

## THE EVOLUTION OF APPROACHES TO ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF THEORIES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*A EVOLUÇÃO DAS ABORDAGENS DOS PROCESSOS  
ELEITORAIS NO CONTEXTO DAS TEORIAS DA  
PARTICIPAÇÃO POLÍTICA NO SÉCULO XXI*

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**Abstract:** *In the context of global transformations of democratic regimes and the growing crisis of political legitimacy, the study of political participation is increasingly relevant. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods, including literature review (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and analysis of IFES, World Bank, European Parliament, and EIGE reports, the research develops a model for assessing twenty-first-century political participation. Key evolutionary stages of participation theories are identified: institutional-behavioral (early 2000s), communicative-network (2010–2015), identity-existential (2015–2020), and post-institutional crisis-reflective (2020–present). Modern political mobilization is increasingly flexible, hybrid, emotional, and digitally mediated, requiring new theoretical frameworks. A critical classification of participation theories—liberal-elite, participatory, resource-mobilization, digital-network, radical-democratic, postcolonial, and resilient—reveals diverse citizen engagement patterns. The proposed Analytical Model covers institutional, socio-cultural, digital-communicative, and semantic-existential dimensions, highlighting a paradigm shift from formal to value-driven, identity-based, and digitally mediated participation, reshaping approaches to legitimacy, representativeness, and civic engagement.*

**Keywords:** *Political participation. Electoral processes. Voting behavior. Democratic governance. Electoral reforms.*

**Resumo:** No contexto das transformações globais dos regimes democráticos e da crescente crise de legitimidade política, o estudo da participação política torna-se cada vez mais relevante. Utilizando uma abordagem interdisciplinar que combina métodos quantitativos e qualitativos, incluindo revisão de literatura (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) e análise de relatórios do IFES, Banco Mundial, Parlamento Europeu e EIGE, a pesquisa desenvolve um modelo para avaliar a participação política no século XXI. São identificadas as principais etapas evolutivas das teorias da participação: institucional-comportamental (início dos anos 2000), comunicativo-rede (2010–2015), identitário-existencial (2015–2020) e pós-institucional reflexivo-crise (2020–presente). A mobilização política moderna apresenta-se cada vez mais flexível, híbrida, emocional e mediada digitalmente, exigindo novos referenciais teóricos. Uma classificação crítica das teorias da participação — liberal-elite, participativa, mobilização de recursos, digital-rede, radical-democrática, pós-colonial e resiliente — evidencia diferentes padrões de engajamento cidadão. O Modelo Analítico proposto abrange dimensões institucional, sociocultural, digital-comunicativa e semântico-existencial, destacando uma mudança de paradigma da participação formal para a participação orientada por valores, identidade e mediação digital, remodelando abordagens sobre legitimidade, representatividade e engajamento cívico.

**Palavras-chave:** Participação política. Processos eleitorais. Comportamento eleitoral. Governança democrática. Reformas eleitorais.

## Introduction

Political participation is seen as a key indicator of a functioning democracy, in terms of how active and involved citizens are in making decisions that affect them, in terms of how effective citizens are at influencing the direction of public policy, and in terms of how effectively they utilize the rights granted to them under a democracy. Over the past few decades, there have been significant shifts in both the theory and empirical evidence regarding the concept of political participation.

As a result of the rapid pace of change in society, technology, and culture within the political sphere, classical models of political participation are no longer as relevant today as they were when first introduced. Classic indicators of political activity such as voter turnout and formal participation in traditional political institutions, are being increasingly replaced with hybrid forms of political participation. These hybrid forms of political participation include activities that involve the use of digital platforms, mobilization for a short period of time, and individually-based emotional responses to issues which may or may not align with the classic models of political participation.

In addition to the paradigm shift in understanding what constitutes political participation, the research also found that in countries that experienced post-socialist transitions such as Hungary, the process of socializing individuals to participate in the political system is more complex than it is in Western European countries. This increased complexity is due to the historical, social, and political contexts in which socialization occurs in post-socialist countries. Therefore, the persuasive power of political party communities may serve as a means of compensating for the lack of opportunities for individuals to become politically socialized (Sebestyén, 2025).

Thus, the current theories that support the study of modern political participation need to take into consideration the institutional framework that governs the political system and the individual characteristics of participants, as well as the impact of historical challenges and digital technologies on the dynamics of socialization and the evolution of forms of mobilization, in order to create a new way of understanding the ways in which individuals engage in politics in the modern hybrid political landscape of Europe.

Recent electoral processes in the twenty-first century are taking place in a global environment that is rapidly becoming more unstable, where digital technologies are transforming the way people interact with each other and with government, and where traditional party and institutional structures are deteriorating. As a result of these trends, recent studies have indicated a paradoxical relationship between the increasing opportunity for people to participate in politics through the internet and the declining confidence that people have in the democratic institutions of their country (Loader et al., 2024; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020; Silver, et al., 2024). In addition to voting and joining political parties, the traditional model of political participation does not capture

all of the ways in which citizens now interact with politics, including using consumer choices as a form of political expression, participating in flash mobs, engaging in digital campaigns, and giving “likes” to express political opinions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a catalyst for rethinking political participation: restrictions on offline activity have contributed to the rapid spread of digital forms of engagement, as well as the activation of new groups, including young people and people who were not previously involved in the political process (Chung et al., 2025). In addition, the importance of social media algorithms that model political behavior has increased, creating an information bubble effect that complicates traditional forecasting of political participation (Chornenkyi, 2023; Claud, 2024).

Researchers also emphasize the need to rethink the concepts of «active citizen» and «democratic engagement» given that political participation is increasingly becoming situational, selective, and protest-based (Ojo, 2022). In this regard, the task of systematizing modern approaches to political participation, analyzing new forms of civic action, and revising existing theoretical models is becoming urgent.

## Literature Review

For over 20 years, many academics have tried to understand the aims and meanings of “public participation” with reference to the “participation revolution” of the 1990s which represented an important shift in citizen’s role within political processes. Public participation has become an increasing number of scholars see it as a key part of democratic governance that goes beyond influencing government decisions through instrumental means. Debates around theoretical frameworks of the role of public participation are occurring across the disciplines of philosophy, law, political science and sociology; and these are being used to develop a greater understanding of where public participation sits in relation to broader conceptualizations of the state, law and society. The use of an interdisciplinary approach will enable not only a greater understanding of what citizens expect from their participation in democracy, but also the way in which they envision participation within a democratic society. (Barton, 2002) From a perspective of the theory of civic voluntarism, public participation was seen as a rational choice, which included the availability of resources, motivation and opportunity. This type of model continued to be prevalent throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

It has been established that active participation of citizens in political life is the foundation of a stable democracy, one of the main factors of motivation for such participation, and forms a sense of political effectiveness among citizens - the ability to understand political processes and influence them through their own actions. This self-perception is closely related to the level of trust in the government and forms the basis of citizens’ political behavior (Prats & Meunier, 2021). Scientists note that a decline in civic engagement and growing concerns about the legitimacy of democratic institutions, monitoring citizens’ attitudes toward their role in politics have a significant impact on the formation of effective public policy. A better understanding of voters’ motivations and attitudes can help to develop strategies aimed at overcoming the democratic deficit and strengthening civic participation.

An attempt has been made to demonstrate the importance of the emergent democratic culture model, in which a growing number of voters develop citizen-initiated participation with full awareness of their rights (He, 2007). Various motivations are analyzed and characteristics of political consumers are presented, with a focus on the importance of understanding the involvement of more citizens for effective business marketing strategies (Ciftci, 2020). The author emphasizes the need to build trust between institutions and consumers in the context of boycotts, and also presents demographic aspects of political consumerism. It is noted that gender is not a determining factor in the motivation for such actions, although statistics show that women’s participation in boycotts is prevalent.

In modern conditions, traditional forms of participation are considered «conventional» mainly within representative systems with a focus on voting. The term «alternative participation» is often used as a synonym for «non-conventional» participation, although researchers rarely question the dichotomy between these forms. In Kaim (2021) study, «alternative participation» is

interpreted as a way to go beyond the traditional divide. Despite the possible ambiguity, the author deliberately does not introduce new terms in order not to complicate the already rich terminology. «Alternative» here refers to a third category of participation that does not fit into the «conventional/non-conventional» scheme. The author's concept differs from the approach of Halupka (2016), which contrasts collective and connecting action. Kaim (2021) model reflects connecting action not as the opposite of collective action, but as one of the points of smooth transition between individual and collective dimensions of civic engagement.

The scientific literature also explores the transformation of unified models of participation in the political electoral process into polycentric ones, which involve a significant number of actors, channels and contexts of participation (Radtke & Renn, 2024). In such conditions, there is a need to rethink the essence of the concepts of «participation,» «activity» and «influence,» which calls into question the effectiveness of classical metrics (in particular, the level of election turnout as the main indicator of political activity).

With the growth of social and digital mobility in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, researchers began to document the transformation of participation models: from stable and predictable to flexible, situational and individualized (Pelser & Gaffley, 2020). In today's digital transformation, when the development of cloud technologies, artificial intelligence, and machine learning fundamentally changes the conditions of political participation, the authors believe that electoral processes require large-scale calculations, analytical data research, and new forms of interaction with the electorate. At the same time, the limited level of digital competence of political leaders and governing structures makes it difficult to adapt to the challenges of the new digital reality, which calls into question the effectiveness of traditional models of participation and governance of democratic processes. Today, political participation has become increasingly manifested in non-institutional forms, such as protests, online campaigns, boycotts, and political consumption (Nonomura, 2016; Sorice, & Monti, 2022). At the same time, there is a need to update the analytical apparatus.

The impact of pre-election satisfaction on citizens' participation in elections has been studied. Kostelka et al. (2025) proved that in Central and Eastern Europe, voter satisfaction before the election process significantly affects turnout, and participation in elections, as in the West, contributes to an increase in citizen satisfaction, especially among those who supported the winners, which indicates the relationship between the emotional state of voters and political participation.

It has been found that there are age differences in the perception of political participation: young people focus on institutional forms, while older respondents, especially men, are more likely to recognize digital activism and informal engagement as legitimate forms of participation (Deželan, 2023).

Thus, the scientific discourse is shifting the research vector from the search for a universal model of participation to the formation of more flexible theoretical typologies that focus on the use of digital space, institutional crises, polarization of societies, new media, and ethical dilemmas. Accordingly, the conceptual and categorical apparatus of modern political science itself needs to be updated.

The aim of the study is to systematically analyze the evolution of theoretical approaches to political participation in the context of the transformational processes of the twenty-first century, to identify new patterns of political mobilization of citizens, to critically classify modern theories of participation that form the analytical basis for assessing changes in electoral processes.

## Materials and Methods

The study uses a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze political participation in the twenty-first century. Comparative, analytical, synthetic and critical approaches, as well as methods of thematic analysis of modern scientific literature and applied empirical research were used. The basis for empirical research was the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. The information basis for the analytical research was the reports of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), World Bank, European Parliament, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) for different periods: studying

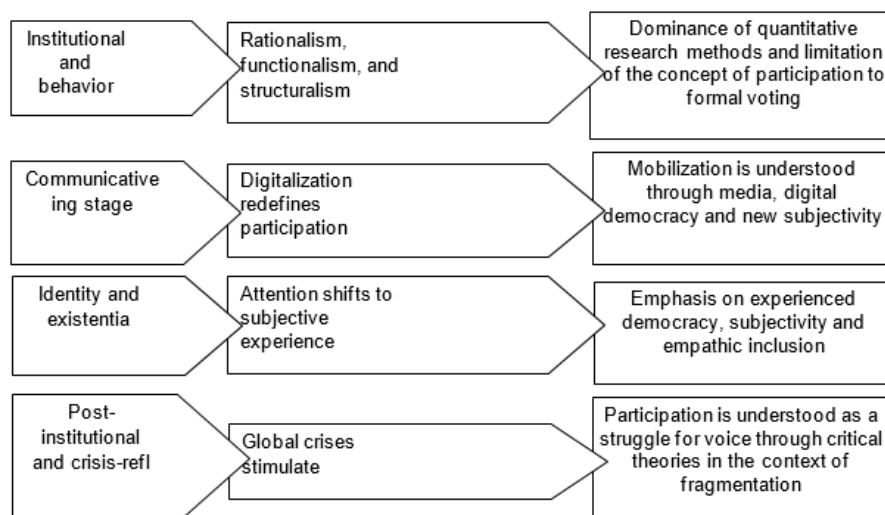
voter activity in different countries of the European zone (Luxembourg, Sweden and Ukraine) for 1948 - present, depending on the parliamentary elections; increasing the role of gender inclusion (world, countries with different income levels) for 2014-2024. Institutional aspects were assessed through structural-functional and comparative analysis (benchmarking) of electoral systems, while socio-cultural aspects were assessed through secondary processing of opinion polls, indicators of trust and civic competence. This approach made it possible to identify individual interpretations of participation, motivational factors, and new forms of civic engagement that are relevant in the context of political fragmentation, digitalization, and the crisis of legitimacy of traditional democratic institutions.

## Results

In the current context of civil society development, the political process covers all stages – from agenda-setting to policy evaluation – and requires a rethinking of democratic institutions in line with the growing demand for equality, dignity and inclusion regardless of legal status (Zilla, 2022).

Today, the development of political participation theories is characterized by dynamism, interdisciplinarity, and growing attention to the individual experience of the citizen as a subject of democratic interaction. Below is a summary of the main stages of this evolution, each of which reflects not only changes in the political environment, but also the transformation of the concept of participation itself (Figure 1).

**Figure 1-** Main stages of evolutionary development of political participation theories in the XXI century



**Source:** (Johansson, 2019; Tasente, 2020; D'Anieri, 2023; Ariel & Elishar, 2025)

Understanding political participation today involves an expansion of our methods and tools for understanding this phenomenon through both an examination of how institutions are changing and a better understanding of how individuals think about and feel about political engagement. Quantitative measures of political participation may help us understand why individuals vote as they do (for example, in terms of the growing fragmentation of political parties, the increasing digitalization of public space and the growing variety of ways citizens engage in civil society), however, they rarely provide insights into why individuals vote as they do (that is, why some individuals vote for one political party while others vote for another political party), or why some individuals participate in electoral politics while other do not. This is why researchers are increasingly turning to hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology that enables them to determine how individuals perceive their own political engagement, how they conceptualize their engagement in electoral

politics, and how these perceptions shape their actions (Folgueiras-Bertomeu et al., 2025; Ivo & Tuke, 2024).

The study of political participation as a major area of study in political science has evolved substantially since the early years of the twentieth century. Political participation was initially conceptualized as the participation of individuals in electoral politics, referendums and/or party politics as a means of ensuring the operation of democracy and legitimacy for the exercise of power within the state (Batalov & Semyboroda, 2024).

The above passage discusses the history of thinking about civic engagement, and how our thoughts around civic engagement have changed. The first ideas of civic engagement came from Dahl (1956), who thought that when lots of people participated in politics, but were organized into groups that could control them, there would be a negative side effect (a “byproduct”) of mass participation (i.e., what he called “pluralism”). Dahl and others in the pluralist school of thought believed that while civic engagement was a good thing, it needed to take place with the participation of a group working towards getting resources. Dahl saw civic engagement in the pluralist perspective as being primarily passive and consisting mostly of people casting ballots at election time (Jackson, 2021).

Another line of thinking that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the active role of citizens in the democratic process. Participatory democracy proponents such as Barber (1984) and Pateman (1970) argued that, in addition to promoting the proper functioning of democracy, active participation would help to develop the socialization and political responsibility of the citizenry. However, both of these lines of thinking have been severely criticized for their emphasis on normative ideals and their failure to recognize the social inequality and institutional barriers that restrict participation (Teorell, 2006; Obregón, 2023; Vissers, 2013; Zittel & Fuchs, 2007).

Thinking about civic engagement has taken another major turn with the advent of neo-institutionalism and rational choice theory (RCT). These two lines of thinking treat political participation as a result of a person’s cost-benefit analysis of whether to participate. While RCT provided an opportunity to study political behavior formally, its focus on a person’s self-interest excludes many of the motivational factors associated with civic engagement including emotional factors, identity-based factors, symbolic factors, and collective factors (Engelen, 2008; Hinings & Tolbert, 2007).

A number of classical models of political participation have limitations that have become particularly evident in the dynamic conditions of the twenty-first century. First, the classical models of political participation are characterized by an institutional reduction of participation. The focus is on formally defined mechanisms for participation such as voting or membership in a political party, while informal mechanisms, such as online activism, protest mobilization, networking and self-organization, and digital democracy practices (Elfahdi, 2022), are largely neglected.

Secondly, the digital transformation of political communication and mobilization, facilitated by the proliferation of social networks, Big Data and algorithmic mechanisms for influencing information, remain outside the purview of most traditional theoretical approaches that have developed prior to the emergence of digital media (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

Finally, classical models have generally overlooked cultural and emotional aspects of political engagement — such as emotion, political identity, subcultural coding, and protest culture — which appear to be increasingly important for motivating people to engage in political activity. Additionally, they conceptualize political participation as being based on a linear and functionalist model of political behavior that relies upon the assumption of behavioral stability and predictability within the existing political structure; this limits their potential for explaining political engagement during periods of crisis, hybrid systems, and revolutionary change (Jacobi & Freyberg-Inan, 2015). Thus, there appears to be an urgent need to re-examine the theoretical base of political participation and develop new analytical models that can capture the variety, fragmentation and multi-dimensionality of political participation in the twenty-first century (such as hybrid and/or revolutionary formats of political interactions (Jacobi & Freyberg-Inan, 2015).

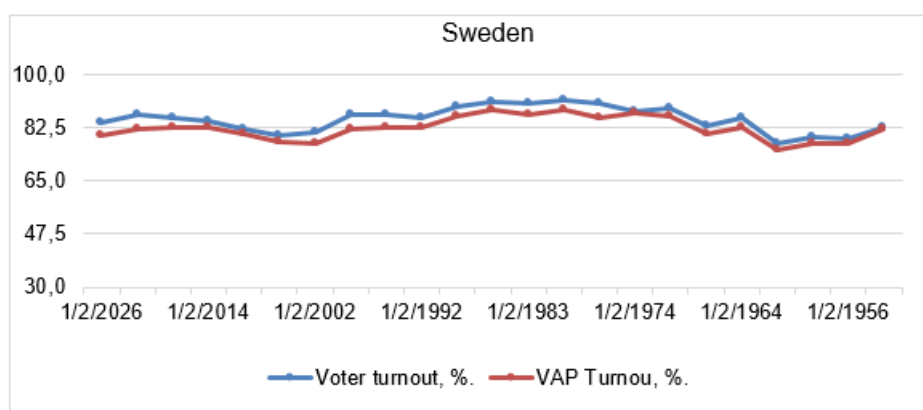
In light of the contemporary transformative developments in electoral systems, the concept of political participation is undergoing a rethinking under the pressure of institutional, socio-cultural, and technological changes of the 21st century. Classical perspectives on citizens’

electoral participation (such as the rational choice theory, the resource model of participation or the theory of political mobilization) are no longer capable of explaining the extent of changes observed in countries with different political traditions and degrees of democratic development. In this regard, special attention is given to empirical participation indicators (including voter turnout among registered voters (Voter Turnout) and participation rates among the total adult population (VAP Turnout), which make it possible to assess the overall success of democratic engagement comprehensively.

Comparing the cases of countries like Luxembourg, Sweden and Ukraine makes it possible to study not only the institutional mechanisms supporting electoral participation, but also the deeper structural factors underlying the latter, including the level of political trust, the political culture, the degree of inclusiveness of the electoral legislation, and the mobilization potential of young people.

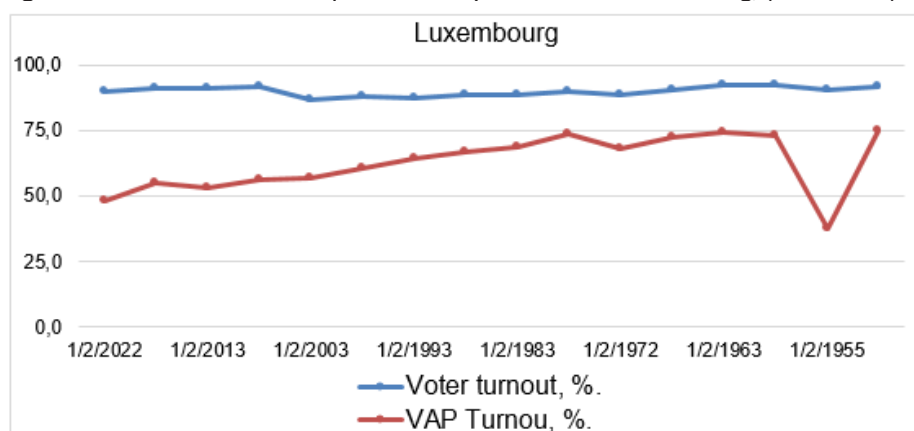
Sweden is a model of consistent democratic participation (see Figure 2), Luxembourg (see Figure 3) displays high voter turnout due to the administrative regulation of the electoral process, although at the same time, the participation of the entire adult population has decreased. A case of the gradual decrease in electoral activity in a politically unstable country with external threats and weak institutional integration of young people can be demonstrated by Ukraine (see Figure 4).

**Figure 2 - Voter turnout in Swedish parliamentary elections (1948-2020)**



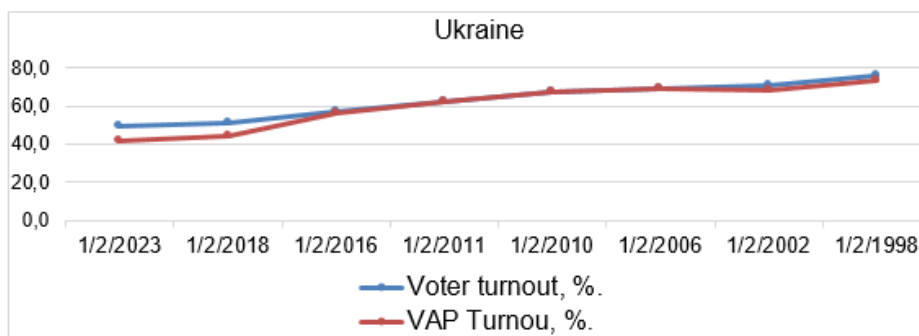
Source: (IDEA, 2025)

**Figure 3 - Voter turnout in the parliamentary elections in Luxembourg, (1948-2018)**



Source: IDEA, 2025

Figure 4 - Voter participation in parliamentary elections in Ukraine, (1994-2019)



Source: IDEA, 2025

This comparative approach allows us to focus on the multi-vector trend in voter participation and identify the main challenges faced by democratic systems in the context of globalization, technological change, and the growing demand for new forms of political subjectivity. Further analysis of Voter Turnout and VAP Turnout in these countries reveals the nature of these changes through the prism of current approaches to political participation, in particular, *second-generation participation theories*, which emphasize the multidimensionality and hybridity of civic engagement in post-industrial societies (Table 1).

Table 1 - Comparative analysis of electoral activity in different European countries

Indicators/factors	Luxembourg	Sweden	Ukraine
Voter Turnout (% of registered voters)	88-92% (stable)	80-92%	75,81% (1994) → 49,2% (2019)
VAP Turnout (% of the adult population)	Decreasing: 74,95% (1948) → 48,16% (2018)	75-89%	73,42% (1994) → 41,29% (2019)
Trends	High formal turnout; lower VAP turnout	Consistently high rates with minor fluctuations	Steady decline in participation after 1994
Key actors of participation	Compulsory voting, participatory culture, 47% disenfranchised, immigration and demographic changes	Automatic registration, trust, education, student elections, youth, simple voting	Apathy, distrust, migration, war, low education, weak party competition, alternative youth participation

Source: IFES, 2023; Ünver, 2020; Guziana, 2021; SCB, 2025; UN Ukraine, 2019; Yakovlev et al., 2025; IDEA, 2025

The results of research into electoral behavior in Luxembourg, Sweden and Ukraine show a clear gap in voter turnout in each country's elections. The number of voters participating in the election process varies depending on the interrelationship of institutional factors (such as compulsory voting, the availability of information about how to vote etc.) and socio-political conditions (such as the level of confidence in political institutions etc.). A key indicator for understanding the relationship of voter participation and socio-political conditions in Luxembourg is the number of registered voters casting ballots (with rates of voter turnout ranging from 88-92%). Although the rate of registered voter turnout is quite high in Luxembourg, the percentage of eligible adult citizens (the GAP) casting ballots in national elections was significantly less, approximately 48.16%, primarily because of the significant number of foreign nationals (approximately 47% of the total population) who do not have the right to vote. Migration to Luxembourg since 1990 has resulted in a long-term decline in the level of citizen engagement in national elections (Eurostat, 2024). Sweden, on the other hand, has consistently demonstrated very high levels of both voter turnout (range 80-92%) and the percentage

of the eligible adult population (the GAP) voting (range 75-89%). These high levels of participation are evidence of the institutionally based nature of democratic engagement in Sweden (SCB, 2025). Factors contributing to this include automatic voter registration, easily accessible voting procedures, high levels of confidence in political institutions, as well as high levels of youth engagement in politics (including through school-based elections and youth-based political organizations) (Bäck & Teorell, 2018; Dahl & Solevid, 2016). Conversely, Ukraine demonstrates a decreasing trend in both voter turnout (from 75.81% in 1994 to 49.2% in 2019) and GAP (from 73.42% to 41.29%) (IDEA, 2025; CISR, 2019). Factors leading to this decline include, but are not limited to, declining political interest, eroding public confidence in political institutions, low levels of competitive political parties, conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and large-scale migration (IFES, 2019a; EP, 2020; IFES, 2019b; IFES Ukraine, 2024). Additionally, the relatively low political mobilization of young adults can be attributed to the lack of civic education and their tendency towards informal forms of political engagement (IFES Ukraine, 2024; UN Ukraine, 2019). As such, the mobilization of electors seems to be determined by an interconnectedness of institutional openness, inclusive nature of the system, degree of political trust, and educational elements of the system.

In the context of 21st century theories of political participation, the study (Yakovlev et al., 2025) reveals a shift in political activity of internally displaced persons in Ukraine from traditional party involvement to forms of horizontal civic mobilization such as volunteering, local initiatives and participation in the public sector, which indicates the emergence of an alternative model of political participation outside of oligarchically oriented party structures. These dynamics emphasize the role of IDPs as agents of change and potential catalysts for democratization through strengthening civil society and rethinking the sources of legitimate political action.

The different types of meanings that citizens attach to voting (instrumental, expressive, ethical, loyal) significantly influence their forms of political participation: loyalty and pragmatism promote both electoral and non-electoral activity, while the lack of meaningfulness of voting often leads to complete passivity (Brunetti et al., 2025).

Modern models of political participation are characterized by a significant transformation of models: from classical, institutionally oriented to flexible, digital, and interpretive ones. Traditional models are based on formal participation through elections, party activism and representative mechanisms, while newer models embrace network activism, emotional and motivational forms of inclusion and non-institutional practices of interaction. This expansion of forms of participation requires a rethinking of its analytical categories and the integration of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of political mobilization of citizens (Table 2).

**Table 2** - Comparison of traditional and modern models of citizen participation in the political process

Criterion of comparison	Classical approaches (twentieth century)	Modern approaches (XXI century)
Form of participation	Formalized (elections, party membership, petitions)	Networked, digital, non-institutional (online activism, flash mobs, crowd politics, digital volunteering)
Level of citizen engagement	Limited, periodic, mostly during election cycles	Dynamic, ongoing, increasing role of micro-participation through digital platforms
Activity	Citizen as a rational individual or object of socialization	Citizen as a multifunctional agent, platform user, content maker, participant of network ecosystems

Channels of influence	Institutional structures (parties, parliament, government agencies)	Social media platforms, decentralized digital movements, crowdsourcing initiatives
Motivation for participation	Rational choice, civic duty, ideological identification	Emotional involvement, instant mobilization, group identity, information fidelity
Concept of democracy	Representative, institutionalized democracy	Deliberative, participatory, platform or «interaction democracy»
Object of analysis	Official data on turnout, voting behavior, party structures	Big Data, digital footprints, participation algorithms, online communication
Methodology	Surveys, statistics, institutional analysis	Quantitative-qualitative mixed-methods approach, digital ethnography, machine learning
Analytical limitations	Ignoring the digital revolution, static models, limited range of forms of participation	Dependence on unstable digital trends, risk of manipulation, difficulties in validating big data

**Source:** Becker, 2019; Arapovic, 2021; Giugni & Grasso, 2022; Aceron, 2024

This table illustrates the transition from the institutionalized model of participation that characterized the twentieth century to the networked, digital, and emotionally charged participation that dominates the twenty-first century. Modern approaches not only expand the palette of forms of participation, but also pose new challenges to researchers, from ethical to methodological. The results of research (Birch, 2010), based on data from 31 countries, show that the perception of voter integrity is indeed positively related to the propensity to vote.

Today, social media is a powerful tool for enhancing youth political participation, but the effectiveness of this influence varies significantly by gender, which points to the need to develop inclusive and sociocultural-sensitive strategies for political mobilization in the digital age (Alodat et al., 2023).

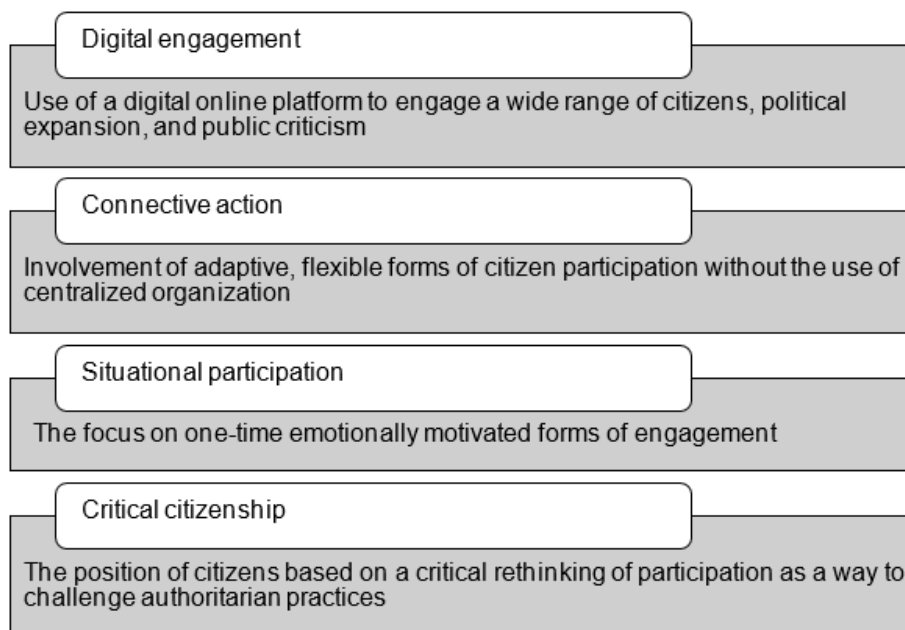
Some new ways of organizing electoral processes emerged as an alternative approach to traditional electoral processes in the early 2010s (see Figure 5).

Voters are increasingly likely to vote digitally and participate in emotional, flexible formats of democracy rather than through traditional voting or by being members of parties (Timreck & Emmons, 2024; Bárta et al., 2021; Aichholzer & Rose, 2019).

As we now live in a “digitally” oriented world where many citizens have very little to no control of how they want their data to be used and there are increasing numbers of decisions made using algorithms, and these decisions will often affect social justice, particularly with those who are most vulnerable in our communities. Past regulatory measures for citizen engagement in government show that only well-regulated participation that includes all stakeholders and has adequate resources can make a difference in shaping the digital world (D’Anieri, 2023; Gilman, 2022).

The use of these technologies is particularly relevant to getting young people involved in the political electoral process. However, it is not always possible for political institutions to keep up with the evolving technology and thus provide the necessary mechanism for citizen engagement.

Figure 5 - Innovative approaches to the organization of electoral processes



**Source:** Brunner & Lynch, 2017; Bennett & Segerberg, 2016; Ologunibi, J.O. & Taiwo, O.T. 2025; Uhlener, 2015; Theocharis & Jan, 2017; Twist et al., 2023

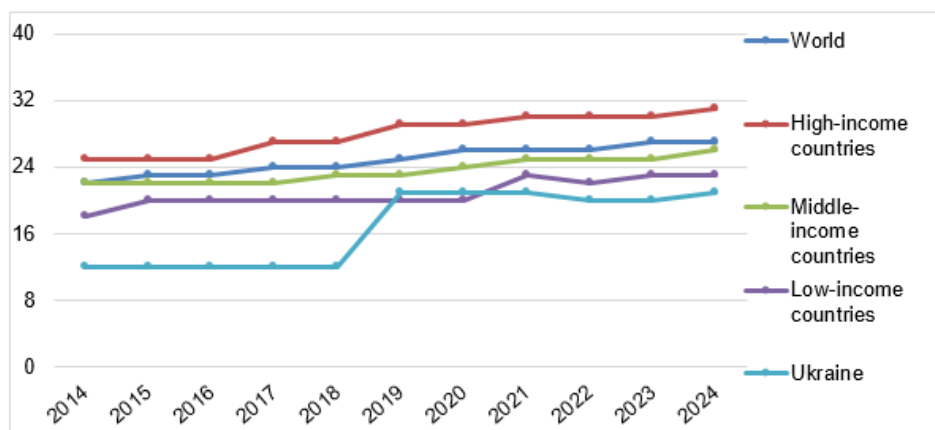
Loader et al. (2014) critically examine the role of social media in shaping new practices of political socialization, participation and civic engagement of young people, offering a holistic, theoretically grounded vision of young citizens as active, diverse and capable of making independent political choices, and not just as a homogeneous «Internet generation».

Recent studies show that there is a large variation in how people across different age groups understand what political participation means. Older generations generally see modern practices (such as signing electronic petitions, taking part in online forums, posting about their views and issues on social media) as being as valid as “traditional” forms of activism (participating in protests, etc.). Younger generations seem to be turning away from newer forms of activism and back toward more traditional ways of becoming involved in politics. These patterns are examples of the complex interactions of personal experience, social and political socialization and digital transformation as they affect changing perceptions of the subjective meaning of political involvement (Déri & Szabó, 2025).

Patrimonial forms of authority are giving way to rational and legitimate forms of authority, even authoritarian governments are trying to keep pace with societal expectations and the structure of the political elite has been shaped by the type of government, party system and professionalism of politics, and now there is increasing influence from other factors like gender and ethnicity (Rothman, 2001).

For example, Singapore’s Government is attempting to promote social mobility via the use of digital services and ethical governance that combines elements of Authoritarian rule with the extremely high levels of public trust toward the government (World Bank, 2025) as well as in Germany, the structures of the political elites are increasingly defined by the degree of professionalism within their political activities (e.g., more than 80% of Members of the German Bundestag hold a degree in Law, Economics, Political Science etc.) rather than the type of government or party system (Mediendienst Integration, 2025) which indicates a transition from representative to expert-based models of democracy (Figure 6). The inclusion of gender and ethnicity into the development of political systems, reflects a global trend of re-examining traditional models of legitimizing power and democratic representation.

Figure 6 - Share of seats held by women in national parliaments, %



Source: World Bank (2025a, b)

The data show a gradual increase in the share of women in parliaments globally – from 22% in 2014 to 27% in 2024. The most stable progress has been observed in high-income countries, where this figure increased from 25% to 31%, indicating effective institutional mechanisms to support gender equality. In middle-income countries, there is also a positive trend – an increase from 22% to 26%. At the same time, in low-income countries, the pace of change is less pronounced (from 18% to 23%), indicating that there are deeper structural barriers to women’s participation in politics.

Particular attention should be paid to Ukraine, where the level of women’s representation remained unchanged at 12% until 2018, but in 2019 there was a sharp jump to 21%, after which the figure stabilized at 20-21%. Such dynamics can be interpreted as a result of the introduction of gender quotas, increased civic engagement of women, and changes in public perceptions of women’s role in the political process. In general, the data presented here emphasize that in the XXI century, women’s political participation is becoming an increasingly prominent element of the democratization of electoral processes, reflecting deeper transformations in the formation of political elites

The European Parliament reached a record level of women’s representation in 2019 - 39.5% (2024 - 33%), and the governments of Canada (2024) and New Zealand (2022 – 50%; 2023 – 40%) are introducing quotas for ethnic minorities, including Maori and indigenous peoples (EP, 2020; EIGE, 2025). These shifts demonstrate a gradual rethinking of political legitimacy as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes not only formal institutions but also the value expectations of society.

Thus, in the context of profound transformations in political culture, digitalization of society, and the growing importance of individual understanding of participation, traditional approaches no longer allow us to fully comprehend the complexity and depth of political engagement.

## Discussion

In the context of transformations in political culture and the communication revolution of the twenty-first century, the scientific understanding of citizens’ participation in political processes requires a critical rethinking of theoretical approaches.

From the standpoint of understanding political participation in the context of hybrid transformations of our time, it is advisable to turn to a multi-level classification of participation theories, which not only reflects the evolution of scientific approaches but also illustrates the paradigmatic multiplicity in the vision of the nature of civic engagement (Figure 7).

**Figure 7 - Classification of modern theories of citizen participation in political processes**

Liberal elite	considers participation as minimal voting within the limits of delegating powers to professional political elites
Participatory	emphasizes the importance of continuous and meaningful involvement of citizens in decision-making processes at all levels
Resource mobilization	interprets participation as a function of the resources available to citizens — economic, educational, social, and informational
Digital network	explains participation through online tools and informal networks, where activism takes place in decentralized forms
Radical democratic	understands participation as a process of political conflict, resistance to dominant discourses, and struggle for recognition
Postcolonial and emancipatory	focuses on restoring the voice of marginalized groups through decolonization of participation and social justice
Resilience theory of participation	interprets mobilization as an adaptive response to crises that strengthens social cohesion in an unstable environment

**Source:** (Vissers & Stolle, 2013; Sevignani, 2022; Helbing et al., 2023; North et al., 2024; He, 2007)

Our understanding of this problem is that we do not just have to create an academic distinction between the two; we also need to recognize how they depend upon one another in actual practice. In times of increasing political turmoil, when society has fragmented digitally, and when security challenges continue to grow, only through the use of participatory, resource-based and resilient mechanisms can we create informal yet effective forms of participation that meet the needs of local communities. A system-wide perspective allows us to redefine participation in terms of will expressed and provides us with a mechanism to sustain democracy in a dynamic hybrid environment.

Traditionally, in the 21st Century, the most commonly used instruments for quantifying political participation - quantitative measures of voting turnout and party affiliation - are becoming increasingly inaccurate in reflecting the depth of citizens' involvement in the democratic process. As a result of the transformative nature of political space, the digital revolution, and the rising significance of the individual's experience and sense of orientation, there is a demand for developing a more sensitive and inclusive framework for evaluating the quality of political participation (Ruess et al, 2021).

The proposed updated analytical model is based on a multi-disciplinary approach and combines four complementary dimensions - institutional, socio-cultural, digital-communicative and semantic-existential (Table 2) - in order to better understand the complexities of political participation.

**Table 2 - Analytical Model for Assessing Political Participation in the Electoral Process in the 21st Century**

Dimension	Main factors	Key indicators
Institutional	Legal framework, electoral system, compulsory participation	Type of electoral system, accessibility of voting, legitimacy of institutions

Socio-cultural	Trust, political education, social capital	Trust surveys, level of awareness, civic engagement
Digital and communication	Use of social media, e-participation, information environment	Number of political posts, participation in e-petitions, digital literacy
Semantic and existential	Experiences, motivations, value engagement	Interviews, focus groups, narrative analysis, subjective impact assessments

**Source:** compiled by the authors

The institutional parameter reflects the formal rules and procedures that determine citizens' access to participation: electoral systems, availability of electronic voting, legitimacy of institutions, and mandatory participation. It serves as a background for the realization of participation, but does not explain its depth.

An important aspect is to take into account the cultural preferences of citizens, the level of political trust, civic competence, generational differences, and social capital. This encourages consideration of motivational sources of participation and social normalization of the electoral process.

Digital tools and media platforms play an important role in mobilizing voters, creating access to information and positive public sentiment. Phenomena such as «digital participation», gamification of politics, social media activity, and e-voting need to be analyzed.

The main element of the proposed model is the citizen's understanding of his or her participation not as a duty or reaction, but as an internal choice - an action that carries meaning, correlates with identity, values, and a sense of belonging to the democratic process. This level allows us to capture deeper layers of participation that are not always captured by traditional statistics, but are crucial for the formation of sustainable democracies.

Thus, this model presents an opportunity for a deeper and more compassionate understanding of political participation as a multilevel process (with formal political behaviors linked to the internal meanings of these behaviors) and not only provides a methodologically productive way to explore how citizens understand their role within the political system but also an ethical way to acknowledge the unique nature of political experiences among humans. As such it will provide a means to assess the effectiveness of democratic institutions as not merely as having some "participatory" component, but rather assessing the extent to which citizens are subjectively engaged as co-creators of the democratic process.

At the same time, the model requires further improvement in the context of hybridization of political regimes, where the classical understanding of participation does not always correlate with the real influence of citizens on the decision-making process. In particular, in countries with formally democratic institutions but de facto authoritarian practices, participation indicators may be formally high but not reflect real political influence. In addition, the model is not yet sufficiently sensitive to asymmetries in political access caused by social inequality, age or ethnic differences, and the digital divide.

The dynamic aspect of the model is particularly important when dealing with crises that can dramatically change both the possibilities for, and forms of, participatory engagement (i.e., pandemics like COVID-19, wars, mass migrations, etc.). This type of situation requires reassessing participatory indicators as much as a quantifiable measure of the degree of civic society's resilience, as well as the ability of democracies to adapt to new realities.

Therefore, the model suggested here represents a big step toward creating new tools for evaluating political participation; however, in order to better utilize this tool, the authors would need to have a greater understanding of how the model fits into changing contexts, assess the legitimacy of formal participatory mechanisms, and develop additional qualitative measures by which to evaluate the actual political impact of participatory actions.

## Conclusion

Political participation is changing dramatically in the 21st century. From the traditional forms of participation, such as voting and institutional involvement; to a more flexible and emotive form of political activity, we see an array of different ways to participate. Digitalization, socio-cultural change and the past (history) all contribute to the development of the classical model of voting behavior and the more modern, individualized, emotive and situationally based models of activist behavior. For example, this is clearly evident in post-socialist countries, where due to the double-sidedness of their history of socialization, it is unclear how citizens should be involved in politics. Therefore, these citizens often rely upon the party community as a means of experiencing a sense of belonging and compensating for their lack of direction. By comparing the rates of political participation in Sweden, Luxembourg and Ukraine, we can observe how political participation is shifting from being primarily concerned with how people vote and instead whether or not they believe in their government, feel supported by society and utilize new technologies of political mobilization. Thus, the current study of political participation requires a multi-disciplinary research methodology that examines the impact of digital technology, emotion and new communication forms of political action.

In today's political space, traditional indicators of participation are less and less reflective of the real depth of citizen engagement, which necessitates updating methodological approaches to its assessment. The proposed model, which is interdisciplinary, multidimensional, and sensitive to the changes of the era, combines institutional, socio-cultural, digital-communication, and semantic-existential components, which allows recording not only formal manifestations of participation but also its value, motivational, and emotional basis. This approach not only expands the analytical horizons of research, but also contributes to an ethically sound interpretation of participation as a deeply personal act of co-creating democracy. At the same time, the effectiveness of this model depends on its ability to adapt to the challenges of hybrid regimes, crisis contexts, and social inequalities, which requires further improvement of qualitative criteria for assessing citizens' political influence.

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