

Review Paper

Civic Participation in Public Administration: Strengthening Democracy and Involving Citizens in Decision-making Processes

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ABSTRACT

The issue of citizens' participation in political life is always of particular relevance since the active involvement of citizens in political processes is one of the crucial principles of democracy that contributes to its strengthening. The purpose of the research is to analyze the benefits of involving citizens in public administration processes, to identify the major mechanisms and practices of public participation in public administration, the challenges related to their implementation, and ways to overcome them. The research methodology is based on two key theories of democracy: participatory and deliberative, which focus on the justification of the ideas of citizens' participation in political life (discussion and political decision-making). The research results made it possible to identify both the key benefits of citizens' participation in public administration and the problems that arise when citizens try to influence political decisions at different levels. In the course of the research, it has been established that civic participation in public administration contributes to increasing the effectiveness and legitimacy of governance and strengthening democracy. It helps people develop a clear awareness of their place in the political decision-making process, giving them the ability to have an impact on national, regional, or local politics. It has been determined that civic participation has a wide range of mechanisms; however, in the vast majority of cases, public authorities use information tools. Information technologies (e-government) are becoming an important tool for expanding citizens' participation in governance processes. This provides an opportunity to involve a wider range of citizens in discussions or proposals. The major problems related to both the low level of civic engagement and the officials' lacks of interest in involving citizens in decision-making processes are outlined.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Citizens' Participation Fosters Democracy and Legitimacy:** The research underscores that citizens' active engagement in various forms, such as referendums, public hearings, and consultations, is crucial for strengthening democracy, increasing government transparency, and ensuring efficiency.
- **Challenges and Opportunities in Citizens' Participation:** While acknowledging the significance of citizens' involvement in political decision-making, the study highlights challenges, including conflicts of interest and a lack of understanding between authorities and the public, necessitating efforts to enhance civic education, overcome social apathy, and bridge communication gaps for effective and meaningful participation.

Keywords: Citizens, civic participation, democracy, public administration

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The modern system of public administration requires further democratization, transparency and efficiency, which is possible only through cooperation between government agencies and the public.

Participation of citizens in public administration is one of the most significant ways to strengthen democracy since it demonstrates the ability of both the community and its individual representatives to influence decision-making at the state or local levels. Political activity of citizens is not limited to their electoral participation but is represented by other forms that allow them to directly influence the political decision-making process and control their implementation.

Citizens' participation in political life becomes especially relevant when certain signs of a democratic crisis appear: citizens' distancing from politics and growing distrust of political institutions. Accordingly, democracy requires the introduction of innovative approaches that involve greater public involvement in political processes at various levels.

However, on the other hand, the issue of citizens' participation in public administration remains rather controversial due to a certain lack of understanding between the authorities and the public on a number of matters, conflicts of interest, insufficient professionalism of community representatives, and low level of communication on the part of officials.

This issue is especially significant for Ukraine in light of European integration, the basic principles of which require the introduction of new democratic practices. This issue is being implemented in a certain way within the framework of the decentralization reform.

Accordingly, the primary purpose of the present research is to identify the benefits of public participation in political decision-making, analyze the main mechanisms of citizens' involvement in public administration, and identify the main problems and ways to solve them.

Literature Review

The issue of citizens' participation in public administration is widely represented in the scientific literature. Strategic aspects of public participation are considered in the scientific works of D. Hart, A. Fung, E. Buehrke, R. Irwin and D. Stansbury, etc.

For instance, A. Fung analyzes the potential of citizens' participation in public administration in the context of promoting its main values: legitimacy and social justice. The scholar proves that civic participation at this stage contributes most to improving the efficiency of public administration (Fung, 2015).

R. Irwin and D. Stansbury, having analyzed in detail the participation of citizens in the implementation of environmental policy at the local level, note that positive results were achieved only within "ideal communities", which is impossible in ordinary life. This requires the authorities, in cooperation with the public, to carefully select proposals that can be included in the implementation process (Irwin *et al.* 2004).

Mechanisms and practices of public participation are presented in the scientific works of D. Fourier, R. Dalton, J. Innes, Graaf, etc.

Having analyzed various mechanisms and practices of civic participation, D. Fourier concludes that citizens' participation in governance is important not only for civil society but also for mobilizing the population to improve their well-being. However, the population does not always understand this, which requires serious information work to explain it (Fourie, 2001).

J. Innes and D. Booher, studying the issue of civic participation in the United States, focus on the introduction of new tools for developing cooperation between government agencies and the public, which can help solve even such complex problems as budgetary (Innes *et al.* 2005).

The topic of involving citizens in administration through electronic tools (e-government) is reflected in the scientific developments of M. Miliakovich, A. Haljachmi and M. Holzer, K. Ehelson and B. Vanderose, etc.

For instance, Halamchi and Holzer note in their publication that information technologies have created conditions for massive involvement of citizens in government processes through e-government, which increases citizens' trust in the government, the decisions of which they can influence (Halachmi *et al.* 2010).

M. Miliakovich emphasizes that the ease of obtaining information through the Internet and its considerable communication power create a new

“polysphere” through which citizens can unite and influence politics (Miliakovich, 2010).

Cases of implementing citizens’ participation in public administration are analyzed in the publications of D. Lee, A. Michels, I. Cabbannes, P. Spada, etc.

Ukrainian researchers (O. Demianenko, T. Andriichuk, N. Melnyk, and H. Shaulska) are more focused on the processes of interaction between the government and civil society in general. Particular aspects of citizens’ participation in public administration have been studied in the works of V. Filippova, A. Hurzhii.

Therefore, in general, the participation of citizens in the processes of public administration in modern conditions is poorly represented in the Ukrainian scientific discourse, which requires a comprehensive study.

METHODS

The basic methodological approaches of our research are the theories of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. They are based on the understanding of democracy as the conscious and active participation of citizens in the formation, development and implementation of political decisions. Theorists of the participatory model (C. Pateman, B. Berber, and D. Tsimmerman) insisted that representative institutions do not give citizens a real opportunity to influence politics; however, a person as a rational being has the right to participate in making decisions that are important to him or her. According to the viewpoint of B. Berber, such a democracy provides citizens with the power to govern themselves when it comes to political issues (Berber, 2005, p. 258).

The theorists of the deliberative model of democracy (J. Coien, E. Hutman, D. Thompson) believed that democracy provides an opportunity for citizens to discuss political issues and formulate conclusions that should become binding (Hutman *et al.* 2005, p. 328)

In the course of the research, both special and general scientific methods were used. Special methods include document analysis, secondary analysis of sociological data, materials from interviews, case studies, and focus groups, which made it possible to identify the most problematic aspects of citizens’

involvement in public administration. The general scientific methods used in the research were as follows: analysis and synthesis, deduction and generalization, which made it possible to conduct the research at the proper scientific level and obtain relevant results.

RESULTS

Citizens are the main value of a democratic state, and their participation in the political life of the country is extremely significant. The active position of citizens determines the level of democracy in society, the degree of transparency and efficiency of the government. Citizens’ participation in political life is not limited to electoral behavior; however, it is represented by various forms: referendums, public hearings, meetings of citizens in their place of residence, public councils, public expertise, public consultations, petitions, focus groups, polls, etc.

Researchers identify three models of interaction between the state and citizens. The first is the managerial one, which is based on improving the provision of services to citizens. The second one is a consultative one, which helps convey citizens’ opinions to the authorities. The third one is the participation model, which focuses on the participation of citizens in the decision-making process (Chadwick *et al.* 2003, p.272). The combination of these models contributes to developing a system of interaction between the government and the public.

Citizens’ participation in public administration makes it possible to promote the three core values of democratic governance: legitimacy, efficiency and social justice.

There has been a decline in trust in state institutions in leading democratic countries since the end of the XX century. For instance, the level of trust in the government in Italy in 2019 was only 21%, in Spain - 29%, in the United States - 31%, in France - 38%, and in the United Kingdom - 42% (Trust in government, 2017).

These statistics are the result of the weakening of the connection between the government and the public, which in a democratic society gives politicians a mandate to govern the state during elections. Trust in legislative and administrative organizations, membership and identification

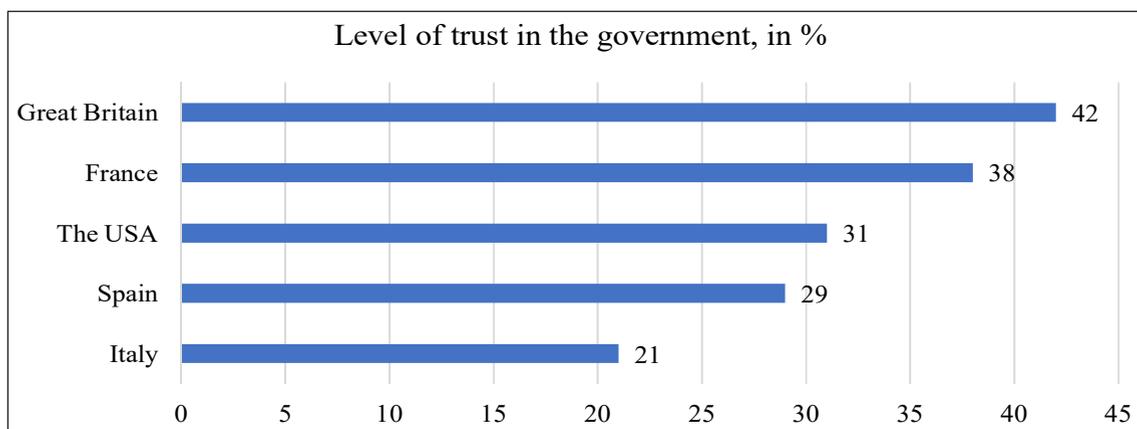


Fig. 1: The level of trust in the government in the leading democratic countries of the world in 2019 (in %)

with political parties, as well as voting rates and regular political participation, has declined in many mature democracies (Dalton, 2008, p. 87). Active involvement of citizens in public policy should increase the level of the government's legitimacy.

Public participation in the development of political decisions can be implemented in various forms, the most important of which is the discussion and preparation of proposals for legislative changes. This is the most challenging issue because citizens undermine the ideals of representative democracy by meddling in the legislative process. However, A. Fung believes that the participation of citizens in legislative processes in a certain format is quite justified: if citizens elect representatives to government bodies, they can probably influence, for instance, the formation of the rules for this election (Fung, 2015, p.515).

At the same time, as practice shows, this format is not very successful: the proposals of the Citizens' Assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario (Canada) to switch to a proportional electoral system were not supported in provincial referendums.

The second component of civic participation in a democratic state is effective governance, which is possible only with constant communication of authorities and the public in addressing the most pressing issues. These matters are usually complex, and their solutions cannot be "limited to the administrative system alone" (Weber *et al.* 2008, p.338), but require the involvement of the public.

According to the viewpoint of Graaf, involving interested parties and citizens' groups at an early stage of the policy process, rather than consulting

them just before the implementation phase, can create broader support for policy decisions and consequently make public policy more effective and legitimate. (Graaf, 2007, p. 214).

The third important component of citizens' participation in governance is social justice, which requires equalizing access to resources and other social benefits for different social groups. Adopting the budget is one of the ways to implement social justice; this is the most problematic practice of interaction of the community and government authorities. In fact, the world practice demonstrates successful examples of budget partnership, which has significantly reduced corruption and strengthened public trust in government institutions (Cabannes, 2004; Jabola-Carolus, 2015; Spada *et al.* 2015).

Despite all the problematic nuances, the involvement of citizens in public administration changes people's philosophy: they begin to be aware that they "can really influence what affects them and begin to appreciate the benefits of democracy" (Gifford, 2003). They feel their importance and ability to influence public processes, from decision-making to implementation. At the same time, the level of their responsibility for their decisions and actions is increasing.

Citizens' participation in the decision-making process not only democratizes the governance process but also affects the government's performance, increases its transparency and enhances trust in the government (Halachmi *et al.* 2010, p. 381).

The information component most frequently represents citizens' participation in public

administration: the government uses the people to get the required data. For instance, A. Michels' research in two Dutch cities demonstrates that the role of citizens in the decision-making process of local authorities was limited to providing information on the basis of which the city government, sometimes in cooperation with other actors, made decisions. The author concludes, "In this way, participatory politics leaves vertical government decision-making intact while creating more space for citizen-driven proposals and ideas" (Michels, 2010, p. 490).

At the same time, the experience of citizens' participation in solving municipal problems in Seoul demonstrates real achievements in the process of overcoming the social isolation of city residents during the implementation of the Seoul Village Community project (Li, 2023).

Consultations with the population are held in various formats, from public discussions to advisory committees under the authorities. According to the standpoint of D. Fourie, advisory committees are considered more informal opportunities for policy-making since they allow politicians to review different options before making a final decision (Fourie, 2011, p. 223).

In Ukraine, public councils at executive bodies have been operating since 2004. Their primary duties include monitoring and providing advice and consultation. Public councils have the power to supervise the process of implementing their own or civic organizations' legally enforceable ideas and submit them for consideration in political decisions (Kulinich *et al.* 2023).

The decentralization reform in Ukraine has opened up opportunities for increased community participation in political life at the local level. The forms of citizens' involvement are standard, ranging from public hearings to focus groups, surveys, and research. Accordingly, the information component remains the main trend in the interaction of local authorities with the community.

Practice shows that public hearings are held mainly on land issues. At the same time, local authorities in most cases try to avoid discussing local budgets with the public (Results of the assessment of financial management of amalgamated territorial communities, 2018).

The low level of civic participation remains the main problem of the reform. According to the survey, the majority of community members (over 40%) considered civic engagement to be only participation in elections. Only 37% of respondents are ready to participate in public hearings and meetings, and 50% are not ready to be involved in civic activities at all. At the same time, 63% of respondents are dissatisfied with their ability to influence the decisions of local authorities (Public opinion on decentralization reform, 2017; Decentralization and local government reform, 2021).

That is, we have a paradoxical situation: citizens do not like the fact that they cannot influence the actions of local authorities. However, on the other hand, the vast majority do not show any desire to do this. It should be noted that even if the decentralization reform in Ukraine has had some success; only 20% of the population participates in community governance.

Scientific achievements in the field of information technologies have created the conditions for the formation of e-government, which the UN considers as a broad set of interactions between the state and citizens through information and communication technologies: online services, electronic information exchange, surveys, open government data, etc. This makes it possible to improve the functioning of government structures and increase the efficiency and transparency of their work, make them more inclusive and thus restore the citizens' trust in their government (UN E-Government Knowledgebase, 2023).

Internet technologies have opened up many opportunities for citizens to participate in political life (e-participation): virtual portals, e-voting, electronic party conferences, social networks and blogs.

Web portals of state institutions provide constant communication with the public nowadays, regularly providing information about their activities. In accordance with its communication strategy, the company collects data from citizens and fulfills their demands.

In the United States, after the presidential election of 2016, the LobbyForMe platform was introduced; this is an online tool that helps citizens leave messages

for politicians; it has a “collective action” function, etc. According to the authors of this tool, it is the most effective way to hear the voices of people who are also given the opportunity to join forces through the portal (Rubin, 2017). The online format makes it possible to engage not only active but also passive citizens who prefer the participation format via smartphone.

Information technologies were used in the development of the Icelandic Constitution in 2010 - 2013: citizens wrote more than 3 600 comments and 311 proposals, which could be shared through social media. 29 public proposals were taken into account in the draft constitution (Hudson, 2017). It received support in a consultative referendum; however, it was not approved by parliament.

Information technologies and e-government are being actively implemented in Ukraine. The government portals provide information about their activities and offer opportunities for online appeals. The portals of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the President and the Cabinet of Ministers have the function of creating petitions by citizens; consequently, in case they have the required number of signatories, they should be considered by the relevant authorities. The Verkhovna Rada’s portal offers the function of public discussion of draft laws, where citizens can leave their comments. However, there are few such comments and observations (“Discussion of Draft Laws” service, 2023).

The “Diia” portal is still mostly aimed at providing administrative services to Ukrainians (e-customers). E-participation is represented only by surveys (the function of collecting information).

The “Kyiv Digital” portal also provides an opportunity to create petitions and conduct surveys that are applied in nature. In 2023, an online voting was launched on the renaming of the capital’s streets. Its results were almost completely taken into account by the city council.

Undoubtedly, the introduction of e-government increases the level of democracy, and promotes transparency and openness of the government, its efficiency and legitimacy. However, this is the area that is most vulnerable to unauthorized interference (US presidential elections in 2020), theft of personal or state information, blocking the work of government authorities, etc.

In addition to the positive aspects of citizens’ participation in public administration, there are a number of significant negative phenomena that sometimes lead to a reduction in civil society participation in public space (dominance of particular social groups in the decision-making process or the influence of individual activists, ignoring the interests of other social groups, etc.). According to the viewpoint of T. Andriichuk, civic participation tools can sometimes complicate decision-making, which can lead to political destabilization. The researcher notes, “To a large extent, this is due to the principle of the preference for the voice of more active citizens, who at the same time can become more active in opposition to state interests” (Andriichuk, 2019, p. 50).

German experts are concerned about the large number of “advisory” institutions under the central government that prepare 600-700-page proposal packages, which significantly complicates the work of government institutions (Schmidt *et al.* 2011, p. 117).

The low level of citizens’ professional preparation for participating in public administration processes is a major issue that reduces public confidence in governmental activities.

The government authorities are not always interested in cooperating with citizens for various reasons. One of them is the lack of consensus among the elite on the place of citizens in political life. In such cases, officials may use participatory democracy mechanisms to legitimize their decisions. This occurs when the authorities do not intend to take into account the proposals of the public, but are required to consult with it according to the procedure. Sometimes officials simply do not know how to communicate with the public; they are unaware of the basics of democratic practices and have no relevant psychosocial skills. As a result, this makes it difficult for them to communicate with people (Swanepeoel, 1992, p. 241).

Citizens’ apathy, or their refusal to engage in civic life, is becoming a global problem. In the leading democracies, the alienation of citizens from the government is caused by the fact that most complex social issues were resolved in the twentieth century. In developing countries, citizens refuse to participate in political life because of traditions or

the totalitarian past since they feel like a “little man” who is completely dependent on those in power and cannot change anything.

Experts suggest various mechanisms to solve these problems. To begin with, political and civic education should become an important tool for improving citizens’ professionalism in communicating with the authorities, helping to understand the functioning of the political system and the role of civil society in political processes. However, as D. Fourier reasonably points out, “citizens require certain incentives to encourage them, to participate in specific programs and activities”, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of their activities (Fourie, 2001, p. 227).

E. Burke believes that political education is not enough when it comes to decision-making at the level of professional expertise (urban development, environmental issues, etc.). Therefore, he suggests using a participatory strategy that has five types depending on the level of complexity of the project: education-therapy, behavioral change, supplementation, cooperation, and public power (Burke, 2007, p. 291).

Solving the issue of the government’s lack of interest in involving the public in governance has several dimensions and, accordingly, solutions. E. Innes and D. Booher propose to draw the authorities’ attention to the fact that joint participation will help resolve complex problems in a better way. Dialogue, the formation of public networks and institutional capacity should be key elements. Accordingly, cooperation should be considered as a set of interactions between citizens and government institutions with further involvement of other players, provision of educational and financial support to the public (Innes et al., 2007, p. 423). The problem with the low level of communication and psychosocial skills of officials should be addressed through conducting trainings.

Social apathy can be overcome through the creation of communication panels and forums for citizens where they can understand their importance in the political decision-making process. Representatives of government bodies should play a special role in this process, encouraging citizens to cooperate. Maintaining the citizens’ enthusiasm and demonstrating the effectiveness of their

participation is an important incentive for their further involvement in public administration.

DISCUSSION

The process of involving citizens in public administration has many problems that need to be addressed. The issue of citizens’ participation in the constitutional and legislative processes remains controversial since many attempts by the public to engage in legislative activities fail in particular aspects.

Another important problem is the ignorance of the public by government officials who consider active citizens not a valuable resource to help solve the problem, but an additional burden. Consequently, the public is involved in the discussion only when the procedure requires it. However, all citizens’ proposals are ignored, which significantly reduces their desire to participate in such events in the future and tends to distance them from politics.

On the other hand, the decline in civic activity removes the issue of conflict of interest for government officials, tying their hands in the implementation of corruption schemes and other deals. This problem is widespread in Ukraine and requires a comprehensive solution.

By the way, budget distribution frequently results in conflicts of interest within the community as a result of lobbying by more influential social groups, which disregards the interests of other social groups and calls into question the notion of social justice.

The high degree of social apathy is a significant issue that is being addressed with the emergence of information technologies. These technologies, however, are more focused on providing online services and collecting information through online surveys than on engaging citizens in real participation in decision-making. At the same time, particular products (social networks) create opportunities for self-organization or even mobilization of citizens (Arab revolutions, Euromaidan).

CONCLUSION

Citizens’ participation in the processes of adopting and implementing political decisions is one of the most important principles of democracy since it allows the public to influence politics. This is

especially relevant when the level of public trust in the authorities is declining; after all, the involvement of citizens in governance processes helps increase their level of legitimacy.

Civic participation in political governance is a manifestation of direct democracy, which has lost its significance in the context of the dominance of the representative form. However, in many cases, government officials cannot solve problems at the proper level without public participation.

It should be emphasized that information technologies have greatly simplified and expanded the process of citizens' participation in political life, allowing them to participate in polls or even elections via their smartphones. Along with this, solving complex public issues requires the real presence and activity of citizens.

The effectiveness of public participation in the decision-making process is crucial not only for the authorities but also for citizens, who are beginning to feel that they can influence politics and change the reality around them. However, this requires raising political awareness and overcoming social apathy among community members. On the other hand, government officials should recognize the benefits of cooperation with the public and actively engage citizens in public administration processes, support their initiatives, and direct the implementation of decisions reached with public participation into action.

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