



Citizen Participation in Collaborative Governance: Concepts, Mechanisms, Challenges, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT: Citizen participation has emerged as a cornerstone of modern governance, reflecting a transition from hierarchical government-centered approaches toward more inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes. This review examines the theoretical foundations, mechanisms, outcomes, challenges, and future directions of citizen participation within collaborative governance frameworks. The review explores key theoretical perspectives, including Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Network Governance Theory, the Collaborative Governance Framework, and Co-production Theory, which collectively explain how stakeholders engage in governance processes. Various participation mechanisms, such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, digital participation platforms, and community-based governance, are discussed in relation to their contributions to policy effectiveness, public trust, service delivery, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. The review also highlights persistent barriers, including power asymmetries, tokenism, resource limitations, digital divides, and stakeholder conflicts. Emerging trends such as digital participation, artificial intelligence-supported engagement, open government initiatives, citizen science, and data-driven governance are examined as transformative developments shaping future governance practices. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive, transparent, and adaptive governance systems that promote meaningful citizen engagement and sustainable public outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Citizen participation; collaborative governance; public engagement; participatory governance; co-production

1. Introduction

Citizen participation has become a central element in contemporary public governance, reflecting a shift from traditional top-down government decision-making toward more inclusive and democratic approaches. Historically, governance systems were predominantly characterized by hierarchical structures in which public authorities exercised decision-making power with limited involvement from citizens. However, increasing social complexity, rising public expectations, and demands for transparency and accountability have encouraged

governments to adopt more participatory approaches. Citizen participation is now widely recognized as a mechanism through which individuals and communities can contribute to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in governance, where citizens are no longer viewed merely as service recipients but as active stakeholders capable of influencing public decisions and contributing valuable local knowledge [1, 2].

The development of citizen participation has been influenced by democratic theories emphasizing the importance of public involvement in decision-making processes. Early models of participation focused primarily on consultation and information sharing, while contemporary approaches encourage more meaningful forms of engagement, including co-creation, co-production, and shared decision-making. The increasing availability of digital technologies has further expanded opportunities for participation by enabling governments to engage with citizens through online platforms, social media, and digital consultation mechanisms. These developments have contributed to a growing recognition that effective governance requires collaboration among diverse actors, including government agencies, civil society organizations, private sector entities, and local communities [3, 4].

Within this context, collaborative governance has emerged as an influential governance paradigm. Collaborative governance refers to decision-making processes and institutional arrangements in which public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in collective deliberation and problem-solving. Unlike traditional governance models that rely primarily on governmental authority, collaborative governance emphasizes partnership, consensus-building, and shared responsibility. The emergence of this paradigm is closely linked to the increasing complexity of public policy challenges, such as environmental sustainability, public health crises, urban development, and social inequality [5, 6]. These issues often transcend organizational and jurisdictional boundaries, making it difficult for governments to address them independently. As a result, collaborative governance has gained prominence as an approach that leverages the expertise, resources, and perspectives of multiple stakeholders to develop more effective and sustainable solutions [5, 7].

Citizen engagement constitutes a fundamental component of collaborative governance. Meaningful citizen participation can enhance policy effectiveness by incorporating local knowledge, identifying community needs, and improving the relevance of policy interventions. Citizens often possess valuable experiential insights that may not be readily available to policymakers, enabling more informed and context-sensitive decision-making. Furthermore, citizen involvement can improve the implementation and sustainability of public policies by fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among stakeholders. Policies developed through participatory processes are often more responsive to societal needs and more likely to gain public acceptance [8, 9].

In addition to improving policy effectiveness, citizen engagement contributes significantly to governance legitimacy. Legitimacy is strengthened when citizens perceive that decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, and fair. Participatory mechanisms provide opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding between governments and communities, thereby enhancing trust in public institutions. In an era marked by declining public trust in government and increasing political polarization, collaborative governance offers a pathway to rebuild confidence by promoting openness, accountability, and democratic participation. Consequently, citizen participation is increasingly viewed not only as a

democratic right but also as a practical necessity for achieving effective governance outcomes [3, 10].

Despite the growing body of literature on citizen participation and collaborative governance, several research gaps remain. Existing studies often focus on specific sectors, geographical contexts, or participation mechanisms, resulting in fragmented knowledge regarding the broader relationship between citizen engagement and collaborative governance outcomes. Furthermore, while numerous studies highlight the benefits of participation, there is less consensus regarding the conditions under which participation contributes to effective governance, as well as the challenges associated with power imbalances, stakeholder conflicts, tokenistic engagement, and digital exclusion. Emerging trends such as digital participation, artificial intelligence-supported engagement, and data-driven governance have also introduced new opportunities and challenges that require further scholarly attention [3, 11, 12].

Therefore, this review aims to synthesize current knowledge on citizen participation within collaborative governance frameworks by examining key theoretical foundations, participation mechanisms, governance outcomes, and contemporary challenges. By integrating findings from diverse disciplines and governance contexts, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how citizen engagement contributes to collaborative governance and to identify future directions for research and practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Citizen Participation and Collaborative Governance

2.1. Concept and Evolution Of Citizen Participation.

Citizen participation refers to the involvement of individuals and communities in public decision-making processes that affect their lives and society. It is a fundamental principle of democratic governance, enabling citizens to contribute to policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Traditionally, governance systems were dominated by centralized and hierarchical decision-making structures in which citizens played a largely passive role as recipients of government services. However, increasing demands for transparency, accountability, and responsiveness have transformed the relationship between governments and citizens [1, 2, 4].

The evolution of citizen participation can be traced through several stages. Early forms of participation primarily involved voting and electoral representation, reflecting a representative democracy model. Over time, governments recognized that elections alone were insufficient to address complex public issues and ensure public trust. This realization led to the development of participatory governance approaches that encourage direct citizen involvement through public consultations, advisory committees, community forums, and participatory planning processes [13, 14].

The rise of information and communication technologies has further expanded opportunities for citizen participation. Digital platforms, social media, and e-governance systems enable governments to engage broader segments of society, facilitating real-time interaction and feedback. Consequently, citizen participation has evolved from a limited consultative process into a multidimensional approach emphasizing collaboration, co-creation, and shared decision-making. Modern governance increasingly recognizes citizens as active partners who contribute knowledge, experience, and innovative solutions to public challenges [15, 16]. The conceptual evolution of citizen participation in public governance, transitioning

from traditional passive representation to multi-dimensional digital engagement and collaborative co-creation is shown in Figure 1.

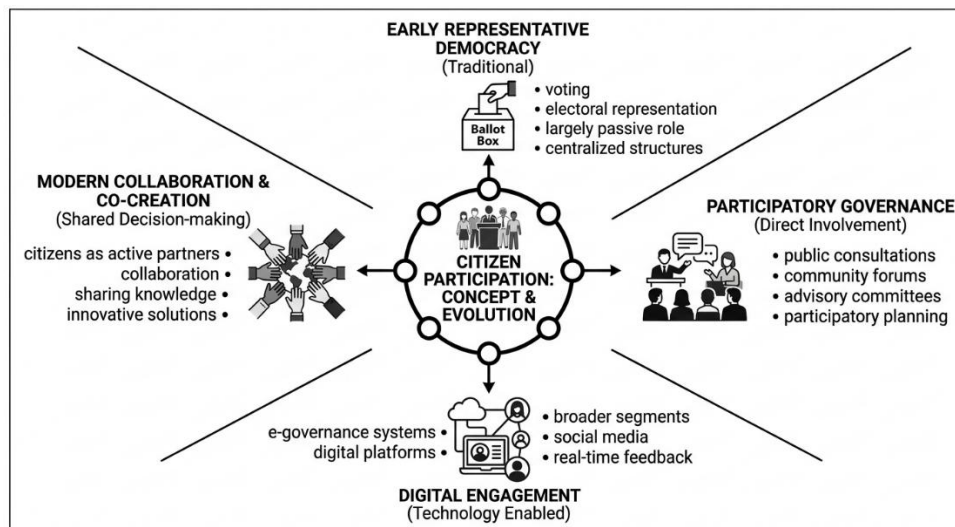


Figure 1. Concept and evolution of citizen participation.

2.2. Collaborative Governance: Definitions and Principles.

Collaborative governance emerged as a response to increasingly complex policy challenges that cannot be effectively addressed by government institutions acting alone. Issues such as climate change, public health, urban development, social inequality, and natural resource management require coordinated efforts among multiple stakeholders. As a result, governance has shifted from a government-centered approach toward collaborative arrangements involving public agencies, private organizations, civil society groups, and citizens [5, 17]. Collaborative governance can be defined as a process in which public institutions engage non-governmental stakeholders in collective decision-making that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative. The approach emphasizes shared responsibility, mutual learning, and joint problem-solving. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical authority, collaborative governance seeks to build partnerships among diverse actors with different interests, expertise, and resources [18, 19].

Several core principles underpin collaborative governance. First, inclusiveness ensures that affected stakeholders have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes [20]. Second, transparency promotes openness and accountability, enabling stakeholders to understand how decisions are made [21]. Third, trust-building facilitates cooperation and reduces conflicts among participants [22]. Fourth, deliberation encourages dialogue and the exchange of diverse perspectives to generate informed decisions [23]. Finally, shared responsibility emphasizes collective ownership of governance outcomes, increasing commitment to policy implementation and long-term sustainability. The growing popularity of collaborative governance reflects the recognition that public value can be enhanced when governments leverage the capacities and knowledge of multiple stakeholders. By fostering cooperation and collective action, collaborative governance can improve policy effectiveness, strengthen social capital, and enhance democratic legitimacy [19, 20, 22].

2.3. Theoretical Models and Frameworks.

Several theoretical models provide important foundations for understanding the relationship between citizen participation and collaborative governance.

2.3.1. Arnstein's Ladder Of Participation.

One of the most influential frameworks is Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, introduced in 1969. Arnstein conceptualized participation as a continuum of citizen power consisting of eight levels, ranging from non-participation to full citizen control. The lower levels, such as manipulation and therapy, represent symbolic participation with limited citizen influence. Intermediate levels, including informing, consultation, and placation, provide opportunities for public input but often leave decision-making authority with government actors. Higher levels, including partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, represent genuine participation where citizens possess substantial influence over decisions. The framework remains widely used to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of participatory processes and highlights the importance of empowering citizens rather than merely consulting them [24, 25].

2.3.2. Network Governance Theory.

Network Governance Theory emerged in response to the growing complexity of modern governance systems. The theory argues that governance increasingly occurs through interconnected networks of public, private, and civil society actors rather than through hierarchical government structures. These networks facilitate information sharing, resource exchange, and collaborative problem-solving across organizational boundaries. In the context of citizen participation, network governance recognizes citizens as important actors within governance networks who contribute local knowledge, social capital, and community perspectives. The theory emphasizes interdependence among stakeholders and highlights the need for coordination, trust, and communication to achieve collective goals [26, 27].

2.3.3. Collaborative Governance Framework (Ansell & Gash).

The Collaborative Governance Framework developed by Ansell and Gash provides a comprehensive model for understanding collaborative governance processes. According to this framework, successful collaboration depends on several interconnected factors, including starting conditions, institutional design, facilitative leadership, and collaborative processes. Starting conditions refer to factors such as power imbalances, stakeholder relationships, and incentives for participation. Institutional design encompasses the rules and procedures governing collaboration. Facilitative leadership helps build trust and manage conflicts among participants. The collaborative process itself involves face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, commitment to the process, and shared understanding. This framework highlights that effective collaboration requires not only stakeholder participation but also supportive institutional and relational conditions [20, 28].

2.3.4. Co-Production Theory.

Co-production Theory emphasizes the active involvement of citizens in the design, delivery, and evaluation of public services. Rather than viewing citizens solely as service users, the theory conceptualizes them as co-producers who contribute resources, knowledge, and effort alongside public institutions. Co-production can occur in various sectors, including healthcare, education, public safety, and environmental management. By involving citizens directly in service delivery and problem-solving, co-production can improve service quality, increase efficiency, and strengthen community ownership. The theory aligns closely with collaborative

governance because both approaches emphasize partnership, shared responsibility, and collective value creation. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how citizen participation contributes to collaborative governance [5, 7, 29]. While Arnstein's model focuses on participation levels and power distribution, Network Governance Theory highlights inter-organizational relationships, the Ansell and Gash framework explains collaborative processes, and Co-production Theory emphasizes shared responsibility in public service delivery. Collectively, they offer valuable insights into the mechanisms, opportunities, and challenges associated with participatory and collaborative governance in contemporary societies [8, 29, 30]. The comparative overview of the major theoretical models and frameworks used to explain the relationship between citizen participation and collaborative governance is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Key theoretical models and frameworks supporting citizen participation and collaborative governance.

Model and Framework	Key Concepts	Relevance to Citizen Participation and Collaborative Governance	References
Arnstein's Ladder of Participation	Eight levels of participation ranging from non-participation (manipulation, therapy) to full citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). Emphasizes the distribution of decision-making authority between citizens and government.	Provides a framework for assessing the quality and effectiveness of citizen participation by examining the extent of public influence in decision-making processes. Highlights the importance of empowerment rather than symbolic consultation.	[24, 25]
Network Governance Theory	Governance occurs through interconnected networks of public, private, and civil society actors. Focuses on interdependence, trust, communication, and resource exchange among stakeholders.	Recognizes citizens as active actors within governance networks who contribute local knowledge, social capital, and community perspectives. Supports collaborative problem-solving across organizational boundaries.	[26, 27]
Collaborative Governance Framework (Ansell & Gash)	Successful collaboration depends on starting conditions, institutional design, facilitative leadership, and collaborative processes such as dialogue, trust-building, commitment, and shared understanding.	Explains how stakeholder collaboration can be effectively organized and sustained. Emphasizes the institutional and relational conditions required for meaningful citizen engagement and collective decision-making.	[20, 28]
Co-production Theory	Citizens actively participate in the design, delivery, and evaluation of public services. Emphasizes shared responsibility, partnership, and collective value creation.	Positions citizens as co-producers rather than passive service recipients, enhancing service quality, efficiency, community ownership, and collaborative governance outcomes.	[5, 7, 29]

3. Mechanisms and Outcomes of Citizen Participation in Collaborative Governance

3.1. Participation Mechanisms.

Citizen participation in collaborative governance is implemented through various mechanisms that enable stakeholders to contribute to public decision-making and policy development. These mechanisms differ in structure, level of engagement, and degree of influence, but all aim to strengthen the relationship between governments and citizens. One of the most widely used mechanisms is public consultation, which allows governments to gather opinions, preferences, and feedback from citizens before making policy decisions. Public consultations may take the form of public hearings, surveys, workshops, focus group discussions, or stakeholder meetings. This mechanism enhances transparency and ensures that policymakers consider community perspectives during policy formulation. Although consultations are often advisory rather than

decision-making processes, they provide valuable insights into public needs and concerns [4, 11, 14].

Another important mechanism is participatory budgeting, which directly involves citizens in deciding how public funds should be allocated. Originating in Brazil and later adopted worldwide, participatory budgeting enables residents to propose, discuss, and prioritize development projects. Through this process, citizens gain a greater understanding of public finance while governments benefit from improved accountability and responsiveness. Participatory budgeting is often recognized as one of the most tangible forms of citizen empowerment because it gives communities direct influence over resource allocation [31, 32].

Citizen assemblies represent a more deliberative form of participation. These assemblies typically consist of randomly selected citizens who reflect the demographic diversity of the population. Participants receive information, engage in structured discussions, and develop recommendations on complex policy issues. Citizen assemblies have been increasingly used to address topics such as climate change, constitutional reform, and urban planning. Their strength lies in promoting informed deliberation and reducing the influence of political polarization by encouraging evidence-based discussions [18, 19, 33].

The rapid advancement of technology has also facilitated the growth of digital participation platforms. Governments increasingly use online portals, mobile applications, and social media channels to engage citizens in policymaking and public service evaluation. Digital participation expands access to governance processes by reducing geographical barriers and enabling broader public involvement. Online consultations, e-petitions, crowdsourcing initiatives, and participatory mapping platforms exemplify how digital technologies support citizen engagement. However, challenges such as digital literacy, unequal internet access, and concerns about data privacy remain important considerations [16, 34, 35].

A further mechanism is community-based governance, where local communities play a direct role in managing resources, services, or development initiatives. Community-based governance emphasizes local knowledge, collective action, and shared responsibility. Examples include community forest management, neighborhood development committees, and local health initiatives. By empowering communities to participate in governance processes, this approach strengthens local ownership and promotes sustainable development outcomes [24, 28, 36].

3.2. Governance Outcomes.

Citizen participation contributes to a range of governance outcomes that enhance both the effectiveness and legitimacy of public institutions. One of the most significant outcomes is improved policy effectiveness. Policies developed through participatory processes are often more responsive to local needs because they incorporate diverse perspectives and experiential knowledge. Citizen input helps policymakers identify problems more accurately, anticipate implementation challenges, and develop solutions that are better suited to specific contexts [17, 37]. Another important outcome is the enhancement of public trust and legitimacy. When citizens have opportunities to participate in decision-making, they are more likely to perceive governance processes as transparent, fair, and accountable. Participation fosters mutual understanding between governments and communities, reducing skepticism and strengthening confidence in public institutions. In many democratic societies, citizen engagement has become an essential strategy for rebuilding trust in government and increasing policy acceptance [26,

27]. Citizen participation can also lead to significant improvements in public service delivery. Through mechanisms such as co-production and community monitoring, citizens contribute knowledge and feedback that help public organizations improve efficiency, quality, and accessibility. Participation enables governments to identify service gaps and adapt programs to better meet community needs, resulting in more effective and sustainable public services [17, 37].

Furthermore, participation promotes social inclusion and empowerment. Collaborative governance creates opportunities for marginalized and underrepresented groups to express their views and influence decisions that affect their lives. By involving diverse stakeholders, participatory processes can reduce inequalities, strengthen social cohesion, and increase citizens' sense of ownership over governance outcomes. Empowered citizens are more likely to engage in civic activities and contribute to community development [8, 9, 10]. Citizen participation also plays an increasingly important role in environmental and sustainability governance. Environmental challenges often require collective action and local knowledge to achieve effective solutions. Participatory approaches enable communities to contribute to resource management, environmental monitoring, and sustainability planning. Such involvement enhances environmental stewardship and encourages long-term commitment to sustainable practices [13, 14].

3.3. Comparative Evidence Across Sectors.

The effectiveness of citizen participation and collaborative governance can be observed across various policy sectors. In urban governance, participatory planning processes allow residents to contribute to decisions related to transportation, housing, infrastructure, and public spaces. Cities that actively engage citizens often achieve more inclusive and sustainable urban development outcomes while strengthening community ownership of local projects. In environmental management, collaborative governance has become a widely adopted approach for addressing resource conservation, biodiversity protection, and climate adaptation. Community participation in forest management, watershed protection, and conservation initiatives has demonstrated positive outcomes by combining scientific expertise with local ecological knowledge [9, 10, 15].

The public health sector has also benefited significantly from citizen participation. Community involvement in health promotion campaigns, disease prevention programs, and healthcare planning can improve service accessibility and public compliance with health interventions. The importance of collaborative governance became particularly evident during public health emergencies, where effective communication and community engagement were essential for policy implementation. Within the context of smart cities, citizen participation is increasingly integrated through digital technologies. Smart governance initiatives utilize data-sharing platforms, mobile applications, and digital feedback systems to involve citizens in urban management. These tools facilitate real-time communication between governments and residents while supporting evidence-based decision-making [15, 17].

In rural development, community participation remains a critical component of governance. Rural communities often possess unique local knowledge regarding agricultural practices, natural resource management, and socioeconomic conditions. Participatory approaches help ensure that development initiatives align with local priorities and contribute to sustainable livelihoods. Evidence from rural development programs indicates that

collaborative governance can strengthen community resilience, improve resource utilization, and enhance long-term development outcomes. Collectively, evidence across these sectors demonstrates that citizen participation is not merely a democratic principle but also a practical governance strategy that contributes to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable policy outcomes [18, 19]. Overview of the principal mechanisms through which citizens participate in collaborative governance, the governance outcomes generated by such participation, and evidence of their application across multiple policy sectors is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Mechanisms and outcomes of citizen participation in collaborative governance.

Dimension	Component	Description	References
Participation Mechanisms	Public Consultation	Enables governments to collect citizen opinions, preferences, and feedback through public hearings, surveys, workshops, focus groups, and stakeholder meetings. Enhances transparency and ensures community perspectives are considered in policymaking.	[4, 11, 14]
	Participatory Budgeting	Involves citizens directly in proposing, discussing, and prioritizing public expenditure and development projects. Promotes accountability, transparency, and citizen empowerment in resource allocation.	[31, 32]
	Citizen Assemblies	Uses randomly selected citizens to deliberate on complex policy issues through informed discussions and evidence-based recommendations. Supports inclusive and less polarized decision-making.	[18, 19, 33]
	Digital Participation Platforms	Employs online portals, mobile applications, social media, e-petitions, crowdsourcing, and participatory mapping tools to broaden citizen engagement and reduce geographical barriers.	[16, 34, 35]
	Community-Based Governance	Empowers local communities to manage resources, services, and development initiatives through collective action, local knowledge, and shared responsibility.	[24, 28, 36]
Governance Outcomes	Improved Policy Effectiveness	Participatory processes generate policies that better reflect local needs, improve problem identification, and enhance implementation success through diverse stakeholder input.	[17, 37]
	Enhanced Trust and Legitimacy	Increases public confidence in government by promoting transparency, accountability, fairness, and mutual understanding between citizens and institutions.	[26, 27]
	Improved Public Service Delivery	Citizen involvement through co-production and monitoring contributes to higher-quality, more efficient, and accessible public services.	[5, 7, 29]
	Social Inclusion and Empowerment	Provides opportunities for marginalized groups to influence decisions, reducing inequalities and strengthening social cohesion and civic engagement.	[24, 25, 28]
	Environmental Sustainability	Facilitates community participation in environmental management, resource conservation, monitoring, and sustainability planning, fostering long-term stewardship.	[24, 36]
Sectoral Applications	Urban Governance	Citizen participation supports planning and decision-making related to transportation, housing, infrastructure, and public spaces, contributing to inclusive urban development.	[18, 31]
	Environmental Management	Collaborative governance integrates local ecological knowledge and scientific expertise to improve conservation, biodiversity protection, and climate adaptation efforts.	[24, 36]
	Public Health	Community engagement enhances health promotion, disease prevention, healthcare planning, and emergency response effectiveness.	[5, 29]
	Smart Cities	Digital governance tools facilitate real-time communication, citizen feedback, and evidence-based urban management.	[16, 34, 35]
	Rural Development	Participatory approaches leverage local knowledge to improve agricultural practices, resource management, community resilience, and sustainable livelihoods.	[28, 36]

4. Challenges, Emerging Trends, and Future Research Directions

4.1. *Barriers to Effective Participation.*

Despite the growing adoption of citizen participation and collaborative governance, numerous challenges continue to limit their effectiveness. One of the most significant barriers is power asymmetry among stakeholders. Collaborative governance ideally promotes equal participation; however, in practice, differences in political influence, financial resources, expertise, and access to information often create imbalances. Government agencies, large corporations, and influential interest groups may possess greater decision-making power than ordinary citizens or marginalized communities. Such disparities can reduce the ability of less powerful participants to meaningfully influence governance outcomes, potentially undermining the collaborative process [9, 10, 37]. Another common challenge is tokenism, where citizen participation exists primarily as a symbolic exercise rather than a genuine mechanism for shared decision-making. In many cases, public consultations are conducted to satisfy procedural requirements, while major decisions have already been determined by authorities. Under these circumstances, citizens may be invited to express opinions without having any real influence on policy outcomes. Tokenistic participation can weaken public trust, create dissatisfaction, and discourage future civic engagement [4–7].

Resource constraints also present significant obstacles to effective participation. Meaningful engagement requires financial resources, time, technical expertise, and organizational capacity. Government agencies may lack sufficient funding to organize participatory processes, while citizens may face limitations related to work commitments, transportation costs, or insufficient knowledge of complex policy issues. These constraints can reduce participation rates and limit the diversity of stakeholders involved in governance activities [16, 38]. The expansion of digital participation has introduced new opportunities, but it has also highlighted the persistent issue of the digital divide. Unequal access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and technological skills can exclude certain groups from online participation platforms. Rural communities, older populations, low-income households, and individuals with limited digital literacy may face barriers to engagement. As governments increasingly rely on digital tools for public participation, addressing digital inequality becomes essential to ensure inclusive governance [16, 34, 35].

A further challenge involves stakeholder conflicts, which frequently arise when participants have competing interests, values, or priorities. Collaborative governance often brings together actors from diverse backgrounds, including government agencies, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. While diversity can enhance decision-making, it may also generate disagreements that complicate consensus-building. Without effective facilitation and conflict management mechanisms, stakeholder disputes can delay decision-making and reduce the effectiveness of collaborative processes [9, 10, 37]. Table 3 shows the summary of the major barriers that hinder effective citizen participation and collaborative governance. These challenges include power asymmetry, where unequal access to resources and influence limits meaningful participation; tokenism, where participation serves symbolic rather than substantive purposes; resource constraints related to funding, time, expertise, and organizational capacity; the digital divide, which restricts access to online participation opportunities for disadvantaged groups; and stakeholder conflicts arising from competing interests and priorities among governance actors

Table 3. Major barriers to effective citizen participation in collaborative governance.

Barrier	Description	Implications for Collaborative Governance	References
Power Asymmetry	Differences in political influence, financial resources, expertise, and access to information create unequal participation among stakeholders. Government agencies, corporations, and influential groups often possess greater decision-making power than ordinary citizens or marginalized communities.	Limits meaningful citizen influence, reinforces existing inequalities, and may undermine the legitimacy and inclusiveness of collaborative governance processes.	[9, 10, 37]
Tokenism	Citizen participation is conducted primarily as a symbolic or procedural exercise rather than a genuine mechanism for shared decision-making. Public input is often collected without substantially influencing policy outcomes.	Reduces public trust, increases dissatisfaction with governance processes, and discourages future civic engagement and participation.	[4–7]
Resource Constraints	Effective participation requires financial resources, time, technical expertise, and organizational capacity. Both governments and citizens may face limitations that restrict engagement opportunities.	Lowers participation rates, reduces stakeholder diversity, and limits the quality and effectiveness of participatory processes.	[16, 38]
Digital Divide	Unequal access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and technological skills creates disparities in participation through digital platforms. Rural populations, older adults, and low-income groups are particularly vulnerable.	Excludes certain groups from digital engagement, reducing inclusiveness and potentially widening existing social inequalities in governance.	[16, 34, 35]
Stakeholder Conflicts	Differences in interests, values, priorities, and objectives among government agencies, businesses, civil society organizations, and communities may generate disputes and disagreements.	Complicates consensus-building, delays decision-making, and may reduce the effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative governance initiatives.	[9, 10, 37]

4.2. Emerging Trends.

As governance systems evolve, several emerging trends are reshaping citizen participation and collaborative governance. One of the most significant developments is the growth of digital and e-participation. Governments worldwide increasingly utilize online consultations, social media platforms, mobile applications, and digital forums to engage citizens. These technologies facilitate broader participation by reducing geographical barriers and enabling real-time communication between governments and communities. Digital participation also enhances transparency by making information more accessible and allowing citizens to monitor public decisions more effectively [15, 16, 34, 35]. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has led to growing interest in AI-supported public engagement. Artificial intelligence can assist governments in analyzing large volumes of public feedback, identifying policy priorities, and facilitating more efficient stakeholder engagement processes. AI-powered chatbots, sentiment analysis tools, and predictive analytics systems can support decision-makers by providing insights into public preferences and emerging social issues. However, concerns regarding algorithmic bias, privacy protection, and accountability require careful consideration to ensure that AI enhances rather than undermines democratic participation [39, 40].

Another important trend is the expansion of open government initiatives, which emphasize transparency, accountability, and citizen collaboration. Open government approaches encourage public access to government information, datasets, and decision-making processes. Through open data portals and transparency platforms, citizens can access information that enables more informed participation and oversight. These initiatives strengthen trust in public institutions while creating opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. The rise of citizen science represents another innovative form of participation. Citizen science involves the active involvement of non-professional individuals in scientific research and data collection activities. In areas such as environmental monitoring, biodiversity

conservation, and public health surveillance, citizens contribute valuable data and local knowledge that support evidence-based policymaking. Citizen science demonstrates how collaborative governance can integrate scientific expertise with community engagement to address complex societal challenges [21, 22].

A final emerging trend is data-driven collaborative governance, which leverages data analytics, digital technologies, and evidence-based decision-making to improve governance outcomes. Governments increasingly utilize big data, geographic information systems, and predictive analytics to support policy development and public service delivery. When combined with citizen participation, data-driven approaches can enhance policy responsiveness, improve resource allocation, and strengthen collaborative problem-solving [8, 29, 30]. Emerging trends shaping the future of citizen participation and collaborative governance is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Emerging trends in citizen participation and collaborative governance.

Emerging Trend	Key Characteristics	Potential Benefits for Governance	Key Challenges/Considerations	References
Digital and E-Participation	Utilizes online consultations, social media, mobile applications, digital forums, e-petitions, and other online engagement platforms to involve citizens in governance processes.	Expands participation, reduces geographical barriers, enables real-time communication, improves transparency, and facilitates broader citizen engagement.	Digital inequality, varying levels of digital literacy, cybersecurity concerns, and unequal access to technology.	[15, 16, 34, 35]
AI-Supported Public Engagement	Employs artificial intelligence tools such as chatbots, sentiment analysis, predictive analytics, and automated feedback analysis to support public participation and policymaking.	Enhances efficiency in processing large-scale public input, identifies policy priorities, and supports evidence-based decision-making.	Algorithmic bias, privacy protection, transparency, accountability, and ethical governance concerns.	[39, 40]
Open Government Initiatives	Promotes transparency, accountability, and citizen collaboration through open data portals, public information access, and transparent decision-making processes.	Strengthens public trust, improves government accountability, supports informed participation, and encourages collaborative problem-solving.	Data quality, information accessibility, institutional commitment, and effective public utilization of available information.	[15, 16, 34]
Citizen Science	Involves non-professional citizens in scientific research, data collection, monitoring, and knowledge generation activities. Commonly applied in environmental, biodiversity, and public health initiatives.	Integrates local knowledge with scientific expertise, expands data collection capacity, and supports evidence-based policymaking.	Data reliability, participant training, quality control, and sustained community engagement.	[21, 22]
Data-Driven Collaborative Governance	Combines big data analytics, geographic information systems (GIS), predictive analytics, and digital technologies with participatory governance approaches.	Improves policy responsiveness, enhances resource allocation, strengthens decision-making quality, and supports collaborative problem-solving.	Data privacy, data governance, technological capacity, and ensuring equitable representation in data-informed decisions.	[8, 29, 30]

4.3. Future Research Agenda.

Although substantial progress has been made in understanding citizen participation and collaborative governance, several areas require further investigation. One important priority is the development of more robust approaches for measuring participation quality. Existing

studies often focus on participation rates or the number of participants involved, while paying less attention to the depth, inclusiveness, and influence of participation. Future research should develop comprehensive indicators that assess both the process and outcomes of citizen engagement. Another critical area involves examining long-term governance outcomes. Many studies evaluate the immediate impacts of participatory initiatives, but relatively little is known about their long-term effects on policy implementation, institutional performance, social trust, and community resilience. Longitudinal research designs would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of collaborative governance arrangements [41–43].

Further attention should also be given to equity and inclusion assessment. While participation is often promoted as a tool for democratization, not all groups benefit equally from participatory processes. Future studies should investigate how governance mechanisms can better engage marginalized populations, reduce participation inequalities, and ensure fair representation across diverse social groups. The growing global adoption of collaborative governance highlights the need for cross-country comparative studies. Governance systems vary considerably across political, cultural, and institutional contexts, influencing how participation mechanisms operate and produce outcomes. Comparative research can identify best practices, contextual factors, and transferable lessons that enhance the effectiveness of citizen participation across different regions [1, 4, 15, 16].

Finally, the increasing use of digital technologies underscores the importance of exploring the integration of AI and participatory governance. Future research should examine how artificial intelligence can support citizen engagement while maintaining transparency, accountability, and ethical standards. Particular attention should be devoted to issues such as algorithmic fairness, data governance, privacy protection, and the potential impacts of AI on democratic decision-making. As governments continue to address increasingly complex societal challenges, understanding these emerging issues will be essential for advancing collaborative governance theory and practice. Future research should therefore focus on developing inclusive, technologically adaptive, and evidence-based approaches that strengthen meaningful citizen participation and enhance governance effectiveness in diverse contexts [39, 40].

4. Conclusions

Citizen participation has become an essential component of contemporary governance, reflecting a shift from hierarchical government structures toward more inclusive, collaborative, and democratic approaches. As public challenges become increasingly complex and interconnected, collaborative governance provides a valuable framework for engaging citizens, civil society organizations, private actors, and public institutions in collective decision-making and problem-solving. The theoretical foundations discussed in this review demonstrate that meaningful participation extends beyond consultation, emphasizing shared responsibility, co-production, and active stakeholder involvement. The review highlights various participation mechanisms, including public consultations, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, digital platforms, and community-based governance, all of which contribute to improved governance outcomes. Effective citizen participation enhances policy effectiveness, strengthens public trust and legitimacy, improves service delivery, promotes social inclusion, and supports environmental sustainability. Evidence from sectors such as urban governance, public health, environmental management, smart cities, and rural development further confirms

the practical value of collaborative governance approaches. However, significant challenges remain, including power imbalances, tokenistic participation, resource limitations, digital inequalities, and stakeholder conflicts. Emerging trends such as digital participation, artificial intelligence, open government initiatives, citizen science, and data-driven governance present both opportunities and new governance challenges. Future research should focus on evaluating participation quality, long-term impacts, inclusiveness, comparative governance experiences, and the ethical integration of artificial intelligence into participatory processes. Strengthening these areas will be critical for ensuring that collaborative governance remains effective, equitable, and responsive in an increasingly complex and digitalized world.

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Author Contributions

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or professional affiliations that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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