



The Participatory Policy Cycle:

A Conceptual Framework for Citizen-Centred Governance and Democratic Policy

Innovation

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Abstract

Democratic governance in the twenty-first century confronts an accelerating legitimacy crisis: citizens increasingly distrust public institutions, technocratic policy processes fail to harness distributed knowledge, and conventional top-down reform cycles are too slow to address compounding social, economic, and environmental challenges. This paper introduces and theorizes the Participatory Policy Cycle (PPC), a six-phase iterative framework designed to reposition citizens as active Policy Entrepreneurs across the full spectrum of the policy process. The six phases are: (1) Agenda Creation, through evidence-driven national dialogues; (2) Policy Co-Creation, via collaborative design with multidisciplinary experts; (3) Public Validation, through collective deliberation and peer review; (4) Policy Advocacy, using multi-channel communications strategies; (5) Impact Execution, transforming proposals into measurable pilot initiatives; and (6) Real-Time Evaluation, employing adaptive feedback systems and policy intelligence. Drawing on deliberative democracy theory, co-production scholarship, design thinking, and governance innovation literature, the paper develops theoretically grounded postulations for each phase and presents an integrated conceptual model of the full cycle. The PPC is argued to enhance policy legitimacy, epistemic quality, adaptive capacity, and civic empowerment. Implications for governance reform in developing democracies with particular relevance to Pakistan and the Global South are discussed alongside an agenda for future empirical research.

Keywords

Participatory Governance, Policy Co-creation, Deliberative Democracy, Citizen Engagement, Policy Entrepreneurship, Adaptive Governance, Policy Cycle, Public Innovation

Introduction

Policy-making has long been theorized as the exclusive province of elected officials, civil servants, and technocratic experts. The conventional policy cycle problem identification, agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation has provided an enduring analytical scaffold since Harold Lasswell's foundational contributions in the mid-twentieth century (Lasswell, 1956; Jann & Wegrich, 2007). Yet this model has been criticized for its linearity, its elite-centered epistemology, and its inadequate account of the political and social dynamics through which real policies emerge (Sabatier, 1991; Fischer, 2003). Citizens, in the dominant model, appear principally as beneficiaries or electoral actors, rarely as substantive co-designers of the policies that govern their lives.

The consequences of this exclusion are well-documented. Public trust in governmental institutions has declined significantly across democratic systems over the past three decades (OECD, 2022). Policy failures — from education reform to public health to environmental regulation are frequently attributed not merely to insufficient resources but to the absence of situated, experiential

knowledge that only affected communities can provide (Ostrom, 1990; Healey, 2006). The rise of digital platforms, open governance initiatives, and civic technology ecosystems has further destabilised the boundary between expert and citizen, creating both the imperative and the infrastructure for more participatory policy architectures (Linders, 2012; Mergel et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the Participatory Policy Cycle (PPC) is proposed. The PPC is not merely a procedural checklist for citizen consultation; it is a reconceptualization of governance that positions citizens as Policy Entrepreneurs agents who do not simply react to policy proposals but who identify problems, co-design solutions, validate options, advocate for reform, execute pilots, and continuously improve outcomes through adaptive learning. The framework integrates insights from deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996; Fishkin, 2009), co-production theory (Ostrom, 1996; Bovaird, 2007), public sector innovation (Bason, 2010; OECD, 2017), and complexity governance (Snowden & Boone, 2007) into a coherent six-phase model.

This paper makes four principal contributions. First, it synthesizes relevant theoretical traditions into a unified conceptual framework. Second, it advances a formal postulation for each of the six phases, grounding them in empirical and theoretical literature. Third, it presents an integrated conceptual model of the PPC that articulates the relationships among phases, actors, and feedback mechanisms. Fourth, it discusses the transformative potential and practical implications of the PPC for governance reform, with particular attention to contexts such as Pakistan, where participatory deficit and institutional trust deficit are simultaneously acute.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review spanning deliberative democracy, co-production, design thinking, and adaptive governance. Section 3 presents the six-phase postulations of the PPC. Section 4 introduces the conceptual model. Section 5 analyses the expected impact of the framework. Section 6 concludes with implications and a research agenda.

Literature Review

The Policy Cycle and Its Discontents

The classic policy cycle, as synthesized by Lasswell (1956) and later elaborated by Brewer and deLeon (1983), identifies a sequential progression from problem definition to agenda-setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation, and evaluation. While this heuristic has proven pedagogically durable, scholars have long identified its limitations. Sabatier (1991) challenged its linearity, noting that real-world policy processes are characterized by iteration, contestation, and non-sequential dynamics. Kingdon's (1984) Multiple Streams Framework offered an alternative, conceiving policy change as the convergence of problems, policies, and politics streams a model that foregrounds agency, timing, and advocacy rather than orderly progression. Fischer and Forester (1993) brought argumentative and discursive dimensions to the fore, insisting that policy analysis is inherently a rhetorical and interpretive practice. These critiques share a common thread: the conventional cycle undertheorises participation, contestation, and knowledge plurality.

More recent scholarship has sought to reconceptualize the policy process to accommodate the networked, multi-stakeholder environments of contemporary governance (Rhodes, 1997; Sorensen & Torfing, 2007). The governance network literature stresses horizontal co-ordination among state and non-state actors, while the co-production literature discussed below foregrounds the active role of service users and citizens in producing public value. The PPC builds upon both traditions, proposing a structured yet flexible framework that systematizes citizen engagement across the full policy lifecycle.

Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Participation

The normative case for deeper citizen participation in policy-making draws its most sustained elaboration from the deliberative democracy tradition. Habermas's (1996) discourse ethics argues that legitimate political decisions must emerge from processes of rational communicative action, in which all affected parties can participate as equals under conditions of non-coercion and reason-giving. This normative ideal has been operationalized in diverse institutional designs: citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, and co-design workshops (Fishkin, 2009; Wampler, 2007; Fung & Wright, 2003).

Empirical studies of deliberative forums have demonstrated that, when well-designed, they can increase participant knowledge and policy literacy, foster preference transformation through exposure to diverse perspectives, generate more legitimate and publicly accepted policy outputs, and strengthen civic identity and democratic efficacy (Luskin et al., 2002; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006;

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Curato et al., 2017). Critically, however, critics note that deliberative forums can remain elite-captured, tokenistic, or disconnected from actual decision-making power (Cornwall, 2008; Mouffe, 1999). The PPC addresses these critiques by embedding deliberation within an action-oriented cycle that connects dialogue directly to co-design, validation, and execution.

Co-Production and Public Service Innovation

Elinor Ostrom's (1996) concept of co-production the joint delivery of public services by state actors and citizen users — has generated an extensive literature on the conditions under which citizen participation improves public outcomes. Bovaird (2007) extended this analysis, distinguishing between co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment, and arguing that the most transformative forms of co-production involve citizens as genuine partners across all stages. Verschuere et al. (2012) conducted a systematic review of co-production's impacts, finding consistent evidence of service responsiveness and gains in user satisfaction, while noting the importance of institutional support, trust, and facilitation.

In the public-sector innovation literature, Bason (2010) and the OECD (2017) have championed human-centered design and design thinking as methods for developing policy solutions grounded in citizens' lived experiences. Design thinking's empathize-define-ideate-prototype-test cycle shares structural affinities with the PPC's phases, particularly co-creation and validation. Mergel et al. (2019) document the growing application of agile and iterative development methodologies in government, providing practical precedents for the PPC's emphasis on adaptive learning and continuous improvement.

Policy Entrepreneurship and Civic Agency

The concept of the policy entrepreneur an individual or group that identifies policy problems, develops innovative solutions, and mobilizes coalitions to secure adoption — was developed by Kingdon (1984) and has been substantially elaborated by subsequent scholars (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Roberts & King, 1991). Policy entrepreneurs are typically conceived as insider actors: legislators, officials, or well-connected advocates. The PPC reconceptualizes policy entrepreneurship as a civic capacity that can be cultivated and institutionalized across wider citizenries.

This reframing is consistent with Roberts and King's (1991) typology of policy entrepreneurs, which includes citizen advocates and social movement actors alongside institutional insiders. It is also supported by the growing literature on civic technology and digital participation, which documents the emergence of new forms of citizen-led agenda-setting and policy advocacy enabled by digital platforms, open data, and social media (Linders, 2012; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). The PPC provides a structured framework within which these distributed entrepreneurial energies can be channeled constructively.

Adaptive Governance and Real-Time Policy Evaluation

The complexity of contemporary policy challenges — from pandemic response to climate adaptation to digital governance has generated a growing literature on adaptive governance: institutional arrangements that support ongoing learning, adjustment, and experimentation in the face of uncertainty (Holling, 1978; Folke et al., 2005; Duit & Galaz, 2008). Adaptive governance frameworks emphasize monitoring and evaluation as continuous, system-wide processes rather than terminal audits; the use of real-time data and policy intelligence to inform iterative adjustment; and the importance of feedback loops that connect policy outcomes to agenda-setting and problem definition.

The PPC's sixth phase — Real-Time Evaluation is grounded in this tradition. It draws on the logic of the learning organization (Senge, 1990), the policy intelligence literature (Howlett et al., 2015), and contemporary advances in civic data infrastructure and participatory monitoring to propose evaluation as an ongoing, citizen-engaged process that actively feeds back into the cycle's earlier phases. This distinguishes the PPC from conventional evaluation frameworks, in which assessment is typically conducted by expert evaluators after implementation has concluded.

Participatory Governance in the Global South

While much of the deliberative democracy and co-production literature draws on experiences from established democracies in Europe and North America, a growing body of scholarship documents participatory governance innovations in the Global South. Wampler's (2007) comparative study of participatory budgeting in Brazil demonstrated that citizen-led budgetary processes could enhance resource allocation equity, reduce corruption, and strengthen democratic accountability. South Africa's public participation requirements in post-apartheid governance (Piper & Nadvi, 2010), India's

gram sabha village assemblies, and diverse African citizen engagement experiments all provide evidence for the feasibility and impact of participatory models in lower-income and transitional democratic contexts.

Pakistan presents a particularly significant context for the PPC. The country's democratic trajectory has been marked by institutional fragility, low public trust, elite capture of policy processes, and persistent governance deficits (Khan, 2021; UNDP, 2020). At the same time, Pakistan's young, digitally connected population, its tradition of community mobilisation, and its experience with localisation reforms — including the devolution experiments under the Local Government Ordinance 2001 — provide a foundation upon which participatory policy architectures could be constructed. The PPC is offered as a conceptual contribution to this agenda.

Postulations of the Participatory Policy Cycle

The following postulations provide theoretically grounded propositions for each phase of the PPC. Each postulation is presented with its conceptual foundation, its distinctive contribution to the cycle, and its expected outcomes. The postulations are intended to be empirically testable, providing a foundation for future experimental and comparative research.

Phase 01: Agenda Creation: The Epistemic Foundation of Participatory Governance

Conceptual Foundation

Agenda Creation is the phase through which the PPC begins: citizens, through structured and evidence-informed national dialogues, identify and prioritize the most urgent challenges confronting their communities and nation. This phase draws conceptually from three traditions. First, from deliberative democracy, it incorporates the principle that agenda-setting must be a communicative process open to all affected voices rather than a technocratic pre-selection of problems (Habermas, 1996). Second, from Kingdon's (1984) Multiple Streams Framework, it recognizes that effective agenda-setting requires not merely the identification of problems but the construction of shared narratives about their urgency and tractability. Third, from the epistemic democracy literature (Landmore, 2013), it draws on the argument that diverse groups collectively possess superior problem-identification capacities to those of homogeneous expert panels.

Postulation

Postulation P1: Citizen-led, evidence-informed agenda creation processes, incorporating structured national dialogues that systematically harvest diverse experiential knowledge, will produce policy agendas that are more epistemically comprehensive, more responsive to the lived realities of marginalized populations, and more publicly legitimate than agendas produced by technocratic elite processes.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

The mechanisms through which this postulation operates include: (a) the aggregation of distributed knowledge through structured dialogue, enabling problems invisible to central actors to surface; (b) the deliberative transformation of personal grievances into shared problem definitions through reasoning and mutual exposure; (c) the enhancement of public sense of ownership over the resulting agenda, reducing implementation resistance; and (d) the creation of an evidence base — drawn from citizens' experiential data — that complements and challenges technocratic problem framings.

Expected outcomes include a policy agenda that reflects the full spectrum of national challenges rather than elite priorities; increased public engagement with the policy process from its inception; and the identification of innovative problem framings that may not emerge from conventional consultations. Specific mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, digital participatory platforms, and structured community dialogues provide the operational infrastructure for this phase.

Phase 02: Policy Co-Creation: Collaborative Intelligence in Policy Design

Conceptual Foundation

Policy Co-Creation is the phase in which identified priority challenges are transformed into actionable policy proposals through structured collaboration between citizens and technical experts. This phase draws on the co-production literature (Ostrom, 1996; Bovaird, 2007), design thinking methodology (Brown, 2008), and the concept of collaborative intelligence — the enhanced problem-solving capacity that emerges from structured interaction between experiential and technical knowledge holders (Noveck, 2015).

The key insight motivating this phase is that neither citizen experiential knowledge nor technical expert knowledge is individually sufficient for high-quality policy design. Citizens possess situated, contextual understanding of problem dynamics, implementation barriers, and community assets; experts possess theoretical models, comparative evidence, and technical feasibility assessments. Co-creation provides structured processes through which these knowledge types are productively integrated.

Postulation

Postulation P2: Policy proposals developed through structured co-creation processes that integrate citizen experiential knowledge with expert technical knowledge via facilitated collaborative design will demonstrate superior implementability, contextual fit, and innovative potential compared to proposals developed through conventional expert-only design processes.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

Co-creation operates through iterative cycles of empathy, problem definition, ideation, prototyping, and feedback mirroring the design thinking process. Citizens bring lived-experience validation to technical proposals, identifying implementation barriers before they become costly failures. Experts bring evidence from comparable contexts and technical feasibility assessment. The resulting proposals reflect this joint intelligence. Expected outcomes include policies with higher local contextual fit; identification of innovative solutions that neither citizen nor expert groups would generate independently; early identification and mitigation of implementation risks; and stronger stakeholder ownership of the resulting proposals.

Phase 03: Public Validation: Collective Deliberation as Quality Assurance

Conceptual Foundation

Public Validation is the phase in which co-created policy proposals undergo broad public deliberation, review, ranking, critique, and strengthening before advancing to advocacy and implementation. This phase is grounded in epistemic democratic theory (Estlund, 2008; Landemore, 2013), which holds that aggregated collective deliberation has superior error-correcting properties compared to individual expert judgment. It also draws on the open innovation literature (Chesbrough, 2003) and peer-review models from scientific practice, adapting them to public policy contexts.

Postulation

Postulation P3: Structured public validation processes incorporating systematic peer review, collective ranking, and deliberative strengthening of policy proposals by diverse citizen participants — will identify proposal weaknesses, generate constructive amendments, and produce a public validation signal that significantly reduces the likelihood of large-scale policy failure.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

The mechanisms include: crowd-sourced identification of implementation weaknesses and unintended consequences; the wisdom-of-crowds effect in proposal ranking, which surfaces broadly preferred options over those favored by narrow expert or interest-group preferences; the public commitment effect, through which validation participants become invested advocates for validated proposals; and the legitimation function of broad public endorsement. Expected outcomes include a reduction in type-I (false-positive) policy errors; the generation of constructive amendments that strengthen proposals; the identification of emerging public concerns before implementation; and a publicly visible validation signal that strengthens advocacy efforts in the subsequent phase.

Phase 04: Policy Advocacy: Mobilizing Change through Multi-Channel Communication

Conceptual Foundation

Policy Advocacy is the phase in which validated proposals are championed through systematic communications strategies designed to build political will, public awareness, and stakeholder coalitions. This phase draws on social movement theory (Tarrow, 1994), framing theory (Entman, 1993), and the policy advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). It recognises that technically superior policies routinely fail to be adopted due to insufficient advocacy capacity a gap that the PPC seeks to address by developing citizens as advocacy actors.

Postulation

Postulation P4: Citizen-led advocacy campaigns for PPC-validated policy proposals employing strategic multi-channel communication across policy dialogue, media engagement, and digital influence initiatives will generate broader and more durable political coalitions for reform than

conventional interest-group lobbying, owing to the legitimacy premium conferred by the preceding agenda creation, co-creation, and validation phases.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

Advocacy in the PPC context is distinguished from conventional lobbying by its grounding in a process of extensive participatory legitimation. Citizens advocating for PPC outputs can credibly invoke the breadth and quality of the deliberative process from which proposals emerged, providing a powerful rhetorical and political resource. Multi-channel advocacy spanning formal policy dialogues with decision-makers, media and journalistic partnerships, and digital communication campaigns maximizes reach across institutional, mass media, and networked publics. Expected outcomes include expanded coalitions of support across civil society, media, and political actors; accelerated adoption timelines relative to conventionally developed proposals; and greater durability of adopted policies due to broad public ownership.

Phase 05: Impact Execution: From Policy Innovation to Measurable Change

Conceptual Foundation

Impact Execution is the phase in which validated and advocated policy proposals are transformed into tangible initiatives — pilot projects, impact ventures, strategic partnerships, and national development programmes — with clearly defined, measurable outcomes. This phase draws on public sector programme management literature (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), social enterprise and impact investment frameworks (Nicholls, 2009), and the agile implementation literature (Mergel et al., 2019). It recognises that the gap between policy adoption and policy impact — the 'implementation gap' (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) — is one of the most persistent sources of governance failure.

Postulation

Postulation P5: PPC-derived policies, when implemented through iterative pilot projects designed with citizen participation, clear measurement frameworks, and strategic multi-sector partnerships, will demonstrate superior implementation fidelity, faster scale-up trajectories, and more equitable benefit distribution compared to conventionally implemented public policies.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

The mechanisms include: the ownership and commitment effect generated by preceding participatory phases, reducing citizen resistance and increasing voluntary compliance; the contextual intelligence embedded in co-created proposals, reducing adaptation costs at implementation; the pilot-before-scale logic, enabling evidence-based refinement before full national rollout; and strategic multi-sector partnership, which leverages private, civil society, and academic resources alongside state capacity. Expected outcomes include reduced implementation failure rates; generation of locally validated evidence of impact; more rapid adaptation to implementation challenges; and demonstration effects that generate political support for scale-up.

Phase 06: Real-Time Evaluation: Adaptive Learning as Governance Infrastructure

Conceptual Foundation

Real-Time Evaluation is the phase through which the PPC maintains its adaptive capacity: citizen feedback, policy intelligence systems, data-driven assessment, and adaptive learning loops are systematically deployed to continuously improve active policies and feed insights back into the cycle's earlier phases. This phase draws on the monitoring and evaluation literature (Patton, 2011), the learning organization concept (Senge, 1990), adaptive management theory (Holling, 1978), and the emerging field of civic data infrastructure (Verhulst & Young, 2017).

The critical innovation of this phase is its insistence on real-time, ongoing, and citizen-engaged evaluation, rather than the periodic, expert-led, and retrospective evaluation that characterizes conventional public sector monitoring. This shift from evaluation-as-audit to evaluation-as-learning fundamentally changes the relationship between evidence and action: insights generated through ongoing monitoring immediately inform adaptive adjustments rather than awaiting the next policy cycle.

Postulation

Postulation P6: Real-time, citizen-engaged evaluation systems integrating continuous feedback mechanisms, policy intelligence analytics, and adaptive learning loops will enable faster identification and correction of implementation failures, reduce the cumulative cost of policy errors, and generate a dynamic evidence base that continuously improves both current policy performance and the quality of future iterations of the Participatory Policy Cycle.

Mechanisms and Expected Outcomes

The mechanisms include: real-time citizen feedback through digital and community-based channels, providing continuous performance data that official monitoring systems cannot capture; policy intelligence analytics that transform raw feedback data into actionable insights for policy managers; adaptive learning loops that connect evaluation findings to immediate operational adjustments; and feedback pathways that route systemic insights from Phase 06 back to Phases 01 and 02, enabling evidence-informed agenda revision and co-design improvement. Expected outcomes include earlier detection of implementation problems; faster error correction; accumulation of a rich evidence base for policy learning; increased public confidence in government responsiveness; and the progressive strengthening of the PPC framework itself through iterative refinement.

The Conceptual Model of the Participatory Policy Cycle

Overview of the Model

The PPC is conceptualized as a dynamic, iterative, and non-linear governance architecture in which six interdependent phases form a continuous loop of civic action. Unlike linear policy models, the PPC does not posit a single, terminal endpoint; rather, evaluation findings continuously feed back into agenda creation and co-design, generating successive cycles of improvement. The model is structured around three core architectural principles.

First, the principle of citizen centrality: citizens are not passive beneficiaries or periodic consultees but active Policy Entrepreneurs who exercise meaningful agency across all six phases. This is operationalized through institutional design that creates genuine decision-making power not merely advisory roles — for citizen participants. Second, the principle of multi-actor collaboration: the PPC integrates citizens, policy experts, researchers, strategists, reform architects, civil society organizations, media actors, private sector partners, and state institutions into a structured collaborative ecosystem. No single actor type dominates; authority is distributed and negotiated through deliberative processes. Third, the principle of adaptive learning: the cycle is designed to learn and improve over time, with real-time evaluation feeding insights back into earlier phases and each iteration of the cycle building on accumulated evidence.

Architecture of the Six-Phase Cycle

The six phases of the PPC are organized in a sequential but iteratively connected architecture. Phase 01 (Agenda Creation) generates the priority problem agenda that structures Phase 02 (Policy Co-Creation). The co-designed proposals produced in Phase 02 enter Phase 03 (Public Validation), where they are refined through collective deliberation. Validated proposals are taken up by Phase 04 (Policy Advocacy), which generates the political and public coalitions required for Phase 05 (Impact Execution). The implementation processes of Phase 05 generate performance data that enters Phase 06 (Real-Time Evaluation), whose findings feed back into Phase 01, initiating a new cycle of problem prioritization informed by implementation evidence.

Critically, the model also incorporates lateral feedback connections between non-adjacent phases. Phase 06 findings may directly trigger revisions in Phase 02 (if implementation evidence reveals design flaws) or Phase 03 (if validation criteria require updating in light of new evidence). Phase 04 advocacy campaigns may surface new problem definitions that enrich Phase 01 dialogues. Phase 05 pilot evidence may generate new co-design opportunities that re-engage Phase 02 processes. These lateral connections prevent the model from becoming rigidly sequential and ensure its adaptive responsiveness to emerging evidence and changing contexts.

The Actor Ecosystem

The PPC's actor ecosystem is structured around four concentric engagement tiers. The innermost tier comprises citizen Policy Entrepreneurs, those who engage deeply across multiple phases, developing policy literacy, co-design skills, advocacy capacity, and evaluative competencies. The second tier comprises civil society intermediaries non-governmental organizations, community associations, professional bodies, and academic institutions that provide technical support, facilitate processes, and amplify citizen voices. The third tier comprises state partners — government departments, regulatory agencies, and public institutions that provide institutional authority, implementation resources, and data access. The outer tier comprises media, private sector, and international partners that provide communication channels, implementation resources, and comparative learning opportunities.

This tiered ecosystem is deliberately designed to be inclusive and scalable: it accommodates both intensive engagement by committed Policy Entrepreneurs and lighter-touch participation by

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broader publics. Digital platforms and community-based channels provide multiple access points, enabling participation at intensities suited to diverse citizens' capacities and interests.

The Knowledge Architecture

The PPC is premised on a pluralistic epistemology that recognizes multiple legitimate forms of knowledge relevant to policy-making. Experiential knowledge — held by citizens who live with the consequences of policies — is granted equal status with technical knowledge held by domain experts — and political knowledge — held by governance practitioners who understand implementation contexts. The six-phase cycle is designed as a structured process for integrating these knowledge types productively: Agenda Creation privileges experiential knowledge; Co-Creation integrates experiential and technical knowledge; Validation aggregates distributed collective knowledge; Advocacy leverages political knowledge; Execution combines technical and political knowledge; and Evaluation synthesizes all three knowledge types to generate meta-level learning.

Digital Infrastructure and the PPC

Contemporary implementation of the PPC is enabled and accelerated by digital infrastructure. Phase 01 dialogues can be conducted through digital deliberation platforms, mobile civic applications, and structured online consultations, which dramatically expand the geographic and demographic reach of agenda-creation processes. Phase 02 co-creation can be supported by collaborative design tools, open data portals, and virtual co-design workshops. Phase 03 validation can leverage online proposal review systems, crowdsourced rating mechanisms, and digital deliberative tools. Phase 04 advocacy is amplified through social media strategies, digital campaign infrastructure, and online policy-dialogue platforms. Phase 05 execution benefits from digital project management, open contracting data standards, and e-governance delivery systems. Phase 06 evaluation is transformed by real-time data dashboards, citizen feedback applications, and machine-learning-assisted policy intelligence analytics.

The digital layer does not replace face-to-face deliberation, community mobilization, or institutional engagement; it complements and extends them, enabling the PPC to achieve the scale, speed, and inclusivity that purely offline participatory processes cannot attain.

Table 1: Summary of the Participatory Policy Cycle

Phase	Name	Core Actors	Primary Outcome
01	Agenda Creation	Citizens, Facilitators, Data Analysts	Evidence-based national priority agenda
02	Policy Co-Creation	Citizens, Policy Experts, Researchers, Strategists	Contextually-grounded, innovative policy proposals
03	Public Validation	Citizens, Civil Society, Peer Reviewers	Validated, refined, publicly endorsed proposals
04	Policy Advocacy	Citizens, Media, Civil Society, Political Allies	Political will and public coalitions for reform
05	Impact Execution	Citizens, State Agencies, Private Sector, NGOs	Measurable pilot outcomes and scaled initiatives
06	Real-Time Evaluation	Citizens, Data Policymakers, Evaluators, Scientists,	Adaptive learning and continuous cycle improvement

Impact of the Participatory Policy Cycle

Enhancing Policy Legitimacy

Perhaps the most fundamental impact of the PPC is its potential to restore public trust in policy institutions through procedural legitimacy. Procedural justice theory (Tyler, 1990) demonstrates that citizens evaluate the legitimacy of outcomes not only by their substantive quality but by the fairness, inclusivity, and transparency of the processes through which they were produced. A policy developed through the PPC's six-phase citizen engagement architecture carries a legitimacy premium that conventionally produced policies cannot achieve: citizens who have participated in agenda creation, co-design, validation, and advocacy are significantly more likely to comply voluntarily, defend publicly, and actively support the implementation of the resulting policies.

This legitimacy effect is particularly consequential in contexts of low institutional trust, such as Pakistan, many African nations, and other Global South democracies, where public cynicism about governance creates implementation resistance that undermines even technically well-designed policies. The PPC's procedural legitimacy premium represents a structural solution to this challenge, addressing the trust deficit not through communications campaigns but through genuine power-sharing in the policy process.

Improving Epistemic Quality

The PPC's multi-phase integration of experiential, technical, and political knowledge is expected to produce policies with superior epistemic quality more accurate problem diagnoses, more contextually appropriate solutions, and more realistic implementation strategies. The epistemic democracy literature (Landmore, 2013; Estlund, 2008) provides theoretical support for this claim, and empirical evidence from participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, and co-design experiments offers practical corroboration (Fishkin, 2009; Wampler, 2007).

Specifically, the co-creation and validation phases are expected to reduce type-I errors (adopting policies that do not work) by subjecting proposals to multi-layered deliberative scrutiny before implementation. The real-time evaluation phase is expected to reduce type-II errors (abandoning policies that would have worked) by providing adaptive mechanisms to improve policy designs during implementation, rather than waiting for terminal evaluations. The combined effect is a policy process with significantly improved error-correction capacity.

Strengthening Civic Capacity and Democratic Culture

Beyond its direct policy outcomes, the PPC is expected to generate significant civic capacity benefits. Citizens who engage as Policy Entrepreneurs across multiple phases of the cycle develop policy literacy, understanding of how governance works, what evidence looks like, how trade-offs are assessed. They develop deliberative competencies and the capacity to engage constructively with diverse perspectives, reason with evidence, and build coalitions. They develop advocacy skills: the ability to communicate policy ideas persuasively and to navigate political processes effectively.

These capacity gains accumulate over successive cycles of the PPC, progressively strengthening the civic infrastructure of participating communities and nations. The PPC thus operates simultaneously as a policy-making mechanism and as a civic education program generating not only better policies but better-equipped citizens, a resource that compounds in value over time. This dimension is particularly significant for post-colonial democracies seeking to build substantive rather than merely procedural democratic cultures.

Accelerating Innovation in the Public Sector

By incorporating citizens' diverse experiential knowledge and creative perspectives into policy design, the PPC creates conditions for policy innovation that expert-only systems cannot replicate. The history of public sector innovation reveals a consistent pattern: many of the most transformative policy ideas have originated from citizens and communities, not from government departments (Bason, 2010; OECD, 2017). Participatory budgeting originated from citizen activists in Porto Alegre; conditional cash transfer programmes were refined through recipient community feedback; many digital government services were redesigned after user co-creation processes revealed design flaws invisible to their creators.

The PPC provides a systematic channel to harness this citizen-led innovation potential at scale. By institutionalizing the co-creation and validation phases, it transforms occasional participatory innovation from an exceptional practice into a structural feature of the governance system.

Implications for Pakistan and the Global South

For Pakistan specifically, the PPC offers a structured response to several interconnected governance challenges: the need to rebuild public trust through genuine power-sharing; the opportunity to harness the creative and intellectual capital of a young, educated, and digitally connected population; the requirement for contextually intelligent policies that address the specific challenges of Pakistani communities rather than transplanting foreign models; and the imperative to develop a new generation of civic leaders Policy Entrepreneurs capable of sustaining democratic governance beyond electoral cycles.

The Jibran Bashir Leadership Institute is positioned to serve as a national hub for PPC implementation in Pakistan, providing facilitation expertise, analytical support, capacity development

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for citizen Policy Entrepreneurs, and evaluation infrastructure. Its work could provide the empirical evidence base required to test the postulations advanced in this paper and to refine the PPC framework through iterative application.

More broadly, the PPC is relevant to any governance context characterized by participatory deficit, institutional trust challenges, and the need for innovative, contextually adapted policy solutions — conditions that describe many democracies across the Global South and, increasingly, established democracies confronting legitimacy crises of their own.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced, theorized, and systematically postulated the Participatory Policy Cycle a six-phase framework that reconceptualizes citizens as active Policy Entrepreneurs across the full policy process. By integrating insights from deliberative democracy, co-production theory, design thinking, public sector innovation, and adaptive governance, the PPC offers a theoretically grounded and practically oriented response to the twin crises of democratic legitimacy and policy quality that characterize contemporary governance.

The six postulations advanced in this paper concerning Agenda Creation, Policy Co-Creation, Public Validation, Policy Advocacy, Impact Execution, and Real-Time Evaluation provide a foundation for empirical research that can test, refine, and ultimately strengthen the framework. The conceptual model articulates the relationships between phases, actors, and feedback mechanisms in a way that is both theoretically rigorous and practically implementable.

The PPC is not presented as a universal blueprint; governance contexts vary enormously in their institutional capacities, civic traditions, digital infrastructure, and political cultures. Rather, it is offered as an adaptable framework whose core principles citizen centrality, multi-actor collaboration, knowledge pluralism, and adaptive learning can be translated into diverse contextual implementations while preserving the structural integrity of the cycle.

The expected impacts of the PPC enhanced policy legitimacy, superior epistemic quality, strengthened civic capacity, and accelerated public sector innovation represent not merely technical governance improvements but a deeper democratic transformation. The ultimate aspiration of the PPC is a governance system in which every citizen is equipped and empowered to act as a Policy Entrepreneur: identifying problems, designing solutions, validating options, advocating for change, executing initiatives, and learning continuously. Such a system would not merely produce better policies; it would produce a more deeply democratic society.

Future research should rigorously test the six postulations through experimental designs, comparative case studies, and longitudinal evaluations of PPC implementations. Particular attention should be paid to the conditions under which citizen participation produces the predicted epistemic and legitimacy benefits; the design features of digital platforms that best support the cycle's phases; the capacity development interventions most effective in cultivating citizen Policy Entrepreneurs; and the governance and institutional arrangements that can sustain the PPC across political transitions.

The Participatory Policy Cycle is as much a vision as a framework: a vision of governance as a continuous, collaborative, and adaptive conversation between citizens and institutions, in which the energy, knowledge, and creativity of entire populations are harnessed in the service of the common good. Its realization will require sustained commitment from civic leaders, policy innovators, academic researchers, and democratic reformers. This paper is offered as a contribution to that shared and urgent endeavor.

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