

Democratic Innovations as a Tool to Restore Trust and Citizens' Participation: A Comparison Between Stakeholder Groups in Italy

FELICE ADDEO, DOMENICO FRUNCILLO
AND DOMENICO MADDALONI



Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 21, No. 3
DOI: 10.2478/pce-2025-0019

Abstract: *Recent changes in European countries have stimulated the search for multilevel policy interventions to restore citizens' trust and engagement, focusing specifically on democratic innovations. Our paper presents the results of a survey conducted in 2025 as part of the Horizon TRUEDEM project, focusing on the views of civil society organisations' leaders and activists on the Italian case. Despite positive experiences, such as local initiatives and referendums, the paper highlights the crisis of trust weighing on democratic participation in Italy, testified by rising abstention rates and disaffection with institutions. By analysing the opinions that emerged in focus groups, we identify significant differences between the various stakeholders and propose concrete actions to revitalise democratic practices, including the need for civic education and the creation of spaces for dialogue. The paper highlights the complexity of the interactions between democratic innovations and political trust in Italy and proposes an integration of perspectives from different levels of civil society to address the current crisis.*

Keywords: *Trust, Citizens' participation, Democratic innovations, Civil society organisations, Italy, Focus group*

Recent changes in political trust and democratic participation in European countries have inspired the search for multilevel institutional interventions to restore both trust and citizens' political involvement at national and local levels. In this context, the case of Italy is of particular relevance since this country has experienced a pronounced decline in both trust and political participation in

recent years, especially compared to other countries in the European Union (Norris 2022; Chiaramonte & Emanuele 2022; Addeo et al. 2025). This paper aims to present some results of a survey carried out between April and June 2025, explicitly devoted to the collection and analysis of the opinions and attitudes of different categories of stakeholders (namely, responsible persons from civil society organisations) and about a specific group of institutional interventions – that is, so-called ‘democratic innovations’ (Gonthier et al. 2024; see also Veraldi & Oddo 2024). The latter are ‘processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence’ (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 14, in Gonthier et al. 2024: 7). More specifically, we focus on petitions, popular initiatives bills, referendums, participatory budgets (PBs) and mini-publics, both at national and local levels, promoted through conventional (face-to-face) and digital channels, both by public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs), such as trade unions, NGOs or grassroots local movements.

Following Gonthier et al. (2024), our approach does not aim to replace current representative democratic regimes with a combination of direct or deliberative democracy. Instead, we convene on the idea that ‘deliberation, direct participation, and delegation to representatives can be creatively combined at different stages of the decision-making process’ (McLaverty 2009; Parkinson 2006; Saward 2000) (Gonthier et al. 2024: 7). Moreover, according to the authors mentioned above, there is a relationship between democratic innovations and political trust, based mainly on the role of political efficacy as a proxy. Also, a number of intermediate factors are identified in the current literature on democratic innovation as necessary conditions for their functioning as trust enablers: for instance, transparency and fairness of the participatory process, its endurance and institutionalisation, and the degree of social and political polarisation (*ibid.*).

Based on this framework, we investigated the Italian case. The Italian political system already offers various interesting examples of democratic innovations. Citizens may propose referendums, petitions and popular initiative bills at a national level. Not only are these practices allowed locally, but there have been some interesting experiences of participatory budgeting and popular assemblies (Tisserand et al. 2025). At the same time, however, Italy is also a country that seems to have experienced – just like some Central European countries – a sharp decline in voter turnout (the clearest indicator of citizen participation in democratic life) as well as trust in institutions and political actors (Addeo et al. 2025). This seems to have generated a climate of mistrust and disaffection that to some extent has also affected democratic innovation mechanisms.

Here, our research questions are to assess (1) how different types of stakeholders perceive the issue of democratic innovation in Italy, and (2) which

avenues they identify in order to make these practices work and improve their effectiveness. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to briefly summarise the literature on experiences of democratic innovation in Italy. A short description of our research methodology will follow. Finally, we propose an analysis of the main results obtained, followed by some concluding observations aimed at the scientific and policy implications of our results.

Democratic innovations in Italy: A literature review from a social sciences perspective

As we have seen, the concept of ‘democratic innovation’ is well-established in international debates on social and political change (Moro 2009). However, there is no uniformity of definitions or a single approach to research on this topic. Furthermore, the concept of democratic innovation has struggled to gain ground in Italy, partly due to substantial resistance within the academic world to anything perceived as ‘new’ and, therefore, potentially dangerous to established scientific dynamics. There is still no explicit recognition of a disciplinary field that is hybrid in nature, bringing together political science, political sociology, media studies and public law (De Blasio & Sorice 2016).

In this regard, the most significant academic reflection on democratic innovations is perhaps the white paper published by the commission established in 2021 by the Ministry for Relations with Parliament on institutional innovations and technological tools helpful in increasing citizens’ political participation (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022). It contains practical recommendations for simplifying and digitising forms of political participation. In particular, it highlights that the National Referendum Platform, established in 2021, facilitates the collection of signatures for referendums and popular initiative bills, introducing digital methods for citizens to sign up. In addition, the paper recommends combining electoral and referendum procedures into a single election day in order to facilitate the achievement of the quorum necessary to ensure the legal validity of the procedure and its results. This suggestion could be of great importance, given that only one national referendum out of nine failed to reach the 50% voter turnout threshold between 1974 and 1995. In contrast, between 1997 and 2025, only one national referendum out of nine reached the threshold (Rainews 2022, Ansa 2025). What is more, since 2011, no national-level referendum question has reached the threshold required for its results to be valid. However, our focus is not only on national referendums but on the whole set of instruments of direct and deliberative democracy.

In this context, no single literature review comprehensively synthesises and analytically discusses all contemporary democratic innovations across mechanisms (petitions, initiatives, referendums, PBs, mini-publics, digital, NGO/grassroots) with a robust interdisciplinary analysis of citizen participation and in-

stitutional effectiveness for the Italian general population. However, high-quality empirical and comparative syntheses are available for participatory budgeting and Tuscany-centred deliberative democracy (Florida 2012, 2013; Bortolotti & Corsi 2012), while other mechanisms remain significantly under-reviewed.

To name just a few of these studies, Alber and Valdesalici (2015) provide a comparative analysis of both institutional innovation and participatory democracy at the subnational level, focusing on 'institutionalised' pathways and their inclusionary/exclusionary results. Bassoli (2012) offers a comparative case study of PB outcomes on democracy, which focuses on inclusion, participation, opposition and transparency, and suggests that leadership and inclusive strategies mediate sustained participation and meaningful democratic impact. Allegretti, Bassoli and Colavolpe (2021) provide an in-depth empirical study of PB in five regions (Tuscany, Sicily, Emilia Romagna, Apulia, Lazio), linking legal frameworks, participatory culture and effective diffusion/implementation. The authors argue that formal legalisation is necessary but insufficient – monitoring, evaluation and community anchoring are crucial. Finally, Mattei, Santolamazza and Grandis (2022) conducted a deductive content analysis and a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis on the PB regulations of 100 Italian municipalities. Their findings suggest that the PB design cannot always guarantee citizens' involvement. 'Successful' municipalities engage citizens from the beginning and in the most relevant phases of the deliberative process. A simple legislative provision does not guarantee genuine involvement in participatory governance.

From a sociological perspective, the most important findings of these analyses concern the demographics of participation. PB and mini-publics usually attract older, male, highly-educated participants; open-call models compromise inclusion unless stratified sampling is applied (Bassoli 2012; Lewanski 2013). Apparently, the social profile of participants in recent national referendums on civil, social and labour rights is not different (Ipsos 2025). Another significant finding in the literature on democratic innovations in Italy refers to the role of civil society. Some studies see this as vital, both as a driver (mobilisation, advocacy, watchdogging) and as a gatekeeper (channelling participation, sometimes unintentionally reinforcing exclusions) of political participation (Bassoli 2012; Russo 2014). For instance, research on democratic innovation in Alto Adige/Südtirol (a northern Italian region with mainly German-speaking residents) has shown that:

In order for democratic innovations to truly bridge the democratic deficit, they need a genuine culture of participation, as well as resources and time. This culture of participation is characterized by the search for consensual solutions through participatory dialogue and debate between decision-makers and citizens, rather than through voting. (Alber 2023: 254)

As for the implementation rates, the adoption of the PB project, when the budget is ring-fenced, exceeds 50%. On the contrary, non-earmarked PB, or mini-public outputs, see lower rates and high inter-municipal variance (Bassoli 2012; Allegratti, Bassoli & Colavolpe 2021).

When considered in relation to international literature on democratic innovations (Gonthier et al. 2024), these results confirm some crucial points in the debate on non-representative forms of modern democracy. We refer in particular to political efficacy as a variable mediating between the institutional environment, citizens' trust in the political system and democratic participation. 'Political efficacy encompasses two dimensions: internal efficacy, which relates to individuals' self-perception of their ability to grasp and participate in political processes, and external efficacy, which pertains to their sense of influence over government actions' (Gonthier 2024: 12). Trust is reinforced when citizens perceive that their input may lead to change (external efficacy). When innovations are dismissed, ignored or blocked, trust erodes further. Moreover, empirical results from research conducted in Italy confirm that democratic innovations mainly involve groups of people who (for social or cultural reasons) have a subjective perception of political efficacy. They tend to involve more the 'critical' citizens (often highly skilled and with middle- or high-income), and less the 'disaffected' ones (less educated and with lower income) (Dalton & Welzel 2014; Hooghe, Marien & Oser 2017; Norris 2011; Walsh & Elkins 2021; Warren 2018; Webb 2013). Moreover, they offer some proof that 'distinct types of innovation, along with their unique designs, produce different outcomes among citizens' (Gonthier et al. 2024: 17).

However, we do not know how much these differences matter to organised actors in civil society. Apparently, it is assumed that they are all, more or less, equally interested in the development of mechanisms of direct democracy or deliberative democracy. However, we could also find the differences among citizens in movements, associations, nonprofit organisations and trade unions. Our research pathway has led us to investigate this very issue.

Research methodology

Our survey focused on the stakeholders in democracy, i.e. leaders of civil society organisations (trade unions, business associations, organisations defending democracy, minority rights movements), at both national and local levels. The survey methodology identified was the World Café method, which is a structured conversational process designed to facilitate open and collaborative dialogue in a group of people (from 9 to 12 persons) (Slocum 2003). However, given our research interest in uncovering divergent perspectives and structural tensions across stakeholder groups, we opted for the Focus Group technique (Bloor et al.

2001; Kristiansen & Grønkjær 2018), which is better suited to exploring disagreement, scepticism and conflicting institutional experiences.

The literature cited above highlights the main differences between the World Café and Focus Group techniques. The former evolved in the context of peace research and conflict resolution and aims to achieve consensus among those involved. Conversely, the latter is now a classic social research and marketing technique aimed at highlighting both elements of convergence and potential conflict. However, despite their differences, the two techniques enable communication between different individuals. From this perspective, an element of interest for social research is that each of the debates we organised involved people belonging to specific categories of democratic politics stakeholders in the current context of crisis. This allows us to compare different sentiments and attitudes towards the current state and future prospects of democratic innovations in Italy.

More specifically, we organised three focus groups, each aimed at a particular target group among the Italian CSOs:

- 1) Representatives of tertiary student associations active in our university: We contacted about twelve people, four of whom participated in the face-to-face debate held in a lecture hall at the University of Salerno (lasting just over an hour);
- 2) Representatives of local civil society organisations in Salerno: We contacted about fifteen people, seven of whom participated in the face-to-face debate held at a marketing research agency in the city of Salerno (lasting over an hour and a half);
- 3) Representatives of national civil society associations: We contacted around eighteen people, of whom only three were able to participate in the debate we held via Google Meet (which lasted about an hour and a half).

We started organising the events in April 2025 and held the three focus groups in May and June of the same year. We have aggregated some information about the participants in each discussion group in the table below (see Table 1).

It is worth noting that our survey was carried out in a climate of disaffection towards the mechanisms of democracy (including direct and deliberative democracy). This general mood, already widespread among the Italian public (Cattolica News 2024), grew even more disaffected during the campaign for the national referendums on social and workers' rights on 8 and 9 June 2025 and the subsequent failure to achieve the quorum required by law for the validity of the consultation. The five questions were aimed at (1) restoring the possibility of reinstatement of workers in their jobs in all cases of unlawful dismissal; (2) removing the cap on compensation for unlawful dismissals in companies with fewer than 15 employees; (3) abolishing specific rules governing the possibility of establishing fixed-term contracts and the conditions for their extensions and

Table 1: Focus groups participants

Name ¹	FG no.	Gender	Age group	Organisation type	Organisational role	Territorial level
Claudia	1	W	under 35	Student	Leader	Local
Luigi	1	M	under 35	Student	President	Local
Marianna	1	W	under 35	Student	Leader	Local
Michela	1	W	under 35	Student	Activist	Local
Alberta	2	W	under 35	Environment	Activist	Local
Laura	2	W	over 55	Welfare	Leader	Local
Luisa	2	W	under 35	Environment	Activist	Local
Mario	2	M	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	Regional
Olindo	2	M	over 55	Welfare	President	Local
Paola	2	W	over 55	Welfare	Coordinator	Local
Ugo	2	M	over 55	Advocacy	President	Regional
Fabrizio	3	M	over 55	Welfare	Leader	National
Giovanni	3	M	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	National
Manuela	3	W	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	National

Source: Authors

renewals; (4) repealing the provision that excludes joint and several liabilities of the client, contractor and subcontractor for accidents at work arising from risks specific to the activities of contractors or subcontractors; (5) cutting from 10 to 5 years the period of legal residence in Italy required for non-EU foreigners of legal age to apply for Italian citizenship. The committee promoting the referendum included Italy's main trade union and various civil society associations. While the centre-left parties had called for people to vote, the governing parties had called for abstention. The result was therefore seen as a victory for the right-wing government and also as proof that discouragement prevails among a large part of the electorate (Fanpage 2025). Indeed, our research findings (see below, sections 3 and 4) confirm that this growing disillusionment and disaffection with democratic life is also widespread among representatives of civil society movements and organisations. It is also worth noting that the small number of participants in our research and the qualitative nature of the methodology used highlight the exploratory nature of our results.

¹ For reasons related to personal data protection, we have changed the names of the participants in the debates.

We analysed the content of each debate using two different routes: a classical content analysis based on interpretive procedures (Silverman 2010, 2015), and a comparative analysis based on AI tools (namely, Qwen and Chat GPT). The following is a reasoned summary of the results we have obtained, aimed at comparing the sentiments and attitudes of the above-mentioned stakeholder groups on the issue at stake.

Democratic innovations in Italy: A comparison between different categories of stakeholders

Actors involved in democratic innovations include activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and networks that actively contribute to advancing democratic processes. These actors offer valuable practical experience, facilitate dialogue and promote collaboration between different social groups and categories, improving the quality of governance and citizen participation (Gonthier et al. 2024). The three debates we held with these actors confirmed this view with regard to Italy. Still, there were some significant differences depending on the type of actors asked about the situation, problems and prospects for citizen participation, which were unfiltered by the political class. We will, therefore, begin by examining the results with a summary of the points of convergence between the three groups of stakeholders before highlighting the differences.

As regards the current state of democratic innovation in Italy, some participants see positive elements. Among these, significant local experiences are often cited, such as those related to some local-level referendums, participatory budgeting and university petitions.

However, the referendum is already an important incentive to participate in the vote. For me, a referendum in my municipality was important because it helped me understand our fellow citizens' views on a particular issue. Of course, it was consultative, but it is a tool for participation. So I think it is important. Then it depends on how it is applied (Michela, student association).

We launched a petition for a lunch break, and now the lunch break in the (name of department) is regulated, thanks to that petition... So, in my opinion, with the right methods, that is, with the right implementation, I think it is a functional tool that can be (useful) (Marianna, student association).

Respondents highlight a still widespread civic engagement at the local level, especially in the areas of community and social welfare.

The third sector also often manages to anticipate needs, rather than just filling gaps (Paola, local CSO).

However, other forms of democratic innovation can be seen... from energy to housing to food to mobility, albeit to a lesser extent. In short, creating places linked to people's daily lives... Very often there are interesting forms of collaboration between mayors and local associations, between mayors and businesses. The point is that they are often on a very limited scale, but they do exist (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Some tools (in particular digital platforms) are seen as effective if well managed and supported by a culture of participation.

One positive thing is that (mini-public policy) promotes digital technology, which is important, and currently digital technology... Also, the fact that it's not just a game, it's more than when we go to vote. In my opinion, we certainly express our thoughts there, but it's a very passive thing, i.e., we go there, there's no dialogue on the issues we face when we go to vote. In this case, there's the possibility of interacting, so I think it's a very positive thing (Marianna, student association).

At the same time, several participants in the discussions highlight the existence of important critical issues that can hinder, or even block, the development of democratic innovations. Perhaps the main one is a crisis of trust in representative democracy, which translates into high abstention rates even in direct consultations.

Non-participation is not determined by lack of interest, but by a lack of trust from the outset... The collective perception is that we are someone's puppets (Laura, local CSO).

In my opinion, the referendum showed us the state of (Italian) democracy. Even on an occasion when citizens had the opportunity to participate, abstention was extremely high (Manuela, national CSO).

According to some, the lack of effective political intermediation and functioning representation hinders the consolidation of innovative democratic practices. Many participation tools are perceived as formal or ineffective (e.g. blocked petitions, slow decision-making processes).

The tool (of the referendum) exists and has enormous potential, but the fact is that... *they* make it seem useless, that it doesn't matter, that it wouldn't change anything (Alberta, local CSO, italics added).

Do we remember the referendum on water? The referendum on water passed the threshold. But what happened to it? (Manuela, national CSO).²

As a result, these experiences often remain isolated and fail to have an impact on structural issues and citizens' quality of life. The implication is that isolated and ineffective democratic innovations can increase citizens' distrust of politics, therefore producing an effect contrary to that expected in the literature (Bauer & Fatke 2014). What is at stake here is the issue of political efficacy as a factor enabling political trust and democratic participation (Gonthier et al. 2024).

The (popular initiative) proposals are certainly fundamental and could have a significant impact, but the problem lies at the parliamentary level. They get bogged down and eventually end up... buried and remain there (Alberta, local CSO).

Finally, there is also some convergence on concrete proposals and lines of action to revitalise democratic innovation in Italy. Among these, the one that has received the widest support refers to the need to reactivate or expand civic and democratic education programmes (Alber 2023), with the development of educational projects on civic awareness and active participation.

Citizenship and the constitution are very important and are not studied in school (Michela, student association).

I would say that one of the tools is to get back to creating democratic culture, in schools, in public squares, in local areas (Manuela, national CSO).

A second important aspect concerns the improvement of digital platforms, making them more accessible to non-digital natives, but also expanding their use – for example, for collecting signatures for referendums and petitions at a local level. This could reduce the negative impact of the current socio-cultural context on participation processes (De Blasio & Selva 2019).

Easy-to-use platforms make people feel more comfortable participating (Luigi, student association).

2 In 2011, the majority of Italian voters voted to repeal a law that allowed the privatisation of publicly owned companies that provided essential services, including water management. Despite this result, the various governing coalitions that have come to power since then have continued down the path of privatisation, largely nullifying the outcome of the referendum.

(We need to promote) the collection of signatures (for petitions and referendums) via SPID,³ which may seem trivial but in reality is not, because... otherwise you need someone to collect citizens' signatures, and that is very complicated (Giovanni, national CSO).

A final line of action on which there is consensus is the creation of physical and digital spaces for networking associations, movements and individual citizens interested in issues related to democratic participation. The implication here is that these changes could ultimately produce a shift towards collaborative governance, a set of participatory arrangements enabling cooperation between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders (Elstub & Escobar 2019).

We need to rebuild these intermediary bodies... because today we don't have a group that can say 'I have listened, I know that these needs exist' (Paola, local CSO).

Chambers of Labour⁴ could constitute an incredible territorial hub to activate this type of thing (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Differences in sentiment and attitudes regarding democratic innovations

The previous analysis highlighted the main points of convergence between the three different categories of Italian civil society representatives with regard to democratic innovations. However, in this work, our research is instead aimed at highlighting the differences between the various groups and proposing hypotheses that contribute to explaining them, as well as paths that contribute to integrating different perspectives into a unified vision capable of breathing new life into democratic participation in Italy.

A comparative sentiment analysis on Italian stakeholder groups

In this whole process, the first step has been a comparative sentiment analysis (Cambria et al. 2017; Maisto 2024), which has allowed us to highlight the differences in the general tone of the three conversations, in the attitude towards democratic innovations and in the level of optimism/pessimism in each group. Sentiment analysis is an increasingly popular social and political research technique, as scholars can use it to understand the political orientation of citizens.

3 The Sistema Pubblico di Identità Digitale (Public System for Digital Identity, SPID) is a tool that guarantees all Italian citizens and businesses unique, secure and protected access to digital services provided by the public administration.

4 The Chambers of Labour are the local branches of Italy's main trade union.

In particular, it is now considered a valuable research technique for determining a topic’s valence and polarity (neutral, positive or negative) under collective debate (Marrazzo 2014). In the context of our research, we proceeded with a content analysis of each conversation in order to identify:

- 1) Explicit emotional tones: keywords expressing positive, negative or neutral judgments;
- 2) Attitudes toward the topics discussed: optimism, scepticism, frustration, hope, critical detachment;
- 3) Trust in the Italian political system: expressed directly or inferred from the context. We then sought to interpret the contextual meaning of the text, considering mostly
 - a) The purpose of the discussion;
 - b) The social and institutional role of the speakers;
 - c) The level of experience or awareness of the topics discussed.

Finally, we proceeded to identify recurring patterns for each of the groups considered. We summarise the results in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparative sentiment analysis

Group	General tone	Attitude toward democratic innovations	Trust in the system	Critical issues	Vision of the future
Student associations	Pragmatic and positive	Favourable, focused on simple and immediate tools	Moderate	Limited understanding of the broader institutional context	Optimistic, trust in education and participation
Local CSOs	Realistic and critical	Interested, but aware of operational and bureaucratic limitations	Low	Difficulty in transforming participation into real change	Moderate, progress is recognised but ineffectiveness is lamented
National CSOs	Analytical, detached, sometimes pessimistic	Reflective, critical of the systemic crisis of democracy	Very low	Crisis of representation, abstentionism, fragmentation	Cautious, sees ferment but calls for a profound rethinking

Source: Authors

The emotional tone of student association representatives toward democratic innovations is generally positive, with an emphasis on the opportunities offered by instruments of direct/deliberative/participatory democracy. Confidence in the ability of students (or, more generally, citizens) to influence political processes through instruments such as petitions and referendums is quite high. On the other hand, they show less awareness of structural weaknesses.

I think that (the assessment of democratic innovations) is positive, because they involve the community, whether it be the university community or the community in general (encouraging it) to take action (Claudia, student association).

However, the referendum is already an important incentive to participate in the vote. For me, a referendum in my municipality was important because it helped me understand our fellow citizens' views on a particular issue. Of course, it was consultative, but it is a tool for participation. So I think it is important. Then it depends on how it is applied (Michela, student association).

On the other hand, the emotional tone of the participants in the second workshop, who came from local civil society organisations, can be described primarily in terms of critical realism. The participants in this debate emphasised, above all, the difficulty of having a real impact on decision-making processes. There is also a certain weariness due to the lack of tangible results and a consequent distrust of democratic participation under the current institutional, political, social and cultural conditions.

The tool (of the referendum) exists and has enormous potential, but the fact is that... they make it seem useless that it doesn't matter, that it wouldn't change anything (Alberta, local CSO).

Finally, the emotional tone of the representatives of national civil society organisations is analytical, expressing a level of knowledge and experience relating to Italian society as a whole, which allows them to take a systematic approach to the issue of democratic innovations in the context of Italian politics. At the same time, they express considerable pessimism, as they tend to highlight the crisis of political representation and the current social and cultural fragmentation of Italian society. The widespread perception that the country is in a structural crisis that is not being adequately addressed by the political class makes the level of trust in the system very low.

Any question about democratic procedures cannot be separated from the question of the current state of democracy... So, it seems to me that we are experiencing the greatest crisis of democracy (Manuela, national CSO).

It seems to me that the state of health (of direct democracy tools) is not particularly flourishing (and this) is due to the great deafness of institutional politics and its very limited capacity to absorb any stimulus or proposal that comes from outside the organisational boundaries of the parties (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Comparative sentiment analysis reveals a gradual shift from youthful optimism to critical awareness at the local level, culminating in analytical detachment and pessimism at the national level. Young people see democratic innovations as a direct educational tool, but their vision is still limited to the micro level. Local CSOs are realistic since they recognise these tools' value but highlight their operational and bureaucratic limitations. Representatives of national-level civil society organisations offer a deeper analysis of the crisis of representative democracy but express reduced confidence in the political system as a whole. This diversity of attitudes suggests the need to build bridges between levels of participation, integrating the enthusiasm of young people, the experience of local communities and the systemic vision of the national level. This represents an important challenge to be taken up both by the parties most interested in citizen participation in the Italian democratic life and by civil society organisations themselves.

A comparative analysis of the stakeholders' attitudes towards enhancing democratic innovations

We can also find differences between stakeholder groups regarding the initiatives to relaunch and disseminate democratic innovation mechanisms to restore trust and increase citizen participation in Italian democratic life. Quite surprisingly, most 'technical' proposals come from student associations. The actions suggested by students to promote democratic innovation refer to the revival of civic education and the establishment of spaces for dialogue and civic discussion in schools. In addition, they also suggest improving access to digital platforms for participation, introducing interactive graphic guides to facilitate the use of democratic tools and even experimenting with artificial intelligence to support the discussion and management of some participatory initiatives, such as petitions.

Perhaps we should establish (dialogue on topics of common interest) as a custom, perhaps starting in schools, and dedicate one hour per week from the youngest to the oldest classes to develop critical thinking (Claudia, student association).

Simulating being a member of the European Parliament... encourages young people to remain active citizens (Luigi, student association).

Creating platforms in the wake of Facebook... would make these people less afraid (of making mistakes) because they would recognise the interface (Luigi, student association).

The proposals put forward by local civil society representatives tend to be on a different level. Particular mention should be made of strengthening the role of intermediary bodies (trade unions, committees, associations). This should involve building integrated territorial networks between public, private and nonprofit entities, thus leading to improved accessibility and effectiveness of local decision-making processes. However, alongside and perhaps even before this, local civil society leaders are suggesting measures to reduce bureaucracy and speed up response times to citizens.

We need to rebuild these intermediary bodies... because today we don't have a group that can say 'I have listened, I know that these needs exist' (Paola, local CSO).

Citizens must organise themselves in order to participate, whether we like it or not, otherwise these are individual demands, and it is difficult to imagine shared visions (Laura, local CSO).

A first step could be to hold public meetings throughout the territory, rather than centralised ones (Laura, local CSO).

One method could be to trigger majority decision-making processes, because a decision has to be made sooner or later, but to integrate mediation phases into the decision-making procedure (Laura, local CSO).

Starting generally from an assessment of the Italian democratic system as a whole, participants in the workshop aimed at representatives of national civil society organisations focused primarily on the need to revive and spread democratic culture in society and institutions. Beyond this general objective, there is a need for reform of the system of democratic representation in both politics and civil society. Some representatives emphasise, in particular, the need to identify local bodies (such as the Chambers of Labor, see above, section 3.1) as hubs for participation. A final suggestion concerns the enhancement and institutionalisation of local experiences within a coherent national framework.

It is necessary to root a political culture, a culture of democracy, in the system in which we operate (Manuela, national CSO).

It is useful to bring together two broad areas of intervention, one consisting of democratising spaces for political decision-making, and another that includes all functions supporting spaces for organising democratic processes (Giovanni, national CSO).

The discourse of best practices is very powerful. We should imagine it ourselves, so that it becomes less tragic when we (left-wingers) lose the elections and have to play defence (Giovanni, national CSO).

We summarise the results of our comparative attitude analysis in Table 3, which shows the main differences between these stakeholder groups on this side. The table also highlights the substantial complementarity between the three positions, which could be usefully integrated into a single proposal for the development of democratic innovations in Italy.

Table 3: Comparative attitudes analysis

Topic	Student associations	Local CSOs	National CSOs
Main objective	Educate active citizens	Strengthen local participation	Rebuild Italian democracy
Level of action	Micro	Meso	Macro
Timeframe	Short term	Medium term	Long term
Main tools	Civic education, digitalisation	Territorial networks	Institutional reforms
Level of realism	High	High	Medium
Political vision	Emerging	Partial	Advanced

Source: Authors

An integrated model could include a strong focus on civic education, institutional support for active participation at the local level and national coordination in order to build a widespread culture of democratic participation. This integration would enable the growth of a new generation of active citizens, strengthen the capacity of local communities to influence decision-making processes and create a favourable environment for systemic action (at the national level) thanks to a solid foundation of democratic practice. This three-tier model proposed for Italy could also be helpful for other countries, such as the Central European ones, where a similar gap between local innovation and national stagnation in both trust and citizens’ participation can be detected (Gonthier et al. 2024). The common challenge is to build bridges between the tiers, preventing democratic innovations from remaining isolated experiences. However, which political entity could take responsibility for this strategy and carry it forward?

Concluding remarks

Our research has highlighted similarities and differences between the opinions and attitudes of different stakeholder groups involved in citizens' participation with regard to democratic innovations in Italy. More specifically, we found a gradation in sentiment and attitudes that seems to be in line with the opinion of those, such as Norris (2022), who argue that in more developed countries with a more established and stable democratic tradition, a sceptical trust in institutions and political actors is emerging today. In fact, as the level of experience and knowledge available to political stakeholders increases, trust decreases, but gives way to a rational attitude oriented toward the construction and consolidation of political alternatives from below (Micciarelli 2018). However, this same attitude signals that this mobilisation strategy tends to present intermediary bodies as political actors in their own right, rather than to build relationships with political parties. Therefore, the relationship postulated by Norris' theory between politico-institutional trust and the trustworthiness of politicians seems questioned when applied to the context of representative democracy in Italy. Here, associative practices and social participation no longer feed political representation (Barbera 2023).

This is in line with the findings of Karlsson et al. (2021), who argue that democratic innovations implemented in periods of growing distrust – like what Italian society is experiencing today – may have counterproductive effects, especially if participants are dissatisfied with the process, such as in the French case (Blondiaux 2021). Therefore, there is a need to rethink the established relationship between mechanisms of representative democracy and those of direct/deliberative/participatory democracy in Italy. In addition, the risks of triggering a boomerang effect indicate that we cannot identify a unidirectional causality between institutional innovations, political trust and citizens' involvement. Whether trust acts as a precondition that enables governments to undertake reforms and innovations, or whether it is a result of institutional innovations that citizens perceive as effective, cannot be answered unequivocally. This dichotomy conceals a complex interdependence that operates on multiple levels and is shaped by many contextual factors. We certainly need more research on this subject.

Another aspect of our research findings deserves attention. The people involved in the three conversations belong to relatively high social strata in both economic and cultural terms. The university students, activists and representatives of civil society organisations who participated in our focus groups share a high level of education and (excluding students) employment in the middle or upper levels of social stratification. The interest they showed in the topic under discussion, therefore, tends to confirm the fact that, in today's Italy, democratic innovations mainly involve 'critical' citizens, not 'disaffected' ones

(see above, section 1). Theoretically, it is reasonable to assume that the cognitive mobilisation approach to citizens' involvement in democratic innovations is more effective than political disaffection in explaining when trust and political participation are lacking (Bowler et al. 2007; Schuck & de Vreese 2015). It remains to be seen whether this is sufficient to reactivate political participation among citizens or whether additional mobilisation is indispensable, which can only be ensured by political dissatisfaction among the less affluent, less skilled social classes.

Finally, our findings may offer a case for rethinking the relationship between representative and participatory democracy. Democratic innovations must be embedded in a broader project of institutional reform and democratic culture-building that bridges the gap between local vitality and national stagnation. The proposed three-tier model – integrating education, territorial networks and institutional reform – offers a roadmap for such a transformation. While Italy's case is specific, its lessons resonate across Southern and Central Europe, where similar tensions between democratic aspiration and institutional fatigue persist.

Acknowledgments

This article has been prepared with the support of the TRUEDEM 'Trust in European Democracies' research project funded under the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101095237). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon research and innovation programme. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

References

- Addeo, F., Ammirato, M., Delli Paoli, A., Fruncillo, D., Haerpfer, C. & Maddaloni, D. (2025): *Trust and voter turnout in Europe: Results from the Horizon TRUEDEM research project*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Alber, E. (2023): Innovazioni democratiche in Alto Adige/Südtirol: un primo bilancio e prospettive [Democratic innovations in Alto Adige/Südtirol: A first assessment and perspectives]. *federalismi.it*, 32, 233–255.
- Alber, E. & Valdesalici, A. (2015): Framing Subnational 'Institutional Innovation' and 'Participatory Democracy' in Italy: Some Findings on Current Structures, Procedures and Dynamics. In: Palermo, F. & Alber, E. (eds.): *Federalism as Decision-Making: Changes in Structures, Procedures and Policies*. Leiden: Brill, 448–478
- Allegretti, G., Bassoli, M. & Colavolpe, G. (2021): On the Verge of Institutionalisation? Participatory Budgeting Evidence in Five Italian Regions. *Financial Journal*, 13(2), 25–45.

- Ansa (2025): *Dal 1946, 78 referendum, quorum superato 39 volte* [Since 1946, 78 referendums, quorum exceeded 39 times]. Ansa, 8 June, <accessed online: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/speciali/referendum/2025/06/08/dal-1946-78-referendum-quorum-superato-39-volte_e1c7a1ef-3629-4bab-8d80-0e2948d269c4.html>.
- Barbera, F. (2023): *Le piazze vuote. Ritrovare gli spazi della politica* [Empty Squares. Rediscovering the Spaces for Politics]. Roma: Laterza.
- Bassoli, M. (2012): Participatory Budgeting in Italy: An Analysis of (Almost Democratic) Participatory Governance Arrangements. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36(6), 1183–1203.
- Bauer, P. C. & Fatke, M. (2014): Direct Democracy and Political Trust: Enhancing Trust, Initiating Distrust—or Both? *Swiss Political Science Review*, 20(1), 49–69.
- Blondiaux, L. (2021): De la démocratie en France. En finir avec les faux-semblants [Democracy in France: Putting an End to False Pretenses]. *Esprit*, 4, 87–99.
- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M. & Robson, K. (2001): *Focus Groups in Social Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Bortolotti, F. & Corsi, C. (a cura di) (2012): *La partecipazione sociale e politica tra crisi e innovazione* [Social and political participation between crisis and innovation]. Roma: Futura.
- Bowler, S., Donovan, T. & Karp, J. A. (2007): Enraged or Engaged? Preferences for Direct Citizen Participation in Affluent Democracies. *Political Research Quarterly*, 60(3), 351–362.
- Cambria, E., Das, D., Bandyopadhyay, S. & Feraco, A. (eds.) (2017): *A Practical Guide to Sentiment Analysis*. Berlin: Springer.
- Cattolica News (2024): *Italiani sfiduciati e stanchi della politica, ma rifuggono da soluzioni autoritarie* [Italians are disheartened and tired of politics, but they shy away from authoritarian solutions], 4 July, accessed online: <https://secondotempo.cattolicanews.it/news-italiani-sfiduciati-e-stanchi-della-politica-ma-rifuggono-da-soluzioni-autoritarie>.
- Chiaromonte, A. & Emanuele, V. (2022): *The Deinstitutionalization of Western European Party Systems*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Dalton, R. J. & Welzel, C. (eds.) (2014): *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Blasio, E. & Selva, D. (2019): Le piattaforme di partecipazione tra tecnologia e governance: i modelli di sviluppo in Italia, Spagna e Regno Unito [Participation platforms between technology and governance: Development models in Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom]. *Rivista italiana di politiche pubbliche*, 3, 349–382.
- De Blasio, E. & Sorice, M. (2016): *Innovazione democratica: Un'introduzione* [Democratic innovations: An introduction]. Roma: LUISS University Press.
- Elstub, S. & Escobar, O. (2019): Defining and typologising democratic innovations. In: Elstub, S. & Escobar, O. (eds.): *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing, 11–30.

- Fanpage (2025): Il referendum è un flop, tra il boicottaggio e una sconfitta annunciata delle opposizioni [The referendum is a flop, between the boycott and the announced defeat of the opposition], *Youtube*, 9 June, <accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfcP15ESPAg>>.
- Florida, A. (2012): Partecipazione e politiche pubbliche: riflessioni a partire dall'esperienza Toscana [Participation and public policy: Some reflections on Tuscany's experience]. *Prisma*, 2, 68–86.
- Florida, A. (2013): *La democrazia deliberativa: teorie, processi e sistemi* [Deliberative democracy: Theories, processes and systems]. Roma: Carocci.
- Gonthier, F., Aymé, P., Belot, C. (2024): *Political Trust and Democratic Innovations: State-of-the-Art Report*. Working paper no. 9. 1. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project (www.truedem.eu).
- Ipsos (2025): Referendum abrogativi 8 e 9 giugno 2025: bassa affluenza e motivazioni, le opinioni degli italiani [Abrogative referendums on June 8 and 9, 2025: low turnout and reasons, Italians' opinions]. *Ipsos*, 16 June, <accessed online: <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/referendum-abrogativi-lavoro-cittadinanza-voto-italiani>>.
- Karlsson, M., Åström, J. & Adenskog, M. (2021): Democratic Innovation in Times of Crisis: Exploring Changes in Social and Political Trust. *Policy & Internet*, 13(1), 113–133.
- Kristiansen, T. M. & Grønkjær, M. (2018): Focus Groups as Social Arenas for the Negotiation of Normativity. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17, eLocator1609406917747393.
- Lewanski, R. (2013): Institutionalizing Deliberative Democracy: the 'Tuscany laboratory'. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 9(1), ea0899820100ca65156315be8fa55789.
- Maisto, A. (2024): *Da Harris ai Large Language Models: Un'analisi linguistica* [From Harris to Large language Models: A Linguistic Analysis]. Roma: Carocci.
- Marrazzo, F. (2014): Dai sondaggi alla sentiment analysis: le previsioni politico elettorali nel racconto dei mass media [From polls to sentiment analysis: Political election forecasts in the media narrative]. *Mediascapes Journal*, 3, 97–123.
- McLaverly, P. (2009): Is deliberative democracy the answer to representative democracy's problems? A consideration of the UK government's programme of citizens' juries. *Representation*, 45(4), 379–389.
- Micciarelli, G. (2018): *Commoning: Beni comuni urbani come nuove istituzioni. Materiali per una teoria dell'autorganizzazione* [Commoning: Urban Commons as New Institutions. Materials for a Theory of Self-Organization]. Napoli: Editoriale scientifica.
- Moro, G. (2009): *Cittadini in Europa. L'attivismo civico e l'esperimento democratico comunitario* [Citizens in Europe: Civic Activism and the Community Democratic Experiment]. Roma: Carocci.
- Norris, P. (2011): *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (2022): *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parkinson, J. (2006): *Deliberating in the Real World: Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy*, 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2022): *Per la partecipazione dei cittadini: Come ridurre l'astensionismo e agevolare il voto [For citizen participation: How to reduce abstentionism and facilitate voting]*. Roma: Dipartimento per le riforme istituzionali – Dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria.
- Rainews (2022): Referendum abrogativi: negli ultimi 25 anni il quorum è stato raggiunto una sola volta [Abrogative referendums: the quorum has been reached only once in the last 25 years]. *Rainews*, 11 June, <accessed online: <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/06/referendum-abrogativi-dal-1997-il-quorum--stato-raggiunto-solo-una-volta-6ef09e47-e782-4de6-ba42-1ba66332ca1d.html>>.
- Russo, S. (2014): *Governance, Accountability and Participatory Budget between Myth and Reality: The Italian Case*. Department of Management, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Working Paper No. 28/2014.
- Saward, M. (2000): Democratic innovation. In: Saward, M. (Ed.): *Democratic Innovation: Deliberation, Representation and Association*. London: Routledge, 3–13.
- Schuck, A. R. T. & de Vreese, C. H. (2015): Public support for referendums in Europe: A cross-national comparison in 21 countries. *Electoral Studies*, 38, 149–158.
- Silverman, D. (2010): *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, 4th edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Silverman, D. (2015): *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 5th edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Slocum, N. (2003): *Participatory methods toolkit: a practitioner's manual*. Bruxelles: King Baudouin Foundation / Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment.
- Tisserand, C.-A., Gonthier, F., Morio, C., Belot, C. (2025): *Catalogue of Knowledge-Based Democratic Innovations to Enhance Trust*. Working paper no. 9. 2. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project (www.truedem.eu).
- Veraldi, R. & Oddo, G. (2024): Partecipazione, democrazia e politica sostenibile: una prima lettura [Participation, Democracy, and Sustainable Politics: A First Insight]. *Science & Philosophy*, 12(1), 7–30.
- Walsh, C. D. & Elkins, J. A. (2021): The dissatisfied and the engaged: Citizen support for citizens' assemblies and their willingness to participate. *Irish Political Studies*, 36(4), 647–666.
- Warren, M. E. (2018): Trust and Democracy. In Uslaner, E. M. (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 75–94.
- Webb, P. (2013): Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Political Research*, 52(6), 747–772.

Felice Addeo is Full Professor of Sociology at the University of Salerno, Department of Political and Communication Sciences. His current research focuses on social research methods, social cohesion, migration, digital capital, and politics. E-mail: faddeo@unisa.it; ORCID: 0000-0001-7072-7019.

Domenico Fruncillo is Full Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Salerno, Department of Social and Political Studies. His main research fields are political participation, political communication, governance, and technocracy. Among his recent publication, the book on *Trust and voter turnout in Europe* (Franco Angeli, Milan, 2025), co-authored with Felice Addeo, Domenico Maddaloni and other scholars. E-mail: dfruncillo@unisa.it; ORCID: 0000-0003-4230-7847.

Domenico Maddaloni is Full Professor of Sociology at the University of Salerno, Department of Political and Communication Sciences. His current research focuses on social and political change, migration, and social policy. E-mail: dmaddaloni@unisa.it; ORCID: 0000-0002-1312-2299.