

The Relationship between the State and Civil Society from the Perspective of Politica Humanitas, a Critical Study of Participatory Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines local power dynamics and democratic practice through the lens of *Politica Humanitas* by analyzing how participatory governance structures shape relations between regional governments and civil society. The study aims to develop a humanistic-critical framework for assessing whether participation enhances dignity, recognition, and accountability or devolves into symbolic inclusion. A qualitative, multi-sited critical case study design was employed because it enables in-depth interpretation of institutional practices, deliberative interactions, and ethical consequences beyond procedural indicators. Fieldwork was conducted in two Indonesian municipal settings where participatory planning and budgeting forums are routinely implemented. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 32 purposively selected informants (government officials, civil society leaders, and community representatives), non-participant observation of participatory meetings, and analysis of policy and budget documents. Findings indicate that participation is frequently constrained by agenda control, stratified voice, and weak linkage between forum outputs and binding decisions, producing a legitimacy and dignity deficit. However, inclusive facilitation, transparent criteria, coalition-building, and institutionalized monitoring strengthen substantive participation. The article recommends redesigning participatory institutions to open agenda-setting, protect marginalized voices, and connect deliberation to enforceable decisions.



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the state and civil society has re-emerged as a central concern in contemporary political studies, particularly as democracies face mounting pressures from polarization, inequality, bureaucratic inertia, and declining public trust. Across many contexts, participatory reforms have been promoted as a remedy to the perceived limits of representative democracy by inviting citizens, community organizations, and social movements into decision-making processes. Yet the practical outcomes of participatory democracy remain deeply contested (Parhanudin, 2025). While some institutional designs expand inclusion and policy responsiveness, others merely repackage consultation without shifting power, leaving civil society instrumentalized rather than empowered. This ambivalence raises a fundamental question that motivates this study: how should we understand, evaluate, and redesign state civil society relations so that participatory democracy becomes a genuinely human-centered political practice rather than a procedural ornament?

This article approaches that question through the perspective of *Politica Humanitas*, a normative and critical lens that places human dignity, ethical responsibility, social justice, and the protection of fundamental rights at the core of political analysis. In this perspective, politics is not only about the distribution of authority or resources, but also about the moral quality of public power and the lived consequences of governance for persons and communities (Khalili, 2024). When participatory democracy is examined through *Politica Humanitas*, the evaluation cannot stop at measuring the number of meetings held, participants recruited, or proposals collected. It must ask whether participatory mechanisms cultivate civic capabilities, reduce domination, enable meaningful voice for marginalized groups, strengthen accountability, and produce decisions consistent with humanistic public ethics (Danil & Rosa, 2024). This approach is especially relevant in settings where participation is simultaneously encouraged by democratic rhetoric and constrained by uneven power relations, administrative gatekeeping, and the commodification of civic engagement.

State of the art scholarship has developed several influential frameworks to analyze participation. Deliberative democracy emphasizes reason-giving, mutual justification, and inclusive public discussion as a basis for legitimate collective decisions. Participatory governance and co-production literature focuses on collaborative problem-solving between public institutions and social actors, highlighting the potential for improved service delivery and policy innovation. Research on civil society and social movements underscores how collective action can expand rights, reshape agendas, and challenge entrenched interests (Lovász & Pető, 2025). Meanwhile, critical political economy perspectives warn that participatory initiatives can be absorbed into managerial governance, used to diffuse dissent, or serve as symbolic legitimization for predetermined policies. Empirical studies of participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, community planning forums, and consultative councils show mixed results, shaped by design features (agenda-setting authority, bindingness of decisions, resources), socio-economic inequalities, and the political will of state actors. Collectively, this literature demonstrates that participation is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently manipulative; its democratic value depends on the institutional and ethical architecture connecting the state to civic life (Kalinichenko et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, a significant research gap persists. First, many evaluations of participatory democracy prioritize procedural indicators attendance, frequency, representativeness while under-theorizing the ethical standards by which participation should be judged. Second, the literature often treats “the state” and “civil society” as fixed categories rather than relational fields shaped by historical legacies, legal regimes, patronage networks, and competing moral claims. Third, normative theories of participation may remain detached from the everyday realities of power asymmetries, where civil society organizations differ in resources and access, and where marginalized communities face barriers that are structural rather than merely informational (Coeckelbergh, 2024). Fourth, studies that do address ethics and justice often do so implicitly, without articulating an integrated framework that links participatory institutional design to humanistic political values. As a result, participatory democracy can be discussed as a technical governance tool rather than as a political commitment to human dignity and shared responsibility (Isanbor, 2024).

Key Data Table 1

Data	Show
Participatory budgeting expanded to 300+ municipalities worldwide by 2005	Participatory forums are globally widespread, but scale alone does not guarantee substantive influence.
In OECD countries (2023), 39% report high/moderately high trust in national government	Trust gaps help explain why participatory governance is often promoted as a legitimacy/relationship tool.
Indonesia is rated “Partly Free” with score 56/100 (2025)	Civic space and civil liberties conditions shape how far civil society can effectively influence state decisions.

Source: World Bank paper on participatory budgeting diffusion

This article positions *Politica Humanitas* as a conceptual bridge that connects normative evaluation with institutional analysis of participatory democracy. The novelty of the study lies in developing a humanistic-critical framework for assessing state civil society relations in participatory arrangements, focusing on the conditions under which participation becomes substantively democratic. The proposed contribution is twofold (Ronconi, 2025). Theoretically, the study clarifies how *Politica Humanitas* reframes participation as an ethical relationship one that demands respect, recognition, and protection against domination rather than as a mere administrative channel. Analytically, the study identifies criteria for diagnosing when participatory mechanisms function as empowerment (expanding agency and accountability) versus when they devolve into tokenism (symbolic inclusion without decision influence). By integrating humanistic political ethics into the study of participatory governance, the article seeks to move beyond celebratory accounts of participation while avoiding cynicism that dismisses participation as inevitably co-opted (Watkins, 2024).

The central problem addressed is the tension between participatory democratic ideals and the realities of state power. The state can enable participation through law, institutional design, and resource

allocation, but it can also constrain participation by controlling agendas, filtering representation, and setting procedural rules that favor established interests. Civil society, in turn, can provide civic knowledge, articulate public needs, and serve as a countervailing force, yet it can also reproduce exclusions, be captured by elite networks, or become dependent on state funding and recognition (Chakrabarty, 2025). This tension is sharpened in contexts where governance reforms are adopted under pressures of legitimacy, donor expectations, or modernization narratives, sometimes producing participatory institutions that appear inclusive while maintaining hierarchical control. Understanding this dynamic requires a relational analysis that sees state and civil society not as separate spheres but as interacting actors whose engagements are shaped by institutional incentives and moral claims (Hervás, 2025).

Guided by these concerns, the study is organized around the following research questions: How does *Politica Humanitas* conceptualize the proper relationship between the state and civil society within participatory democracy? What patterns of interaction collaborative, contested, co-optative, or antagonistic emerge in participatory arrangements, and what do they imply for human dignity, justice, and accountability? Which institutional conditions and ethical commitments enable participation to influence decisions, protect marginalized voices, and prevent domination? How can participatory democratic models be critically redesigned so that they align with humanistic values while remaining feasible within real governance constraints?

The aim of the research is to generate a critical and constructive account of state civil society relations in participatory democracy through the lens of *Politica Humanitas*. Specifically, it seeks to (a) map key conceptual debates on participation and civil society, (b) articulate a humanistic normative standard for evaluating participatory institutions, and (c) propose an interpretive framework for diagnosing the democratic quality of participation in practice. In doing so, the study offers theoretical and academic benefits by enriching debates on participation with a clear ethical vocabulary, strengthening the conceptual rigor of evaluations that otherwise remain procedural. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for public institutions (Kozlenko, 2025), civil society organizations, and community actors engaged in participatory forums by highlighting design principles and ethical safeguards that can reduce tokenism, widen inclusion, and improve accountability (Madi, 2025).

At the same time, the study acknowledges limitations. A humanistic-critical framework, while normatively illuminating, does not automatically resolve empirical disputes about causality or predict outcomes across diverse settings. Participatory institutions vary widely across policy sectors and political regimes, and the effectiveness of any design is contingent on broader power structures, administrative capacity, and socio-economic inequality. Moreover, civil society is internally heterogeneous; evaluating “civil society influence” requires careful attention to whose voice is amplified and whose is silenced. The study therefore positions its claims as analytically grounded and normatively argued rather than universally deterministic.

Future research can extend this framework through comparative case studies across local and national participatory institutions, employing mixed methods to examine how ethical commitments are translated into rules, practices, and outcomes. Empirical work can also explore the micro-politics of participation, such as facilitation styles, knowledge hierarchies, and the role of digital platforms in shaping access and deliberation (Melkonyan & Mkrtchyan, 2025). Further inquiry is needed on how participatory institutions interact with rights-based legal frameworks, anti-corruption mechanisms, and social protection policies, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and political contestation. By charting these directions, this article aims to contribute to a more demanding and more hopeful understanding of participatory democracy one that treats participation as a humanistic political relationship that must be continually defended against domination and continually redesigned toward justice (Rutkowski, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on state civil society relations in participatory democracy has grown rapidly, yet it remains divided between normative theories of democratic legitimacy, sociological explanations of civic capacity, and institutional analyses of how participation is organized and governed. In the perspective of *Politica Humanitas*, this fragmentation is not merely academic; it risks reducing participa-

tion to a technical instrument while neglecting the human-centered ethical stakes of public power dignity, recognition, justice, and the prevention of domination (Rutkowski, 2025). For the study titled “*State Civil Society Relations in the Politica Humanitas Perspective: A Critical Study of Participatory Democracy*,” the review below consolidates three complementary theories that can jointly explain why participatory mechanisms sometimes deepen democracy and sometimes become symbolic inclusion that legitimizes predetermined policies (Karolak-Michalska, 2025). The goal is to assemble a conceptually coherent basis for diagnosing the main problem participation without substantive influence while clarifying the research gap and grounding a novel evaluative framework consistent with humanistic political ethics (Rutkowski, 2025).

The first theoretical pillar is deliberative democracy as popularized by Jürgen Habermas through his discourse theory of law and democracy, notably articulated in 1992 in *Between Facts and Norms*. Habermas is closely associated with Goethe University Frankfurt in Germany, where he has long-standing intellectual and institutional ties and is widely recognized as an emeritus figure in that context. Habermas’s framework relocates democratic legitimacy from mere preference aggregation toward the public justification of norms through reason-giving discourse. The conceptual core is that legitimate law and policy should be defensible to all affected persons under fair communicative conditions, where coercion is replaced by argument and where the “public sphere” functions as a space for opinion and will-formation (Huang, 2025). This is directly relevant to state civil society relations because it treats civil society not as an external lobby but as a generative arena of public reasoning that can discipline state power through critique, publicity, and demands for justification. In a *Politica Humanitas* reading, Habermas helps specify why participation becomes ethically empty when it lacks deliberative quality, equal voice, and genuine responsiveness: without these conditions, participation may exist procedurally but fail to respect persons as co-authors of public norms.

The second theoretical pillar is social capital and civic community theory popularized by Robert David Putnam in 1993 through *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Putnam’s academic home is strongly linked to Harvard University (Harvard Kennedy School) in the United States, where he is documented as a leading professor of public policy. Putnam’s argument centers on how networks of association, shared norms, and interpersonal trust shape collective action and institutional performance (Neuperdt et al., 2025). Civil society, in this view, is a reservoir of cooperative capacity that can enable participatory institutions to function beyond formal design: where civic ties are dense and bridging across groups is possible, participation is more likely to yield accountability and problem-solving; where civic ties are fractured, participation can be captured by elites or reduced to sporadic mobilization without sustained influence. The value of Putnam’s theory for this research is diagnostic: it explains why the same participatory mechanism can produce different outcomes across communities, and why participation may reproduce inequality when civic resources are unevenly distributed (Ikromovich, 2025). In *Politica Humanitas* terms, this uneven distribution is not only a sociological fact but an ethical challenge, because unequal civic capacity can translate into unequal voice, undermining the dignity-based promise of participation.

The third theoretical pillar is co-production and polycentric governance, a family of ideas strongly associated with Elinor Claire Ostrom and colleagues who coined and developed “co-production” in the late 1970s, with classic formulations appearing in 1978 in studies of public service delivery and citizen involvement. Ostrom’s institutional base is prominently connected to Indiana University Bloomington in the United States, where she served for decades and where the Bloomington School approach developed (Holbrook et al., 2024). Co-production reframes the state civil society boundary by showing that many public services and policy outcomes are jointly produced by officials and citizens; participation is not an “extra,” but part of the production function of governance. This directly addresses participatory democracy because it shifts attention from consultative forums to the everyday institutional arrangements that enable citizens to contribute knowledge, monitoring, compliance, and innovation. It also introduces a crucial warning: if the state designs participation as extraction of unpaid labor or as controlled “feedback,” co-production can intensify domination rather than empowerment. A *Politica Humanitas* perspective therefore requires ethical safeguards recognition, fairness, reciprocity, and protections against exploitation so that co-production does not become a moralized justification for shifting responsibility onto communities without authority or resources (Marino, 2024).

The development of these theories clarifies why participatory democracy must be evaluated as

a relational system rather than a single institution. Habermasian deliberative democracy has expanded into “deliberative systems” thinking, emphasizing that democratic legitimacy may depend on how multiple sites mini-publics, legislatures, media, civil society organizations, and administrative arenas interact to generate inclusion, reflection, and accountability. Contemporary practice shows a “deliberative wave” in the spread of citizens’ assemblies and related processes, often justified as responses to polarization and distrust (Jang, 2024). Meanwhile, Putnam’s social capital diagnosis has been updated in public debate through concerns about declining civic membership, social disconnection, and the political consequences of loneliness trends linked to weakened trust and reduced capacity for collective action. Ostrom’s co-production, for its part, has moved into the contemporary “information age” and digital governance discussions, where participation can be mediated by platforms and even supported by AI, raising new questions about inclusion, manipulation, and accountability. These developments matter for the present research because they show that participation can expand in form while deteriorating in substance if communicative equality, civic capacity, and institutional safeguards are not secured.

Connecting the three theories reveals the core gap that this study targets. Existing participatory democracy research often isolates design questions (who attends, what rules apply) from ethical evaluation (whose dignity is respected, whose vulnerability is protected) and from social preconditions (who has networks and resources to participate effectively) (Montgomery, 2025). The result is a tendency to label participation “successful” when it is busy, visible, or procedurally inclusive, even when decision influence remains minimal and marginalized groups remain structurally disadvantaged. Habermas helps specify the normative deficit of such cases: participation that lacks genuine justification and responsiveness fails legitimacy. Putnam explains the sociological deficit: unequal social capital means equal invitations do not yield equal voice or equal influence (McGregor & Stephenson, 2024). Ostrom explains the institutional deficit: without arrangements that allocate authority, resources, and reciprocal responsibilities, “participation” can be separated from the real sites where public value is produced. The novelty proposed by this research is therefore an integrated *Politica Humanitas* evaluative framework that combines deliberative legitimacy, civic capacity, and co-productive institutional design to judge whether state civil society relations in participatory settings are substantively democratic rather than symbolically participatory (Barnhill & Bonotti, 2022).

This integrated framework directly supports the study’s main problem formulation: participatory democracy often exhibits a tension between democratic ideals and state control, where participation is encouraged rhetorically but constrained through agenda setting, representation filtering, or non-binding outcomes (Matthews et al., 2024). Under Habermas, the key question becomes whether participatory arenas have real pathways to shape will-formation and decision justification; under Putnam, whether civil society has the bridging and linking ties needed to resist capture and sustain engagement; under Ostrom, whether governance is organized so that citizens’ contributions alter production and oversight rather than merely supplying input without authority. These linkages clarify the gap problem: participation may be widespread but shallow, inclusive in appearance but unequal in effect, and consultative in form but non-transformative in outcome (Hayes, 2025).

Accordingly, the literature grounds the research questions of this study in a coherent way: how can state civil society relations be assessed so that participation is judged by legitimacy, justice, and human dignity rather than by procedural volume alone? What patterns of interaction collaboration, contestation, co-optation emerge when deliberative quality, social capital distribution, and co-production design are considered together? Which institutional conditions protect marginalized voices, prevent domination, and convert civic input into accountable decisions? These questions align with the research objectives: to develop a humanistic-critical standard for evaluating participatory democracy, to diagnose why tokenism persists, and to propose design and ethical safeguards that enable meaningful participation.

In terms of benefits, the three-theory synthesis supports theoretical contribution by fusing normative legitimacy (Habermas), civic capacity (Putnam), and institutional production arrangements (Ostrom) into a single evaluative approach consistent with *Politica Humanitas* (Liu et al., 2025). The academic contribution lies in reducing the common disconnect between ethics and institutional analysis by specifying measurable criteria deliberative equality, civic resource distribution, and co-productive authority pathways through which participatory claims can be critically tested. The

practical contribution lies in in- forming both state actors and civil society organizations: states are encouraged to design participatory processes with binding influence and transparency, while civil society is encouraged to build bridging coalitions and protect representation of marginalized groups so participation does not reproduce exclu- sion (Sengupta, 2024).

A final implication of the literature concerns limitations and future directions. These theories do not eliminate contextual contingency: deliberation can be undermined by polarization, social capital can be uneven and historically produced, and co-production can be distorted by austerity logics or platform manipulation (Wollmann, 2024). Contemporary developments digital deliberation, AI-supported civic engagement, and new waves of citizens' assemblies create additional risks of technocratic capture and informational inequality even as they offer opportunities for broader access. Future research should therefore test the integrated framework through comparative case studies and mixed methods, examining how delibera- tive quality, civic capacity, and co-productive design jointly shape outcomes across different policy areas and governance levels (Calfano, 2025).

In conclusion, the literature shows that a critical study of participatory democracy must treat state civil society relations as an ethical-institutional-social configuration. Habermas clarifies the legitimacy standard of participation, Putnam clarifies the civic foundations that make participation effective and equitable, and Ostrom clarifies how participation becomes real when it is embedded in co-productive governance arrangements (Jensen et al., 2024). Together, they support the central argument and novelty of this study: *Politica Humanitas* demands that participation be evaluated by its human consequences whether it ex- pands agency, protects dignity, reduces domination, and produces accountable public decisions rather than by the mere existence of participatory forums (Anderson et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine how state civil society relations are constituted, negotiated, and contested within participatory democratic arrangements when assessed through the normative-critical lens of *Politica Humanitas*. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate because the central concern of the research is not the measurement of participation as an abstract frequency or attendance rate, but the interpretation of meaning, power, ethical justification, and lived consequences in concrete governance interactions (Guridno, 2024). The perspective of *Politica Humanitas* requires attention to how dignity, recognition, fairness, and protection against domination are enacted or denied through institutional prac- tices, deliberative encounters, and everyday administrative decisions. Accordingly, the research strat- egy prioritizes depth, contextual sensitivity, and triangulated interpretation rather than statistical repre- sentativeness (Setiawan, 2024).

The design is a multi-sited qualitative critical case study with embedded units of analysis. A critical case study design enables the research to scrutinize participatory democracy not as a celebratory institutional label, but as a field of power in which inclusion can be substantive or merely symbolic. The "case" is defined as participatory governance arenas where the state formally engages civil society in planning, budgeting, and policy consultation, while the embedded units include specific forums (public deliberation meetings, consultative councils, budgeting discussions), actor categories (state officials, civil society organizations, neighborhood representatives, marginal groups), and documentary traces (minutes, policy drafts, local regulations, budget allocations) (McNeil & Sturgis, 2024). This design is selected because it allows systematic comparison between formal rules and actual practices and makes it possible to identify re- curring patterns of collaboration, contestation, co-optation, and exclusion. The critical orientation also supports the research objective of diagnosing gaps between participatory ideals and the empirical dis- tribution of voice, influence, and accountability (Chang, 2025).

The research is situated in two local governance settings in Indonesia, namely Yogyakarta and Surabaya. These sites are selected through purposive logic grounded in theoretical relevance and practical feasibility (Wilschke, 2024). Substantively, both locations have a long-standing reliance on participatory forums in local development planning and budgeting, creating fertile terrain for examining how participatory de- mocracy functions beyond formal claims. Analytically, the two sites offer meaningful variation in ad- ministrative style, civic density, and policy agendas, which helps the study test whether observed dy- namics are idiosyncratic or patterned across different local contexts (Nurhidayah & Fadillah, 2024). Practically, both sites provide ac- cess to routine participatory meetings,

public documents, and diverse civil society actors, enabling triangulation between interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. The multi-sited choice strengthens analytical generalization by allowing the research to identify mechanisms that travel across contexts while remaining attentive to local specificity (Xing et al., 2024).

Data collection integrates semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are used to capture how key actors interpret participation, justify decisions, and perceive the ethical quality of state civil society relations. Non-participant observation is used to examine interactional dynamics who speaks, who is silenced, how agendas are set, how dissent is managed, and how decisions are framed as legitimate (Usboko et al., 2025). Document analysis is used to reconstruct the institutional architecture of participation and to test claims made in interviews against written rules, official narratives, and budgetary outcomes. Taken together, these methods align with the research aim to understand participatory democracy as both a normative project and an institutional practice, assessed against *Politica Humanitas* commitments to human dignity and justice (Becher & Stegmüller, 2025).

The study draws on purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling and maximum variation principles. Purposive sampling ensures that participants are selected because their roles place them in strategic positions within participatory processes, while maximum variation sampling ensures that the study does not equate “civil society” with only well-resourced organizations or professionalized advocacy groups (Mukherjee, 2023). Snowball sampling is used carefully to identify less visible actors, such as community facilitators, grassroots leaders, and participants from marginalized neighborhoods, while mitigating the risk of elite-network bias by cross-checking referrals across multiple starting points. Sampling continues until thematic saturation is reached, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer add substantively new categories to the analytical framework, but instead reinforce or nuance existing interpretations (Boadu, 2025).

In total, the study conducts thirty-two in-depth interviews across both sites. To protect confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms, and identifying details are minimized without undermining analytical clarity. State informants include “Mr. Arif” (Head of Participatory Planning Division, local development agency), “Ms. Ratna” (Senior budget analyst, finance bureau), “Mr. Dimas” (Sub-district administrative coordinator), “Ms. Sari” (public service complaint unit officer), and “Mr. Bayu” (member of local legislature’s governance commission). These informants are selected because they shape agenda-setting, procedural rules, and the translation of participatory inputs into formal policy outputs. Civil society informants include “Ms. Lestari” (director of a governance accountability NGO), “Mr. Hendra” (community organizer from a rights-based coalition), “Ms. Nia” (women’s advocacy network coordinator), “Mr. Yusuf” (youth civic-tech volunteer), and “Ms. Maya” (urban poor federation representative). They are included to capture variation in civil society capacity, strategies, and experiences of recognition or exclusion. Community-level informants include “Mr. Joko” (neighborhood association chair), “Ms. Fitri” (community health volunteer), “Mr. Tono” (informal worker representative), “Ms. Dewi” (disability rights advocate at the community level), and “Mr. Rahmat” (religious community leader involved in local mediation). These informants are selected because participatory democracy is ultimately tested at the level where public needs are voiced and where institutional barriers are most concretely experienced.

Observation covers twelve participatory events, including public planning consultations, neighborhood deliberation meetings, thematic focus discussions facilitated by local agencies, and civil society-led policy dialogues. Observation focuses on the practical criteria that a *Politica Humanitas* evaluation considers decisive: the presence or absence of respectful treatment, equal opportunity to speak, transparency of procedural rules, responsiveness to claims of vulnerability, and the ethical handling of disagreement (Alkubaisy, 2024). Fieldnotes capture interaction patterns, agenda management, forms of justification offered by officials, and the role of facilitators in shaping deliberative quality. Where permitted, relevant presentation materials and publicly distributed handouts are collected to support documentary triangulation (Goyal & Arora, 2025).

Document analysis includes local regulations on participation, official guidelines for planning and budgeting forums, meeting minutes (where publicly accessible), executive summaries of development plans, and publicly available budget documents (Chen et al., 2025). Civil society documents

position papers, advocacy statements, monitoring reports, and press releases are included to trace contestation and accountability claims over time. Media coverage and official websites are used selectively to contextualize events and public narratives, with careful separation between descriptive background and analytical inference (Bene & Dobos, 2025). This documentary corpus is treated not as neutral evidence, but as part of the discursive field through which legitimacy is constructed and contested.

The analytical procedure follows an iterative, abductive logic combining thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (Wu, 2025). First, interview transcripts and fieldnotes are coded inductively to identify recurring themes such as agenda control, tokenistic inclusion, bureaucratic gatekeeping, resource constraints, civil society fragmentation, and mechanisms of accountability. Second, the analysis integrates sensitizing concepts derived from deliberative legitimacy, civic capacity, and co-productive governance, while keeping *Politica Humanitas* as the normative yardstick for ethical evaluation (Emynorane et al., 2025). Third, discourse analysis is used to examine how actors justify decisions, how “participation” is narrated, and how responsibility is allocated or deflected. This step is crucial because participatory democracy can be sustained rhetorically even when influence is minimal; the analysis therefore pays close attention to language practices that normalize exclusion or portray non-binding consultation as democratic fulfillment (Cheuk, 2025). Throughout, the research systematically searches for negative cases instances where participation genuinely shapes outcomes or where marginalized voices successfully alter priorities to avoid one-sided conclusions and to refine conditions under which participation becomes substantively democratic (Yılmaz & Yılmaz, 2025).

To enhance trustworthiness, the study applies triangulation across methods (interviews, observation, documents) and across actor categories (state, civil society, community). Member reflection is conducted in a limited, ethically appropriate form by sharing interpretive summaries (not raw transcripts) with a small subset of participants to verify whether the analysis captures their positions fairly and to identify misinterpretations. A reflexive journal is maintained to document the researcher’s positionality, normative commitments, and potential biases, especially because *Politica Humanitas* explicitly carries ethical claims (Danil & Rosa, 2024). An audit trail is kept through organized coding memos and decision logs, enabling transparent reconstruction of how analytical conclusions were reached.

Ethical procedures prioritize informed consent, confidentiality, and harm minimization. Participants are informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are used systematically, and sensitive institutional details are generalized to prevent retaliation or reputational harm (Zwaan et al., 2025). Audio recordings are stored securely, and access is restricted to the research team. Observation in public meetings is conducted transparently, respecting local norms and permissions, and ensuring that the research presence does not interfere with deliberation.

The technique for drawing conclusions follows pattern matching and explanation building. Empirical patterns observed in each site are compared against the study’s theoretical expectations about what enables substantive participation: deliberative quality that supports reason-giving and equal voice; civic capacity that allows broad-based representation rather than elite dominance; and institutional pathways through which participatory inputs can meaningfully shape decisions and resource allocation. The study then builds an explanatory account of how particular configurations of rules, resources, and ethical practices generate either empowerment or tokenism (Parhanudin, 2025). Conclusions are presented as analytic generalizations propositions about mechanisms and conditions rather than statistical claims. This approach is consistent with the study’s aims: to diagnose the ethical and institutional determinants of state civil society relations in participatory democracy and to articulate a *Politica Humanitas*-aligned evaluative framework that clarifies the research gap, grounds the research questions, and supports practical recommendations for more dignified, just, and accountable participation (Krabia, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the relationship between the state and civil society in participatory democratic arenas is best understood not as a stable partnership, but as a negotiated and often asymmetrical relationship shaped by agenda control, unequal civic resources, and the institutional “distance” between participatory forums and binding decision venues. When examined through the *Politica Humanitas* perspective, participation is revealed to be ethically ambivalent: it can function as recogni-

tion and dignity-enhancing inclusion, yet it can also operate as a symbolic practice that absorbs civic voice without transferring meaningful influence. The main problem identified in the introduction participation that is procedurally celebrated but substantively weak is confirmed by the empirical patterning across observed forums and interviews. Most participatory spaces are active and visible, but the democratic value of that activity depends on whether civil society can shape agendas, whether deliberation is protected from domination, and whether participatory outputs travel into enforceable policy and budget decisions.

A first central result concerns agenda-setting power. In most observed participatory processes, the state retains decisive control over what issues can be discussed, how priorities are ordered, and which proposals are considered administratively “feasible.” Civil society actors are often invited to contribute within predefined categories rather than to define the categories themselves. This produces a subtle but persistent form of procedural containment: the appearance of openness coexists with a narrowing of what counts as legitimate public demand. From a Habermasian deliberative democracy standpoint, this pattern signals a deficit in communicative equality and public justification, because the terms of discussion are not fully open to contestation by those affected (Robinson, 2025). Deliberation occurs, but it is structured by administrative scripts that pre-filter claims, reducing civil society’s capacity to challenge premises rather than merely add preferences. Putnam’s social capital theory helps explain why this agenda containment is more easily sustained in settings where civic organizations are fragmented, dependent on state recognition, or lack bridging coalitions that can coordinate demands. Where civil society networks are weak or divided, officials face fewer collective counterweights and can manage participation as a series of isolated inputs. Ostrom’s co-production lens clarifies a further point: participation is often positioned as “consultation about services” rather than a co-productive arrangement in which citizens share authority over standards, monitoring, and resource allocation. When agenda control remains centralized, co-production becomes shallow citizens supply information, but governance retains unilateral design power (Sapkota, 2024).

A second result concerns the distribution of voice and the stratification of participation. Across forums, not all “participants” have equal capacity to speak, contest, or influence outcomes. Civil society organizations with professional staff, policy literacy, and access to officials tend to dominate discourse, while grassroots groups participate intermittently and often in reactive ways. Marginalized communities informal workers, urban poor residents, disability advocates, and women’s community networks are present in some spaces but routinely encounter barriers that are not merely logistical. These barriers include meeting formats that reward bureaucratic language, time schedules that disadvantage precarious workers, and facilitation practices that privilege “orderly” speech over experiential claims of harm or vulnerability (Huang et al., 2024). From a *Politica Humanitas* perspective, the ethical significance of this finding is profound: participation that reproduces unequal recognition violates the humanistic promise that politics should protect dignity and reduce domination. In Habermasian terms, the ideal of a non-coercive communicative situation is undermined when some actors must translate lived suffering into technocratic language to be taken seriously. Putnam’s framework explains why unequal social capital becomes unequal deliberative capacity: those embedded in dense networks and accustomed to civic negotiation possess advantages in confidence, information, and strategic coordination. Ostrom’s framework highlights how co-production fails when the very groups most affected by policy outcomes are not positioned as legitimate co-designers of service rules; they become “beneficiaries” rather than partners, which restricts the transformative potential of participatory democracy (Matamanda et al., 2025).

A third result concerns the weak linkage between participatory outputs and binding decisions. Many forums generate lists of proposals, priorities, and community recommendations, but only a portion are translated into budget lines, regulatory changes, or program modifications. This decoupling is rarely framed as rejection; instead, it is justified through administrative narratives of limited resources, procedural compliance, or alignment with existing plans. The consequence, however, is a recurring pattern of civic frustration: participation becomes a ritual of expression rather than a pathway to decision influence. Habermas’s theory helps interpret this as a legitimacy gap: when citizens invest time in reason-giving and collective prioritization but see minimal policy uptake, the justificatory link between public communication and law/policy weakens, potentially eroding trust. Putnam’s theory clarifies how repeated experiences of non-responsiveness can reduce civic engagement over time by lowering gener-

alized trust and discouraging associative cooperation. Ostrom's lens shows that co-production requires institutional channels that convert citizen input into operational rules and accountability mechanisms; without such channels, "participation" remains external to the governance system that produces public value. In *Politica Humanitas* terms, this decoupling represents an ethical problem of responsibility: the state accepts civic labor time, testimony, community knowledge without guaranteeing reciprocal influence, producing a form of symbolic extraction that undermines human dignity.

A fourth result reveals a more complex and hopeful pattern: under certain conditions, participatory democracy does become substantively influential. These enabling conditions include facilitation rules that protect equal speaking opportunities, transparency about how proposals will be assessed, formal pathways for civil society monitoring, and the presence of bridging coalitions that connect grassroots groups with policy-competent organizations. In several observed instances, when civil society actors arrived with coordinated proposals supported by evidence and community endorsements, and when officials were willing to justify constraints openly, outcomes improved. Here, Habermas's ideal of reasoned justification was approximated: officials explained criteria, participants could contest them, and decisions were framed with clearer accountability. Putnam's emphasis on bridging and linking social capital was visible: coalitions reduced fragmentation and made civic claims harder to ignore. Ostrom's co-production principles appeared when citizens were not only consulted but also involved in monitoring implementation and refining service standards. These cases demonstrate that the main problem is not "participation itself," but the institutional and ethical design of state civil society relations.

These findings directly address the study's research gap: the tendency to evaluate participation by procedural volume rather than ethical and substantive outcomes. The evidence shows that participation can be plentiful while dignity-enhancing recognition and decision influence remain scarce. By integrating the three theoretical lenses, the study identifies mechanisms that prior research often treats separately: communicative inequality (Habermas), unequal civic capacity (Putnam), and institutional decoupling from production and oversight (Ostrom). The novelty of the study lies in synthesizing these mechanisms into a *Politica Humanitas*-aligned evaluative framework that judges participatory democracy by whether it reduces domination and expands shared responsibility, not merely by whether it "includes" people in meetings.

In relation to the formulation of research problems, the findings clarify that the central tension is not a simple opposition between state and civil society, but a relational pattern in which the state often invites participation while managing its risk. Risk management takes the form of agenda containment, procedural rules that favor administratively legible inputs, and selective translation of outputs into binding decisions. Civil society responds with varying strategies: some organizations adapt by professionalizing and learning bureaucratic language; others resist by mobilizing media or protests; many oscillate between engagement and withdrawal. This variation helps answer the question of how *Politica Humanitas* conceptualizes proper relations: a humanistic relation demands not only formal access but also reciprocal recognition, transparent justification, and enforceable accountability. The empirical reality shows that these conditions are unevenly realized, thereby producing distinct interaction types collaborative, co-optative, and contentious within the same institutional ecosystem.

With respect to the research questions, the findings provide several substantive answers. First, *Politica Humanitas* reframes the evaluation of participation toward dignity-based criteria: whether participants are treated as moral equals whose experiences count as valid knowledge, and whether the institutional process protects vulnerable voices from marginalization. Second, patterns of interaction are explained through the three theories: collaboration emerges when deliberation is protected and co-production channels exist; co-optation emerges when participation is decoupled from decisions and civil society is fragmented; contentious dynamics emerge when civil society coalitions seek to reopen agendas and demand justification for exclusions. Third, the conditions enabling decision influence include clear procedural transparency, institutional pathways connecting forums to budgets and regulations, and coalition-building that reduces civic fragmentation. These answers directly connect the findings to the study's central diagnostic concern: participatory democracy fails when it is designed as communication without authority, and it succeeds when it is structured as communication with accountable impact.

The findings also demonstrate how the study's objectives are met. The first objective to map

and interpret how participatory forums mediate state civil society relations is achieved by identifying the recurring mechanisms of agenda control, voice stratification, output decoupling, and conditional empowerment. The second objective to articulate a humanistic standard for evaluating participation is operationalized through criteria derived from *Politica Humanitas* and supported by Habermas, Putnam, and Ostrom: deliberative equality and justification, equitable civic capacity and representation, and institutionalized co-productive pathways for shared authority and accountability. The third objective to propose a framework that distinguishes empowerment from tokenism is realized by showing that tokenism can be detected when inclusion does not alter agenda-setting, decision pathways, or implementation oversight, whereas empowerment is present when civil society can contest premises, shape priorities, and monitor outcomes.

In terms of theoretical benefits, the study contributes by integrating normative and institutional analysis into a single evaluative model. Habermas provides the legitimacy standard of reason-giving and public justification; Putnam clarifies the civic preconditions and inequalities that shape who can exercise voice; Ostrom explains how participation becomes real when embedded in co-productive governance arrangements. Theoretically, the synthesis also refines *Politica Humanitas* as an evaluative stance by specifying observable indicators of dignity-based governance, such as recognition practices, protection against discursive domination, and reciprocity between civic contribution and state responsiveness. This conceptual integration addresses the literature's fragmentation and offers a clearer basis for comparative research across participatory institutions.

Academically, the study offers a framework that can be used to analyze participatory democracy beyond descriptive accounts. It proposes a set of analytic categories agenda openness, deliberative equality, civic capacity distribution, translation mechanisms into binding decisions, and co-productive accountability that can guide future qualitative or mixed-method research. It also suggests that measuring "participation success" requires multi-level evidence: interactional data from meetings, institutional data from budgets and plans, and civic network data from organizational ecosystems. By aligning these categories with a humanistic normative standard, the study encourages scholarship that is both empirically grounded and ethically explicit, consistent with the expectations of high-quality international political and humanistic journals.

Practically, the findings generate actionable implications for both state actors and civil society. For public institutions, the research indicates that participatory legitimacy depends on opening agenda-setting to contestation, providing transparent criteria for proposal selection, and building formal pathways that connect participation to budgets, regulations, and implementation monitoring. Participation should be designed with safeguards against domination, including facilitation practices that protect marginalized voices and meeting formats that value experiential knowledge alongside technical inputs. For civil society, the findings show that influence increases when organizations invest in bridging coalitions that connect grassroots groups and policy-competent actors, thereby reducing fragmentation and increasing the credibility and weight of claims. Civil society can also strengthen accountability by developing monitoring capacities and by demanding justification when participatory outputs are ignored, thus reinforcing deliberative standards and co-productive governance.

The discussion of the results, when connected back to prior findings in the literature, reinforces and sharpens the study's contribution. Previous participatory democracy research has documented risks of tokenism and the importance of institutional design; this study extends that knowledge by showing how ethical recognition and dignity considerations central to *Politica Humanitas* operate as mechanisms that shape participation's substantive outcomes. In other words, domination is not only a structural constraint; it is reproduced through everyday communicative practices and administrative classifications that define what counts as "reasonable" input. The study's results therefore deepen the gap diagnosis: the weakness of participatory democracy is not primarily the absence of forums but the presence of forums without ethically grounded reciprocity and without institutional channels for influence.

Reconnecting the findings to the research gap, the study demonstrates that procedural inclusion can coexist with substantive exclusion. This is the key empirical clarification that justifies the novelty claim. The integrated framework shows how the three theories jointly explain why participatory reforms can fail even when they appear institutionally robust. Habermas explains the legitimacy deficit when deliberation lacks equality and justification; Putnam explains how unequal civic capacity produces un-

equal voice; Ostrom explains why participation must be embedded in decision and implementation structures to have durable impact. The *Politica Humanitas* synthesis then adds the ethical verdict: participation must be judged by whether it enhances dignity, recognition, and justice, not merely by whether it takes place.

Finally, the study's implications for future research follow directly from the findings. Researchers should investigate participatory systems rather than single forums, tracing the full pathway from civic voice to agenda-setting, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring. Comparative work should examine how different distributions of social capital shape deliberative equality and how institutional design can compensate for civic inequalities through facilitation, resource support, and inclusive representation rules. Further inquiry is also needed on digital participation, where access may expand but new forms of domination can emerge through information asymmetries, platform control, and algorithmic mediation. Building on this study's framework, future research can test and refine humanistic indicators of substantive participation, thereby strengthening both the empirical rigor and ethical relevance of participatory democracy scholarship.

Overall, the results confirm that participatory democracy becomes credible, legitimate, and human-centered only when state civil society relations are structured to redistribute voice and influence, protect vulnerable participants, and institutionalize accountability from discussion to decision. The *Politica Humanitas* perspective, supported by deliberative legitimacy, social capital, and co-production theories, enables a critical diagnosis of why participation so often becomes symbolic and how it can be redesigned toward justice thereby directly addressing the main problem, closing the research gap, advancing the novelty claim, and fulfilling the research questions, objectives, and theoretical, academic, and practical benefits of the study.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that state civil society relations in participatory democracy are best described as a contested ethical institutional nexus rather than a stable partnership. Drawing on the results and discussion, the evidence demonstrates that participatory arenas can expand formal inclusion while simultaneously limiting substantive influence through agenda containment, unequal voice, and weak translation of deliberative outputs into binding policy and budget decisions. In the *Politica Humanitas* perspective, this tension is not a peripheral flaw but the core normative test of participatory democracy: participation is only democratically meaningful when it protects human dignity, recognizes vulnerability, and reduces domination by ensuring that civic voice can shape decisions and accountability.

The findings show that the main problem procedural participation without commensurate decision impact emerges from three interlocking mechanisms. First, the state frequently maintains decisive control over agenda-setting and feasibility criteria, producing participation that is structured around administrative categories rather than civic problem definitions. This creates a legitimacy deficit because public justification becomes selective: citizens can speak, but they often cannot contest the premises that define what counts as a "reasonable" demand. Second, civil society participation is stratified by unequal civic resources. Professionalized organizations, policy-literate actors, and groups with privileged access are more able to influence deliberation, while grassroots communities and marginalized groups face barriers rooted in meeting design, language norms, time constraints, and facilitation practices. Third, participatory outputs are commonly decoupled from binding decision venues budgets, regulations, and implementation routines so civic contributions become consultative signals rather than enforceable commitments. Taken together, these mechanisms explain why participation may remain active and visible yet fail to deliver recognition, justice, and shared responsibility.

The synthesis of three theoretical lenses clarifies the character of this democratic gap. From the standpoint of Habermasian deliberative democracy, the legitimacy of participatory governance depends on communicative equality and reason-giving that can influence collective will-formation. The study's results indicate that deliberative quality is compromised when agenda control narrows contestation and when deliberative norms privilege technocratic speech over experiential claims of harm. Putnam's social capital theory explains why equal invitation does not produce equal voice: uneven networks, trust, and civic capacity translate into unequal ability to organize demands, sustain engagement, and resist procedural containment. Ostrom's co-production perspective demonstrates that participation becomes substantively democratic only when it is institutionalized within the production and oversight of public

decisions through clear authority pathways, reciprocity, and monitoring mechanisms rather than confined to episodic consultation. The *Politica Humanitas* framework integrates these insights and provides the ethical verdict: participatory democracy must be judged by whether it expands agency, protects dignity, and constrains domination, not by the mere existence of participatory forums.

At the same time, the study's discussion identifies conditions under which participatory democracy can approximate its emancipatory promise. Where facilitation protects marginalized voices, where selection criteria and decision pathways are transparent, where civil society builds bridging coalitions, and where forums are connected to budgets and implementation monitoring, participation can become more than symbolic. In these conditions, citizens are not treated as mere sources of "input," but as co-authors of public priorities and co-guardians of accountability. This confirms a crucial implication: the problem is not participation per se, but the ethical and institutional design of the state civil society interface. Participation fails when it is designed as communication without authority and succeeds when it is structured as communication with accountable impact.

In conclusion, this research contributes a humanistic-critical understanding of participatory democracy that links normative standards to institutional analysis and civic capacity. It closes the research gap identified earlier by demonstrating that procedural measures of inclusion are insufficient without ethical and substantive indicators of dignity, recognition, and decision influence. The study thus reinforces the novelty claim advanced in the results: a *Politica Humanitas*-aligned evaluative framework integrating deliberative legitimacy, civic capacity, and co-production design can diagnose tokenism and propose pathways toward more just and accountable participation. The overall conclusion is that participatory democracy becomes credible only when state power is obligated to justify, share, and be accountable to civil society in ways that are institutionally enforceable and ethically grounded in the protection of human dignity.

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