The Invisible Crisis of Democracy: A Conceptual Inquiry into Civic Fatigue

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Abstract: Contemporary democratic theory frequently celebrates citizen participation as an ideal in which individuals are expected to be increasingly involved in decision-making processes at all levels. However, this article argues that the quantitative expansion of participatory calls does not necessarily enhance democratic legitimacy; on the contrary, it may in certain contexts generate political and administrative exhaustion among individuals. In this regard, the study introduces the concept of civic fatigue into the literature. Civic fatigue refers to a condition of political exhaustion that emerges when citizens are repeatedly invited to express opinions, provide feedback, or participate in decision-making processes that ultimately remain devoid of substantive content and fail to produce meaningful outcomes.

Drawing on a critical theoretical framework—including Habermas's deliberative democracy ideal, Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, and Byung-Chul Han's critique of the neoliberal subject—the article examines the causes and consequences of civic fatigue. Employing a conceptual analysis methodology, the study substantiates the phenomenon through illustrative case examples from diverse contexts such as municipalities, digital participation platforms, social media activism, academia, and public institutions.

The findings demonstrate that in environments where participation becomes instrumentalized and stripped of meaning, citizens gradually become more passive and their trust in democratic processes erodes. The primary contribution of the article is to challenge the widely held assumption in democratic theory that "more participation equals greater legitimacy," and to foreground the qualitative dimensions of participation by bringing attention to civic fatigue as an invisible crisis of contemporary democracies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, debates surrounding democratic theory and practice have increasingly focused on declining voter turnout, citizens' growing disengagement from political processes, and the crisis emerging within mechanisms of representation (Norris, 2011; Dalton, 2017). A shared assumption underlying these discussions is that democratic regimes become stronger through broader and more inclusive forms of public participation (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Indeed, Putnam's (2000) seminal work—now a major reference point in the literature—highlighted the rising phenomenon of "public disengagement" in American society and the erosion of social capital, interpreting this trajectory as a critical warning sign for democracy. Yet this dominant approach, which prioritizes the quantitative level of participation, overlooks an increasingly distinctive and complex phenomenon observed in contemporary public administration practices: heightened participation does not under all circumstances translate into stronger democratic legitimacy (Fung, 2015; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007).

Today, citizens are directed toward an expanding range of participatory mechanisms—spanning municipalities, universities, public policy processes, and digital platforms (Smith, 2009; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Participatory budgeting initiatives, online surveys, strategic planning consultations, feedback forms, and civic suggestion platforms are employed by institutional actors with the stated aim of promoting and institutionalizing participation (Fung, 2006). However, many of these mechanisms increasingly fail to generate substantive outcomes within decision-making processes and instead become symbolic, procedural, or merely representative tools (Michels

& De Graaf, 2010; Cornwall, 2008). In most cases, citizens' views and contributions do not meaningfully shape decisions; participation is thus transformed from a democratic right into a task imposed by the system or a bureaucratic obligation. It is in this context that the psychosocial and administrative exhaustion produced by the instrumentalization of participation calls attention to a concept that remains insufficiently theorized in the literature: *civic fatigue*.

This article seeks to offer a critical contribution to the contemporary democratic governance literature by systematically theorizing the notion of civic fatigue. The concept captures a phenomenon that is increasingly widespread yet frequently overlooked in democratic regimes: a distinctive form of political exhaustion arising when citizens are persistently subjected to various calls for participation in processes whose meaning, substance, and capacity to produce impact have gradually weakened. This exhaustion is approached not merely as an individual psychological reaction, but also as a structural outcome generated by neoliberal governance practices—a form of institutional "governance pathology" (Brown, 2015; Davies, 2014). The article argues that, under neoliberalism, governance has transformed participation from a democratic value into a technical, procedural, and performative administrative tool, thereby producing forms of political and psychopolitical fatigue among citizens.

Building on Habermas's theory of communicative action and his deliberative model of democracy, the article examines the profound disjuncture between the normative–idealized visions of participation and its actual implementation in contemporary governance practices (Habermas, 1984, 1996). The pluralistic public sphere envisioned by Habermas—premised on rational-critical deliberation—has increasingly been reduced to procedural, supervisory, and managerial forms of citizen involvement (Dryzek, 2000).

At the same time, Gramsci's analysis of hegemony provides a critical lens through which to understand how participatory practices function in the production and reproduction of consent (Gramsci, 1971). Within this framework, calls for participation operate not only as instruments of democratic empowerment but also as hegemonic devices that shape the orientations, demands, and expectations of the governed within the boundaries set by the political system.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence further illuminates the passive, normalizing, and often subject-weakening dimensions of participation (Bourdieu, 1991). While participatory mechanisms appear inclusive and emancipatory on the surface, in practice they frequently transform individuals into passive carriers of technical, bureaucratic, and inconsequential processes. Thus, participation becomes a symbolic field through which social power relations are reproduced.

Moreover, drawing on Byung-Chul Han's analysis of the "burnout society," the article explores the psychopolitical effects of neoliberal governance's performance pressures, the imperative of constant self-actualization, and the intensification of institutional expectations as they manifest within participatory processes (Han, 2015). The transformation of participation from a right or political instrument of subjectification into a "duty economy" constitutes one of the fundamental sources of civic fatigue.

Within this theoretical framework, the central problem addressed by the article is how participatory practices—expanded ostensibly to enhance democratic legitimacy—paradoxically erode that legitimacy in subtle ways by generating administrative weariness, political withdrawal, institutional distrust, and a collective sense of exhaustion among citizens. In this respect, *civic fatigue* aims to make visible a new axis of governance tension within

contemporary democracies—one that remains insufficiently conceptualized yet increasingly shapes political life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a comprehensive body of literature that examines the theoretical evolution of the notion of participation—an issue at the heart of contemporary debates on democratic governance—and the rupture this evolution has produced in current political practices. These studies, which analyze the shift of participatory discourse from normative-democratic ideals toward an administrative and instrumental logic, require a reconsideration of foundational concepts in both classical democratic theory and critical social theory. In particular, Habermas's deliberative democratic approach, Gramsci's analyses of hegemony, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, and Byung-Chul Han's critique of the neoliberal subject provide significant theoretical grounds for explaining why participation today has become increasingly visible yet ineffective, widespread yet devoid of substance, accessible yet exhausting.

This literature demonstrates that the concept of *civic fatigue*, as developed in this study, cannot be reduced to mere individual apathy or psychological burnout; rather, it constitutes a multilayered political phenomenon closely intertwined with the historical, ideological, and administrative transformations of participatory practices.

2.1. The Evolution of the Participation Discourse and the Governance Paradigm

Citizen participation is a foundational principle situated at the core of modern democratic thought—regarded as one of the essential indicators of freedom, political legitimacy, and democratic progress (Dahl, 1989; Pateman, 1970). Especially in the post–World War II era, the quality of democratic regimes came to be assessed not merely by the existence of regular and competitive elections but also by the functioning of institutional mechanisms that enable citizens to engage actively and continuously in political processes (Held, 2006; Almond & Verba, 1989). Rising civic consciousness and diversifying societal demands during this period laid the groundwork for a more inclusive, pluralistic, and participatory orientation in political decision-making (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2011).

By the 1960s, particularly with the rise of civil rights movements, citizen participation moved beyond its quantitative dimensions and began to be discussed within the framework of qualitatively transformative requirements (Carson & Martin, 1999; Pateman, 1970). Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" model offered a hierarchically structured critique of participatory practices, exposing the limitations of superficial and non-substantive involvement. According to Arnstein, participation that is not accompanied by decision-making power constitutes nothing more than an "empty ritual," transforming participatory mechanisms into symbolic tools that obscure unequal power relations.

The global rise of neoliberal policies in the 1980s ushered in a paradigm shift in public administration (Harvey, 2005). The New Public Management (NPM) approach advocated restructuring public services according to market-oriented principles (Hood, 1991; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), while the subsequent governance paradigm redefined participation away from the democratic ideal of self-government and toward instrumental goals such as efficiency, performance, consent production, and administrative effectiveness (Rhodes, 1996). As a result, citizens increasingly ceased to function as active agents in political decision-making and were instead recast as passive users who provide feedback, generate data, and contribute to the maintenance of systemic legitimacy.

Multi-actor participation mechanisms developed within the governance approach—structures premised on the interaction of state, market, and civil society actors—ostensibly aim to strengthen participation but in practice

frequently produce selective, superficial, and ineffective processes (Rhodes, 1997; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). The literature conceptualizes this phenomenon as "pseudo-participation" (Palacin, Nelimarkka, Reynolds-Cuéllar & Becker, 2020) or "tokenistic participation" (Morrison & Dearden, 2013), referring to situations in which citizen input is collected but not meaningfully incorporated into decision-making. Such practices preserve the formal visibility of participation while eroding its substantive depth; participation thus shifts from a process through which political power can be shared to an administrative mechanism through which legitimacy is reproduced.

The process of digitalization plays a dual role in the transformation of the participation discourse. While e-government initiatives, online consultation platforms, and digital feedback systems reduce spatial and temporal barriers and enhance the accessibility of participation (Macintosh, 2004), many of these tools simultaneously reduce participation to functions of data collection, performance monitoring, and technical oversight (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; Morozov, 2013; Chadwick, 2011). In this sense, digital participation becomes less a mechanism for empowering citizens to influence decision-making in meaningful ways, and more a passive form of involvement that contributes to the technical operation of administrative systems.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of the Concept of Civic Fatigue

Establishing a robust analytical foundation for the concept of civic fatigue requires moving beyond explanations that focus solely on the quantitative dimensions of political participation, and instead evaluating its normative, ideological, and structural dimensions through a holistic lens informed by diverse theoretical traditions. Within this framework, the concept denotes a distinctive form of exhaustion that emerges when participation diverges from its democratic function of generating legitimacy and is transformed into an obligation, a repetitive administrative ritual, or a symbolic practice of reproduction. The following section discusses in detail how the phenomenon of civic fatigue can be conceptualized and explained from various theoretical perspectives.

2.2.1. Habermas and the Normative Ideal of Participation

Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and his model of deliberative democracy position political participation as a foundational and indispensable component of democratic legitimacy. According to Habermas, a rational public sphere is one in which citizens interact on equal footing, free from external pressure, strategic manipulation, or power asymmetries; it is a space where mutual argumentation enables the production of collective reason and makes social consensus possible (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996). In this framework, participation is not merely a formal political right but one of the essential pillars through which social integration and normative legitimacy are reproduced via the construction of public reason (Bohman, 1996).

Yet contemporary participatory practices diverge substantially from Habermas's normative design. Many participatory mechanisms generate processes that lack substantive content, are administratively steered, operate superficially, or are reduced to mere formal representation (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007; Fung, 2015). Such practices weaken the rational consensus-building potential of communicative action, transforming participation from a central element of deliberative democracy into a technical governance procedure (Smith, 2009; Dryzek, 2000).

In this context, civic fatigue can be conceptualized as a phenomenon closely linked to the erosion of participation's capacity—understood in the Habermasian sense—to generate real impact and transformation. As participatory mechanisms fail to meet their normative expectations, citizens experience diminishing confidence in participatory processes, declining belief in democratic functioning, and growing disappointment with their encounters

in the public sphere.

2.2.2. Gramsci and the Hegemonic Function of Participation

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony posits that the continuity of political power is sustained not only through the coercive apparatuses of the state, but also through the institutionalization of consent produced at the cultural and ideological levels (Gramsci, 1971). From this perspective, the discourse of participation in modern governance does not primarily signify an emancipatory practice aligned with the ideal of democratic self-government; rather, it becomes a hegemonic instrument that repositions citizens within the normative framework of the existing order (Mouffe, 1979; Hall, 1986).

In such a context, participation functions less as a means of strengthening political subjectivity and more as a strategic mechanism through which the governed are encouraged to identify with the governing, thereby reproducing the legitimacy of the established system (Cox, 1993; Crehan, 2016). Thus, the discourse of participation can be understood as one of the most effective ideological tools of neoliberal governance for organizing consent and reproducing social power relations (Dean, 2010).

Within this framework, the individual who is continually invited—or compelled—to "participate" gradually loses their critical capacity and engages in participatory processes not out of autonomous will, but due to the imperative to conform to governance norms. This dynamic reflects a form of hegemonic steering in the Gramscian sense. As participation becomes ritualized and detached from substantive depth, it facilitates the reproduction of consent in ways that appear voluntary yet are structurally orchestrated.

In this regard, civic fatigue may be interpreted as a passive form of resistance to this hegemonically imposed symbolic order. By consciously withdrawing from the staged performances of participation, citizens enact a protest that is outwardly silent but politically meaningful—rejecting the symbolic arenas in which their consent is expected to be continuously reaffirmed.

2.2.3. Bourdieu and the Symbolic Violence of Participation

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence* was developed to explain how social actors come to internalize hierarchical and unequal power relations, thereby exhibiting a form of voluntary compliance without being fully aware of the mechanisms that shape their dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1991). In this framework, participatory processes—although ostensibly designed to be open, inclusive, and democratic—are in practice structured by distributions of social capital, variations in habitus, and embedded cultural codes that systematically position some groups advantageously while placing others at a disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1984). Participation thus becomes less an egalitarian political arena than a space in which social power relations are reproduced.

A Bourdieusian analysis enables participation to be understood not simply as a technical or administrative procedure but as a field in which power is legitimized and symbolically reproduced (Wacquant, 2013). Individuals with higher levels of education, greater familiarity with institutional language, and strong cultural capital tend to possess visibility and influence within participatory processes. Conversely, marginalized actors or those with limited capital struggle to articulate their interests—or are excluded altogether (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). These inequalities transform participation from a democratic right into a process that imposes additional burdens, stress, and pressures for conformity on certain groups.

In this context, civic fatigue can be interpreted as a subtle yet politically meaningful form of withdrawal or

rupture in response to participatory processes that reproduce symbolic violence. Citizens' refusal to take part in these imposed arenas constitutes a passive—but critical—form of resistance to the unequal structures embedded within participation itself.

2.2.4. Byung-Chul Han and the Exhaustion of the Neoliberal Subject

Byung-Chul Han analyzes the pressures imposed on individuals in late-capitalist societies through the notion of an "excess of positivity" (Han, 2015). According to Han, the neoliberal subject is no longer the traditional "obedience subject" who submits to external authority, but rather a "performance subject" who compels themselves toward constant achievement, efficiency, and productivity (Han, 2015; Han, 2017). This subject lives under a structural pressure framed by the discourse of freedom yet fundamentally governed by an internalized norm of productivity (Han, 2017). Exhaustion, therefore, is not the result of external coercion but emerges from the invisible and continuous neoliberal discipline that the subject imposes upon themselves.

Within this perspective, public participation ceases to function primarily as a democratic right and instead becomes a prerequisite for social acceptance, moral adequacy, and the image of the "good citizen" (Brown, 2015). The neoliberal individual internalizes expectations to be a "responsible individual," an "active citizen," or a "participatory community member," reproducing participation as an ethical obligation and a performance indicator (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 2010). As a result, non-participation, withdrawal, or political distancing come to be perceived as deviant or even irresponsible behavior. In this context, civic fatigue can be conceptualized as a form of silent exhaustion, political retreat, and inward withdrawal that individuals develop in response to these performative regimes of participation.

The theoretical perspectives discussed above demonstrate that civic fatigue is far from being merely an individual or psychological condition; rather, it constitutes a multilayered political phenomenon shaped by structural ruptures between normative democratic ideals and political practices, hegemonic mechanisms of consent, the reproduction of symbolic inequalities, and neoliberal subjectification processes. When considered together— Habermasian failures of communicative rationality, Gramscian hegemonic structures that instrumentalize participation, Bourdieusian inequalities produced through capital and habitus, and Han's neoliberal regimes of internal coercion—the reasons behind the declining capacity of participation to generate democratic legitimacy become increasingly visible.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual analysis methodology in order to conceptualize the phenomenon of civic fatigue and examine it within an analytical framework grounded in contemporary participatory practices. Moving beyond positivist research traditions that rely on hypothesis testing, the study is built upon critical theoretical inquiry, interdisciplinary literature review, and illustrative case examinations. Accordingly, the research is both descriptive and explanatory in nature; its aim is to develop a new conceptual framework and offer a critical contribution to ongoing debates on democracy and governance.

The research process consists of two main stages. In the first stage, the literature on democratic theory, citizen participation, and governance was systematically reviewed. Within this scope, studies from public administration, political science, media studies, and critical theory that address the transformation of participation were comparatively analyzed. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy, Antonio

Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, and Byung-Chul Han's analyses of the neoliberal subject constitute the core components of the study's theoretical framework. These theoretical reference points were integrated into a holistic analytical structure to illuminate the tension between the normative ideals of participation and its contemporary practices.

In the second stage, the study employs a representative case study approach, selecting examples from diverse institutional and digital contexts through purposive sampling. These cases were chosen to enable an examination of how civic fatigue manifests across different socio-political environments. The cases include:

• Digital participation platforms used by local governments in Turkey,

• Open-source e-participation systems developed in Europe,

• Agenda-mobilization practices on social media platforms,

• Mandatory participation and feedback systems implemented in higher education institutions,

• Performance-based feedback mechanisms in the public sector.

For each case, secondary data analysis, document review, and critical observation techniques were utilized. Reports, user feedback, and interface data related to municipal digital platforms were examined; the interaction dynamics and agenda cycles of social media campaigns were analyzed; and publicly available institutional guidelines, administrative documents, and performance reports concerning assessment systems in universities and public organizations were evaluated in detail.

The findings were analyzed comparatively with the theoretical framework, assessing the explanatory capacity of the concept of civic fatigue and identifying its normative and structural dimensions. The conceptual analysis thus moves beyond merely proposing an abstract theoretical construct and instead establishes a multilayered explanatory ground supported by empirical observations. In this regard, the study provides both a critical theoretical assessment of the instrumentalization of participation and a demonstration of how these processes materialize in practice.

In conclusion, the methodological approach adopted in this study enables a theoretically grounded and interdisciplinary examination of civic fatigue, as well as an in-depth analysis of its observable dimensions across diverse institutional and digital contexts. The study not only develops a new conceptual framework but also offers a critical perspective on the structural problems embedded within contemporary governance arrangements.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from the four representative cases examined to assess how the phenomenon of civic fatigue manifests across different institutional and digital contexts. The case analyses indicate that although participatory mechanisms are formally present and institutionally visible, they contain significant functional gaps. These gaps, in turn, generate experiences of exhaustion, distrust, ineffectiveness, and meaninglessness among citizens, users, and participants. The findings reveal a structural tension between the institutionalization of participation and the emergence of participant fatigue across a wide spectrum—from digital local governance practices and mandatory feedback systems in higher education institutions to social media–based agenda mobilizations and digital democracy initiatives in Europe.

4.1. Digital Participation in Municipalities: Between Visibility and Ineffectiveness

In recent years, many metropolitan municipalities in Turkey have developed various e-participation

mechanisms—such as online surveys, mobile applications, and digital consultation platforms (e.g., *Benim Fikrim*, *Birlikte Karar Verelim*, *İzmirSenin*, *Benim İstanbul'um*)—to increase citizen participation.

The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality has expanded digital participation through the *Benim İstanbul'um* and *İstanbul Senin* applications, enabling budget voting, urban planning surveys, and thematic participation processes (URL-1; Şahin, 2024). The Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, via the *Başkent Mobil* and *ABB E-Demokrasi Uygulaması* platforms, has broadened its digital democracy initiatives through neighborhood prioritization processes, online surveys, and open data practices (URL-2). Similarly, the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality has developed a robust e-participation infrastructure through the *Bizİzmir* platform, supporting participatory budgeting, project voting, and neighborhood assembly processes with digital tools (URL-3).

However, existing research indicates that despite the quantitative expansion of these initiatives, significant limitations persist regarding the qualitative impact of participation, its reflection in decision-making processes, and levels of inclusiveness (Elitok & Saylam, 2023; Gündoğdu, 2021; OECD, 2023). Digital divides, cultural barriers, low levels of digital literacy, and problems of representation remain among the primary factors that constrain the democratic potential of these platforms.

Although these initiatives aim to broaden participation at the formal level, several substantive and functional limitations are evident:

Representation Gap: The lack—or insufficiency—of demographic and socio-economic data regarding participant profiles makes it difficult to assess which societal groups actually engage in these platforms. This indicates that numerical increases in participation do not necessarily align with representational fairness or social inclusivity.

Lack of Feedback Mechanisms: There is limited institutional transparency concerning how citizens' inputs are evaluated and to what extent these inputs are reflected in decision-making. This lack of feedback fosters a perception among participants that they are "speaking into a void" or that their contributions "do not resonate."

Institutional Disconnect: The structural separation between digital participation platforms and the internal decision-making processes of municipalities suggests that these tools often function symbolically or procedurally rather than substantively. Participation, in this sense, becomes a display mechanism serving the reproduction of administrative legitimacy rather than a meaningful democratic process.

These findings indicate that digital participation practices in local governance tend to transform into administrative tools that foreground the formal visibility of participation rather than genuinely enhancing democratic legitimacy. As a result, many citizens develop the perception that their contributions have little or no impact on actual decision-making, thereby deepening tendencies toward civic fatigue and political withdrawal.

4.2. E-Participation Platforms in Europe: The Limits of Technicized Participation

Digital participation platforms such as Decidim, MeinBerlin, and Consul—implemented in advanced democracies including the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Spain—initially emerged as emblematic cases of democratic innovation and were internationally viewed as leading models for the digitalization of participation (Borge, Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2022; Barandiaran et al., 2024; Pruin, 2022; Royo, Pina & Garcia-Rayado, 2020). However, long-term observations reveal significant transformations in the functioning of these platforms: the democratic ideals that characterized their early stages have increasingly evolved into technical, routinized, and bureaucratic structures

(Michels, 2011; Smith, 2009; Sgueo, 2023). This evolution not only limits the platforms' capacity to strengthen participation but also generates new dynamics that contribute to civic fatigue:

Access Inequalities: Technical terminology, complex interface designs, and digitally demanding operational features render participation difficult—and often exclusionary—for groups with lower levels of digital literacy (Saglie & Vabo, 2009; Luna-Reyes, 2017). Thus, despite their promise of broad accessibility, these platforms in practice advantage certain social segments.

Superficial Participation: Participation on digital platforms is frequently reduced to low-engagement activities such as submitting proposals, completing surveys, or casting votes (Townley & Koop, 2024). Real-time deliberation, reciprocal discussion, and collective decision-making remain limited, transforming participation from a substantive democratic interaction into a procedural user action (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021).

Weakening Feedback Mechanisms: Transparency and accountability features that were robust during the initial years of platform implementation have diminished over time, leading to declining participant motivation (Gigler et al., 2014). The inability to trace decision-making processes transparently has weakened trust in the platforms' capacity to produce meaningful outcomes.

These findings suggest that the digitalization of e-participation has produced a largely formal transformation, accompanied by a significant qualitative decline in the depth, continuity, and impact of participation (Fung, 2015). As participation becomes increasingly centered on "data production," citizens shift from political subjects to passive data providers, thereby weakening the democratic character of participation. As Zuboff (2019) highlights, the logic of surveillance capitalism—anchored in the extraction of behavioral surplus—structurally transforms the meaning of political participation by decoupling individuals' actions from democratic subjectivity and converting them into raw material for data-driven governance. The visible decline in participation rates thus clearly exposes the digital dimension of civic fatigue.

4.3. Social Media Activism: The Performative Turn in Participation and Emotional Erosion

Social media platforms are widely regarded as digital arenas that broaden individuals' access to the public sphere and facilitate democratic mobilization. Yet recent developments reveal that emerging forms of participation on these platforms are accompanied by distinct limitations, transformations, and exhaustion dynamics (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Analyses indicate that the democratic potential of social media–based participation has weakened over time and that these environments generate multifaceted effects that contribute to civic fatigue:

Agenda Circulation and the Experience of Meaninglessness: On social media platforms, public agendas are consumed at an extremely rapid pace; issues that attract intense engagement one day may become virtually invisible the next. This high-speed circulation prevents in-depth deliberation on societal problems and produces interaction cycles that render participation increasingly superficial (Fuchs, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2019). Consequently, individuals often experience feelings of "meaninglessness" and "ineffectiveness" in the face of continuously shifting agendas.

Emotional Burden and Performance Pressure: The logic of visibility and constant responsiveness embedded in social media creates chronic feelings of inadequacy, emotional depletion, and exhaustion. The performative structure driven by likes, comments, and shares pushes users into a perpetual cycle of emotional productivity and attention-economy engagement (Han, 2015; Morozov, 2013). This dynamic increases the emotional labor required of individuals in the digital age and undermines the sustainability of their participation in public discussions.

The Spectacularization of Participation: Digital participation is increasingly reduced to performative and symbolic reactions; visible actions—such as liking, commenting, reposting, or hashtagging—come to stand in for participation itself. This shift narrows the meaning of political engagement and generates a culture of participation that is tethered to visibility rather than substance. As a result, rapid and superficial reactions characteristic of the "digital spectacle" begin to replace deeper forms of collective action.

As a common consequence of these dynamics, individuals either develop selective desensitization or withdraw entirely in response to the normative and emotional pressures to "care about every issue" (Morozov, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2021). Thus, while social media facilitates participation on one level, it simultaneously heightens the emotional costs of excessive, superficial, and inconsequential engagement, making it one of the principal producers of civic fatigue in the digital age.

4.4. Mandatory Participation Practices in Higher Education: Bureaucratic Routine and Loss of Motivation

Course evaluation surveys, self-assessment forms, quality assurance documents, and similar participation instruments in universities are designed as mechanisms through which both students and academic staff contribute to administrative processes. However, findings indicate that participation practices in higher education tend to emphasize their formal existence rather than their substantive value (Harvey, 2003; Rowley, 2003).

Perceived Meaninglessness Among Students: Students often view end-of-semester course evaluations as routine formalities that do not produce tangible results, which diminishes both their motivation to participate and the quality of the responses provided (Spooren, Brockx & Mortelmans, 2013; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). Participation thus shifts from a tool intended to support pedagogical improvement into a procedural obligation.

Lack of Feedback Loops: The failure to communicate survey results transparently back to students weakens the cyclical function of feedback and generates uncertainty about the capacity of participation to produce outcomes (Blair & Noel, 2014; Winstone et al., 2017). As a result, students' expectations regarding participation decline, rendering the activity increasingly meaningless.

Burnout Among Academic Staff: Academic staff are routinely required to produce strategic reports, performance indicators, accreditation documents, and various institutional forms, leading to declining academic autonomy, an increased bureaucratic workload, and reduced job satisfaction (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Gill, 2014). This environment produces administrative pressure and emotional exhaustion among academics (Winefield et al., 2003).

These findings reveal that participation mechanisms in higher education have gradually diverged from their initial objectives of quality enhancement and institutional improvement, instead evolving into technicalized and routinized administrative rituals. This growing burden of mandatory participation generates resistance, withdrawal, and disengagement among both students and academic personnel in response to what they perceive as "ineffective participation." Such reactions represent concrete institutional manifestations of civic fatigue.

Overall, across all cases examined, the findings demonstrate that although contemporary governance practices attempt to enhance the visibility of participation, its substantive effectiveness is diminishing. This contradiction produces political, emotional, and administrative forms of exhaustion among individuals and communities. While the proliferation of participatory calls is often framed as a sign of democratization, their symbolic and non-impactful nature fosters skepticism regarding the sincerity of institutional processes and ultimately weakens participation's capacity to generate democratic legitimacy. In this regard, civic fatigue should be recognized as one of the structural

and increasingly visible crisis symptoms of modern democracies.

4.5. Performance Feedback in the Public Sector: The Proceduralization and Meaninglessness of Participation

In recent years, performance management practices have become increasingly widespread across the public sector, aiming to institutionalize participatory governance by encouraging employees to engage actively in feedback processes (Bouckaert & Halligan, 2008). Employees are routinely expected to complete satisfaction surveys, submit improvement proposals, and comment on organizational operations. In theory, these mechanisms are intended to strengthen employees' sense of belonging and promote organizational learning (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). However, empirical findings indicate that these participation tools contain significant structural problems in practice and gradually lose their substantive content. Participation thus becomes less a mechanism for supporting a democratic organizational culture and more a workplace-specific form of civic fatigue, generating emotional exhaustion and managerial distancing among employees.

a) Form-Centered and Quantified Participation: Performance evaluation systems define participation primarily through the production of forms, surveys, and quantitative data sets. This orientation marginalizes the qualitative dimension of participation and creates a culture in which numerical indicators are absolutized and bureaucratically monitored outputs are prioritized (Power, 1997; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Over time, filling out forms becomes synonymous with participation itself, while institutional improvement, collective reasoning, and collaborative deliberation are weakened. Participation thus becomes an ostensibly functioning but substantively symbolic routine.

b) Participation Mechanisms as Instruments of Control: Although participatory mechanisms are theoretically designed to foster horizontal interaction and freedom of expression, they frequently operate in practice as tools of behavioral surveillance deployed by managers (Foucault, 2020; Deetz, 1992). Critical feedback offered by employees may be indirectly reflected in warnings or performance evaluations, revealing that these mechanisms function within hierarchical power relations. Participation thereby shifts from a right grounded in freedom of expression to a normative expectation that employees produce "appropriate," "reasonable," or "organizationally compliant" views (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

c) Resistance to Change and the Perception of Tokenistic Participation: Field observations demonstrate that participatory processes in many institutions lack the capacity to produce meaningful organizational change. As employees observe that their feedback does not lead to concrete policy adjustments, their trust in the process erodes, reinforcing perceptions of participatory inefficacy. This dynamic produces what the literature identifies as "tokenistic participation" (Arnstein, 1969; Yang & Pandey, 2011), resulting in increased silence and voluntary withdrawal among employees. Such silence can ultimately crystallize into "organizational silence," a structured form of institutional resistance characteristic of public sector environments.

d) Passive Resistance and Quiet Exhaustion: When participation becomes a formal obligation, employees experience emotional distancing, alienation, and burnout. Persistent expectations to complete surveys, produce reports, or voice opinions during meetings lead to these processes being perceived as "organizational drudgery." In response, employees develop passive resistance strategies such as completing surveys randomly, remaining silent in meetings, or avoiding feedback altogether (Scott, 1990). These patterns highlight not only individual motivational decline but also the symbolic nature of participation mechanisms.

The dysfunctionalization of performance-based feedback systems in the public sector represents a typical case of the instrumentalization and subsequent erosion of participatory meaning. These practices—maintained formally yet lacking substantive impact—erode employees' trust and commitment to the organization while producing an internalized sense of distance and reluctance toward governance processes (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). As a result, civic fatigue emerges not only in the sphere of citizenship but also within institutional labor processes, taking on a structural and multilayered character.

5. DISCUSSION

The concept of civic fatigue developed in this study offers a critical alternative to the normative assumption—prevalent in much of contemporary democratic theory—that participation is an unequivocal good. For decades, the democratic theory literature has regarded citizen participation as a fundamental component that enhances governance quality, strengthens legitimacy, and enables democratic deepening (Pateman, 1970; Fung, 2015). However, the findings of this research demonstrate that not only the absence of participation but also its excess, formalization, and instrumentalization can produce detrimental effects on democratic structures. At this point, it becomes evident that the traditional participatory optimism within the literature often fails to account for the distinction between the quantitative expansion and the qualitative substance of participation (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017).

The increasingly institutionalized "fetishization of participation" in modern democracies reflects a normative orientation that treats all forms of participation as inherently valuable and thus beyond critical scrutiny. Yet when participation becomes a technical ritual, it loses its capacity to generate democratic impact; superficial and non-consequential participatory experiences reinforce citizens' perception that they cannot meaningfully influence decision-making processes (McComas et al., 2010; Araos, 2023; Moini, 2011; de Vries, 2000; Turner, 2014). This dynamic leads to a condition far deeper than political disinterest—namely, civic fatigue—which should be understood not as an individual psychological reaction but as an institutional pathology that exposes the limits of contemporary governance practices.

Safeguarding the democratic meaning of participation requires focusing not merely on quantitative expansion but on qualitative elements such as transparency, accountability, institutional responsiveness, and transformative capacity (Smith, 2009). Otherwise, even well-intentioned participatory policies may erode democratic legitimacy in the long term. Indeed, Kern and Hooghe's (2017) empirical research on European countries shows that the excessive and repetitive use of direct democracy tools generates voter backlash and withdrawal. This finding empirically substantiates the emerging "participation paradox," reinforcing the explanatory value of civic fatigue.

The results of this study also align with broader critical approaches in contemporary political theory. Crouch's (2004) post-democracy thesis argues that while democratic institutions continue to exist formally, decision-making processes increasingly concentrate within narrow elite circles. In this context, declines are observed not only in electoral participation but also in general political engagement. This can be interpreted as a macro-level manifestation of civic fatigue. Similarly, as Mair (2023) emphasizes in his analysis of the "void," both citizen withdrawal from politics and the distancing of political elites from the public create a mutually reinforcing cycle of estrangement, further solidifying perceptions of participatory mechanisms as symbolic and artificial.

This study also suggests that certain behavioral patterns commonly explained through concepts such as apathy or political disengagement may, in fact, be better understood as forms of critical withdrawal. As participatory

processes lose their substantive content, individuals distance themselves from these practices either consciously or semi-consciously; this withdrawal often takes the form of passive resistance or a defensive political reflex (Eliasoph, 1998). In this regard, nonparticipation should, in some contexts, be interpreted as a response to the instrumentalization of participatory structures—a form of democratic fatigue.

In conclusion, the findings presented in this discussion section highlight the need to move beyond normative optimism regarding participation for the sustainability of democratic legitimacy. The mere presence of participation is not sufficient for democratization; what matters is how participation is structured, whom it serves, and what kinds of transformations it enables. In this sense, increasing participation may, under certain circumstances, signal democratic exhaustion rather than democratic deepening. Civic fatigue must therefore be treated as one of the invisible yet intensifying crises of contemporary democracies. Instead of issuing calls for more participation, priority should be given to institutional reforms that design more meaningful, inclusive, and transformative participatory practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study offers a conceptual contribution to contemporary debates on democratic governance by foregrounding an overlooked phenomenon in the literature—*civic fatigue*. While dominant theories of democracy generally treat citizen participation as a prerequisite for strengthening democratic legitimacy and diagnose its absence as a fundamental problem, the findings of this study suggest otherwise. The research argues that not only insufficient participation but also its excessive, formalized, instrumentalized, and non-impactful forms can generate political exhaustion and democratic erosion. Civic fatigue refers to a multidimensional condition that emerges when citizens are repeatedly subjected to participation calls that remain largely formal, inconsequential, and lacking transparency. This exhaustion manifests not only physically but also cognitively, emotionally, and politically.

The core findings highlight the need for a more cautious and critical approach centered on the *quality* of democratic participation. In this regard, the study proposes the following recommendations for revitalizing democratic governance and enhancing the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms:

1. Strengthening Transparency and Accountability in Participation Processes: It is crucial for the sustainability of democratic legitimacy that participants clearly understand the extent to which their input influences decision-making. Citizens, employees, and students should receive regular feedback demonstrating how their contributions have been evaluated and translated into outcomes. Without such feedback loops, participatory processes risk generating distrust and, over time, societal cynicism.

2. Designing Participation Mechanisms Capable of Producing Real Impact: Participatory tools must not function merely as data-gathering instruments; they should be designed to create tangible institutional or policy transformations. Whether in municipal digital platforms, university evaluation surveys, or public-sector feedback systems, participation should move beyond procedural formality to become an effective mechanism shaping decision-making processes.

3. Recognizing the Right *Not* to Participate as a Legitimate Political Choice: Persistent expectations of mandatory or continuous participation may undermine individual autonomy. The assumption that every citizen must be active in every issue contradicts democratic principles. Thus, flexible, interest-based, and voluntary models of participation should be encouraged. Instead of stigmatizing individuals who withdraw from participatory processes,

research should examine the underlying reasons behind such disengagement.

4. Empirically Investigating Civic Fatigue: While this study offers a conceptual framework, the empirical manifestations of civic fatigue remain insufficiently explored. Quantitative and qualitative research focusing on groups such as youth, public employees, academics, and digital citizens could deepen our understanding of exhaustion patterns, participation behaviors, and withdrawal dynamics. Empirical models examining indicators such as survey fatigue, psychological reactions to ineffective participation, and trust in governance institutions would meaningfully extend the analytical scope of this concept.

5. Developing Comparative Analyses Across Regime Types: Civic fatigue may emerge not only in liberal democracies but also in hybrid or authoritarian regimes—in different forms and intensities. As participation serves functions such as coercion, surveillance, or legitimacy production in various regime settings, the patterns of citizen withdrawal may differ accordingly. Comparative studies are therefore essential to understanding how civic fatigue manifests in diverse political contexts.

Taken together, the phenomenon of civic fatigue should be recognized as an invisible yet deepening crisis within modern democracies. This crisis is expressed through widespread dissatisfaction, representational gaps, and political exhaustion—often unspoken but socially palpable. The sustainability of democratic systems requires not merely the proliferation of participation channels but their meaningful, equitable, inclusive, and effective design. Otherwise, hollow participation rituals risk becoming instruments of symbolic violence that erode, rather than reinforce, public trust.

Ultimately, this study calls for a rethinking of the nature of democratic legitimacy and invites a substantive reimagining of participation itself. Strengthening democracy requires not only expanding opportunities for participation but also safeguarding and enhancing its meaning. Thus, preserving the substantive quality of participation is as essential to democracy as broadening its scope.

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