

8 • 1 • 2026



**The “Proceduralization” of Democratic  
Innovations (DIs): an Analytical Framework  
for the Institutional Turn**

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Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:  
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

## Saggi

THE “PROCEDURALIZATION” OF DEMOCRATIC  
INNOVATIONS (DIs): AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR  
THE INSTITUTIONAL TURNLA “PROCEDURALIZZAZIONE” DELLE INNOVAZIONI DEMOCRATICHE  
(ID): UN QUADRO ANALITICO PER LA SVOLTA ISTITUZIONALE*Martina Trettel\**

## ABSTRACT

[Eng.] This article examines the institutionalization of democratic innovations within systems of public authority. While existing literature has largely focused on participatory processes as isolated events, the paper argues that democratic innovations are increasingly embedded within legal and administrative structures. Drawing on the concept of “proceduralization”, it develops an analytical framework structured around three dimensions: procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring. The framework is illustrated through two institutional examples: the participatory governance framework in Tuscany and the deliberative system of the German-speaking Community of Belgium. The article contributes to debates on democratic innovations by reframing participation as an institutional procedure and by highlighting the role of legal and administrative structures in shaping its effects.

**Keywords:** Democratic Innovations – Institutionalization – Participatory democracy – Proceduralization.

[It.] Questo articolo esamina l’istituzionalizzazione delle innovazioni democratiche all’interno delle istituzioni pubbliche. Mentre la letteratura esistente si è concentrata prevalentemente sui processi partecipativi come eventi isolati, il contributo sostiene che le innovazioni democratiche siano sempre più integrate nelle strutture ordinamentali e amministrative. Facendo riferimento al concetto di “proceduralizzazione”, l’articolo sviluppa un quadro analitico articolato su tre dimensioni: integrazione procedurale, stabilizzazione temporale e strutturazione dell’accountability. Il quadro viene illustrato attraverso due esempi empirici: il modello di governance partecipativa della regione Toscana e il sistema deliberativo della Comunità germanofona del Belgio. L’articolo contribuisce al dibattito sulle innovazioni democratiche riformulando la partecipazione come procedura istituzionale e mettendo in evidenza il ruolo delle strutture giuridiche e amministrative nel determinarne gli effetti.

**Parole chiave:** Innovazioni democratiche – Istituzionalizzazione – Democrazia partecipativa – Proceduralizzazione.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Democratic Innovations (DIs)<sup>1</sup> such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and deliberative mini publics have proliferated across democratic systems. Originally conceived as experimental responses to declining trust in representative institutions and the perceived limits of majoritarian democracy, these mechanisms have increasingly become embedded within public governance structures. In many contexts, participation is no longer exceptional or *ad hoc* but is progressively integrated into the routine functioning of public authorities<sup>2</sup>.

Despite this shift, much of the existing literature continues to analyze DIs as isolated democratic events. In fact, research has primarily focused on the design, deliberative quality, inclusiveness, and legitimacy of individual participatory processes<sup>3</sup>. While this body of work has generated fundamental insights, its predominantly event-centered perspective risks overlooking a significant empirical shift: the increasing institutionalization of DIs within systems of public authority.

This paper aims to address this gap by moving the analytical focus from isolated deliberative processes to the conditions under which DIs become stable components of democratic governance. Therefore, the central question guiding the analysis is how DIs become institutionalized within public decision-making systems.

The argument advanced here is that DIs become institutionalized through processes of proceduralization, whereby participatory and deliberative processes are progressively embedded within the legal and administrative procedures of public authorities. Drawing on the notion of proceduralization developed by Julia Black<sup>4</sup>, the paper conceptualizes institutionalization not merely as repetition or formal rec-

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper Democratic Innovations are intended as “Processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”. See S. Elstub, O. Escobar, *Defining and typologising democratic innovations*, in S. Elstub, O. Escobar (Eds.), *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019, 11–31.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Johnson, J. Gastil, *Variations of institutional design for empowered deliberation*, in *Journal of Public Deliberation*, No. 1, 2015 and S. Ravazzi, *The Legal Institutionalisation of Public Deliberation and the Embeddedness in the Democratic System: The Italian Case*, in *Politics and Governance*, 2026, 1–19.

<sup>3</sup> See in general on this: A. Bächtiger et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> J. Black, *Proceduralizing Regulation: Part I*, in *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, No. 4, 2000, 597–614; the work of Black relies

ognition, but as the integration of DIs into the procedural architecture through which public decisions are produced and implemented. Understood this way, DIs do not only complement existing institutions; they become part of the rules and processes that structure public authority.

To analyze this shift, the paper adopts a concept-driven and institutionally oriented approach (Section 2), moving beyond the empirical description of participatory events toward a theoretical understanding of their systemic integration. It develops an original analytical framework structured around three interconnected dimensions: procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring. Together, these dimensions provide the conceptual tools to analyze how DIs are embedded within legal frameworks, routinized through administrative practice, and how they exert a tangible impact on decision-making processes (Section 3).

The way in which this framework works is subsequently demonstrated through two distinct empirical illustrations: the participatory governance model established by regional legislation in Tuscany (Italy), and the permanent deliberative system of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Section 4). These cases were selected as representing divergent yet complementary pathways through which DIs are institutionalized into formal decision-making processes.

By focusing on the institutional and procedural conditions of participation, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on DIs and participatory governance in three ways. First, it reframes DIs as institutional components of public decision-making rather than isolated participatory experiments. Second, it introduces the concept of proceduralization as a key mechanism of institutionalization. Third, it offers an analytical framework that enables the systematic study of how DIs become embedded within systems of public authority.

## 2. THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH: PROCEDURALIZATION AND THE INSTITUTIONAL TURN

To investigate the transition of DIs from ephemeral experiments to permanent features of public governance, this article adopts an expansive, concept-driven, and institutionally oriented analytical approach. This choice is fundamentally dictated by the limitations of the “event-centered” paradigm that has largely dominated the study of participatory and deliberative processes in the last decades. Scholarly attention has been focused mainly on the internal micro-dynamics of individual participatory instances, measuring inclusiveness, the quality of discourse, and the psychological shifts in participants, often treating these processes as isolated experiments, detached from the legal and administrative structure of public authorities<sup>5</sup>. By contrast, the approach advanced here prioritizes what has been termed the “institutional turn”<sup>6</sup>, treating DIs not as a peripheral activity, but as an integrated feature of governance frameworks and institutional routines<sup>7</sup>.

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on J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> On the shift from forum-based analyses to a systemic perspective on deliberative democracy see J. Parkinson, J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 1–5.

<sup>6</sup> See G. Smith, *Survey Article Democratic Innovations: Bringing Theory and Practice into Dialogue*, in *Philosophy Compass*, No. 12, 2011, 895–901.

<sup>7</sup> On this approach see A. Di Gregorio, *I modelli di democrazia deliberativa in Italia tra esperienze autoctone e ispirazioni comparate*, in A. Di Gregorio (Ed.), *Partecipazione, inclusione e Stato di diritto: per una visione solidale e partecipativa della democrazia costituzionale*, Giuffrè, 2026, 81 ss.

This analysis follows Giovanni Sartori's classical emphasis on conceptual clarity to ensure we are using precise vocabulary<sup>8</sup>. In the study of DIs, there is a common risk of conceptual stretching, where the term institutionalization is applied so broadly that it begins to cover almost any participatory activity, regardless of its actual legal weight. To avoid this lack of clarity, this paper focuses on the specific mechanics of *proceduralization*: the concrete ways in which participation is translated into formal rules. By using what Sartori calls a ladder of abstraction<sup>9</sup>, we can move beyond general descriptions and develop practical analytical tools. These tools allow us to distinguish between a participatory event and a deep structural change, making it possible to compare different legal and administrative systems without losing sight of their unique institutional characteristics.

This conceptual work is further anchored in an institutionally oriented perspective that draws significantly from the tradition of historical institutionalism and the study of institutional change. As Thelen has argued, institutions are far more than neutral functional arrangements or temporary responses to external shocks; they are the enduring products of historical processes and power dynamics that create path dependencies, structuring political life by defining the boundaries of what is possible and legitimate within a given system<sup>10</sup>. Applying this logic to the study of DIs implies that their institutionalization is not simply a matter of temporal frequency or administrative repetition, but a fundamental process of embedding participation into the very rules of the game that govern the institutions' *modus operandi*<sup>11</sup>.

This institutional focus is further enriched by recognizing that the institutionalization of DIs does not occur in a *vacuum*, but within what recent literature describes as a broader democratic infrastructure<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, institutionalization is not merely a legal act but a systemic effort to rebuild trust and enable new pathways of civic engagement by connecting scattered knowledge and fragmented practices into a coherent framework. This perspective suggests that proceduralization acts as a tool for resilience, allowing DIs to move from being episodic experiments to becoming durable tools that can withstand political shifts and crises. By viewing participation as a governance infrastructure, we move away from seeing it as a series of one-off meetings and begin to see it as a permanent public utility. In practical terms, this means public authorities (at different levels of government) treat citizen engagement as a structural component of governance. An infrastructure approach ensures that information flows systematically across different levels of government from the local neighborhood to the national parliament, creating a more coherent system in which the different levels complement each other rather than operate in isolation<sup>13</sup>. Without this infrastructure, public participation remains thin and disorganized; with it, participation becomes thick, meaning it is embedded in the daily work of government(s) and accessible to all citizens as a standard right of citizenship<sup>14</sup>.

The transition from theoretical experimentation to institutional reality is rarely a linear trajectory.

<sup>8</sup> See G. Sartori, *Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*, in *American Political Science Review*, No. 4, 1970, 1033–1053.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, 1040.

<sup>10</sup> See K. Thelen, *Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics*, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 384.

<sup>11</sup> About institutional embedding of DIs see: S. Bussu et al., *Introduction: Embedding participatory governance*, in *Critical Policy Studies*, No. 2, 2022, 133–145.

<sup>12</sup> As noted in Nets4Dem, *Scoping Report: Governing with Citizens. Systematic Mapping of Democratic Innovations and Civil Society Engagement*, 2024, available at <https://nets4dem.eu/>, the shift toward a democratic infrastructure implies that participation must function as a stable utility within the state machinery, a view that provides empirical weight to the theoretical process of proceduralization.

<sup>13</sup> On participatory democracy in multi-level contexts see U. Allegretti, *Participatory Democracy in Multi-Level States*, in C. Fraenkel-Haeblerle et al. (Eds.), *Citizen Participation in Multi-Level Democracies*, 2015, 127–154.

<sup>14</sup> See T. Nabatchi, M. Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Jossey-Bass, 2015.

As Geissel observes, for DIs to achieve their transformative potential, they must move beyond mere symbolic gestures and exert a tangible impact on political outcomes and the distribution of power. This necessitates what can be viewed as a fundamental shift in the relationship between public institutions and citizens, from symbolic inclusion toward forms of participation that are more closely connected to decision-making processes<sup>15</sup>. Institutionalization, therefore, is best understood as a dual process. On the one hand, it involves a formal dimension, whereby innovations are legally anchored and regulated within the constitutional and administrative order. On the other hand, it entails a substantive dimension, whereby these practices are effectively embedded in the routines of public administrations. This distinction is crucial for the present analysis: it shows that the institutionalization of DIs is not merely a matter of adopting new legislation, but of transforming how citizen engagement is integrated into administrative routines<sup>16</sup>.

Because DIs are often undervalued by policymakers due to the friction between their transformative objectives and the rigid environments of traditional administration, their study requires an interdisciplinary bridge between political science and legal theory<sup>17</sup>. By focusing on the procedural architecture of participation, we can examine how legal norms, specifically within administrative and constitutional law, act as the essential scaffolding that supports these new democratic forms. This approach draws heavily on the concept of proceduralization that describes the mechanism by which public authorities internalize DIs, evolving them from discretionary political choices into predictable administrative sequences<sup>18</sup>.

In this sense, participation no longer functions as an external input that simply feeds into decision-making from the outside. Instead, it is incorporated into the internal functioning of public institutions. The relevance of participation then depends less on its existence as a separate process and more on how it is connected to decision-making procedures and how its outputs are treated within them<sup>19</sup>.

This shift also affects the basis on which decisions are justified. Decisions are no longer evaluated solely in terms of representative authorization, but also in relation to whether DIs have been carried out and whether their results have been taken into account. In this way, DIs become part of the procedural conditions under which decisions are considered legitimate<sup>20</sup>.

At the same time, this development is inherently ambivalent. Embedding DIs within formal procedures can enhance their stability, visibility, and potential impact. However, it may also lead to forms of routinization in which participation is carried out as a procedural requirement without substantially influencing outcomes. In such cases, participatory processes risk becoming formal steps that accompany decision-making without shaping it in a meaningful way<sup>21</sup>.

The analytical framework developed in this paper is designed to capture this variation. It treats institutionalization not as a fixed outcome, but as a process that can take different forms depending on

<sup>15</sup> See B. Geissel, *How to improve Democracy? Assessing the Reforms*, in B. Geissel, K. Newton (Eds.), *Evaluating Democratic Innovations. Curing the Democratic Malaise?*, 2012, 163–183.

<sup>16</sup> S. Bussu et al., *Introduction: Embedding participatory governance*, cit., 135.

<sup>17</sup> S. Ravazzi, *When a government attempts to institutionalize and regulate deliberative democracy: The how and why from a process-tracing perspective*, in *Critical Policy Studies*, No. 1, 2016, 79–100.

<sup>18</sup> J. Black, *Proceduralizing Regulation: Part I*, cit. and J. Black, *Proceduralizing Regulation: Part II*, in *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, No. 1, 2001, 33–58.

<sup>19</sup> C. Opitz, *Democratic Innovations Administered: The Organisational Embeddedness of Public Administrators’ Attitudes Towards Participatory Policy Making*, in *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, No. 1, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> On the “dual-track of legitimacy”, see Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, cit. 356–373.

<sup>21</sup> On risks of formalization and bureaucratic absorption see D. Courant, *Institutionalizing deliberative mini-publics? Issues of legitimacy and power for randomly selected assemblies in political systems*, in *Critical Policy Studies*, No. 2, 2022, 162–180.

how participation is integrated into decision-making, how it is sustained over time, and how it generates obligations for public authorities. To analyse these dynamics, the following sections examine three dimensions: procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring.

By focusing on these dimensions, the framework makes it possible to assess how DIs operate within different institutional settings and to distinguish between forms of participation that remain peripheral and those that become consequential for decision-making.

### 3. AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DIS

Building on the analytical approach outlined in the previous section, this article develops a framework for examining how DIs become embedded within systems of public authority. The framework is designed to capture the process of proceduralization, understood as the incorporation of DIs into the formal structures and routines through which public decisions are produced.

Rather than offering a typology of DIs, the framework operates as a heuristic device for analyzing institutionalization across different contexts. Its purpose is not to classify participatory and deliberative practices, but to identify the key dimensions through which they become institutionally consequential. In doing so, it provides a structured way to move beyond event-centered approaches and to examine DIs as components of governance arrangements.

The framework is structured around three analytical dimensions: procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring. These three dimensions are analytically distinct but interrelated, and together they capture the conditions under which participation is embedded, reproduced, and made effective within institutional settings.

#### 3.1 *Procedural Integration*

The first dimension concerns the procedural integration of DIs within public decision-making processes. It addresses the extent to which participatory practices are connected to the formal sequences through which decisions are prepared, adopted, and implemented.

In event-centered analyses, DIs are often treated as external inputs that precede or accompany decision-making. By contrast, the notion of procedural integration focuses on whether participation is embedded within the institutionalized procedures of governance. This includes examining whether participatory mechanisms are linked to specific stages of policymaking, incorporated into legislative or administrative processes, or formally required as part of decision-making sequences<sup>22</sup>.

Procedural integration can vary significantly in degree. In weaker forms of procedural integration, DIs may remain loosely connected to decision-making, with no formal obligation for public authorities to engage with their outputs. In stronger forms of procedural integration, DIs may be embedded within legally or administratively defined procedures, with clearly specified roles, timelines, and points of interaction with decision-making bodies.

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<sup>22</sup> See G. Smith, *The institutionalization of deliberative democracy: democratic innovations and the deliberative system*, in *Journal of Zhejiang University*, No. 2, 2018, 5–18 and S. Ravazzi, *The Legal Institutionalisation of Public Deliberation and the Embeddedness in the Democratic System: The Italian Case*, cit.

From the perspective of proceduralization, this dimension captures the extent to which participation is transformed from a discretionary practice into a procedurally structured component of governance. It thus provides a first indicator of the institutional relevance of DIs.

### 3.2 Temporal Stabilization

The second dimension concerns the temporal stabilization of DIs. It examines whether participatory processes remain episodic and contingent, or whether they become recurrent and durable features of governance.

A defining feature of institutionalization is the shift from one-off or experimental initiatives to repeated and routinized practices. Temporal stabilization captures this transformation by focusing on the extent to which DIs are embedded within the ongoing temporal structures of public institutions. This includes whether participatory processes are organized on a recurring basis, whether their activation is linked to defined procedural triggers, and whether their continuation depends on discretionary political choices or on more stable institutional arrangements<sup>23</sup>.

Where participatory practices remain sporadic or discretionary, they are typically activated in response to specific political initiatives and may not be repeated once concluded. In such cases, continuity is uncertain and participation retains an experimental character.

Where participatory practices are institutionally stabilized, by contrast, they are embedded within recurring cycles of governance and are supported by stable organizational and procedural arrangements. Their repetition is not contingent on political will alone but is anchored in institutional design.

Temporal stabilization is closely linked to processes of learning and adaptation. Recurrent DIs allow for the accumulation of experience, the refinement of procedures, and the development of administrative capacities. At the same time, repetition can generate path dependencies, as early design choices shape subsequent developments and constrain future institutional trajectories.

By analyzing temporal stabilization, the framework allows us to analyze how continuity and repetition transform DIs from episodic interventions into durable components of governance.

### 3.3 Accountability Structuring

The third dimension concerns the accountability structuring associated with DIs. It focuses on how participatory outputs are treated within systems of public authority and on the extent to which they generate obligations for decision-makers<sup>24</sup>.

In many DIs, the relationship between citizens’ input and institutional decision-making remains weakly specified. Recommendations may be produced without clear expectations regarding whether, how, or by whom they should be considered. In such cases, participation risks remaining decoupled from decision-making, with limited capacity to shape outcomes.

From an institutional perspective, however, the significance of DIs depends on whether participatory outputs are connected to structured mechanisms of response, justification, or follow-up. Account-

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<sup>23</sup> See OECD, *Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy*: OECD Public Governance Policy Papers, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> See T. Pogrebinschi, M. Ryan, *Moving beyond input legitimacy: When do democratic innovations affect policy making?*, in *European Journal of Political Research*, No. 1, 2018, 135–152.

ability structuring captures this dimension by examining the extent to which participation gives rise to procedural expectations or duties on the part of public authorities.

Where accountability remains weakly structured, public authorities may acknowledge participatory outputs without being required to engage with them in a systematic way. There may be no obligation to provide feedback, to justify decisions considering participatory recommendations, or to demonstrate how input has been considered. The influence of citizens' participation therefore depends largely on political will.

Where accountability is institutionally structured, by contrast, participatory processes are linked to defined obligations within decision-making procedures. These may include requirements to provide a reasoned public response, to formally consider recommendations within a decision-making stage, or to justify departures from them. In such cases, participation becomes part of a procedural chain of justification, increasing its visibility and potential impact.

This dimension also relates to the broader question of authority. Even in the absence of legally binding powers, institutionalized DIs may exercise influence by shaping agendas, framing policy alternatives, and generating expectations of responsiveness. Accountability structuring therefore provides an analytical lens for assessing how DIs acquire practical authority within governance systems.

By focusing on the presence and form of response obligations, this dimension highlights how participation moves from being merely expressive to becoming institutionally consequential within decision-making processes.

### *3.4 Operationalization of the Analytical Framework*

The analytical framework outlined above is synthesized in Table 1 (below), which operationalizes the three dimensions – procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring – into a set of guiding questions and observable indicators. The table is designed as a heuristic tool that facilitates the systematic application of the framework across different institutional contexts. Rather than providing a rigid classification, it identifies the key elements through which the proceduralizing of DIs can be empirically examined, namely how participation is embedded within decision-making procedures, how it is sustained over time, and how it generates obligations for public authorities. By structuring the analysis along these dimensions, the table enables a comparative reading of institutional configurations, making it possible to distinguish between forms of participation that remain peripheral and those that become procedurally consequential within systems of public authority<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> As noted by Ryan, the study of DIs has been characterized by a predominance of single-case analyses, highlighting the need for more systematic and comparative approaches; the analytical framework developed in this paper responds to this gap by providing a structured basis for cross-case comparison. See M. Ryan, *Comparative approaches to the study of democratic innovation*, in S. Elstub, O. Escobar (Eds.), *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, 2019, 73–92.

| Dimension                            | Key Question                                                  | Mechanism                                                                   | Institutional Effect                                            |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Procedural integration</b>     | How are DIs linked to decision-making and through which acts? | Legal and administrative procedures connect DIs to policy or legislation.   | DIs are built into legal and institutional processes.           |
| <b>2. Temporal stabilization</b>     | Are DIs occasional or recurring, and how?                     | Permanent bodies, legal frameworks, or funding enable DIs to recur.         | Participation becomes a stable practice, not just experimental. |
| <b>3. Accountability structuring</b> | How must authorities respond to participatory outputs?        | Formal/informal duties to consider, justify, or respond to recommendations. | DIs create expectations for justification and responsiveness.   |

Table 1: Authors’ own elaboration

Taken together, the analytical framework and its operationalization provide a structured lens for examining how DIs are embedded within systems of public authority. By focusing on the three dimensions, the framework makes it possible to move beyond descriptive accounts of participation and to assess its institutional consequences in a systematic and comparative manner. The following section applies this framework to two empirical illustrations, showing how different configurations of these dimensions give rise to distinct pathways of proceduralization and varying degrees of institutional embedding.

#### 4. EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS: TWO PATHWAYS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

This section applies the analytical framework developed above to two institutional examples: the participatory governance framework in the Italian region of Tuscany and the deliberative system centered on the Permanent Citizens’ Council of the German-speaking Community of Belgium. The aim is to illustrate how different configurations of procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring give rise to distinct pathways of proceduralization, while also demonstrating the analytical usefulness of the framework. The analysis does not aim to provide a comparison in a strict methodological sense, but rather to use these cases as illustrative configurations of institutionalization. To ensure consistency, both cases are examined systematically along the three dimensions identified above.

##### 4.1. The Participatory Governance Framework of the Italian Region of Tuscany

The participatory governance framework of the Italian region of Tuscany is primarily structured through Regional Laws No. 69/2007 and No. 46/2013, which establish a system of public support for participatory processes promoted by local authorities and civil society actors<sup>26</sup>. The framework is centered on a Regional Authority for Participation that evaluates, funds, and oversees participatory

<sup>26</sup> See M. Ciancaglini, *La democrazia partecipativa in Toscana: Note a margine della legge regionale n. 69/2007*, in *Osservatorio sulle Fonti on-line*, 2008, 1–28; V. De Santis, *La nuova legge della Regione Toscana in materia di dibattito pubblico regionale e promozione della partecipazione*, in *Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana dei Costituzionalisti*, 2013.

projects, with the aim of fostering citizen involvement in public decision-making across policy areas. Participation is thus organized through a combination of legal provisions, administrative procedures, and project-based initiatives<sup>27</sup>.

Coming now to the application of the analytical framework, starting from the perspective of *procedural integration*, DIs within the Tuscan framework are embedded primarily through administrative processes, as the law targets local authorities and civil society actors. Participation is not incorporated into legislative decision-making procedures but is connected to policy development and administrative action through a set of legally structured arrangements that regulate the design, funding, and implementation of participatory initiatives<sup>28</sup>.

Where participation operates within this framework, it is activated by public authorities, and in some cases by civil society actors, through procedures that are legally defined but remain external to the core decision-making sequence. Participatory processes therefore contribute to policy development as structured inputs, but they do not form part of the formal steps through which decisions are taken. This configuration reflects a form of procedural integration in which participation is institutionally organized but only indirectly linked to the procedural pathways through which decisions are formally adopted.

In terms of *temporal stabilization*, the Tuscan model establishes participation as a recurrent and institutionally supported practice, rather than as a series of isolated experiments. The presence of a permanent institutional infrastructure, most notably the Authority for participation, ensures continuity and provides ongoing organizational support.

At the same time, participatory processes remain partly initiative-based. Their activation depends on proposals submitted by public authorities or civil society actors, as well as on the allocation of resources within the framework<sup>29</sup>. As a result, participation is not fully embedded within automatic or mandatory procedural cycles but instead combines elements of institutional continuity with forms of discretionary activation. As a result, DIs acquire continuity and visibility, but their influence on decision-making outcomes remains conditional on the discretionary choices of those empowered to activate them.

With regard to *accountability structuring*, the Tuscan framework relies primarily on soft mechanisms of response and justification. While participatory processes are designed to inform decision-making, public authorities are not subject to formalized obligations to adopt the outputs produced.

Where participatory outputs are transmitted to decision-makers, expectations of follow-up remain largely informal. There are limited procedural requirements to provide reasoned responses or to justify decisions in light of participatory recommendations<sup>30</sup>. As a result, the relationship between participation and decision-making remains loosely coupled, and the influence of DIs depends significantly on political and administrative uptake.

This configuration reflects a form of accountability structuring in which participation generates limited procedural obligations, thereby constraining its capacity to become fully consequential within decision-making processes.

<sup>27</sup> See R. Lewansky, *Institutionalizing deliberative democracy: the “Tuscany laboratory”*, in *Journal of Public Deliberation*, No. 1, 2013, 1–18.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Picchi, *La partecipazione all’attività legislativa e amministrativa della Regione Toscana*, in *Federalismi.it*, No. 7, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> M. Brunazzo, *Istituzionalizzare la partecipazione? Le leggi sulla partecipazione in Italia*, in *Le Istituzioni del Federalismo*, No. 3, 2017, 837–864.

<sup>30</sup> R. Lewansky, *Institutionalizing deliberative democracy*, cit., 1 ss.

#### 4.2. The Permanent Citizens’ Council of the German-speaking Community of Belgium

The deliberative system centered on the Permanent Citizens’ Council of the German-speaking Community of Belgium represents a distinctive model of DI embedded within a parliamentary framework. Established by decree in 2019, the system institutionalizes citizen participation through a permanent deliberative body composed of randomly selected citizens, which is tasked with initiating and organizing citizens’ assemblies.

The functioning of the system is structured in successive stages. The citizens’ council identifies and selects policy topics, on the basis of which citizens’ assemblies are convened. These assemblies, also composed through sortition, deliberate on the selected issues over a defined period and produce a set of recommendations. The outcomes are then formally transmitted to the parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium, which is required to examine them and provide a reasoned response within the parliamentary process<sup>31</sup>.

From the perspective of *procedural integration*, the Belgian model exhibits a high degree of embedding within parliamentary procedures. Participatory processes are not positioned alongside decision-making but are incorporated into a procedurally defined sequence within the legislative process. The institutional design creates a structured linkage between citizen deliberation and parliamentary activity. Topics identified by the citizens’ council feed into deliberative processes whose outputs are formally transmitted to the parliament and taken up within its internal procedures. In this way, participation is connected to specific stages of legislative activity, particularly in relation to agenda-setting and parliamentary deliberation. Hence, DIs become part of the procedural pathway through which parliamentary institutions organize discussion and prepare decisions, rather than remaining external to them. Although participatory processes do not replace representative authority, they are institutionally positioned within the procedural structure of parliament. This configuration reflects a form of procedural integration in which DIs are directly incorporated into parliamentary procedures, giving them a structured and visible role within the functioning of representative institutions.

With respect to *temporal stabilization*, the Belgian model exhibits a highly institutionalized form of continuity. The citizens’ council is established as a permanent body, and the organization of citizens’ assemblies follows a recurring and procedurally defined pattern linked to parliamentary activity. Participation is therefore not contingent on ad hoc political decisions, but is embedded within a stable institutional design that ensures continuity over time. The activation of deliberative processes does not depend on external initiative or discretionary funding but is anchored in an ongoing institutional cycle that connects agenda-setting, deliberation, and parliamentary follow-up. This configuration reflects a form of temporal stabilization in which DIs are fully integrated into the regular functioning of parliamentary institutions, ensuring both continuity and predictability in their operation.

About *accountability structuring*, the Belgian model is characterized by formalized mechanisms of response and justification within parliamentary procedures. Participatory outputs are not merely transmitted to decision-makers but are incorporated into a process that requires the parliament of the Ger-

<sup>31</sup> C. Niessen, M. Reuchamps, *Institutionalising Citizen Deliberation in Parliament: The Permanent Citizens’ Dialogue in the German-speaking Community of Belgium*, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, No. 1, 2022, 135–153, Pautsch, *Institutionalisierte Deliberation*, in *Verfassungsblog*, 15 May 2025 and N. Junius, *What about elite manipulation in deliberative mini-publics?: Examining threats and resilience in the Ostbelgien model*, in *European Political Science Review*, No. 3, 2025, 420–421.

man-speaking Community of Belgium to engage with them. Where recommendations produced by citizens' assemblies are submitted, elected representatives are required to examine them and provide a reasoned public response. This ensures that participatory outputs are not only received but also formally addressed within parliamentary activity. Although the recommendations are not legally binding, these obligations establish a systematic link between participation and decision-making. In this configuration, participation gives rise to institutionalized duties of consideration and justification, strengthening its relevance within legislative activity and enhancing its capacity to shape decision-making outcomes.

### 4.3. *Comparative Synthesis*

The analysis of the Tuscan and Belgian cases highlights how different configurations of procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring give rise to distinct pathways of proceduralization. While both cases reflect a broader process of institutionalization of DIs, they do so through different institutional arrangements.

The Tuscan framework illustrates a model of administrative proceduralization, in which participation is embedded within administrative governance through legally structured but flexible arrangements. Participatory processes are connected to policymaking yet remain external to the core procedural sequences through which decisions are formally adopted. Although supported by a stable institutional infrastructure, participation retains a partly initiative-based character and generates only limited obligations for public authorities. As a result, DIs acquire continuity and visibility, but their capacity to shape decision-making outcomes remains contingent on the discretionary choices of the actors entitled to activate these processes.

By contrast, the Belgian *Bürgerdialog* represents a model of parliamentary proceduralization, characterized by a stronger and more direct integration of participation within legislative procedures. Participatory processes are embedded in a defined institutional sequence that links agenda-setting, deliberation, and parliamentary follow-up. This configuration ensures both temporal continuity and structured accountability, as elected representatives are required to engage with participatory outputs through formalized mechanisms of response. In this case, DIs are not only stabilized but also positioned within the procedural architecture of representative institutions.

The comparison between these two configurations underscores the analytical value of distinguishing between multiple dimensions of institutionalization, in line with earlier calls for systematic comparative frameworks<sup>32</sup>. In particular, it highlights the central role of procedural integration and accountability structuring in determining whether participation remains consultative or becomes institutionally consequential. While temporal stabilization contributes to the durability of participatory practices, it is the combination of integration within decision-making procedures and the existence of structured obligations of response that ultimately shapes their capacity to influence governance.

More broadly, the analysis shows that the institutionalization of DIs is not a uniform process but depends on how participation is articulated with existing institutional structures. Administrative and parliamentary settings provide different opportunities and constraints for proceduralization, resulting in

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<sup>32</sup> On the need for analytical frameworks that distinguish between different institutional features of democratic innovations in order to enable systematic comparison. See G. Smith, *Studying democratic innovations: An analytical framework*, in G. Smith (Ed.), *Democratic Innovations*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 12–31.

distinct forms of embedding, authority, and effectiveness.

The comparative insights are summarized in the following table, which presents the two illustrations along the three analytical dimensions. The table highlights the contrasting configurations of proceduralization and provides a concise overview of how DIs are embedded, stabilized, and rendered consequential within the two institutional settings.

| Dimension and Key Question                                                                                       | Empirical Illustrations                    | Mechanism                                                                                                                          | Institutional Effect                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Procedural Integration</b><br>How are DIs linked to decision-making procedures and through which acts?     | <b>Tuscany (Italy)</b>                     | Regional Laws No. 69/2007 and 46/2013 establish procedures for initiating DIs and create the Regional Authority for Participation. | DIs are integrated into administrative and policy-making procedures, linking deliberation to regional decisions.      |
|                                                                                                                  | <b>German-speaking Community (Belgium)</b> | Decree of 25 February 2019 institutionalizes a permanent Citizens’ Council and randomly selected Citizens’ Assemblies.             | DIs become structurally integrated within the parliamentary structure, allowing citizens to propose topics.           |
| <b>2. Temporal Stabilization</b><br>Do DIs occur only occasionally or are they recurring practices?              | <b>Tuscany (Italy)</b>                     | Legal framework, funding, and the Regional Authority allow for the repeated organization of DIs across policy areas.               | DIs become recurring governance practices, though activation still depends on political or administrative initiative. |
|                                                                                                                  | <b>German-speaking Community (Belgium)</b> | Creation of a permanent Citizens’ Council responsible for organizing recurring assemblies through standardized procedures.         | DIs become a stable, permanent institutional component of the parliamentary system.                                   |
| <b>3. Accountability Structuring</b><br>How are public authorities required to respond to participatory outputs? | <b>Tuscany (Italy)</b>                     | Regional procedures require authorities to consider results and communicate how they are taken into account.                       | DIs generate expectations of responsiveness and justification without imposing binding obligations.                   |
|                                                                                                                  | <b>German-speaking Community (Belgium)</b> | The parliamentary decree requires the Parliament to publicly respond to recommendations formulated by the assemblies.              | DIs create formalized accountability mechanisms linking deliberation and parliamentary justification.                 |

Table 2: Authors’ own elaboration

## 5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS: PROCEDURALIZING DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

This paper argued that the institutionalization of DIs is best understood not simply as their diffusion or repetition, but as a process of proceduralization through which participation becomes embedded within the institutional and procedural structures of public authority. To develop this argument, the paper adopted a concept-driven and institutionally oriented approach and proposed an analytical framework structured around three dimensions – procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring.

The application of this framework to two institutional examples, the participatory governance framework in Tuscany in Italy and the deliberative system centered on the Permanent Citizens' Council of the German-speaking Community of Belgium, has illustrated how different configurations of these dimensions give rise to distinct pathways of proceduralization. The Tuscan case reflects a form of administrative proceduralization, characterized by structured but only partially consequential participation, while the Belgian model exemplifies parliamentary proceduralization, in which participation is more directly embedded within legislative procedures and supported by stronger mechanisms of accountability. These findings demonstrate that the institutionalization of DIs is not a uniform process but depends on how participation is articulated with existing institutional structures.

A first implication concerns how DIs are evaluated. Much of the existing literature has focused on deliberative quality, inclusiveness, and legitimacy, often treating participatory processes as isolated events. While these dimensions remain important, they are insufficient to capture the role of DIs once they become institutionalized. As participatory mechanisms are integrated into governance systems, their significance increasingly depends on their institutional effects – that is, on how they shape decision-making processes, influence policy outcomes, and interact with existing forms of public authority. The analytical focus therefore shifts from assessing participation in isolation to examining how it operates within broader institutional configurations<sup>33</sup>.

A second implication concerns the conceptualization of participation itself. As DIs become institutionalized, participation is no longer adequately understood as an external input into decision-making, but rather as part of the procedural architecture through which public authority is exercised. This challenges the tendency to conceptualize participation and representation as distinct or competing models of democracy, as recent scholarship has instead emphasized their integration within hybrid democratic systems and deliberative institutional arrangements<sup>34</sup>. Participatory and representative mechanisms increasingly operate through shared institutional procedures, with DIs contributing to the internal re-configuration of representative institutions. This perspective also highlights the central role of legal and administrative structures in shaping democratic practices, reinforcing the need for interdisciplinary approaches that bring together political science and legal analysis.

A third implication concerns the ambivalent character of proceduralization. While embedding DIs within institutional procedures can enhance their stability, visibility, and potential impact, it does not automatically lead to more democratic outcomes. Proceduralization may strengthen participation by creating clearer connections to decision-making and by establishing expectations of accountability, but it may also produce forms of formalization and bureaucratization that limit the transformative potential of participatory practices. The framework developed in this paper does not resolve this tension but provides analytical tools to identify and assess it by examining how procedural integration, temporal stabilization, and accountability structuring interact in different institutional contexts.

These findings open several avenues for future research. First, the framework could be applied to a

<sup>33</sup> For approaches that emphasize the importance of assessing democratic innovations in terms of their impact on decision-making processes, policy outcomes, and institutional configuration see J. Gastil, T. Nabatchi, *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 25–44 and B. Geissel, K. Newton (Eds.), *Evaluating Democratic Innovations: Curing the Democratic Malaise?*, 2012, 9–23.

<sup>34</sup> N. Urbinati, M. Warren, *The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory*, in J. Parkinson, J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 387–412.

broader range of institutional contexts to test its analytical reach and to refine the distinction between different pathways of proceduralization. In particular, comparative work could explore how variations in legal systems, administrative traditions, and political structures shape the institutional embedding of DIs. Second, further research could investigate more systematically the conditions under which proceduralization enhances democratic responsiveness and accountability, as opposed to producing formalized yet politically marginal forms of participation. This would require closer attention to the interaction between participatory procedures and decision-making practices in concrete policy settings. Third, the framework could be extended to examine the role of bureaucratic actors and administrative capacities in enabling or constraining the institutionalization of participation, an aspect that remains largely underexplored.

More broadly, the analysis suggests that the study of DIs needs to move beyond an event-centered perspective and engage more directly with the institutional conditions of participation. This involves paying closer attention to legal frameworks, administrative structures, and procedural arrangements that shape how participation operates within systems of public authority.

If institutions can be understood, following Douglass North, as the “rules of the game” that structure social and political interaction, then the institutionalization of DIs represents an ongoing transformation of the rules through which democratic governance is organized<sup>35</sup>. Understanding this transformation is essential not only for assessing the role of participation in contemporary democracies, but also for reflecting on the future development of democratic institutions.

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<sup>35</sup> D. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 3.