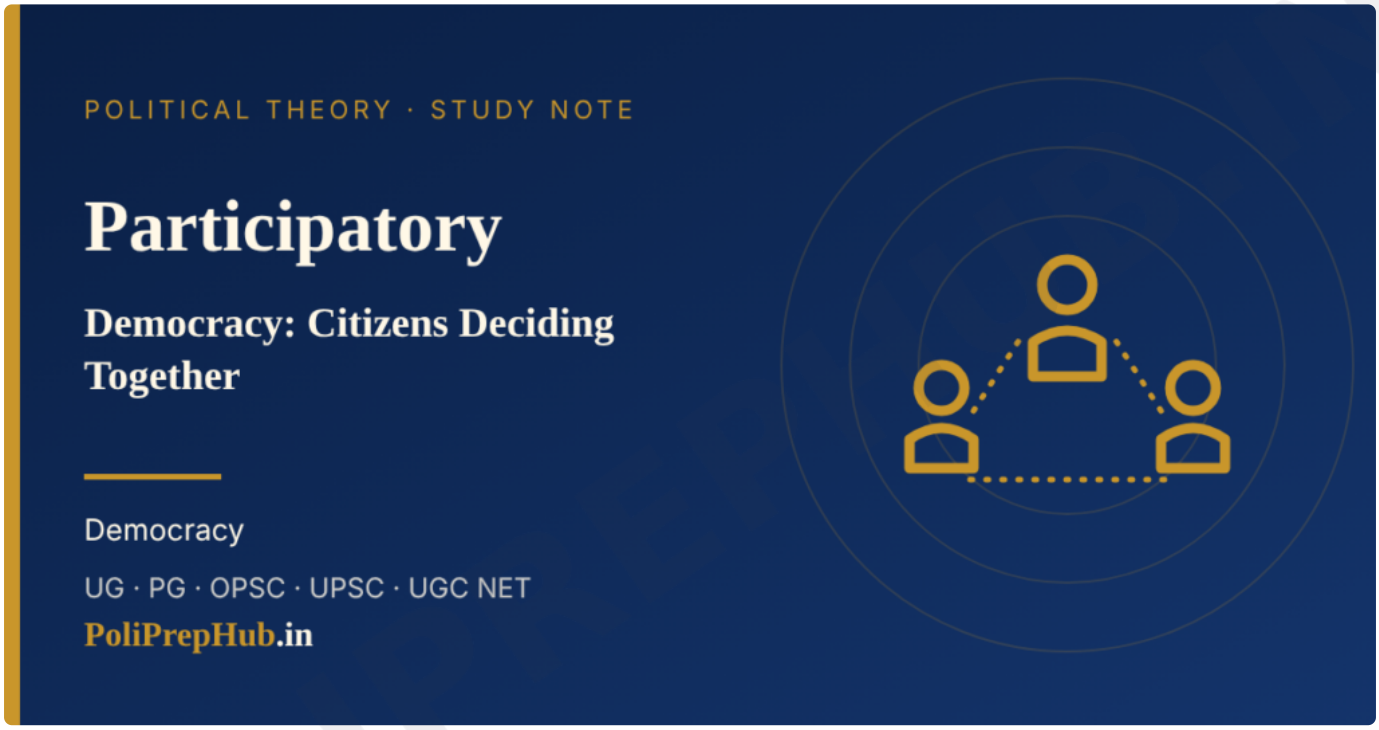
POLITICAL THEORY

Participatory Democracy

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 14, 2026 • 38 min read



Participatory democracy is the model of democracy which holds that citizens should take a direct and continuing part in making the decisions that affect their lives, and not merely vote for representatives once in several years. It does not reject elections or legislatures, but it says that they are not enough. For its supporters, democracy is not only a method of choosing rulers but a way of living and governing in which ordinary men and women learn, discuss, decide and carry out public tasks in their neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools and local governments.

The idea grows out of a basic belief about human beings and about the purpose of politics. It assumes that people are capable of understanding public questions if they are given the chance and the information, and that taking part in public affairs improves them, by making them more responsible, more tolerant and more aware of the interests of others. It also assumes that decisions made with the involvement of those affected are more legitimate and more likely to be accepted and carried out. The model became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, in the time of the student movements, the civil rights movement and the new left, when many people in the West felt that representative institutions had become distant, bureaucratic and dominated by elites. Since then it has gained a place in practice through participatory budgeting, citizens' committees, *Gram Sabhas*, social audits and many other devices, and in theory through the work of Carole Pateman, C. B. Macpherson and Benjamin Barber. It is an important model for those who ask whether democracy can be deepened and not only defended.

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1. Meaning and definitions of participatory democracy

Meaning. Participatory democracy is a form of democracy in which the broad mass of citizens have the opportunity to contribute directly to political decision-making, to a degree greater than that offered by periodic voting. It is concerned with the amount, the quality and the spread of participation. It stresses that participation should extend from the national level to local government, and also to other areas of life such as industry, education, health and housing, where decisions affect the daily lives of people.

Two parts of the idea. First, it contains a claim about decision-making: that those who are affected by a decision should have a real share in making it. Second, it contains a claim about development: that taking part in such decisions educates the citizens, develops their abilities and sense of public duty, and so makes them better citizens and a better society. These two claims, one about the right to a voice and the other about human growth, run through all the writing on the subject.

Participation and representation. Participatory democracy is not the same as direct democracy of the Athenian kind, though the two are close. Direct democracy in its pure form seeks to replace representatives by the assembly of citizens. Participatory democracy usually accepts that, in a large state, national decisions will be taken through representatives, but it asks that the representatives be controlled by active citizens, and that real decision-making power be given to citizens in local bodies and in the institutions of everyday life. It thus supplements, and in some versions transforms, the representative system.

Scholar	Definition or view in brief
Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be handed over; citizens must take part in making the laws they obey.
J. S. Mill	Participation in public affairs, even in small matters, educates the mind and character of the citizen and develops public spirit.

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G. D. H. Cole	Democracy must reach every association in which people live, and self-government in the workplace and the community is the school of democracy.
Carole Pateman	In a participatory society, individuals must have the chance to take part in decisions in all spheres, especially the workplace, so that they develop the qualities needed for democracy.
C. B. Macpherson	A participatory system needs a pyramid of direct and indirect democracy and a more equal and less consumerist society.
Benjamin Barber	Strong democracy is politics in the participatory mode, where conflict is resolved through citizen self-legislation in the absence of an independent ground.
Peter Bachrach	Participation is the process by which individuals take part in decisions that affect their lives, and it must be widened beyond politics to industry.
Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright	Empowered participatory governance gives ordinary citizens real power in local problem-solving through deliberation and devolution.

Rousseau. In *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau argued that the people are sovereign and that sovereignty is inalienable, so it cannot be represented. He held that citizens are free only when they obey laws that they have made themselves, as part of the general will. His admiration for the small republic, in which citizens meet regularly and decide on common questions, is the earliest source of participatory thought, although he did not believe that the idea could be applied in a large nation without great change.

J. S. Mill. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Mill, though a supporter of representative government, wrote that the greatest benefit of political participation is its effect on the character of the citizen. A person who is occupied only with his private life and who has no public duties becomes narrow and selfish. When he serves on a jury, takes part in parish affairs or holds an office, he is forced to weigh interests other than his own and to be guided by the common good. This educative argument is a main foundation of the modern theory.

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G. D. H. Cole. The English guild socialist Cole argued in *Social Theory* (1920) and *Guild Socialism Restated* that democracy should not be limited to the state but should extend to all associations in which people act together. He regarded workplaces and local groups as the places where democratic habits are learned and exercised, and he is a source of the later case for industrial democracy.

Pateman. Carole Pateman, in *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970), re-examined the thinkers of democracy and showed that Rousseau, Mill and Cole had all stressed the developmental effect of participation. She criticised the minimal or elitist theory of Schumpeter and Berelson as an unrealistic reduction of democracy, and argued that for a democratic polity to survive, a democratic society, in which people have the chance to participate in the decisions of their workplace and other bodies, is needed. She based her argument on the experience of workers' self-management in Yugoslavia.

Macpherson. In *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977), Macpherson set out four models of liberal democracy, and held that the model of participatory democracy is the most desirable. He argued that two conditions must be met first: a change in people's consciousness from consumers to enjoyers of their own powers, and a great reduction of social and economic inequality. He proposed a system of direct democracy at the base, in neighbourhood and workplace councils, with delegates chosen up through a pyramid of councils to the national level, together with competing parties.

Barber. Benjamin Barber, in *Strong Democracy* (1984), criticised liberal or thin democracy, which treats politics as a market for the satisfaction of private interests, and called for a strong democracy in which citizens are active, talk with each other, decide together and see themselves as a community. He proposed neighbourhood assemblies, a national system of civic communications, a national referendum and initiative process, and voluntary service, to bring participation into the life of a large country.

Bachrach and Fung and Wright. Peter Bachrach, in *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (1967), challenged the theory that democracy is only elite competition and argued for greater participation in industry. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, in *Deepening*

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Democracy (2003), studied experiments such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, neighbourhood governance in Chicago and panchayat planning in Kerala and West Bengal, and called them empowered participatory governance.

2. Origins and development

Ancient and early roots. The Athenian assembly and the Greek city-states are the first models of citizen participation, in which citizens attended the assembly, served on juries and held office by lot. Medieval town meetings, village assemblies and the New England town meeting of colonial America carried on the habit of local self-government. In India, village republics and councils such as the *sabha* and the *samiti* of the Vedic period, and the village assemblies described in the inscriptions of the Chola kings at Uttaramerur in the tenth century, which chose members of village committees by lot, are often cited as ancient examples of local participation.

Intellectual sources. Rousseau supplied the idea of the sovereign citizen, and Mill supplied the idea of the educative effect of participation. Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (1835-40), praised the township and the voluntary association as schools of freedom. Marx and the later socialists, including the Paris Commune of 1871 and the workers' councils of Russia in 1905 and 1917, offered the idea of self-government by workers. Gandhi's ideal of *gram swaraj* or village self-rule and his plan of an oceanic circle of village republics gave an Indian form to the same concern.

The 1960s and the new left. The phrase *participatory democracy* was made popular by the Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, whose Port Huron Statement of 1962 declared that politics should seek to bring people out of isolation and into community, and that the individual should share in the social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life. The civil rights movement, the student protests in Paris in 1968 and the anti-war movement carried the demand across the world. Out of this ferment came the academic theory of Pateman, Macpherson and others in reply to the elitist theory which was dominant in political science.

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Later experiments and global spread. From the 1980s and 1990s, participation took institutional forms: participatory budgeting began in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989 and spread to many hundreds of cities across the world; the People's Plan Campaign of Kerala started in 1996; neighbourhood governance and school councils emerged in Chicago; citizens' juries and planning cells appeared in Germany and the United States. International agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations began to speak of participation, empowerment and good governance, and civil society organisations pressed for the right to information and social audit.

The present. In the twenty-first century, the demand for participation has been joined by the use of digital platforms for petitions, consultations, crowdsourcing of laws and online budgeting, as in Taiwan's vTaiwan and Madrid's Decide Madrid. At the same time, doubts persist about the real power given to participants, the unequal ability of different groups to take part, and the risk of manipulation, so that participatory democracy is regarded today both as a promising path to democratic renewal and as a field requiring careful design.

3. Features of participatory democracy

- **Active citizenship.** The citizen is not a mere voter or a consumer of government services but an active member of the political community. He is expected to attend meetings, speak, propose, decide and take responsibility. This changes the relationship between the people and the state from one of dependence to one of partnership, as in the monthly meetings of a village *Gram Sabha*.
- **Direct involvement in decision-making.** Real power over some matters is placed in the hands of citizens or their local bodies. A participatory process that only listens to opinions and then ignores them is regarded as tokenism, and the model asks that decisions, such as how a part of the municipal budget is spent, be actually taken by the participants.
- **Participation beyond the ballot box.** Voting is only one act among many. Citizens may attend assemblies, join committees, petition, protest, monitor public works, take

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part in surveys and consultations, or serve in public offices by turn. This widens the meaning of political activity to cover daily civic life.

- **Extension of democracy to all spheres of life.** Pateman and Cole held that democracy should operate not only in government but in the workplace, the school, the hospital and the neighbourhood, since these are the places where people spend most of their lives and where decisions affect them most. Workers' councils and joint management bodies are examples.
- **The educative function of participation.** The model rests on the view that people learn democracy by practising it. Repeated experience of discussing, bargaining and deciding builds the knowledge, confidence and sense of the common good which later make citizens capable of governing. This is the developmental argument inherited from Mill.
- **Emphasis on decentralisation and local self-government.** Participation is easiest in small units where people know one another and the issues are close to them. The model therefore favours the devolution of power to villages, wards, neighbourhoods and municipalities, as in the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments in India.
- **Political equality and inclusion.** All members, rich or poor, men or women, of high or low status, should have equal opportunity to take part. Special measures, such as reservation of seats in local bodies, quorum rules, translation and childcare, are used to bring the marginalised into the process.
- **Reduced distance between rulers and the ruled.** The gap between the governors and the governed is narrowed since citizens help to make and carry out decisions. This aims to answer the complaint of alienation and distrust that is often directed at representative systems.
- **Transparency and access to information.** Real participation requires that citizens know what the government is doing and how money is spent. The right to information, public hearings, open budgets and social audits are essential tools, and the model values them as much as formal institutions.

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- **Community and shared purpose.** Participatory theorists, particularly Barber, hold that active engagement creates a sense of community in which citizens see themselves as co-authors of the common life, in contrast to the liberal picture of separate individuals pursuing private interests.
- **Shared responsibility and ownership.** When people take part in decisions, they are more likely to accept the results and to help in carrying them out. Community management of forests, water users' associations and school management committees are examples where responsibility is shared.
- **A supplement and a challenge to representation.** The model does not always demand the abolition of representative institutions. In its moderate form it adds participatory channels to them, while in its radical form it seeks a transformation of the whole system toward a pyramid of councils.

4. Theoretical foundations

The liberal critique and the participatory reply. The model arose as a response to the elitist and pluralist theories of democracy, which accepted a low level of citizen activity as normal and even healthy. Schumpeter, Berelson and Dahl argued that high participation could endanger stability by bringing in the less educated and the extreme. The participatory theorists replied that these writers confused the existing, restricted practice with what is possible and desirable. Low participation, they held, reflects unequal conditions of life, lack of opportunity and a political system that gives little reward for taking part, and it can be changed.

Rousseau and the sovereign citizen. For Rousseau, the citizen who only obeys laws made by others is not free. Freedom consists in participating directly in making the laws that bind one. The participatory theorists use this thought to question the claim that casting a vote once in five years is enough for self-government. They also draw from him the point that participation shapes character: it brings the citizen to think of the general good and not only of private advantage.

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Mill and the educative argument. Mill added that the main purpose of a political institution is to improve the people who live under it. A system that does not give citizens any practical work in public affairs leaves them passive and self-centred. He gave importance to local government, juries and voluntary associations as schools of public spirit, and he supported women's suffrage and workers' co-operatives on similar grounds.

Cole, Pateman and industrial democracy. Cole argued that if democracy is to be real, it must reach the associations in which people spend their working and social lives. Pateman used evidence of workers' participation to argue that the sense of political efficacy, that is, the belief that one can affect public affairs, grows from experience of taking part in decisions at work. She distinguished three kinds of participation: pseudo-participation, in which people are consulted but the decision is made by others; partial participation, in which people influence but do not make the decision; and full participation, in which each member has equal power to determine the outcome.

Macpherson and the preconditions. Macpherson doubted that participation could flourish in a society divided by great inequality and dominated by the ethic of the market. He called this the vicious circle: without more participation, social inequality will not be reduced, but without a reduction of inequality, citizens will not be able or willing to participate. His answer was that the circle could be broken by practical steps, such as the growth of community action and the wish of people to change their lives, together with a decline in the belief that the market is the only measure of human worth. He outlined a pyramid system, where face-to-face democracy at the base chooses delegates to the higher levels.

Barber and strong democracy. Barber held that thin democracy, liberal in character, saves individual rights but loses the citizen. He maintained that politics is not the discovery of fixed interests but the creation of common ones through talk and action. Strong democracy relies on citizen talk, on the common work of decision and on civic education. Barber also put forward practical ideas, among them neighbourhood assemblies, civic service and electronic voting, in order to bring the model to modern states.

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Gandhian and radical democratic traditions. Gandhi's idea of *gram swaraj*, or village republic with its own power over its affairs and with a federation of villages up to the nation, is among the most thoroughgoing participatory visions. Jayaprakash Narayan's call for partyless democracy and for people's committees at the village level, and M. N. Roy's proposal of a pyramid of local people's committees in his Radical Democratic or Humanist programme, follow the same line. In the West, the ideas of Hannah Arendt on the council system and the revival of civic republicanism as in Michael Sandel's writing also inspire participatory thinking.

Social movements and rights-based approaches. More recent writing relates participation to the idea of rights and capabilities. Amartya Sen's view of development as freedom treats the ability to take part in public decisions as both a goal and a means of development, and the demand for a right to participation has found a place in the work of the United Nations on good governance. The movements in India for the right to information, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and social audits are often treated as practical forms of this approach.

5. Levels and forms of participation

Not all participation is of the same kind. Sherry Arnstein, in her article "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969), distinguished eight rungs, from manipulation at the bottom to citizen control at the top, in order to show that what is called participation may in fact be a way of keeping power in the hands of authorities. The ladder helps to judge whether an arrangement gives citizens real power.

Group	Rungs of the ladder	Meaning
Non-participation	Manipulation; therapy	Citizens are placed on bodies only to be educated or persuaded, with no power
Tokenism	Informing; consultation; placation	Citizens are told or asked for views and given a few seats, but the powerholders keep the decision

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Citizen power	Partnership; delegated power; citizen control	Citizens share, hold or fully control decision-making

Conventional political participation. This includes voting, joining a party, contesting elections, campaigning, contacting representatives, writing to the press and attending public meetings. It is the base on which all other forms rest, and the participatory model asks for it to be more active and better informed.

Participation in local government. Village councils, municipal wards committees and district planning committees provide a platform for taking part in decisions on local services, planning and budgets. This is the field where the model has been most widely used, because the scale is small enough for face-to-face discussion.

Participation in the workplace. Industrial democracy takes forms such as works councils, joint management committees, worker directors on company boards, co-operatives and employee ownership. Yugoslav self-management, the German system of co-determination, the Mondragon co-operatives in Spain and the workers' participation in management schemes in Indian public-sector enterprises are examples. They carry out the view of Cole and Pateman that democracy must reach the places where people work.

Participation in public services. Parent-teacher associations and school management committees in education, patient welfare societies in health, user groups for water, forests and irrigation, and tenants' associations in housing involve the users in running the services, and hold providers answerable.

Participatory budgeting. In this method, residents discuss and decide how a part of a public budget is to be used. The pioneering case is Porto Alegre in Brazil, begun in 1989 by the Workers' Party administration, where citizens met in neighbourhood and thematic assemblies, set priorities, elected delegates to a municipal budget council and monitored execution. Studies report better provision of sanitation, water and schools in poorer areas and a wider involvement of the poor. The method has since spread to thousands of cities, including some wards in Pune, Bengaluru and other Indian cities, and in some state schemes.

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Direct democratic devices. The referendum, initiative, recall and plebiscite allow citizens to decide or propose laws or remove officials. They operate in Switzerland, in many American states and in some other countries. Their supporters see them as a means of keeping representatives close to the voters, while critics point to the dangers of simple yes or no choices on complex questions and the possibility of manipulation by money and emotion.

Social audit and public hearings. In a social audit, the people for whom a programme is intended check its records and spending, in a public meeting, and report any false entries or misuse. Public hearings give citizens the chance to question officials. This form began with the work of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan in the 1990s, which also led the movement for the right to information, and it is now a legal requirement under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005.

Deliberative forums and citizens' panels. Citizens' juries, consensus conferences, planning cells and citizens' assemblies, in which a group of ordinary citizens chosen by lot hear experts and discuss a problem before making recommendations, link participation with deliberation. The Citizens' Assembly of Ireland, which considered constitutional questions such as abortion and same-sex marriage before referendums were held, is a well-known case.

Petitions, protests and social movements. Public meetings, petitions, marches, strikes, *dharnas* and civil disobedience are forms of participation by which citizens put pressure on authorities from outside the formal structure. In India, movements for the right to information, the forest rights movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the anti-corruption agitation of 2011 are examples, and they show the role of civil society in extending democratic debate.

Digital and electronic participation. E-petitions, online consultations, open government platforms such as MyGov in India, crowdsourced law-making, and social media campaigns widen the scope of taking part by lowering the cost of involvement. They also raise problems of the digital divide, misinformation, surveillance and the shallowness of click-

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based action.

6. Conditions for successful participation

Experience shows that participatory arrangements succeed only when certain conditions are met. The first group concerns power. There must be real decision-making authority and funds placed in the hands of the participants, since a forum which can only advise soon loses members. The second concerns information and capacity, because people must be given timely and clear data, and training in procedures, to speak on equal terms with officials and experts. The third concerns inclusion: attention must be paid to the poor, women, minorities and the illiterate, through reservation, timing of meetings, local language and other aids, or the forum will be taken over by the already powerful. The fourth concerns institutional support, including legal backing, a link with the elected bodies and a means of monitoring results. The fifth concerns political will, since the model requires leaders who are ready to share power, and a civil society able to sustain pressure. Finally, a culture of trust and tolerance helps greatly, because participation depends on people believing that their involvement counts and on their willingness to listen to those who differ.

7. The Indian perspective

Traditions of local self-government. India has a long history of village-level self-government, from the *sabha* and *samiti* of the Vedic age to the village assemblies of the Chola period, and the caste and village panchayats of later centuries. Charles Metcalfe’s description of the Indian village communities as little republics has been often quoted, though historians note that these bodies were also dominated by landholding and upper-caste groups, and did not give equal voice to all. The memory of such bodies nonetheless shaped the demand for self-rule in the modern period.

Gandhi and *gram swaraj*. Gandhi wanted India to be a federation of self-governing villages, where each village would manage its affairs through a panchayat chosen by the adults, and the larger bodies would be built up from below, in what he called an oceanic circle, with the individual at the centre. In his view, true democracy cannot be worked by

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twenty men sitting at the centre but has to be worked from below by the people of every village. This is the strongest Indian statement of the participatory ideal.

The Constituent Assembly debate. The Constituent Assembly had a long discussion over whether the village panchayat should be the base of the new constitution. Members such as K. Santhanam and Shriman Narayan Agarwal, who followed Gandhi, urged it, while Ambedkar opposed it, calling the village “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism”, since in his view the Indian village was dominated by caste and gave no protection to the weak. As a compromise, Article 40 was placed in the Directive Principles, directing the State to organise village panchayats and give them such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

Early efforts in community development. The Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953) aimed to bring villagers into development work, but they were run mainly through officials. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) proposed a three-tier panchayati raj system, based on direct election at the village level and indirect election above, with democratic decentralisation, and Rajasthan adopted it first in 1959, at Nagaur. The Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) proposed a two-tier system and political parties’ participation, and the L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986) and the P. K. Thungon Committee (1989) recommended constitutional status for the panchayats. Many of the early bodies were weak, because elections were irregular, finance was short and power remained with the bureaucracy and state governments.

The Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments. These Amendments, passed in 1992 and in force from 1993, gave constitutional status to rural and urban local bodies, and constitute the largest institutional experiment in participatory governance in India.

Feature	Provision
Gram Sabha	Body of all registered voters in the village; powers as the state law gives (Article 243A)
Three-tier structure	Village, intermediate and district levels in states with population above twenty lakh (Article 243B)

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Direct elections	All members of panchayats at every level chosen by direct election (Article 243C)
Reservation	Seats and chairpersons for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to population, and at least one-third for women (Article 243D)
Fixed term	Five years, with election within six months of dissolution (Article 243E)
State Election Commission	Superintendence of panchayat elections (Article 243K)
State Finance Commission	Review of finances every five years (Article 243I)
District Planning Committee	Consolidated plan for the district (Article 243ZD)
Eleventh Schedule	Twenty-nine subjects that may be devolved to panchayats (Article 243G)
Municipalities	Wards committees, reservation, fixed term, Twelfth Schedule with eighteen functions (Articles 243P to 243ZG)

Women in local government. Reservation of one-third of seats and of chairpersons' offices for women has brought lakhs of women into public life, and many states, among them Bihar, Odisha, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, have raised the share to fifty per cent. Studies such as that by Esther Duflo and Raghabendra Chattopadhyay in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that women leaders gave more attention to public goods such as drinking water, which women had demanded. At the same time, the problem of *sarpanch pati*, in which the husband or relatives of a woman representative exercise her power, shows how social structures can limit formal participation.

Special provisions for tribal areas. The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, known as PESA, extended the panchayat system to Fifth Schedule areas and gave the *Gram Sabha* strong powers: to safeguard community resources and traditions, to approve development plans, to be consulted on land acquisition and to control minor forest produce and minor water bodies and the grant of licences for minor minerals. The Sixth Schedule provides autonomous district and regional councils in parts of the north-east. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, gives the *Gram Sabha* the role of

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deciding claims to individual and community forest rights. In *Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment and Forests* (2013), the Supreme Court, in the Niyamgiri case, directed that the Gram Sabhas of the affected villages should decide whether the religious and cultural rights of the Dongria Kondh would be affected by bauxite mining, and the Gram Sabhas rejected the project.

Participatory devices in law and administration. A number of Indian laws are intended to strengthen citizen participation. The Right to Information Act, 2005, gives every citizen a legal right to request information from public authorities, and has been used to expose corruption in ration shops, pensions and public works. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, requires social audit by the *Gram Sabha*. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, provides for school management committees. The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013, grew out of mass public pressure. Public hearings are required for environmental clearances under the Environment Impact Assessment notification, and the National Advisory Council in 2004 to 2014 brought civil society members into policy preparation.

Kerala's People's Plan Campaign. In 1996, the Left Democratic Front government of Kerala decided to devolve between thirty-five and forty per cent of the state's plan funds to local bodies, and to prepare plans through *Gram Sabhas*, working groups and volunteer technical experts, with the support of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad. The campaign is one of the best-known cases of democratic decentralisation, praised by scholars such as Thomas Isaac and Patrick Heller, even though later enthusiasm waned and the role of parties became a matter of concern.

Social movements and civil society. Movements such as the MKSS in Rajasthan, which developed the *jan sunwai* or public hearing and led the campaign for the right to information, the Chipko movement for forests, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, movements of Dalits, Adivasis, women and workers and the anti-corruption campaign of 2011 show the strength of participation outside the formal institutions. Scholars such as Rajni Kothari, who wrote about the decline of the Indian state and the rise of non-party political formations, and Partha Chatterjee, who distinguished civil society from political society, have analysed these

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developments.

Problems in practice. The record is uneven. Many *Gram Sabhas* are held irregularly, have low attendance and are controlled by dominant castes and the village elite. The devolution of the twenty-nine subjects, along with funds and functionaries, is incomplete in many states, so that panchayats depend on grants from above and on bureaucrats. Parallel bodies and the use of centrally sponsored schemes weaken their autonomy. Local elections are sometimes delayed, caste and gender hierarchies influence who speaks, and information and training are limited. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in their reports have repeatedly stressed the need for activity mapping, own-source revenue and capacity building. Digital platforms such as the e-GramSwaraj portal are being used to improve planning and tracking, though access in poorer regions is uneven.

8. Importance and limitations of participatory democracy

Importance and merits

- **Deepens democracy.** It carries the idea of self-government beyond the act of voting, so that citizens have a continuing role in the affairs that concern them. Where it works, democracy is felt as a daily practice and not as a distant event.
- **Educates citizens.** Taking part in meetings, budgets and committees teaches people to listen, argue, compromise and think of the common good. Mill’s belief in the improving effect of public duties is confirmed by studies of village councils, where members grow in confidence and skill.
- **Improves legitimacy and acceptance of decisions.** People are more willing to accept and carry out decisions in which they had a hand, even when the result is not what they wanted. This is helpful in matters like land use, water sharing and displacement, where conflicts are sharp.
- **Makes policy better informed.** Local people possess knowledge of their conditions, which experts and officials may lack. The choice of where to place a well, a road or a school is often better when residents are consulted. The Porto Alegre budget and Kerala’s

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People’s Plan used this local knowledge.

- **Strengthens accountability.** Public hearings, social audits and the right to information expose corruption and waste, as the MKSS showed in Rajasthan. Officials who face the beneficiaries directly are less able to hide misuse than those who answer only to superiors.
- **Gives voice to the excluded.** Reservation, special meetings and outreach bring women, Dalits, Adivasis and the poor into the forum. In participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, poorer districts gained a greater share of investment.
- **Reduces alienation and builds community.** People who take part in common affairs feel that the state belongs to them and develop trust and social capital, which Putnam’s study of civic traditions in Italy found to be linked with better government.
- **Counters elitism and the power of money and parties.** By bringing ordinary people into decisions, the model offers a check on the power of professional politicians, bureaucrats and organised interests, and on the capture of institutions.
- **Helps development and service delivery.** Community management of schools, forests, water and health services tends to improve quality and ownership. The World Bank and other bodies have treated participation as a part of effective development.
- **Supports the extension of democracy to the economy and society.** By including the workplace and the community, it brings democratic values to areas that representative government does not reach, and supports the aims of social and economic democracy.

Limitations and criticisms

- **Impracticality in large and complex states.** National decisions on defence, finance, foreign policy or technical regulation cannot be taken in neighbourhood meetings. The time and cost of involving millions in each decision is too great, and Weber, Michels and later writers pointed to the necessity of organisation and hierarchy.

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- **Unequal capacity to participate.** Those with more time, education, money and confidence tend to dominate discussions. Studies by Verba, Schlozman and Brady show that participation is linked with socio-economic status, so that open participation can strengthen the privileged. In Indian villages, upper-caste and landed groups often control the *Gram Sabha*.
- **Low and uneven turnout.** Many citizens are uninterested in public meetings, or cannot attend because of work and household duties. Fatigue sets in, and those who come are often the most committed or the most aggrieved, and not representative of the whole community.
- **Tokenism and manipulation.** Authorities may use participation as a show to give legitimacy to decisions already taken, as Arnstein warned. Meetings may be held only on paper, resolutions may be recorded without discussion, and participants may be handled by officials or local powerful persons.
- **Risk of local capture and parochialism.** Small groups may be dominated by local elites, and may favour narrow local interests over wider public needs, or rule against minorities. Ambedkar's fear of the village as a place of caste oppression remains a warning that localism does not guarantee justice.
- **Slow and costly decision-making.** Wide consultation takes time and resources and may produce delay or deadlock. Where quick or technical decisions are needed, as in emergencies, the model can be inefficient.
- **Danger of majority tyranny and populism.** Direct decisions made by crowds or by simple votes may override minority rights or be swayed by emotion and charismatic leaders. Representative institutions with constitutional limits provide some protection that open assemblies lack.
- **Lack of information and competence.** Critics argue that many issues, such as budgets and regulations, are technical and that citizens may not understand them, so that participation can lead to poor decisions. Supporters reply that training and expert help can meet this problem.

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- **Possible conflict with representative authority.** Participatory bodies may challenge the powers of elected legislators and councils, which claim a wider mandate. This creates confusion over who has the final say and may lead to a conflict of legitimacy.
- **Hard to sustain.** Enthusiasm is often high at the start and falls when results are slow, leaders change or funds are cut. Porto Alegre's participatory budget lost ground after the Workers' Party left office in 2004, and many Indian schemes decline when the initial push from officials or civil society fades.

9. Critical analysis

The case for participatory democracy rests on a view of human beings and of politics which is both ethical and practical. It claims that human faculties develop through use, that people know their own interests best, and that decisions made by those who bear their consequences are more just and more lasting. The theory has been successful in drawing attention to the narrowness of the elitist view, which reduces democracy to a method of choosing rulers, and in showing that the quality of democracy depends on the quality of citizenship. In this it carries on the tradition from Rousseau and Mill to Pateman.

The model, however, faces serious objections. Realists and elitists argue that mass participation is neither possible nor safe. They point to the evidence that most citizens are inattentive to politics and that organisations, in the manner described by Michels, tend to be led by a few. Liberal critics add that an emphasis on collective decision may endanger individual rights, and that a politics of constant engagement may place excessive demands on people who want to live private lives. Giovanni Sartori, for example, argued that the participatory ideal underestimates the necessity of representation and leadership and runs the risk of confusing democracy with ceaseless activism. Feminist and critical writers note that participation, if the social background is unequal, may extend the influence of those who are already strong and silence those who are not. The studies of deliberation in village meetings in India, for instance, show that women and lower castes often speak less and are less likely to be listened to.

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The defenders reply that these defects are not an argument against participation but an argument for designing it well. They stress that participation is not an all-or-nothing choice and that it can be organised at different levels, with representation at the national level and wider involvement at the local level and in specific services. The experience of Porto Alegre, Kerala and some Gram Sabhas, where participation with real power and good design has brought benefits to the poor, suggests that the model is workable under suitable conditions. The task is then to supply the conditions: devolution of real power and funds, reduction of inequality, public information and capacity building, and special arrangements for the weak.

A further question concerns the relation of participation to the other models of democracy. Participatory democracy and representative democracy are best seen as complementary. The first adds a base of engagement and a school of citizenship, while the second provides the national framework, the continuity and the checks on power that make large-scale democracy possible. There is also a close link with deliberative democracy, which stresses the reasoned quality of discussion, as against the number and power of participants. A participation that is not deliberative may be mere assertion of interests, while deliberation without wide participation may turn into the talk of a small group. Recent writings, such as Fung and Wright’s account of empowered participatory governance and the practice of citizens’ assemblies, attempt to combine the two.

The Indian case brings out both the promise and the difficulty. India has gone further than most countries in giving constitutional status to local bodies, in providing for reservation for women and weaker groups, in granting rights to information and to employment, and in empowering the *Gram Sabha* in tribal areas. It has also seen how caste, gender and class hierarchy and bureaucratic control reduce the effect of these measures. The lesson is that participation cannot be created by law alone, and that it depends on a long process of social change, organisation and pressure from below. In this, the model reminds us that democracy is not only a form of government but an unfinished social task.

10. Authors and books for UGC NET

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Author	Book or work	Main idea
Jean-Jacques Rousseau	*The Social Contract* (1762)	Sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be represented; participation as freedom
J. S. Mill	*Considerations on Representative Government* (1861)	Educative effect of participation; local government and associations
Alexis de Tocqueville	*Democracy in America* (1835-40)	Township and association as schools of freedom
G. D. H. Cole	*Social Theory* (1920); *Guild Socialism Restated* (1920)	Democracy in all associations; industrial self-government
Hannah Arendt	*On Revolution* (1963); *The Human Condition* (1958)	Council system; public action as the essence of freedom
Peter Bachrach	*The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (1967)	Critique of elitist theory; participation in industry
Sherry Arnstein	“A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969)	Eight rungs from manipulation to citizen control
Carole Pateman	*Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970)	Developmental argument; workplace democracy; pseudo, partial and full participation
C. B. Macpherson	*The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977)	Pyramid of direct and indirect democracy; preconditions of participation
Benjamin Barber	*Strong Democracy* (1984)	Citizen talk, common action and civic community
Robert Putnam	*Making Democracy Work* (1993)	Civic engagement and social capital in Italy
Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright	*Deepening Democracy* (2003)	Empowered participatory governance
Giovanni Sartori	*The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (1987)	Critique of participatory ideals; need for representation

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Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady	*Voice and Equality* (1995)	Unequal participation by socio-economic status
Amartya Sen	*Development as Freedom* (1999)	Participation as both end and means of development
Mahatma Gandhi	*Hind Swaraj* (1909); writings on *gram swaraj*	Village self-rule; oceanic circle
Jayaprakash Narayan	*A Plea for the Reconstruction of Indian Polity* (1959)	Partyless democracy; village and people's committees
M. N. Roy	*Reason, Romanticism and Revolution* (1952); *New Orientation*	Radical humanism; pyramid of people's committees
Rajni Kothari	*Rethinking Democracy* (2005); *Politics in India* (1970)	Non-party politics; state and civil society
Partha Chatterjee	*The Politics of the Governed* (2004)	Civil society and political society in India
Patrick Heller and others	*Local Democracy and Development: The Kerala People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning* (2007)	Evaluation of Kerala's decentralisation

11. Practice questions

Long answer questions

1. Define participatory democracy and discuss its main features.
2. Examine the theoretical foundations of participatory democracy with reference to Rousseau, Mill, Pateman, Macpherson and Barber.
3. Discuss the main forms and mechanisms of participation, with examples from India and other countries.
4. Examine the role of the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments in promoting participatory democracy in India.
5. Evaluate the merits and limitations of participatory democracy.

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6. “Participatory democracy supplements, but cannot replace, representative democracy.” Discuss.

Medium answer questions

1. Explain Pateman’s idea of participation and democratic theory.
2. Explain Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation.
3. Discuss Macpherson’s model of participatory democracy.
4. What is participatory budgeting? Explain with the example of Porto Alegre.
5. Explain the role of the Gram Sabha in participatory democracy in India.
6. Discuss social audit and the right to information as tools of participation.

Short answer questions

1. What is participatory democracy?
2. What is meant by the educative function of participation?
3. What is industrial democracy?
4. What is strong democracy?
5. What is a social audit?
6. What is meant by tokenism in participation?

Very short answer questions

1. Who wrote *Participation and Democratic Theory*?
2. Which Article of the Constitution directs the State to organise village panchayats?
3. Where did participatory budgeting begin?
4. Which Act extended panchayats to Scheduled Areas in 1996?
5. Who wrote *Strong Democracy*?

Objective questions

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1. The book *Strong Democracy* was written by: (a) Carole Pateman (b) C. B. Macpherson (c) Benjamin Barber (d) Robert Dahl
2. Pseudo, partial and full participation were distinguished by: (a) Arnstein (b) Pateman (c) Putnam (d) Fung
3. Participatory budgeting was first practised in: (a) Chicago (b) Madrid (c) Porto Alegre (d) Pune
4. Which Article provides for the Gram Sabha? (a) 243A (b) 243B (c) 243C (d) 243D
5. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee recommended: (a) A two-tier system (b) A three-tier system (c) A single-tier system (d) No panchayats
6. Assertion (A): Participation without equality of resources may strengthen the dominant groups. Reason (R): Those with more time, education and money take part more effectively. (a) Both A and R are true and R explains A (b) Both are true but R does not explain A (c) A is true but R is false (d) A is false but R is true
7. The People's Plan Campaign of 1996 was launched in: (a) Rajasthan (b) West Bengal (c) Kerala (d) Karnataka
8. Match: (i) Cole (ii) Macpherson (iii) Arnstein (iv) Barber with (a) Pyramid of councils (b) Ladder of participation (c) Guild socialism (d) Strong democracy. (a) i-c, ii-a, iii-b, iv-d (b) i-a, ii-b, iii-c, iv-d (c) i-b, ii-c, iii-d, iv-a (d) i-d, ii-a, iii-b, iv-c

Analytical prompts

1. A Gram Sabha meets regularly, but only a few members of the dominant caste attend and speak. Analyse the problems and suggest ways in which participation could be made real.
2. A city government announces that a portion of its budget will be decided by residents. Discuss the conditions under which this would be genuine participation and not tokenism.
3. Compare the Gandhian idea of gram swaraj with Macpherson's pyramid of councils.
4. Can participatory democracy work in a society marked by deep inequality? Discuss with reference to Macpherson's vicious circle.

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Key takeaways

- Participatory democracy holds that citizens should take a direct and continuing part in decisions that affect their lives, and not only vote at intervals.
- It rests on two claims: that those affected by decisions should have a share in making them, and that participation develops the capacities and public spirit of citizens.
- Rousseau, Mill, Cole, Pateman, Macpherson and Barber are the main thinkers, and the idea gained force from the new left of the 1960s as a reply to elitist theories.
- Its forms include participation in local government, workplace democracy, participatory budgeting, social audits, citizens' forums, direct democratic devices and social movements.
- Arnstein's ladder separates real citizen power from tokenism and non-participation.
- In India, the idea appears in Gandhi's gram swaraj, Article 40, the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments, PESA, the Right to Information Act and social audits.
- Its limits include impracticality in large states, unequal capacity to take part, local elite capture, tokenism and difficulty of sustaining involvement.
- It is best treated as a supplement to representative democracy, strongest at the local level and in specific services, and dependent on real power, information and equality.

Further reading

1. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*
2. C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*
3. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*
4. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (eds.), *Deepening Democracy*
5. Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique*
6. G. D. H. Cole, *Guild Socialism Restated*
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

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8. J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*
9. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*
10. Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality*
11. Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*
12. David Held, *Models of Democracy*
13. Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations*
14. Carole Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation*
15. Rajni Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy*
16. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*
17. Patrick Heller, K. N. Harilal and Shubham Chaudhuri, *Local Democracy and Development*
18. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*
19. Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya (eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction*
20. O. P. Gauba, *An Introduction to Political Theory*

Frequently asked questions

1. What is participatory democracy? It is a model of democracy in which citizens take a direct and continuing part in decisions that affect their lives, in local government, workplaces and public services as well as in elections. It rests on the belief that participation is both a right and a means of developing better citizens.

2. How is participatory democracy different from representative democracy? Representative democracy gives the work of deciding to elected persons and gives the citizen the role of choosing and controlling them at elections. Participatory democracy asks for a larger and more continuing share of citizens in decisions, and generally accepts representation at the national level while adding wider involvement locally.

3. What is the educative argument for participation? It is the claim, made by Mill and developed by Pateman, that taking part in public decisions improves citizens by teaching them to consider others' interests, to argue and to compromise, so that participation

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produces the very qualities that democracy needs.

4. What is Arnstein’s ladder of participation? It is a scheme of eight levels, from manipulation and therapy at the bottom, through informing, consultation and placation, which are tokenism, to partnership, delegated power and citizen control at the top. It helps to test whether a participatory process gives real power to citizens.

5. How does the Indian Constitution promote participatory democracy? Article 40 directs the State to organise village panchayats, and the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendments give constitutional status to rural and urban local bodies, with the Gram Sabha, direct elections, reservation for weaker sections and women, and State Election and Finance Commissions. Laws such as PESA, the Right to Information Act and the Forest Rights Act add further participatory powers.

6. What are the main difficulties of participatory democracy? The main difficulties are the large size of modern states, unequal ability of groups to take part, the capture of local forums by dominant groups, the use of participation as a show without real power, the time and cost involved, and the problem of keeping interest alive over a long period.

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