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EDITORIAL

Towards an Innovative Democracy: Institutionalizing Participation in Challenging Times

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Abstract

Democratic innovations designed to deepen citizen involvement, inclusion, and decision-making legitimacy increasingly face a question: how can experimental practices transition into stable and enduring institutional forms capable of sustaining meaningful impacts? Institutionalization exceeds legal codification, spanning regulatory, administrative, and cultural processes that socially and politically embed participatory practices in the contexts where they take place. This includes the symbolic aspect whereby citizens recognize these innovations as indispensable to democracy's fabric, thanks to the authority and legitimacy conquered through their own concrete impacts. This editorial stresses that institutionalization involves balancing standardization for durability with maintaining creativity and flexibility to avoid ossification or co-optation. Hence, some challenges emerge, such as the Collingridge dilemma, according to which governing fast-evolving innovations struggles to keep pace with the incremental slow-rhythm of legal adaptation. Through a brief synthesis of the articles that compose this thematic issue, this text highlights how theoretical reflections and empirical case studies are combined to show how different political and cultural contexts shape institutionalization dynamics. Collectively, these contributions enrich the understanding of how democratic innovations can foster more inclusive, resilient democratic governance amid contemporary challenges.

Keywords

citizen participation; Collingridge dilemma; democratic innovations; embedding participatory practices; institutionalization; participatory governance

1. Introduction: Understanding the Multiple Facets of Institutionalization

Our democracies—or what has been understood as such until now—are going through challenging times. A widely discussed global "democratic malaise" (Jacquet et al., 2023), marked by falling turnout, growing disillusionment, and declining trust in representative institutions and intermediary bodies, has renewed interest in democratic innovations. These participatory practices, ranging from participatory budgeting and citizen juries to deliberative mini-publics and referenda, seek to deepen citizen involvement between elections, broaden inclusion, and strengthen the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of public decisions. As these innovations proliferate, a key question arises: how can they move beyond a pilot phase—either through integration into formal institutions or via alternative trajectories—so that their impact, durability, and democratic relevance are sustained over time? This thematic issue addresses this multifaceted question by analysing the institutionalization of participatory practices, the conditions that facilitate or obstruct it, the most desirable forms and degrees of institutionalization, and the specific challenges posed by different patterns of democratic decline.

In debates on public action and democratic innovations, institutionalization is often equated with incorporation into legal or regulatory frameworks. Yet a broader view is needed, encompassing not only formal law but also soft-law instruments and administrative practices that shape how participatory processes are integrated into public administration and how participatory rights consolidate over time. These instruments (e.g., constitutions, bylaws, guidelines, and local regulations) are strongly context-dependent, as democratic innovations emerge from locally rooted "ideoscapes" and evolve through variation (Appadurai, 1996). Effective legal and administrative tools must therefore reflect specific legal cultures, political attitudes toward participation, and local patterns of institutional action and reaction.

Institutionalization also involves processes that go beyond formal codification, captured by the notion of embedment, the capacity of a participatory device to consolidate its ability to generate outcomes and to become a socially and politically rooted part of existing systems (Bussu et al., 2022). Crucially, using the term institutionalization adds a symbolic and perceptual dimension, as citizens perceive a participatory mechanism as an indispensable component of the institutional landscape. Once this recognition is achieved, democratic innovations gain authority and legitimacy, so that their removal would be widely experienced as a democratic loss. This resonates with Morlino's (2005) concept of democratic anchoring, where intermediary institutions stabilize democracy by renewing citizen-institution linkages. Embedment emphasizes integration, while anchoring highlights its effect on democratic legitimacy and resilience.

In this perspective, institutionalization can better respond to democratic decline through combining formal adoption of procedures with the social consolidation of their authority and by attending to the legal, political, and cultural conditions that allow innovations to evolve from experimental ad hoc events into stable governance components. Deliberative and participatory experiments often arise when representative institutions lose credibility, attempting both to repair legitimacy and reimagine democratic practice (Escobar, 2022). The "time" dimension has long been central in innovation diffusion theories (Rogers, 1962; Ryan & Gross, 1943), showing how new ideas spread through social systems. Applied to democratic innovations, participatory mechanisms may remain marginal for years before demonstrating impact or may become routinized once mainstreamed. While diffusion theory highlights gradual spread, Escobar's (2022) concept of "liminality" captures their ambivalent position as a permanent work in progress between empowerment and

co-optation. Institutionalization, in this view, is neither an endpoint nor a guarantee of deepening democracy, but an ongoing negotiation between stability and innovation.

Reflecting on institutionalization from this perspective provides a privileged vantage point for observing the tensions between stabilization and adaptability. Efforts to mainstream and consolidate participatory practices inevitably carry a component of ossification, as procedural standardization may stifle creativity and experimentation. Yet, institutionalization is what grants participatory rights' durability and protection from arbitrary political reversals. This tension reveals the dual imperative of maintaining openness and flexibility while safeguarding the procedural integrity of participatory democracy. Hence, reading institutionalization as a pathway rather than a destination allows for unpacking the multiple and sometimes contradictory processes through which democratic innovations interpret societal change, adapt to institutional contexts, and respond to the demands of diverse actors across different scales of governance. It also implies a continuous capacity to incorporate new repertoires of social struggle and deliberation. In this sense, studying institutionalization offers an analytical prism for understanding not only how democratic innovations become embedded, but also where fault lines emerge, where participatory and deliberative devices risk being instrumentalized, and where institutionalization may become a symbolic act rather than a substantive transformation.

Empirical research on citizens' assemblies underscores this ambivalence in practice. As Macq and Jacquet (2023) demonstrate, political elites often endorse such mechanisms less to redistribute power than to restore institutional legitimacy. Given that only a small fraction of democratic innovations reached stable institutional status worldwide, conclusions must remain cautious, but this tension between consolidation and domestication lies at the very heart of contemporary democratic innovation. Indeed, we still lack systematic knowledge about how frequently institutionalisation actually occurs in practice. Recent comparative research suggests that such cases are highly exceptional; however, this conclusion is based primarily on analyses of scientific articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science (Schiuma & Cagnoli, 2025), as well as on a limited number of action-research networks, rather than on a comprehensive sample of real-world institutionalised cases.

2. Diffusion, Dynamics, and the Pacing Problem of Democratic Innovations

Early work on the institutionalisation of democratic innovations mainly relied on normative democratic theory, which limited its ability to capture ongoing, context-specific processes and their variations. Recent scholarship, as anticipated by Smith (2009) and reinforced by Elstub and Escobar (in press), has shifted toward the concrete dynamics of institutionalisation and the notion of embedment within socio-institutional systems. However, comprehensive mapping remains difficult and incomplete, often constrained by single case-study designs.

Comparative analysis is hindered by diverse contexts, conjunctures, and uneven maturity across countries, regions, and localities. Nonetheless, comparisons are eased when focusing on specific "devices" with recognizable features across borders. Participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies, supported by extensive bodies of handbooks, guidelines, and toolkits, now anchor much of the literature that maps both participatory practices and their institutionalisation dynamics (Dias et al., 2021; McNulty & No, 2021; Smith, 2009). Networks spanning local authorities, academics, facilitators, and consultants have been crucial to

these efforts, as illustrated by The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies and the World Atlas of Participatory Budgeting community.

This thematic issue does not map individual participation devices or their specific institutionalization. Instead, it surveys diverse processes, highlighting efforts to align the experimental character of democratic innovations with regulatory frameworks that secure participatory rights and advance equality, justice, and transparency amid socio-technical and environmental transitions. The call for contributions was intentionally broad, inviting theoretical and empirical work from varied regions and regimes to foster cross-pollination and a mature debate on the ambivalences of institutionalization worldwide.

The "Collingridge dilemma"—the difficulty of steering technologies before their effects are known and of changing them once entrenched—applies equally to democratic innovations (Collingridge, 1980). Understanding institutionalisation in both its controlling and emancipatory dimensions (Santos, 2020) is crucial in light of the "pacing problem" (Thierer, 2018), where fast-evolving innovations and their social drivers outstrip slower, incremental legal adaptation (Downes & Nunes, 2014).

Viewing democratic innovations as consolidating technologies helps explain how institutionalisation can drive consolidation, transformation, diffusion, and, at times, regression, co-optation, or ossification under power. Yet, this perspective also underscores the need for richer, more diverse analytical frameworks, precisely where the contributions in this thematic issue intervene.

Among the contributions, Pierri (2026) challenges the presumed paradox between innovation and creativity, often treated as contradictory or fundamentally different in nature, process, and temporality. Pierri shows that this tension stems from a dualistic view of institutions and change rooted in traditional institutionalism. Using the lens of political creativity, she reframes institutions as dynamic, evolving constructs shaped through creative bricolage by internal and external actors. Although political creativity is not yet central in debates on democratic innovation, Pierri underscores its strong potential.

Pudar Drasko and Fiket (2026) propose a conceptual model to understand the roles played by various socio-political actors in driving democratic innovations' institutionalization, drawing an analogy with the successful institutionalization of National Human Rights Institutions. The authors show how state actors, civil society groups, participation professionals, academics, and international organizations contribute, often independently yet reinforcing, to the adoption, anchoring, and potential ritualization of democratic innovations. The model argues that institutionalization hinges on their interplay, with roles spanning incentives, acculturation, persuasion, and advocacy.

Anđelković and Tepavac (2026) explore how to integrate deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) into political systems beyond one-off events. It offers a normative framework for embedding DMPs in a policy subsystem, focusing on legal and organisational requirements to secure inclusion, contestation, and openness to stakeholders. The authors outline six conditions, ranging from citizen agenda-setting power and inclusive design to multi-stakeholder oversight and final policy vetting, envisioning DMPs as permanent actors in the policy cycle. They stress that institutionalisation depends on clear legal bases and flexible integration that fits political realities.

Veri and Stojanović (2026) conceptualise institutionalization of DMPs as both repetition over time and formal legal embedding. Using OECD data and new cases, they build a typology linking forum permanence to governance levels and compare patterns in federal and unitary systems. They find federal systems' multiple decision arenas foster experimentation and stable regional uptake, while unitary systems centralize and formalize deliberation more episodically. The study advances understanding of how democratic innovations endure within governance and how political architectures enable or constrain lasting citizen deliberation.

Pospieszna and Hoffmann (2026) examine the institutionalization of DMPs in countries like Poland, where citizens' assemblies lack formal legal status. They treat rules of procedure as key indicators of institutionalisation, frame institutionalization as an evolving, learning process across assemblies, and apply a descriptive, not normative lens, showing how institutionalization sustains and creatively adapts practices over time.

Daher et al. (2026) explore the potential of citizens' assemblies (CAs) in politically volatile contexts, where representative institutions are fragile. They highlight trade-offs between institutionalizing assemblies and preserving transformative potential, challenging universal standardized Global North models. Based on multi-sited fieldwork, they advocate a critical, decolonial perspective that adapts CAs to local realities, histories, and cultural practices. The article further emphasises that in such fragile contexts, issues like local legitimacy, foreign interference, and political "red lines" shape feasibility, requiring flexibility, relational engagement, and community ownership rather than rigid standardisation.

Indeed, the topic of DMPs, in line with recent academic literature (Elstub & Escobar, 2025; Smith, 2009), represents a central core for this thematic issue, being declined at different administrative and political scales, and in very different contexts. For example, Petit and Oleart (2026) examine some citizen panels on tech policies, which could be viewed as a legacy and a consequence of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Through participant observation, the authors argue that these panels, while presented as empowering "everyday citizens," constitute a form of "citizenwashing" and represent a strategic effort to institutionalize this form of public engagement as a legitimacy-building activity in EU-level policymaking processes.

The consistent ongoing technological changes that are affecting democratic innovations inspired Ohren et al. (2026) to examine how AI technologies are shaping emerging institutional trajectories for democratic innovations. Introducing the democracy-in-the-loop framework, the authors argue that institutionalisation in the age of AI cannot rely on efficiency-driven logics alone. Instead, AI must be embedded within practices that foreground contestation, reflexivity, participant agency, and "meaningful frictions." Drawing on experimental workshops conducted across four European cities, the article demonstrates how AI-supported democratic innovations can be designed to enhance deliberative quality and democratic oversight. In doing so, it offers a normative and practical model for institutionalizing AI-enabled democratic innovations in ways that preserve and expand their democratic character.

Goldfrank et al. (2026) examine the institutionalisation of democratic innovations through the lens of Latin American Institutions of Citizen Participation. Their article offers three key contributions to the understanding of the institutionalisation of democratic innovations. First, it introduces a four-dimensional framework for analysing institutions of citizen participation, focusing on formalization, political embedding, professionalization, and social engagement. Second, applying this framework to three Latin American

institutions of citizen participation reveals that institutionalisation is highly context-dependent and evolves differently across mechanisms and over time. Third, the findings challenge the assumption that formalization alone ensures success, highlighting instead that political embedding is particularly vital for sustaining democratic innovations and integrating them effectively into broader political systems.

Drawing on the specific context of Hungary's hybrid regime, Kovács Szitkay et al. (2026) examine how the degree of institutionalisation shapes the functioning and quality of institutions of citizen participation. Assessing five institutions of citizen participation (open primaries, referenda, national consultations, public hearings, and citizens' assemblies), the authors show that institutionalisation alone is not sufficient to guarantee their effectiveness. The article further proposes a typology of democratic innovations in backsliding contexts, illustrating how these institutions can support, protect, or undermine democratic practices depending on the broader political environment.

Finally, Ravazzi (2026) reflect on several ambivalences that emerge from the chosen example. The author examines the legal institutionalisation of public debates on major infrastructure projects in Italy (2021–2023), a participatory device shaped around the consolidated French experience. The article shows that institutionalisation legitimised deliberation, enhanced professional recognition, and improved project designers' communication skills, fostering more serious engagement with local communities. At the same time, proceduralisation and bureaucratic compliance reduced flexibility, transforming debates into formal administrative procedures and shifting attention from substantive to procedural aspects. By highlighting these trade-offs, the article contributes to debates on the institutionalisation of democratic innovations, showing how legal frameworks can simultaneously support and limit the embeddedness of deliberative practices.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thematic issue brings together a series of relevant studies and reflections on the challenging journey of democratic innovations from experimental ideas to embedded features of governance. It underscores that while institutionalization holds immense promise for strengthening democratic stability and fostering more inclusive, legitimate, and effective policymaking, it is not a monolithic concept nor a guaranteed panacea. Instead, it is a dynamic process shaped by contexts, power dynamics, the interplay of diverse actors, and the continuous negotiation between steadiness and creative adaptation. The contributions collectively advance our understanding of how to navigate these complexities, advocating for approaches that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and genuinely committed to empowering citizens, even in the most challenging political times.

As with many thematic issues, its timing did not necessarily allow for capturing all the ongoing reflections on the topics, especially in contexts (as the African one, see Ministério da Administração do Território, 2020) where institutionalisation of participation coincides with a process of re-institutionalization of the decentralization framework that presides over the formalization of some central institutes of representative democracy. But, for sure, it can establish a serious and mature dialogue with future analyses, based on a wide body of high-level contributions with convergent and empirically enlightened reflections.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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