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Quality of Democracy from a Political Culture Perspective: Citizen Dispositions and Participatory Behavior

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Abstract

The availability of opportunities for political participation within a democratic system does not necessarily translate into greater public involvement in political processes. This disparity calls for an examination of how citizens' political orientations and attitudes toward the political system shape their participation. This study aims to analyze the relationship between political culture and participatory behavior, with particular attention to the factors shaping political engagement. It employs a qualitative library research method through an analysis of relevant theoretical literature. The findings indicate that political orientations, institutional trust, and public perceptions of the political system are associated with patterns and quality of participation. Political mobilization, social networks, and the bandwagon effect also shape collective engagement, potentially strengthening democratic participation or intensifying polarization when not accompanied by critical awareness. This study positions political culture as a link between democratic structures and participatory behavior, highlighting the importance of civic orientations in fostering an inclusive democratic environment.

Keywords: *Political Culture; Participatory Behavior; Democratic Quality*

Abstrak: Ketersediaan ruang partisipasi dalam sistem demokrasi tidak selalu berbanding lurus dengan keterlibatan masyarakat dalam proses politik. Kondisi ini memerlukan penjelasan posisi orientasi dan sikap masyarakat terhadap sistem politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis hubungan budaya politik dengan perilaku partisipatif masyarakat dengan pembentukan keterlibatan politik. Penelitian menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan (*library research*) melalui analisis literatur teoretis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa orientasi politik, kepercayaan terhadap institusi, serta persepsi masyarakat terhadap sistem politik berkaitan dengan pola dan kualitas partisipasi. Mobilisasi, jaringan sosial, dan *bandwagon effect* turut membentuk keterlibatan kolektif, yang dapat memperkuat partisipasi demokratis maupun mendorong polarisasi ketika tidak disertai kesadaran kritis. Kajian ini menempatkan budaya politik sebagai penghubung antara struktur demokrasi dan perilaku partisipatif, sekaligus menegaskan pentingnya kualitas orientasi kewargaan dalam membangun kehidupan demokrasi yang inklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Budaya Politik; Perilaku Politik; Kualitas Demokrasi.*

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of democracy is determined not merely by the availability of institutions and avenues for political participation, but also by how citizens perceive, respond to, and utilize these spaces. In this context, political culture represents a critical dimension because it encompasses the public's orientations, values, attitudes, and trust toward the political system, the government, and democratic institutions. While the presence of elections, representative bodies, civil society organizations, and mechanisms for voicing aspirations creates opportunities for civic engagement, how these channels are utilized depends heavily on the prevailing political orientations within society. Divergent perspectives on institutions, decision-making processes, and the role of citizens ultimately shape variations in participatory behavior. Consequently, understanding political participation in a democracy requires examining political culture as a foundational framework that explains how citizens construct their engagement in the political process.

Positioning political culture as a key analytical dimension clarifies the relationship between public attitudes and the political system. Political culture pertains to citizens' orientations toward the political system as a whole, the political process, and their own role within that system. Almond and Verba classify political culture into three ideal types: parochial, subject, and participant. In a parochial political culture, public orientation toward the political system remains relatively limited; in a subject political culture, citizens possess an awareness of the political system but tend to occupy a passive role as policy recipients; whereas a participant political culture reflects active public orientation and engagement in the political process (Almond and Verba 1989, 43).

This framework provides a basis for understanding that public political behavior is shaped not only by the opportunities afforded by democratic institutions, but also by how citizens comprehend and position themselves relative to the political system. Citizens holding distinct political orientations exhibit varied forms of engagement, ranging from voting, organizational involvement, and public discourse to voicing aspirations and participating in broader political and social activities. Thus, participatory behavior can be understood as a tangible actualization of citizens' political orientations within democratic life.

Within a democratic society, political participation holds a vital position by enabling citizens to articulate their interests and influence public decision-making. Participation may occur either directly or indirectly. Direct engagement includes voicing aspirations, public deliberation, demonstrations, and other civic activities, whereas indirect engagement operates through elections, support for political organizations or groups, and involvement in civil society organizations. These diverse manifestations demonstrate that

participatory behavior encompasses a far broader scope than electoral activity alone.

Nevertheless, the openness of a democratic system does not automatically yield uniform participatory behavior. Citizens operating within the same political system frequently exhibit varying degrees and forms of political engagement. While some segments of society demonstrate active involvement, others remain largely passive or confined to specific political activities. These disparities underscore the importance of examining political culture to explain participatory behavior, as public orientations, values, attitudes, and trust toward the political system fundamentally shape how citizens respond to opportunities for participation.

Recent scholarship on political participation highlights a wide array of factors shaping civic engagement in democratic life. Theocharis et al. (2023) examine shifting patterns of political participation driven by the features and affordances of social media platforms, while Kuznetsova and Tolbert (2023) demonstrate a cross-national link between digital information network usage and increased political participation. Jung et al. (2024) expand this discourse by elucidating the role of attitudinal processes, motivation, and social relationships in bridging online activities with offline civic participation. Within the Indonesian context, Kurniawan et al. (2024) find that the impact of social media on political participation is moderate and contingent upon sociocultural contexts, whereas Ashfaq (2025) highlights the contribution of social networks and intergroup ties to youth political participation. Collectively, these studies explain political participation through communication media, social networks, motivation, and participatory environments. However, an underexplored area remains regarding how these factors intersect with citizens' underlying orientations toward the political system. Therefore, drawing on Almond and Verba's political culture perspective, this study analyzes how public orientations and attitudes toward the political system relate to the tendencies and forms of participatory behavior in democratic life.

This paper aims to analyze the relationship between political culture and citizens' participatory behavior within a democracy. The discussion focuses on the characteristics of political culture, forms of public participation, and the nexus between political orientations and engagement in the political process. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: How does political culture relate to citizens' participatory behavior? Ultimately, this analysis seeks to demonstrate that political participation is manifested not solely through elections, but also reflects the underlying orientations and attitudes of citizens toward the political system.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing a library research method. The research data were drawn from primary literature—comprising theoretical works on political culture, democracy, and political participation—as well as secondary literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant research findings. Data collection was conducted through documentation by identifying, selecting, reviewing, and categorizing literature based on relevance, academic credibility, and alignment with the research focus (Creswell et al. 2018, 45; Snyder 2019, 333–339).

Data analysis was performed using a descriptive-interpretive approach through conceptual identification, thematic categorization, comparative argumentation, and the synthesis of findings across diverse sources. Specifically, the analysis focused on the characteristics of political culture, the sociopolitical environment—encompassing resources, mobilization, and social networks—and forms of citizens' participatory behavior. These three dimensions were subsequently interpreted to explain how public orientations and attitudes toward the political system relate to patterns of civic engagement in democratic life. To ensure analytical consistency, cross-source comparisons were conducted to achieve a comprehensive conceptual synthesis. Rather than measuring statistical relationships, this study aims to elucidate the interplay between both concepts grounded in theoretical arguments and prior scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political Culture as an Orientation Shaping Participatory Behavior

Political structure can be defined as the institutional framework governing the relationships among political institutions, political parties, and citizens within a state—particularly within democratic systems that emphasize active citizen involvement in political decision-making. A fundamental element of democracy is political participation, which encompasses all forms of public engagement in political activities. These include electoral consensus for heads of government at both centralized and decentralized levels, legislative representation, public protests (demonstrations), and participation in political organizations, whether aligned with the opposition or the ruling coalition.

Political institutions—another term for political structure—are organized within a framework that regulates power relations in a system of governance, encompassing the rules and norms that dictate how power is distributed and exercised within the state. In other words, political structure comprises the institutions and mechanisms that facilitate decision-making, policymaking, and interactions among political actors. Initial conceptual findings indicate that the relationship between political culture and participation cannot be understood solely through the frequency of citizen

involvement. Rather, political culture first shapes how citizens conceptualize politics: whether it is viewed as a shared arena for resolving public issues, a competitive battleground of interests, or an exclusive domain reserved for elites. These divergent orientations directly influence citizens' decisions to utilize available political channels.

As Sidney Verba famously stated—a view widely endorsed by political scientists—citizen participation lies at the very heart of democracy, as democracy cannot function without the ability of citizens to participate freely in governance (Mujani 2007, 253). Substantive and frequent political participation predominantly occurs within democratic states, generating diverse political activities that form the bedrock of a democratic political culture. Civil society, which exercises popular sovereignty by participating in decision-making processes, constitutes a vital component of the political structure alongside the state institutions discussed in the introduction.

From the perspective of Almond and Verba, public political orientation encompasses citizens' knowledge, feelings, and evaluations regarding the political system. Consequently, citizens with a participant orientation tend to view themselves as possessing both the capacity and the right to engage in the political process. Conversely, when citizens perceive political decisions as beyond their ability to influence, participation becomes markedly more limited. This demonstrates that while democratic structures provide the enabling conditions for participation, political culture determines how those opportunities are perceived and utilized (Almond and Verba 1989, 43).

Within any state, political structure significantly shapes citizens' participatory behavior—specifically, the extent to which they engage in the political process. In a democratic order, political culture is rooted in political activities that manifest as participation in consensus-building, legislation, and public discourse, enabling collective political decisions to be made. This culture reflects the power dynamics between the state and its citizens, often giving rise to organized citizen groups institutionalized as political parties. These parties function to build consensus, advance legislation, and engage in public discourse to influence public policy.

Accordingly, the relationship between political culture and participatory behavior is bidirectional. While political culture shapes participation, the experience of participating can also reshape political culture. When citizens experience that their aspirations are heard, criticism is tolerated, and institutions respond to public demands, such experiences reinforce institutional trust and strengthen participant orientations. Conversely, repeated encounters with unresponsive political institutions can breed distrust and drive more confrontational forms of participation.

Public Opinion as a Linking Mechanism Between Political Culture and Participation

The formation of public opinion serves as a crucial mechanism linking political orientations to collective action. Extensive literature indicates that public opinion emerges when a problem requires resolution, an issue is deemed relevant to communal life, and a communication process enables the public to recognize and debate that issue (Tosepu 2018, 13). Analytically, this demonstrates that political participation does not occur in a vacuum; rather, citizens first interpret public problems through communication, discussion, media, and social interaction.

Strategically, public opinion functions to build consensus, secure public legitimacy, and foster discourse aimed at influencing public policy. The full vitality of democratic processes is particularly evident during consensus-building initiatives, referendums, and electoral campaigns.

Drawing on Manalu (2023, 17–18), the emergence of public opinion unfolds through three distinct stages. First, a pressing problem arises that requires resolution, prompting a search for alternatives; the emergence of multiple options stimulates public deliberation to select the best course of action, which subsequently requires broad support for program implementation. Second, an issue of high relevance to the broader public surfaces, generating ambiguity or competing evaluative standards. Opinion leaders—such as politicians and academics—engage with the issue, attracting press coverage that disseminates information and public reactions to a wider audience. Third, public sentiment transitions from an amorphous, shifting phase of disorganized inputs into structured deliberation that crystallizes a clear, unified collective opinion (Machiavelli, as cited in Tosepu 2018, 13).

The role of public opinion becomes even more critical when citizens evaluate the performance of political institutions. Institutional distrust does not inherently signify a rejection of democracy; rather, it can operate as a form of critical oversight when channeled through mechanisms that translate public demands into policy reform (Mujani 2007, 298–99). Complications arise, however, when institutional distrust is coupled with manipulative mobilization, steering public opinion toward escalating conflict rather than expanding democratic deliberation

Factors Influencing the Formation of Public Opinion

a. Policies of the *Trias Politica* (Separation of Powers)

Public opinion can be shaped by decision-making and policy implementation processes carried out by the government or political elites (Sarihati et al. 2019, 78). According to Saiful Mujani in *Muslim Demokrat* (2007), distrust toward political institutions tends to generate instability when distrustful citizens engage in non-conventional protests, including the strategic manipulation of public opinion. Consequently, public distrust of government policies can potentially destabilize democracy when combined with political mobilization directed toward protest activities; without such

mobilization, distrust remains politically inconsequential. As Benjamin Franklin Norris Jr. (1870–1902) warned, the number of critical citizens grows as the gap widens between democratic ideals and the actual performance of political institutions (Mujani 2007, 299). However, not all policies enacted under the *trias politica* are rejected by the public; many policies generate favorable public opinion and widespread acclaim.

This dynamic relates to the political substance of government policy—specifically, the legislative outcomes produced by political institutions—which reflects complex public preferences in evaluating the conduct of decision-makers. Thus, public opinion serves as a representative mechanism to convey binding public expectations to officials. Accordingly, effective communication channels are required to disseminate policy information with the aim of refining or endorsing policies in alignment with the sentiments, conscience, and demands of the public (Aris 2021).

b. Media Coverage

Communication media represent a primary strategic tool utilized by political communicators to influence prevailing public attitudes, thereby shaping public opinion (Sarihati et al. 2019, 77). Structurally, public views are most frequently articulated through mass media, whether via interviews or dedicated public forums such as letters to the editor and opinion columns. Policymakers pay close attention to these expressions of public support or dissent.

Effective political communication shapes public opinion in alignment with the intended political message, which subsequently influences broader societal views on pressing political issues. Traditionally, mass media have been regarded as the most effective medium for shaping political public opinion. However, with the rapid expansion of digital communication, social media platforms have also emerged as highly potent vehicles for molding public opinion (Syarbani et al. 2023, 87).

c. Actions of Civil Society Organizations

Furthermore, public opinion is frequently shaped by collective actions channeled through interest-based civil society organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that stage street demonstrations to sway public sentiment or lobby legislative and executive bodies to demand policy action (Tosepu 2018, 21). Organizational communication combines interpersonal (one-to-one) and mass (one-to-many) delivery methods. Within political communication, however, mediated one-to-many channels remain classified as organizational communication media and often serve as alternative arenas for opinion formation, whereas organization-led one-to-one outreach is rarely employed, likely due to cost constraints. Common manifestations of such mediated organizational communication include pamphlet distribution and mass rallies (Syarbani et al. 2023, 13).

According to Dan Nimmo, political communication functions as a persuasive strategy to reach psychologically receptive individuals and integrate them into organizations, ultimately driving the formation of public opinion (Nimmo 2007, 125). This dissemination of political messages is also executed through political advertising targeted at heterogeneous mass audiences, alongside political rhetoric operating as a transactional form of communication aimed at securing mutual benefits (Susanto 2013, 166).

As outlined earlier, the emergence of public opinion is triggered by an unresolved problem that prompts a search for alternative solutions. Implementing a chosen decision requires structured programs backed by broad public support. Because initial policy inputs often remain fragmented, focused deliberation is necessary to crystallize a clear, unified collective stance. Consequently, issues of high relevance to the broader public come to the fore, often exposing ambiguous or double evaluative standards. When opinion leaders—such as politicians and academics—engage with these issues, they attract press attention, disseminating information and public reactions to a wider audience.

Therefore, public opinion occupies an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it expands the space for public oversight of the government; on the other, it can be strategically engineered through political communication. This analytical distinction is vital because high levels of participation do not automatically equate to a high quality of democracy. Participation grounded in adequate information and open deliberation differs substantively from participation driven by propaganda, group pressure, or information manipulation.

Factors Influencing Political Participation

a. Mass Mobilization

Mass mobilization refers to the reality that public involvement in the political process is not merely individual or spontaneous, but can also occur in an organized, collective manner. Various factors drive this process, including the influence of political elites, political parties, and civil society organizations, whereby individuals or groups are activated to engage in political activities. Mobilization operates on a top-down basis when political elites rally the masses to achieve specific political objectives, whereas bottom-up mobilization occurs when grassroots initiatives emerge organically from citizens themselves, such as staging demonstrations as part of a social movement (Elwan 2019, 2–3). Political mobilization theory examines how individuals and groups are spurred into political action through various methods and conditioning factors. While healthy mobilization can strengthen democracy, manipulative mobilization risks deepening societal polarization.

Mobilization effectively explains how individual political orientations evolve into collective action. Distinguishing between top-down mobilization

(driven by elites or organizations) and bottom-up mobilization (initiated by citizens) is analytically crucial because the source of mobilization shapes the character of participation. Mobilization rooted in genuine societal needs strengthens interest articulation, whereas mobilization entirely orchestrated by elites risks reducing citizens to mere instruments for achieving narrow political goals.

Analytically, mobilization should not be positioned as antithetical to political culture; rather, it operates through existing cultural frameworks. Societies endowed with strong organizational traditions, social trust, and participant orientations are far better equipped to sustain collective action. Conversely, mobilization occurring within a low-trust political culture may generate highly emotional involvement that lacks long-term sustainability. Thus, the strength of mobilization lies not merely in the capacity to assemble crowds, but in the ability to transform public demands into organized, meaningful participation.

b. Social Networks as Capital for Political Participation

In this context, social networks comprise interacting political actors who forge relationships within a political system. These networks consist of diverse entities connected through digital communication, engaging in either cooperation or competition within the political arena. Characterized by flexibility and adaptability to change, actors within social networks rely on mutual interdependence to achieve their political objectives, making inter-actor connections a primary form of capital in political activity (Hasanudin 2017, 60). Social networks form around shared interests within the political system, sustained through social interaction, information exchange, and reciprocal ties. In the digital era, social networks play an increasingly powerful role in driving public participation across both institutional democracies and global social movements.

Social networks provide the essential social infrastructure for participation. Family ties, friendships, communities, organizations, and digital networks enable the rapid dissemination of political information and facilitate coordinated action. In this regard, network mobilization demonstrates how intergroup connections serve as vital capital when actors enter electoral politics or social movements.

Nevertheless, social networks do not invariably yield democratic participation. While they can broaden access to information, they can also create echo chambers that reinforce insular group beliefs. From a political culture perspective, the democratic quality of a network depends on the norms cultivated within it: networks open to dissenting views foster deliberation, whereas exclusive networks intensify polarization. Consequently, social networks should be understood not merely as instruments of mobilization, but as arenas in which political culture is continuously produced and reproduced.

c. The Bandwagon Effect and the Problem of Participation Quality

The bandwagon effect refers to the tendency of individuals to align with political choices perceived as popular or dominant within society. This inclination may stem from shared backgrounds, culture, ethnicity, or political vision. The phenomenon frequently manifests during legislative or executive electoral contests and political campaigns, wherein individuals support candidates or parties that appear to command broad backing. For instance, candidates sharing a voter's regional origin or social background can trigger emotional affinity. In many cases, once a group identifies with a particular candidate, individuals tend to conform to the group, follow the prevailing current, and avoid social conflict (Winarno 2023).

More broadly, the bandwagon effect explains the psychological tendency to adopt choices perceived as the majority preference or as gaining widespread momentum. In political contexts, this dynamic can prompt previously hesitant individuals to vote for a candidate, endorse a movement, or conform to group attitudes. On the surface, the bandwagon effect appears to boost political participation; however, a critical reading reveals that a higher volume of participants does not necessarily indicate a higher quality of participation.

To be sure, the bandwagon effect can strengthen participation when the perception of majority support gives individuals the confidence and solidarity needed to engage. Yet the very same mechanism can undermine political autonomy if individuals cast their votes solely under the assumption that the majority choice must be correct. Here, political culture plays a decisive role: a critical political culture enables citizens to treat popularity metrics as merely one consideration among many, rather than the sole basis for decision-making. Conversely, a conformist political culture allows popularity to substitute for substantive evaluation of candidates' programs and policies.

Institutional Trust and Political Change

Almond and Verba argue that "trust in political institutions is crucial for stabilizing democracy, as it enables governments to operate effectively without unnecessary interruptions and disruptions. In reality, even when public trust in political institutions is low in any modern democracy, there is no indication that the democracy itself is losing its legitimacy simply due to that low level of trust" (Almond and Verba, as cited in Mujani 2007, 298).

In contrast, Norris contends that distrust toward political institutions is closely associated with the rise of critical citizens, whose numbers grow as the gap widens between democratic ideals and the actual performance of political institutions. Norris warns that such distrust can trigger democratic instability, particularly in emerging democracies, whereas in established democracies, public distrust often spurs institutional reforms aimed at meeting citizen expectations (Mujani 2007, 299).

According to Saiful Mujani in *Muslim Demokrat* (2007), distrust toward political institutions tends to generate instability when distrustful citizens resort to unconventional demonstrations rather than channeling their grievances through consensus-building mechanisms, referendums, or conventional interest-group activities. Furthermore, political distrust can potentially destabilize democracy when combined with political mobilization directed toward protest activities; otherwise, distrust remains politically inconsequential.

Public trust in institutions can enhance political participation and civic awareness, strengthen democracy by incorporating broader voices into decision-making, and drive social change alongside policies that are more responsive to societal needs. However, excessive politicization can fuel polarization and social conflict, particularly when mobilization relies on misleading information or propaganda to manipulate public opinion. Moreover, mobilization grounded in coercion or intimidation fundamentally undermines democracy.

Institutional trust also facilitates political lobbying and interpersonal political relationships during processes of institutionalization. The emergence of social networks as a political force reinforces the argument that patterns of social ties—such as friendships, extended families, communities, and alumni associations—command societal legitimacy. Extending these social alliances into electoral politics operates through political party affiliation and requires mass resources capable of being converted into political capital during electoral contests. Thus, a social network holds the potential to become political capital when one of its members enters practical politics (Hasanudin 2017, 76).

When the media report that a particular candidate is leading with strong electability ratings in opinion polls, undecided voters may be swayed to support the frontrunner. Endorsements from prominent figures—such as celebrities backing a candidate or ethnic community leaders endorsing a politician based on shared ethnic ties—further amplify this bandwagon effect (Winarno 2023).

The interaction among mass mobilization, social networks, and the bandwagon effect constitutes a triad of mechanisms analyzed in this study as key drivers of participatory behavior. Building political networks facilitates mobilization by disseminating information and fostering solidarity. In turn, political mobilization can trigger a bandwagon effect as a growing number of people visibly rally behind a candidate or movement, while the bandwagon effect accelerates mobilization by projecting a sense of overwhelming momentum.

Table 1. Interactive Dynamics in Political Participation

Political Phenomenon	**Mobilization**	**Networks**
Electoral Campaigns	Political parties mobilize citizens to vote	Volunteer networks expand outreach

Social Movements / Demonstrations	Activists organize protests	Social networks disseminate information
Consensus-Building / Referendums	Candidates rally public support	Social media amplifies political messages

As these three elements reinforce and interact with one another, they generate faster, broader, and more effective political movements capable of shifting public opinion and electoral outcomes, thereby driving significant institutional reform.

Institutional trust thus represents a pivotal nexus between political culture and participatory behavior. Trust enables governments to operate with stronger legitimacy, whereas distrust can evolve into constructive critical oversight when a discrepancy persists between democratic expectations and institutional performance (Mujani 2007, 298–99). Analytically, trust should not be equated with uncritical obedience; rather, democratic trust can—and should—coexist with public scrutiny and criticism.

In this light, political participation serves as a corrective mechanism for political institutions. When citizens utilize elections, civic organizations, public deliberation, social action, or formal channels for voicing aspirations to influence policy, they compel institutions to adapt to public demands. Under such conditions, the interplay between political culture and participation generates institutional change: citizen orientations shape political action, action shapes public policy, and institutional responsiveness subsequently reshapes citizens' trust and political orientations.

Conversely, when institutions close off avenues for participation, distrust escalates and unconventional forms of participation become increasingly likely. This does not imply that every protest poses a threat to democracy; peaceful protest constitutes a legitimate democratic mechanism when used to articulate interests excluded from conventional channels. Democracy is endangered only when protests are driven by intimidation, disinformation, or exclusionary mobilization that infringes upon the rights of other groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this analysis demonstrate that political culture shares a reciprocal relationship with citizens' participatory behavior in democratic life. This dynamic is evident in how citizens' orientations and attitudes toward political institutions, institutional trust, and perceptions of the political system shape both the forms and intensity of their engagement. Furthermore, mass mobilization, social networks, and the bandwagon effect serve as key mechanisms linking political orientations to collective action. While these mechanisms can strengthen participation when underpinned by a critical, open, and tolerant political culture, they risk fostering polarization and majoritarian pressure when devoid of critical awareness. Consequently,

political culture acts as a vital bridge between democratic structures and participatory behavior, simultaneously shaping the substantive quality of civic engagement. Ultimately, democratic political participation is determined not merely by the sheer volume of participants, but by the freedom, civic awareness, and quality of the political orientations underlying their involvement.

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