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ARTICLE

The Influence of Participation in Civic Spaces on Perceived Political Trust: Lessons From Two Case Studies in the Netherlands

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Abstract

As governments increasingly turn to participation to increase political trust among their citizens, it becomes urgent to understand the relationship between participation and trust. We explore how participants of two case studies – in invited spaces and citizens' governance spaces – perceive the influence of their participation on political trust. We find that both government responsiveness and citizens' expectations affect political trust. In the case of citizens' governance spaces, governments can meet the expectations of citizens, and political trust increases. However, in the case study on invited spaces, citizens expect more of the government than it can deliver, which negatively impacts citizens' trust. This challenges assumptions both about participation raising trust no matter what happens, and about the 'Matthew-effect', which predicts that savvy citizens will see their trust rise easily. Raising trust at the level of participatory spaces requires calibration of mutual ambitions rather than mere 'expectation management'.

Keywords: local participation, sortition, community-based initiatives, active citizenship, political trust

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Introduction

The relationship between participation in participatory spaces and political trust is an increasingly salient factor in contemporary democracies. Rising dissatisfaction with political institutions (Bennett et al., 2022; Mußotter & Rapp, 2025; Przeworski, 2019) has led to growing attention for, and the use of, participatory spaces as a means of rebuilding trust in democratic institutions (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Hendriks, 2023; Sørensen, 2017). Participatory reforms that aim to foster trust face a complex task: They must simultaneously engage disaffected citizens and rebuild civic confidence and long-term problem-solving capacity by embedding citizen collaboration in everyday governance (Stoker & Evans, 2019, p. 120-135). With this article, we aim to contribute to the ongoing debate on the relation between participation and political trust.

In this debate, we identify three lines of argumentation regarding the impact of participation on political trust. First, participation may enhance political trust by empowering citizens and improving their political skills and efficacy (Jo & Nabatchi, 2018; Smith & Tolbert, 2019). Second, participation could lower political trust (Bernhard, 2024), as participants may become disillusioned after observing the inner workings of politics or disappointed by limited opportunities to influence policy (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Fledderus, 2018; Isett & Miranda, 2015). Third, participation may raise citizens' expectations of governmental responsiveness, thereby generating disappointment when such expectations are unmet (Isett & Miranda, 2015; Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2019; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2011).

Empirical research on the relationship between participatory spaces and political trust has largely relied on quantitative, large-scale surveys (for an overview, see Beste & Wyss, 2019) or single case studies emphasising political and administrative contexts (Ryan, 2019, p. 559). Comparative qualitative research that examines not only whether, but *how*, participation affects political trust remains scarce (Spada, 2019). Understanding why trust changes – whether due to improved understanding of public affairs or increased recognition from authorities – is crucial for managing expectations among both governments and citizens.

In this paper, we explore how participants perceive the influence of participation on their political trust through comparative qualitative interviews. We interviewed participants involved in citizens' governance spaces and invited spaces in the Netherlands to address the question: *How does participation in different civic spaces influence political trust in local government?* By comparing two distinct participatory spaces through in-depth interviews that allow participants to elaborate on their experiences, we aim to provide insight into the mechanisms that influence political trust among participants in civic spaces.

This inquiry is particularly relevant in an era of declining political trust and the expanding use of democratic innovations such as participatory spaces as a remedy

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for that decline (Harris, 2019, p. 45). A better understanding of the mechanisms through which participation affects trust can help civil servants, policymakers, and active citizens design participatory processes more effectively and purposefully.

Theory

While the impact of participation on political trust is widely discussed, the mechanisms through which participants experience changes in their trust remain unclear. A range of factors may influence how participation affects political trust.

Levels of Analysis

We discern three levels of analysis of the factors that impact the influence of participation in civic spaces on political trust: *micro*, *meso*, and *macro*. The *micro* and *macro* levels are well-researched, as explained below. In this article, we focus on the *meso* level by comparing two distinct types of participatory space.

The micro-level concerns individual characteristics of participants. A substantial body of research has examined individual characteristics such as class, education, social capital, gender, and age (for an overview, see Grasso & Giugni, 2025). One important individual factor is participants' initial level of political trust. Participation in democratic innovations tends to exhibit self-selection bias, as individuals with higher political trust are more likely to engage (Boulianne, 2019). This dynamic aligns with the so-called Matthew-effect: "Those who have shall receive" (Røiseland, 2022), whereby those already inclined to trust are both more likely to participate and, through participation, may further increase their political support (Boulianne, 2019).

The meso-level concerns the characteristics of participatory spaces and is the focus of this paper. Research aims to explain how participation affects political trust, as the perceived success of a participatory event is commonly linked to its effect on political trust (Stack & Griessler, 2022). Our study focuses on this level and is located in the Netherlands, where trust in both local and national government is comparatively high. Approximately 40-50% of citizens report high or moderate trust, compared to 20-40% in many other countries (OECD, 2024, p. 23). Government support for civil society is also relatively strong (Ubels, 2020). Deliberative and participatory forms of engagement are common expressions of active citizenship in the Netherlands (Hurenkamp et al., 2011), and municipalities are legally required to promote citizen participation in policymaking (Spit et al., 2020).

The macro-level refers to the political and socio-economic context in which participatory processes take place. Contextual factors such as overall political support, socio-economic conditions, and institutional characteristics shape the environment in which participation takes place. The Dutch context is characterised by "the myth of

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immaculate citizenship": Citizenship is dreamt of as a spontaneous activity but rarely develops entirely independently of government (Hurenkamp & Tonkens, 2011). Citizens are frequently invited, supported, and subsidised by government actors to self-organise. Even when civic initiatives arise spontaneously, interaction with municipalities and professional welfare organizations typically occurs at an early stage. The Netherlands shares many of these features with other developed welfare states, particularly the other Benelux countries (Antonelli & De Bonis, 2017), which perform highly in terms of democratic participation (International IDEA, 2023; OECD, 2024). Benelux countries have a strong tradition of democratic innovations and embedded citizens' initiatives, including G1000s in Belgium and the Netherlands, and Bürgerforen in Luxembourg (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

Spaces of Participation

Our chosen level of analysis is the meso level, where we follow Hendriks and Dzur (2021) in differentiating between *invited spaces*, initiated and organised by the government, or *citizens' governance spaces*, initiated and driven by citizens. Invited spaces are established by government actors to address specific policy needs, with authorities defining the scope and agenda. In invited spaces, design features such as participant selection procedures play a crucial role (OECD, 2020), and leadership, social capital, organisational capacity, and government support are key to effectiveness (Igalla et al., 2020).

In invited spaces, the initiative lies with the government, which determines the purpose, boundaries, and structure of participation (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021, p. 2). Citizens participate as guests within government-defined frameworks, including mini-publics, town hall meetings, and citizens' assemblies (Hendriks & Colvin, 2024). While these formats can foster deliberation, they also risk reinforcing existing power asymmetries and limiting citizen creativity (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, since such spaces serve governmental agendas, the scope of possible outcomes is often constrained (Boswell et al., 2023, p. 89).

Citizens' governance spaces, by contrast, are initiated by citizens who organise to address collective problems independently from the state. These spaces often enable more radical and authentic forms of participation (Bua & Bussu, 2021; Hendriks & Dzur, 2021). Citizens' governance spaces, as defined by Hendriks and Dzur (2021, p. 4-5), are characterized by their independence: "These spaces emerge from within civil society and are wholly independent (at least initially) from state or market support". Citizens in these spaces undertake collective problem-solving without government invitation. They self-authorise their activities in domains typically dominated by professionals and officials (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021, p. 7), seeking neither legitimacy nor solutions from government (Van Bentum & Visscher, forthcoming). Citizens' governance spaces can thus be described as grassroots initiatives

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that are (1) citizen-led, (2) practically oriented towards addressing collective issues, (3) experimental and often disruptive, and (4) inclusive and collaborative in engaging relevant publics and organisations (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021, p. 4).

What primarily distinguishes citizens' governance spaces from both invited spaces is their emphasis on practical collective problem-solving (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021, p. 6). Rather than focusing on policy formulation, these spaces concentrate on implementation – doing policy. They represent democratisation of the executive branch of the trias politica (Visscher et al., 2023): Citizens take responsibility for tangible public tasks such as maintaining parks, running community centres, or improving local infrastructure. As Hendriks and Dzur (2021, p. 6) note, "citizens do the heavy lifting of public policy: they define the problem, design feasible plans, implement solutions, and evaluate outcomes".

In the literature on participatory spaces, a third type of participatory space, *claimed spaces*, is often presented as a counterpart to invited spaces (Gaventa, 2019; Hendriks & Dzur, 2021). Claimed spaces typically emerge from social movements, spaces "where less powerful people or groups create their own arenas to shape their own agendas" (Gaventa, 2019, p. 119). These are less susceptible to elite or governmental co-optation and provide stronger opportunities for criticism (Bua & Bussu, 2021). However, claimed spaces still imply an antagonistic relationship between citizens and the state, reaffirming state primacy by "claiming" space from government to express dissent. Even theoretical adaptations of the concept, such as Bua and Bussu's (2021, p. 719) democracy-driven governance, maintain a centralized relationship with the state. In citizens' governance spaces, this relationship is almost absent (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021)

We examine citizen initiatives as instances of citizens' governance spaces – neighborhood-based efforts to solve local problems by providing public goods and services (Igalla et al., 2020). However, Hendriks and Dzur (2021) may overstate the lack of government involvement in such spaces, at least in the Dutch context, where governmental support for citizen initiatives is common (De Wilde et al., 2014; Igalla et al., 2019). When collaboration between citizens and government increases, these spaces come close to collaborative governance (Bussu, 2019).

We compare these citizens' governance spaces with invited spaces. Our example of invited spaces is sortition-based neighborhood committees. Sortition has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years (Curato et al., 2025; Gąsiorowska, 2023; Jacquet et al., 2022) because it mitigates the self-selection bias typical of participatory processes – biases "toward the intensively interested and well-organized, and against the unorganized" (Warren, 2014, p. 54). A robust sortition process, in which participants are personally invited through random selection, can help address these inequalities to some extent (Brand & Hurenkamp, 2022, p. 55).

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The core differences between citizens' governance spaces and invited spaces are thus 1) who instigates the democratic event; 2) who controls the agenda of the event; 3) who decides who can join, and 4) what the aim of the event is (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview Differences Invited and Citizens' Governance Spaces

Type of space	Instigated by	Agenda set by	Attendance decided by	Aim of the event
Citizens' governance space	Citizens	Participants	Individual participants	Public goods and services
Invited space	Government	Government	Government strongly encouraged sorted citizens	Deliberative advice

Hendriks and Dzur (2021) believe that participants in citizens' governance spaces are more likely to see an increase in political trust, as they are free to develop as autonomous citizens, whereas participants in an invited space are much more likely to be stifled and frustrated by government interference. Hendriks and Dzur (2021) also claim that citizens participating in citizens' governance spaces are more likely to see an increase in their political trust, as they are more likely to already have relatively high political trust – especially compared to the citizens recruited by sortition from a neighbourhood with low voter turnout.

Political Trust

To conceptualise trust, we adapt Norris's (2017, p. 19) framework. Norris's classic five levels of system support are based on Easton's (1965) distinction between diffuse and specific political support. Norris breaks down political (or democratic) support along these lines in a concise and comprehensive model of five levels of political support.

The first, most diffuse level of political support Norris describes is *national identity*: the measure to which people support their country or nation, regardless of the current political regime. Second, and more specific, is *agreement with core principles and values*; for instance, supporting liberal democracy in general, regardless of how it is currently implemented in one's political system. Norris's third level of political support is the *evaluation of the overall performance* of the regime, or the satisfaction with democratic governance and the general working of the democratic process. Fourth, Norris distinguishes *confidence in regime institutions* such as parliament, the police, or the government. The most specific fifth level is *approval*

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of incumbent officeholders, such as party leaders, presidents, or the Speaker of the House. According to Norris (2017), the lower levels of political support are more principled, while the higher ones are more instrumental.

Norris's model was developed for national politics, but we think it can also be applied to local politics. This implies that we replace national identity with neighbourhood identity or identification with the city or municipality in which one lives. This does not alter the position in the hierarchy of specificity of political support; identification with one's neighborhood is still the least specific level of political support, while approval of the alderperson or member of the municipal council – the fifth level – is still the most specific.

Boulianne (2019) conducted an extensive survey on the impact over time of participation on political trust and found that participants of a deliberative minipublic do indeed have more political trust, but that they also started out with more trust (Boulianne, 2019, p. 24-25). Therefore, it remains unclear if and how trust increases through participation. Boulianne does, however, show that government responses do not decrease political trust because, according to her research, the level of government response did not correlate with the degree of increase in political trust.

To find out how participants themselves consider the relationship between participation and trust and what causal mechanisms their stories point to, Boulianne's (2019) study used in-depth interviews with open questions. We purposefully asked broad questions, instead of specific proxy measures for levels 4 and 5. We allowed our respondents to interpret our questions on whatever level they wished and aimed to clarify their utterances by asking follow-up questions. We thus set out to use a slightly broader definition of political trust than Norris (2017) herself, incorporating levels 3 to 5, similar to Muβotter & Rapp (2025). It turns out that our respondents mostly answered questions about trust in government at levels 3 and 4, and only sporadically referred to specific alderpeople or civil servants, located at level 5.

Study Design

We add to Boulianne's (2019) study in two ways. Firstly, we introduce a comparative element. Boulianne (2019) only investigated participation in a deliberative space, but many other forms exist, which are under-investigated (Escobar & Bua, 2025). We used purposive sampling by choosing two most different types of participatory spaces (Bernard, 2006; Ryan, 2019). By comparing participation in invited spaces and citizens' governance spaces, we can shed light on the mechanisms that affect participation, using most different systems design (Ryan, 2019, p. 562). We interviewed participants of both invited spaces and citizens' governance spaces to

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explore citizens' experiences and views, including their views on changes in political (dis)trust (Van der Does & Jacquet, 2023).

Our second addition is that we use a qualitative, inductive method to investigate these mechanisms, rather than checking hypotheses through deductive, quantitative methodologies. Asking open-ended questions, and following up on answers in a way a survey does not allow for, enabled us to delve much deeper into the experiences of our respondents (Talpin, 2019).

Interviewees did not always have an opinion about political trust as an abstract concept. Therefore, we tried to make the concepts in the topic list more concrete by reflecting after the first two interviews and determining whether any minor details needed to be changed or added to the topic list. In that way, the research process stayed flexible, which improved the study's dependability (Frambach et al., 2013). As these were minor changes, the data found could still be properly compared.

To research their views on political trust, we asked participants whether they felt that local government represents people like them, and whether their opinion of the local government changed owing to their participation. We paid attention to transferability by using rich quotations – so-called "thick transcriptions". Furthermore, to improve confirmability during fieldwork, we wrote several memos to reflect on their position, methods, feelings, and ideas during the research. For example, a methodical challenge was that respondents found concepts such as "democracy" abstract.

The transcripts were coded by researchers Visscher and Brand using thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Through focusing on meaning across a data set, [thematic analysis] allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297)

To analyse the interviews, we first pseudonymised and open-coded the transcripts using the ATLAS.ti program. Subsequently, we clustered interview fragments using axial coding. Although the first two authors coded the transcripts of their own case study, we did check each other's coded fragments using research triangulation to enhance credibility (Frambach et al., 2013). We grouped the themes that surfaced in the interviews to create comparable narratives of two cases that described the experiences and feelings of the participants in invited and citizens' governance spaces. We worked together on our interview guides and on coding the interview data, supported by the qualitative data-analysis tool ATLAS.ti. The interviews were semi-structured, anonymised, and audio recorded. Before the interviews, respondents received an information letter about the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time until publication. Below, we describe the two case studies and how we studied them.

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Case Descriptions

Case 1: Invited Spaces: Sortition in Seacity

The sortition case is a clear example of an invited space as citizens are quite literally invited by the government. There were six sortition-based neighbourhood committees in Seacity, one of the largest cities in the Netherlands, which has a highly diverse population. The neighbourhood committees in Seacity required participation for 4 years, with formal meetings at least once a month, and informal meetings more often (as many as three times a week for certain committees in certain periods). The committees were allowed to advise the municipality – solicited and unsolicited – on various subjects and to be involved in assessing submitted citizens' initiatives and allocating budget.

The researcher selected three out of six committees in neighbourhoods where citizens' trust in the municipality and voter turnout for elections was lowest. In 2022, the turnout in municipal elections in the Netherlands was 50.4% compared to 54.1% in 2018. In the selected neighbourhoods in Seacity, the 2022 turnout was 24% in Neighborhood 1, 21% in Neighborhood 2, and 44% in Neighborhood 3. Between December 2021 and February 2022, researcher Brand interviewed 15 committee members and former committee members. They worked in various sectors and had different ages and cultural backgrounds. Eight of them had received college education (including three students), while seven had followed vocational education. From the start of the experiment, most (12 participants) had little knowledge of and experience with democratic participation.

Five participants participated in the experiment for four years; the others did so for a shorter period, between six months and three years. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were held at a public location in the neighbourhood or online. The neighbourhood committees then existed for about 3.5 years. Three committee members declined the interview invitation owing to illness, lack of time, and insufficient understanding of Dutch and English.

Table 2. Overview of respondents' IS: Sortition-based Neighbourhood committees

	Interviewed committee members	Interviewed ex-committee members	Total number of interviewed members
Neighbourhood 1	5	1	6
Neighbourhood 2	2	1	3
Neighbourhood 3	5	1	6
Total	12	3	15

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Case 2: Citizens' Governance Spaces: Citizens' Initiatives in Woodtown and Hilltown

Our example of a citizens' governance space involves 21 citizens' initiatives in Woodtown and Hilltown, both mid-sized municipalities (of around 170,000 inhabitants) consisting of bigger city surrounded by several villages, in the East of the Netherlands. Citizens' initiatives are good examples of citizens' governance spaces, which Hendriks and Dzur (2021, p. 2) define as "practically focused initiatives, projects and groups that are formed and led by citizens working together to address a specific collective problem."

The composition of our sample represents the variety of citizens' initiatives in these two municipalities. The initiatives vary from small-scale community-building activities within a neighbourhood to the semi-professional provision of non-essential care for a whole village. The number of participants in the initiatives ranges from 2 to 750, but most initiatives have 10-20 participants. Most initiatives have been operating for several years, with weekly gatherings, especially for those intimately involved with the initiatives' day-to-day operations.

Virtually all initiatives are supported by the municipality, either through direct funding or a housing opportunity, and often the public service they provide is intertwined with the services provided by the government. For example, social welfare initiatives often are in contact with neighbourhood healthcare providers and civil servants that work in social care. This close relation to the municipality is a core feature of citizens' governance spaces in the Netherlands. "Citizens control the aims, means, and actual implementation of their activities, but they often link to governments and other formal institutions, as their work field contains the public domain and they, therefore, find themselves in institutionalized settings" (Igalla et al., 2019, p. 1176).

Between September 2019 and May 2021, head-researcher Visscher and co-researcher Van Bentum spoke to 21 representatives of citizens' initiatives – whomever the citizens' initiatives put forward as a representative, commonly the most active member. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes each and were held at a public location in the neighbourhood or online. We invited members of a wide variety of initiatives with help from the municipality, looking for variety in domain, location, size, and measure of professionality. All selected candidates were willing to participate in the interviews.

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Table 3. Overview of Respondents' Interviews CGS

	Interviewed representatives of citizens' governance spaces
Municipality 1: Woodtown	10
Municipality 2: Hilltown	11
Total	21

Findings

Invited Spaces: Low Expectations are Easily Met

Twelve out of 15 participants reported an increase in their trust in local government, and the remaining three participants did not become more negative. Thus, at first sight, inviting citizens to participate seems highly effective in augmenting trust. However, these participants had low expectations of participation. None of them would have come up with the idea of becoming politically active in local politics, and three participants were not even accustomed to voting. They considered it an honour to be invited and to be offered this opportunity for participation. Consequently, all participants started out with a positive attitude, seeing it as a chance to do something for their neighbourhood.

The actual sortition process began with letters from the government. Several people who received such a letter assumed they were not the target demographic for these committees because they were not fluent in Dutch, felt they were either too young or too old, or believed they lacked experience or education. Additionally, they had no idea what to expect from this type of participatory space. Most participants only became aware of the opportunity for political participation via neighbourhood committees after a personal visit from a civil servant to their home. For example, Semiha, who is in her 30s and a self-described housewife, stated:

> *I received a letter from the municipality at the beginning of the year, saying that neighbourhood committees were going to be installed via a lottery, but I didn't take it seriously. I didn't read further at all. A few months later, people from the municipality showed up at the door and explained that I had been selected. 'Selected for what?' was my first reaction. I thought I wouldn't dare. I had no experience, of course, and I thought I wouldn't know anything.*

The primary motivation for all members to participate was the wish to contribute something meaningful to their neighbourhood and to do something for their fellow

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citizens. As is often the case, such ambitions remain rather vague until one is explicitly asked, as many people seem to possess what has been termed "altruistic abundance" (Van Bochove et al., 2014). Sofija, who works as a care assistant, articulated this as follows:

> *Only then did it strike me that maybe everyone is able to do something meaningful for the neighbourhood – that even I can change a few things for the better. I thought, I'll just go for it.*

Almost all participants found that they were capable of more public participation than they had previously thought. For example, Myrem, who is in her 20s and works for the government, explained:

> *I think the neighbourhood committee subconsciously made you feel stronger. If you talk with someone who is apparently more knowledgeable and suddenly you realize: I have something to add to this conversation; I do also matter.*

Through participation, committee members learned that they had experiences and insights to offer because they knew the local context – knowledge that civil servants and politicians, who normally decide on neighbourhood policy, may lack. Care assistant Sofija, who has lived in this neighbourhood for 20 years, argued:

> *We know exactly what is going on in the street, even late at night when everyone is home from work, for example. We also know what has happened in the last few weeks and what kind of people live here.*

The participants' perception of local government and politics also changed. The mere fact that the local government invited them to take part in this experiment somewhat increased the political trust of 12 of the 15 participants. Committee members felt taken seriously because the municipality encouraged them to participate, made substantial efforts to support them, and often responded quickly to the advice given by the committee. Most participants also indicated that their interest in local politics had grown. This also applied to Eef, who said:

> *And I actually think that about the municipal elections – I didn't care that much for them at first, but I think they are becoming very important. I think you notice that even more than national politics anyway.*

Committee members began noticing that representative politicians genuinely want to do good for the neighbourhood and that negative perceptions of local politicians

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are often exaggerated. At the same time, the rather negative connotations of politics – evoking an atmosphere of power and struggle – that originally contributed to participants not showing up for elections or deliberative meetings, did not disappear despite their increased interest in local politics. Most participants still held negative attitudes towards politics and (national) government and portrayed their work in the committees explicitly as apolitical. For some, the word 'politics' had such negative connotations that they mentioned having no political trust at all. Denver even viewed politics as being in opposition to the residents:

> *I tried not to get on the political side but to vote for the residents. Yes, because if you're going to do something with politics, you're not doing anything for the residents.*

However, the opinions and behaviour of participants sometimes seem ambivalent, their action implying more political trust than their words indicate. Importantly, despite their negative attitudes towards politics, the participants changed their political behaviour while participating in this "invited space". Their participation has increased their trust in their political behaviour, a development we observed in all participants in all committees.

Three participants who previously did not vote do now, and two others even ran for office in local elections. This indicates that their political trust has increased, as voting – and especially running in an election – does imply some trust in the electoral process. Former non-voters included docker Denver and Mirza, head of cleaning at a vacation park. Denver stated:

> *I didn't vote because I never got into it. I also didn't know who to vote for. I voted for the first time the last time there was an election.*

Mirza now votes and follows political debates on television. She has developed an interest in politics through participation in the neighbourhood committee. Another participant, student Fidan, who previously had little political interest, has since run for city council following her experiences on the committee.

Citizens' Governance Spaces and Hybrid Spaces

The participants in the citizens' governance spaces began their democratic participation with high self-trust and sufficient political trust to believe that they could influence their environment. Most had prior experience with democratic participation. Eight participants were civil servants, and all of them voted in elections. More than half had a college education.

Regarding political (dis)trust, we identified two distinct groups of participants in two types of citizens' governance spaces: self-reliant citizens in independent citizens'

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governance spaces and "proto-professionals" (De Swaan, 1988) in another type of citizens' governance spaces that we came to distinguish in this research, which we refer to as hybrid spaces.

Self-Reliant Citizens in Citizens' Governance Spaces

The first group consisted of participants whose political trust with the municipality ranged from neutral to positive. These initiators tended to have political trust in the municipality but preferred limited municipal involvement in their initiatives. They took pride in their independence from the municipality, sometimes even rejecting funding opportunities to preserve that autonomy. For example, Sjoerd, who runs an initiative aimed at reducing loneliness among elderly people, explained:

> *And the alderperson suggested: "If you make sure you organise all of this, we will get you the money. You can buy bikes, you can buy the expensive bikes and rickshaws". And then we said very clearly: no, we are not going to do that.*

These initiatives were content with the municipality and remained so throughout their participation. Participants were often comfortable keeping the municipality at arm's length. They had started their initiatives independently, not at the instigation of the government but because they noticed a problem in their neighbourhood or saw opportunities to improve their community – just as Hendriks and Dzur (2021) would predict. When they did receive support or contacted the municipality, this typically occurred only during the initial phase of their projects.

Barbara, from an ecological housing initiative, a neighbourhood that is ecologically built and completely self-sustaining, echoed this sentiment, saying she would find it "very weird" if the government contacted them – even during the COVID-19 lockdowns – to ask if they needed help, as she repeatedly emphasised that they were "really self-sufficient".

Among the initiatives with a positive perception of the municipality, we found only one that maintained substantial contact with the municipality and received considerable material support in a highly responsive manner. Spokesperson Peter was therefore particularly satisfied with the municipality:

> *When we ask for some wood pulp, they ask if we need it this morning or if this afternoon is fine as well.*

Proto-Professionals in Hybrid Spaces

The second type of citizens' governance spaces consisted of what we call "proto-professional" participants (De Swaan, 1988; Verhoeven & Bochove, 2018). We describe this type as *hybrid* because, upon closer inspection, these spaces were not fully

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self-governed by citizens but were supported, stimulated, and sometimes even initiated by the local government.

Participants in these spaces reported much more frustration and distrust than the self-reliant citizens. Their initiatives were municipality-oriented and often began with municipal funding or other forms of support, such as housing. Their activities were usually intertwined with existing public services, meaning they continued to interact with the municipality after the initial setup.

A good example is a last-mile transportation initiative led by Kitty. The initiative emerged when local bus routes were "straightened", meaning buses no longer entered neighbourhoods but only visited the bigger roads that pass by. The initiative had three aims: (1) promoting welfare and self-sufficiency among elderly residents, (2) encouraging sustainability using electric vehicles, and (3) filling the public transport gap.

The municipality appointed a civil servant from the Department of Public Transportation to support the initiative, helping it to hire a coordinator and organise evening sessions for volunteers on topics such as Excel, digital communication, and customer service. Kitty was pleased with these opportunities to professionalize her volunteers and explained that she was essentially "running a business", managing insurance, leasing cars, and feeling responsible not only for the users of the service but also for 40 volunteers.

However, this professionalisation sometimes clashed with the volunteers' perspectives. Many felt they were doing Kitty a favour by volunteering and resisted being told they needed further training. As Kitty remarked in our interview, the volunteers "did not always respond well to being told they had to be educated".

The municipality, meanwhile, wanted the initiative to professionalise further by integrating it into a new city-wide public transport network as a "last-mile" option – essentially becoming a subdivision of the commercial transport company once the new public tender took effect. Kitty expressed apprehension about this development, fearing that volunteers would not approve:

> *Say that we will also start driving for young people. I think a bunch of our volunteers would say: what, why should I play private driver to this snot-nosed youngling?*

She also questioned the fairness of providing a crucial service entirely through unpaid labour:

> *As long as there is a need, we hope to provide this solution. But in an ideal world, our volunteers would get some compensation. It would frankly turn into a low-paying job. So instead of a bus driver, you'd have this kind of transport, but the drivers are rewarded – financially. Because how long should we let volunteers do these kinds of things?*

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While the government encouraged professionalisation, it did not always meet participants' expectations for how professional organizations should be treated. For instance, Kitty waited a year for a response to a financial plan that the municipality had requested – partially drafted by a municipal civil servant. Then, suddenly, in November, the municipality responded that they would fund the initiative if it was operational by March, which Kitty felt was much too soon.

A similar mismatch in expectations arose regarding signage that the municipality was supposed to install at neighbourhood pick-up spots. Because this involved public space, the initiative could not place the signs themselves. Although Kitty appreciated the effort, she noted:

> *Getting the budget, getting the signs, and making sure they are placed – that's just a lot of work for us. [But] it took about five months before the signs were put up. Well, if you're really running a professional enterprise…*

These proto-professional initiatives often stressed that they were not taken seriously enough by the municipality. They felt insufficiently heard, inadequately consulted, and not treated as equal partners, even though they were providing public services as well as – or maybe even better than – the municipality itself. Some even considered themselves more legitimate representatives of their community than elected officials or civil servants.

For example, Korneel, a member of an initiative providing non-essential care for inhabitants of a village with 750 volunteers, stated:

> *There is no political party with 750 members around here, so who is the representative around here?*

Participants in these initiatives often regarded themselves as more innovative than the municipality could accommodate. They criticised municipal bureaucracy and what Kitty called the "old way of thinking", especially concerning funding.

As Gina, from a large-scale neighbourhood activities initiative, explained:

> *What I find very interesting is that the municipality, through the way they think – they cheer it all on, right, they consider everything you do great and all that. But they'll also say they can't fit your plans into their funding schemes. So, if you want to fit into their funding schemes, you must be more specific with your target audience.*

Gina was frustrated because, if the initiative did not fit within existing schemes, she could not apply for funding. At the same time, the municipality promoted the

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expectation that it was flexible and supportive of innovation. Thus, she argued, the municipality created expectations it could not meet.

For many proto-professional initiatives, the municipality acted beyond their control yet had a major impact on their work – more like a force of nature than a partner. As Dora, from an initiative providing music lessons for children, stated:

> *My biggest frustration is the complete disengagement by the municipality. That is what I experience as the most frustrating thing, and at the same time, it's what I have the least influence over.*

These municipality-oriented initiatives required some funding to get started, but also sustainable funding to remain operational. However, the municipality expected them to become self-reliant after a few years, providing only short-term start-up funds. This led to frustration and stress for many initiatives, which viewed the policy as inefficient. As Dora noted:

> *Because when you have to start from scratch every time, it just doesn't really go anywhere, while we already have a project up and running.*

Conclusions

This article set out to explore how participation in participatory spaces influences participants' political trust. We examined this relationship by comparing invited spaces and citizens' governance spaces, as some scholars expect that this distinction affects outcomes (Hendriks & Dzur, 2021).

Our analysis revealed that the binary distinction between invited and citizens' governance spaces is too rigid in the Dutch context, and possibly in other Western European welfare states more broadly. To understand how participation influences political trust, we found it was necessary to introduce a third category: hybrid spaces, which combine features of both invited and citizens' governance spaces. In these spaces, citizens provide public services in close collaboration with governmental institutions. Such spaces often emerge in response to government appeals for citizen action (Bussu, 2019; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties [Ministry of the Interior], 2013; Ubels, 2020). They differ from citizens' governance spaces due to their institutional embeddedness but share with them a focus on providing public goods.

Across all three types of spaces, our qualitative interviews with active citizens indicate that it is the relationship between government responsiveness and citizens' expectations that matters. When looking at the meso level, the level of the type of participatory space, the key determinant of changes in political trust that rises up

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from their narratives is how ambitions of citizens and government meet. This relationship manifests itself differently in each type of space.

In invited spaces, participants, selected by sortition from neighbourhoods with low voter turnout and low political trust, were often surprised by the invitation. Many initially doubted that such participation was meant for them or would make any difference. However, when civil servants clearly communicated the scope of influence and provided tangible support, the government often met or exceeded these low expectations. As a result, participants' trust in local government increased, with some even becoming politically active afterward. In conclusion, it can be said that the negative perspective on local politics that some participants already had before the start did not change. However, the opinions and behaviour of participants sometimes seem to paint a more complex picture. Although their views on politics have not changed, their trust in their political influence has increased. Similarly, they often now participate in local politics, outside of the invited space, which requires a certain degree of trust in our political system.

In citizens' governance spaces, participants acted autonomously and maintained low expectations of government involvement, not due to cynicism, but because they believed that communities should self-organize to provide local services. Trust remained stable or increased slightly when governments supported their autonomy, for instance by providing space or modest resources without interference.

In hybrid spaces, political trust evolved quite differently. These initiatives often emerged where governments withdrew from service provision or delegated responsibilities to citizen initiatives. While collaboration was extensive, citizens were expected to professionalise and adhere to government-imposed standards concerning safety, quality, or accountability. Substantial public funding during early stages raised expectations of continued responsiveness. Yet when governments failed to meet these expectations, participants frequently became disillusioned and disengaged, resulting in decreased political trust, particularly regarding the three specific levels distinguished by Norris (2017). However, when governments did meet or surpass expectations, trust remained comparably high, as in citizens' governance spaces.

Discussion

The study provides insight into the experience of participants in different participatory spaces, but it has several limitations. First, our comparison is imperfect. Ideally, we would also have examined community-based initiatives in Seacity and sortition-based processes in Hilltown and Woodtown to improve comparability. Since the invited space studied represents an atypical case in the Netherlands, expanding the dataset with citizens' governance and hybrid spaces in Seacity would

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address this limitation. Second, the comparison is constrained by participant differences: Citizens' governance spaces typically attract highly efficacious and educated participants, whereas sortition-based invited spaces deliberately seek to engage less active, lower-educated citizens. Although this difference is difficult to eliminate, interviewing not only spokespersons but also rank-and-file participants helped increase respondent diversity.

Despite the limitations, we think the article does contribute relevant insights to the debate on the influence of participation on political trust. We identify four contributions to the field.

First, we contribute to the enduring debate on participation and trust, which traces back to De Tocqueville (1831[2003]), Pateman (1970, 2012), and Putnam (2000). As democratic innovations, such as participatory spaces, proliferate in modern democracies (Hendriks, 2023), often to counter declining political trust (Harris, 2019), understanding these dynamics remains vital. Our findings challenge the widespread Matthew-effect assumption (Røiseland, 2022) that those with high political trust are both more likely to participate and to gain additional trust through participation (Boulianne, 2019). In contrast, our data suggests that individuals from low-trust neighborhoods, when personally invited to participate, can experience substantial trust gains. For policymakers, this underscores the importance of not overpromising and thereby inflating citizens' expectations (Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2019). Participation appears effective when the government invites citizens with low expectations and then successfully meets those expectations.

Second, we make a methodological contribution by employing a qualitative comparative approach. Most existing research relies on large-scale survey analyses (e.g. Boulianne, 2019; Jacobs, 2024), often focusing on deliberative innovations, that is, invited spaces (Escobar & Bua, 2025). However, as Junius (2023) shows, quantitative and qualitative approaches yield distinct insights into complex concepts such as legitimacy. Our interviews reveal that government responsiveness and citizens' expectations are central to understanding both increases and decreases in trust, findings that large-N studies may overlook.

Third, our analysis underscores recent calls to reorient research on participation and to not only imply deliberative democratic innovations (Hendriks, 2023; Escobar & Bua, 2025). Both Hendriks (2023) and Escobar and Bua (2025) take Smith's (2016) remark that "[d]eliberative democracy has established an almost hegemonic hold on democratic theory and the analysis of participatory governance" as a starting point. Citizens' initiatives are a classic example of cooperative democracy, which is, "in essence, an action-oriented, selectively inclusive type of democracy; it does not come with highly deliberative or all-inclusive ambitions", but rather focuses on "getting things done, assembling vital resources for collective action" (Hendriks 2023, p. 44). By comparing deliberative, sortition-based neighborhood committees

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with citizens' initiatives which co-produce public services through voluntary action, we illustrate the importance of broadening the research agenda towards the more participatory forms of democratic innovation.

Fourth, our findings show that participation does not automatically enhance political trust; it can also erode it. The risk of decline is greatest in hybrid spaces, where high expectations meet limited responsiveness. To mitigate this, governments should not just 'manage expectations' of citizens or be ambitious about smart designed innovations. Rather, government should have a substantial repertoire on absorbing civic ambitions in public policy making. For citizens from very low-trust neighborhoods, those approaching Parvin's (2018) "disengaged citizen", a sincere invitation from government to participate in well managed deliberation may serve as an important first step towards renewed civic engagement. In those cases, meaningful dialogue can really make a difference, even if there is little follow-up in terms of policy changes. Where citizens roll up their sleeves themselves it requires not less but different work from public officials, engaging with people who often eerily look like themselves,

In conclusion, the type of participatory space is a meaningful factor when debating the impact of participation on political trust. But the relation is less clear cut than previously thought. Invitations can raise expectations, which, if met, can lead to significant trust gains, especially among citizens with initially low trust. Conversely, citizens who enter the civic domain with trust may benefit more from independent participation with minimal government interference. And where close spaces are hybrid and cooperation is unavoidable, governments should take care of their responsiveness.

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