of democratic innovations operates through linking democratic innovations to external rewards such as funding, political support, and reputational benefits. In this phase, like in the case of NHRIs, international actors are the key actors. Organizations such as the European Union, the OECD, and the Council of Europe actively promote participatory and deliberative reforms through policy frameworks, recommendations, and funding instruments. They exert their influence through policy frameworks such as the EU's emphasis on good governance, subsidiarity, and participatory democracy, funding instruments such as Horizon Europe, the Europe for Citizens programme (Fiket, 2023), and regional development funds that support citizen engagement and normative influence via soft power, peer review mechanisms, or accession conditionality in enlargement countries. In parallel, international donors have supported democratic innovation projects, particularly in transitional and developing democracies, often linking them to governance, development, and conflict resolution agendas. These actors contribute not only financial resources but also normative frameworks and examples of best practices, which influence national and local reform agendas. Their role highlights the transnational dimension of democratic innovation, where global standards and comparative experiences shape domestic political choice. They, therefore, can play a role in both the diffusion and consolidation of democratic innovations, but most often act as agents of incentivization by linking funding and technical support to the uptake of participatory reforms. Although sometimes underrecognized, academics and researchers also have a relevant role in incentivizing democratic innovations by producing normative and empirical justifications (Talpin, 2019) that can attract external



support and funding as well as legitimize innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Geissel & Joas, 2013). While their involvement does not necessarily drive the initial emergence of such innovations, some, like deliberative polls and citizen juries, are directly invented and promoted globally by academics (Fernandez Martinez et al., 2023). The global uptake of participatory budgeting, for example, cannot be disentangled from the scholarly work that identified, evaluated, and promoted it as a replicable model of democratic innovations (Baioocchi & Ganuza, 2016). Knowledge production, in fact, acts as a soft form of incentivization by framing innovations as effective tools for improving governance and social cohesion.

The example of participatory budgeting also illustrates that traditional political actors can play a significant role during the incentivization phase. When it was first introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, the initiative was spearheaded by the Partido dos Trabalhadores following their electoral victory (Spada, 2010). It shows us that reforms to electoral democracy, such as the institutionalization of democratic innovations, are unlikely to materialize without the active engagement of political parties (Farrell, 2025; Gherghina & Jacquet, 2023). Beyond the influence of political parties, individual elected representatives have likewise been instrumental in advancing formal institutionalization processes. One significant case is the Tuscan Law of Participation (Law no. 69/2007), introduced by the president of the Italian Region of Tuscany after a two-year community engagement process. This law represents the formal institutionalization of democratic innovations at the regional level (Carson & Lewanski, 2008; Thompson, 2019). These developments highlight the critical role of political will and, therefore, policymakers in sustaining democratic innovations beyond isolated experiments (Ravazzi, 2016).

Under the mechanism of acculturation—understood as the process through which democratic innovations become normalized and embedded within existing institutional and cultural contexts—a distinct category of actors emerges: participation professionals. These include experts, facilitators, and consultants who translate democratic innovations into standardized procedures that align with prevailing governance norms. Together with international actors and traditional political elites, they help ensure that these adapted practices conform to international standards and broader global governance frameworks. Participation professionals work both inside governments, as “deliberative public servants” (Bottin & Mazeaud, 2023), and outside, as consultants and independent facilitators. By defining procedural standards, training practices, and institutional routines, they ensure the routinization and stabilization of innovative practices within organizational structures, thus contributing to the durability and quality of democratic innovations over time. In doing so, they shape not only how democratic innovations are designed and function, but also how legitimate, effective, and sustainable they become within institutional and cultural contexts. Experts collaborate with citizens and officials in the co-production of knowledge and more inclusive decision-making (Lightbody & Roberts, 2019). Far from being neutral actors, facilitators, experts, and consultants make political choices about who is included, how issues are framed, and how power is distributed. Due to their professional and organizational interests, their influence may also become antidemocratic or limit innovation, particularly as the field matures and becomes more institutionalized (Bherer & Lee, 2019). In the study that examines how urban planning consultants interact with citizens during participatory policymaking processes (Stapper et al., 2019), the authors showed how some consultants can serve the preferences of their contracting authority, typically local governments, making the democracy-enhancing potential of participation largely symbolic. Furthermore, their involvement may reinforce dependency on external expertise while obscuring structural inequalities and weakening the transformative capacity of democratic innovations (Stapper et al., 2019).

Often, however, their work contributes to institutional culture change, especially in contexts where traditional administrative practices are challenged by participatory demands (Escobar, 2019). Together with traditional political actors, they engage in interpretive and framing practices within bureaucracies and political arenas that mediate and enable the integration of innovations into public discourse and administrative routines (Ravazzi, 2023). Regardless of their motivations, political actors are crucial in this mechanism: their actions determine whether innovations remain merely symbolic or become embedded through integration into bureaucratic routines, legal norms, and administrative practices, thereby shaping their scope, durability, and transformative potential. In this phase, they have the power to shape the institutional fate of innovations through interpretive practices within bureaucracies and political arenas (Courant, 2022; Opitz, 2024). Academics and researchers also contribute to the acculturation by framing democratic innovations as legitimate policy tools and by enabling their broader recognition and transnational diffusion (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2016). They construct normative and empirical justifications but also contribute to the design, facilitation, and evaluation of processes, acting as guarantors of procedural quality and democratic standards (Talpin, 2019). A particularly significant role is played by bottom-up actors or grassroots actors, such as civil society organizations, social movements, and community-based initiatives. Often referred to as “advocates” (Hendriks, 2019), these actors contribute knowledge, experience, and networks to participatory processes and are instrumental in mobilizing, informing, and organizing citizens. They generate new democratic ideas and practices by developing counter-expertise and alternative forms of democratic knowledge (Della Porta & Felicetti, 2022), therefore promoting horizontal learning and peer pressure in the acculturation process. They also act as motivators, advocating for and educating about specific areas of democratic reform. They may translate best practices from other contexts and in responding to international calls to integrate democratic innovations (Farrell, 2025).

Unlike incentivization or acculturation, the persuasion mechanism reflects deeper normative commitments and domestic ownership. It involves the normative internalization of democratic innovations as legitimate, desirable, and necessary components of democratic governance. International organizations also play a role in this mechanism, promoting democratic innovations not only through funding but also through norm-setting. The OECD (2020) and the Council of Europe (2017) advocate for deliberative democracy as a core principle of good governance, framing it as a normative benchmark. Their reports, tools, and recommendations increasingly shape what is considered legitimate democratic practice globally. Academics and legal experts contribute by framing innovations within democratic theory and ensuring procedural quality, thereby underpinning their normative legitimacy and helping establish them as durable policy tools (Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023; Talpin, 2019). Still, the mechanism of persuasion crucially depends on ongoing local engagement and trust-building that transform externally encouraged reforms into intrinsic democratic practices (Goodman & Jinks, 2004). Grassroots actors, including civil society organizations, community groups, social movements, and reform-minded political elites, act as agents of persuasion by mobilizing public demand, piloting participatory practices, and fostering societal acceptance and legitimacy. Grassroots actors, often referred to as “advocates” or “agitators” (Hendriks, 2019), frame participatory innovations not only as policy instruments but as democratic imperatives. Their influence can be seen in initiatives such as referendums promoted from below and experiments in crowdsourced constitutionalism, all of which represent attempts to innovate democratic systems toward more participatory and deliberative models and challenge elite-driven policies, thereby shifting public discourse on democratic participation (Della Porta & Felicetti, 2022). Their work builds demand for democratic innovation from below and provides normative

scaffolding for long-term institutionalization. They often play a dual role, mobilizing participation and ensuring institutional accountability (Ravazzi, 2016).

A compelling example of bottom-up dynamics driving the institutionalization of democratic innovations can be found in the Region of Tuscany's Law No. 69 on participation. The law, adopted in 2007, was designed to provide an institutionalized channel for addressing grassroots committees, resident action groups, and local conflicts by fostering structured interaction between citizens and public institutions. What distinguishes this case is not only the innovative content of the law but also its unique formulation process. Beginning in January 2006, the regional government initiated an open drafting phase in which a wide array of actors, local authorities, civil society organizations, grassroots groups, professional associations, academics, and ordinary citizens were invited to shape the law's goals, provisions, and procedural mechanisms. This process, later conceptualized as a form of "meta-participation" (Lewanski, 2013), directly embedded citizens' experiences into the legal framework. Approximately 1,000 individuals contributed at various stages, ensuring that the final text reflected the diverse participatory practices that had emerged in Tuscany and beyond. This case demonstrates a concrete mechanism through which grassroots mobilization and sustained citizen engagement can move beyond issue-specific campaigns to shape the very institutional architecture of participation.

Political representatives may act as central actors in shaping both the public discourse and the perceived legitimacy of democratic innovations (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). They can, for instance, influence how direct legislation is framed and debated in the public sphere (Junius et al., 2020). Political parties, in particular, shape the broader landscape for democratic innovations through their ideological orientation and institutional position. Evidence shows that especially green and left-leaning parties tend to be more supportive of democratic innovations than their conservative or right-leaning counterparts, except for the far-right parties (Núñez et al., 2017). However, it should be noted that while many parties voice support for democratic innovations in principle, it remains an open question whether they sustain this commitment once in power (Farrell, 2025). Overall, political actors, while often driven by strategic calculations, may also act through persuasion, especially when facing legitimacy crises or shifting public expectations. Some elected officials champion participatory reforms as responses to democratic malaise. For instance, the introduction of the Ostbelgien model in Belgium was partly motivated by a genuine desire to restore trust and citizen engagement after democratic fatigue (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019). Similar motivations were behind reforms in the Tuscan Participation Law, reflecting both political and normative commitments to inclusive governance (Lewanski, 2013). At the same time, public administrators, traditionally seen as neutral implementers of policy guided by rules and technical expertise, are increasingly expected to support citizen participation, facilitate engagement, and act as intermediaries between institutions and the public (Steinbach & Süß, 2018). This shift has redefined their roles as democratic professionals, facilitators, or meta-governors who work to uphold democratic values in participatory processes (Blijleven et al., 2019). Similarly, elected representatives also influence democratic innovations in multiple ways. However, in their case, tensions between representative authority and participatory demands are more pronounced. Some are very skeptical towards democratic innovations, while others actively initiate, participate in, or institutionalize such processes (Thompson, 2019).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Proponents of institutionalization argue that institutionalizing democratic innovations within political systems can effectively bring back citizens in political life, enhance legitimacy of political processes, provide solutions to key limitations of the electoral model of democracy, including the overrepresentation of advantaged groups, the absence of long-term perspective in decision making as well as institutional stability (Landemore, 2020; Macq & Jacquet, 2023). By granting formal recognition to innovative participatory mechanisms, such as deliberative mini-publics or participatory budgeting, governments also signal a commitment to inclusive governance, fostering public trust and reducing perceptions of elite capture (Smith, 2009). Institutionalization also ensures continuity, shielding innovations from the volatility of political cycles (Sintomer et al., 2016). Moreover, evidence suggests that deliberative mini-publics demonstrate greater capacity to influence policy outcomes when formally institutionalized, whereas their non-anchored counterparts frequently fail to transcend symbolic or consultative roles (Bua, 2019; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Liu & Lin, 2023).

Critics, however, caution that institutionalization carries risks. Embedding innovations within existing structures may co-opt their transformative potential, reducing them to tools for legitimizing pre-existing power dynamics. For instance, bureaucratized participatory processes often prioritize procedural compliance over genuine deliberation, stifling creativity and marginalizing dissenting voices (Bua, 2019; Smith, 2009). Similarly, institutionalization can impose rigid norms that clash with the experimental nature of innovations. In Belgium's G1000 citizen assembly, tensions arose between the fluidity of deliberative practices and the formal expectations of political institutions, undermining adaptability (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018). Such challenges highlight the dilemma of institutionalization of democratic innovations: democratic innovations may struggle to retain their radical edge when forced to conform to established hierarchies. Moreover, democratic innovations are increasingly shaped by technological developments—such as digital deliberation platforms, AI-supported moderation, and tools for participatory traceability—highlighting their evolving nature and adaptive potential, but also cooptive nature.

These debates underscore that institutionalization is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental. Its success hinges on balancing stability with flexibility, understood as the capacity of democratic innovations to adapt to evolving social, political, and economic contexts while maintaining core participatory democratic principles. It involves openness to institutional adaptation, responsiveness to citizen demands, and the ability to incorporate new forms of engagement and deliberation without undermining democratic legitimacy or stability. Ultimately, the transformative potential of democratic innovations lies in their ability to evolve within and reshape existing institutions, fostering systemic inclusion while resisting co-optation (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

We have sought to provide a model for interpreting the roles of different actors in democratic innovations and the dynamics between them, while fully acknowledging the limitations of our contribution to this debate. More focused research on specific cases is needed to examine, through empirical examples, how these mechanisms operate in practice and what contributions different actors can make, depending on the context and the type of institutionalization. In other words, detailed case study analyses are necessary to apply and test the framework we have adopted, and to assess its explanatory potential in diverse empirical settings.

Our discussion showed that the institutionalization of democratic innovations is neither a linear process nor an inevitable outcome of well-intentioned design. A diverse set of actors, civil society groups, participation professionals, political institutions, researchers, and international organizations operate through mechanisms of incentivization, acculturation, and persuasion. These mechanisms interact in contingent and often unpredictable ways, shaped by the political, cultural, and institutional environment in which they unfold. These actors do not simply contribute in complementary ways; they may also compete, resist, or selectively advance particular forms of democratic innovation. For example, while international institutions and academic consultancy networks have recently promoted citizens' assemblies, such initiatives are sometimes met with scepticism by organized civil society in corporatist contexts, where they may be perceived as bypassing established structures. Similarly, participation professionals can act as enablers of procedural translation but may also impose standardized models that constrain local experimentation or privilege institutional convenience over grassroots priorities. At the same time, political actors provide authority and resources, yet may require external pressure or evidence to sustain reforms. Researchers can legitimate and refine innovations, but only if their work resonates beyond academic circles. International actors may catalyze change through funding and models, but without local ownership, their impact risks remaining superficial.

From this perspective, the durability and transformative capacity of democratic innovations depend less on the presence of individual actors than on the quality and balance of their interactions over time. Following the analogy with the institutionalization of NHRIs, we suggest that no single actor can sustain institutionalization in isolation. Enduring and adaptive democratic innovations emerge when collaboration is sustained despite tensions, when conflicts are negotiated rather than suppressed, and when institutional embedding allows for iterative adaptation to shifting social and political conditions. In this light, our triadic framework of mechanisms should be seen not only as a diagnostic tool for understanding how democratic innovations become embedded, but also as a lens for identifying potential fault lines, where actor interests diverge, where mechanisms are instrumentalized for purposes other than democratization, and where institutionalization risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for both scholars and practitioners aiming to assess, design, and sustain democratic innovations in diverse political contexts.

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