# Participatory and Deliberative Approaches in Policy: A Theoretical Analysis

This assignment focuses on applying two distinct theoretical perspectives to the challenges of participatory and deliberative approaches in policy making. The brief requires an analysis of an article and area of study, followed by the application of these theories, their critique, and an expression of my own position on the issue. In this case, I examine Hoppe's (2016) exploration of the institutional barriers and challenges faced by participatory approaches to policy making. I then apply two theoretical frameworks—intersectionality and expanded rational choice theory—to analyze the constraints and possibilities of participatory policymaking. Intersectionality offers insights into the power dynamics and inequalities that shape decision-making, while expanded rational choice theory provides a framework for understanding the behaviour of political actors within institutional constraints. In this essay, I critique both theories in the context of participatory policymaking and conclude by presenting my own perspective on the complexities of these approaches within democratic governance, including by suggesting a third way, and complementing these approaches by a more interpretivist theoretical stance.

# The Issue: The Challenges of Participatory and Deliberative Approaches in Policy

Participatory and deliberative approaches in policy making aim to enhance democratic engagement by involving citizens more directly in decision-making. However, as Hoppe (2016) highlights, these approaches often face institutional constraints and practical challenges. Despite their increasing rhetorical appeal, their implementation is frequently constrained by existing political structures and vested interests.

Hoppe examines these barriers through a *political-institutional* lens, noting that representative democracy and network governance inherently resist participatory shifts. He highlights a persistent gap between the promise and the reality of participation, as deliberative mechanisms are often treated as optional add-ons rather than meaningful alternatives to existing decision-making structures.

A key theoretical idea Hoppe draws on is *democracies of problems*, originally proposed by Hisschemöller (1993, cited in Hoppe, 2016). This perspective suggests that policymaking is not just shaped by institutional structures or ideological contexts but by the nature of the problem itself. Different types of policy issues necessitate different governance approaches—some requiring expert-led solutions, others benefitting from deliberation, and some necessitating networked collaboration. This challenges the notion that participatory mechanisms can be universally applied, instead framing democracy as a fluid and adaptive process.

Hoppe also explores how participatory policymaking alters *decisional arenas* (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). Different democratic principles come into tension—deliberation-based legitimacy, where stakeholders engage in reasoned dialogue, versus electoral legitimacy, which centres on competition for political authority. Similarly, Goodin and Dryzek (2006, also cited in Hoppe, 2016) discuss the *macro-political uptake of minipublics*, questioning whether participatory experiments, such as citizens' assemblies, can meaningfully influence broader political decisions.

Moreover, institutional resistance stems from power maintenance, as political elites often have a vested interest in preserving established decision-making processes. As Hoppe notes, participatory approaches inevitably confront ideological and power-based limitations (Dauenhauer, 1986). The underlying challenge is whether these approaches can overcome structural inertia and establish legitimacy in broader governance.

To explore these issues, two theoretical frameworks—*intersectionality* and *expanded rational choice theory*—are useful lenses for understanding both the constraints and possibilities of participatory policymaking.

# Theoretical Framework #1: Intersectionality

Intersectionality, first introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical framework for analysing power dynamics and structural inequalities. While originally applied to issues of race, gender, and discrimination, intersectionality has since evolved into a broader analytical tool for understanding how different axes of social identity—such as class, ethnicity, and institutional positioning—intersect to shape political and social structures (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

# Key features of intersectionality relevant to policymaking include:

* Relationality over binary thinking; social categories are not separate but

co-constructed. This framework resists oversimplification, recognising that power relations are dynamic and contingent rather than reducible to singular identities.

* Contextualisation; policy processes unfold within historically and institutionally specific contexts. Structural inequalities manifest differently depending on political and institutional settings.
* Power dynamics; governance structures reinforce or challenge power imbalances, determining who has decision-making authority.
* Social justice orientation; intersectionality critiques systemic inequality and examines how institutions reproduce exclusionary practices.

# Applying Intersectionality to Participatory Policymaking

Intersectionality offers insight into *democracies of problems* by highlighting how

decision-making processes vary depending on power dynamics and institutional contexts. A participatory mechanism may work effectively in one setting but fail in another because of entrenched inequalities or institutional resistance.

For instance, the *macro-political uptake of minipublics* can be analysed through intersectionality by considering how different groups’ voices are legitimised or excluded. Deliberative spaces are not neutral—they are shaped by existing social and political hierarchies. As Hoppe notes, participatory processes often remain supplementary rather than transformative because they challenge elite power structures. Intersectionality helps explain *why* these barriers exist: legitimacy is context-dependent and mediated by broader social inequalities.

Additionally, intersectionality challenges the assumption that deliberation is an inherently fair or equal process. It critiques idealised notions of participation that overlook how power

operates within decision-making arenas. For example, in a participatory policy making setting, marginalised voices may still struggle to be heard, even if a process appears inclusive on the surface.

Thus, intersectionality enhances our understanding of why participatory approaches can bring different voices and perspectives, but can often struggle to gain traction at higher political levels—it exposes the underlying inequalities that shape institutional receptivity.

# Theoretical Framework #2: Rational Choice and Expanded Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory traditionally assumes that individuals act as rational agents, making strategic decisions to maximise their utility. This perspective has been influential in explaining political behaviour, including how institutions shape decision-making constraints. However, elements of its’ classical form has been critiqued for oversimplifying human behaviour and ignoring social and psychological factors.

Herbert Gintis (2018) expands rational choice theory by incorporating insights from psychology, evolutionary biology, and social norms, reframing it as an interdisciplinary framework that unifies behavioural sciences. His version—sometimes referred to as *expanded rational choice theory*—retains key rationalist assumptions but introduces a more nuanced understanding of human motivation.

Key expansions include:

* Individuals as rational agents, but with social constraints; while individuals seek to maximise utility, Gintis argues that rationality is shaped by social norms, cultural evolution, and cooperative behaviours such as reciprocity.
* Preferences are influenced by institutions and social learning; unlike classical rational choice theory, which assumes stable preferences, Gintis emphasises that preferences evolve based on experience, morality, and institutional pressures.
* Behaviour is shaped by evolutionary predispositions; rationality is bounded by cognitive biases and fairness norms, meaning decisions are not always purely self-interested.
* Strategic interaction includes evolved cooperation; beyond self-interest, humans act based on group stability, reputation, and fairness expectations.

# Applying Expanded Rational Choice Theory to Participatory Policymaking

Rational choice theory helps explain the institutional barriers to participatory policymaking. Political actors often resist deliberative mechanisms because they disrupt established power structures. In classical rationalist terms, institutions operate based on self-interest, meaning political elites have little incentive to cede decision-making authority. This aligns with Hoppe’s (2016) argument that vested interests sustain the gap between the *rhetoric* and *reality* of participation.

However, *expanded rational choice theory* offers a more optimistic perspective. By acknowledging the role of norms and social learning, it suggests that participatory mechanisms can gradually reshape institutional behaviour. For example, even if *minipublics*

initially face legitimacy barriers, sustained exposure to deliberation can shift expectations and create new political incentives for participation.

Gintis’ work also provides insight into why participatory approaches vary in effectiveness. The *democracies of problems* framework assumes that different policy issues require different governance approaches. Rational choice theory supports this idea by emphasising strategic adaptation—actors behave differently depending on the constraints and incentives in place. Some policy areas are more conducive to deliberation than others because institutions are more flexible in certain domains (e.g., local governance vs national security).

Furthermore, Gintis’ insights into fairness norms help explain the macro-political uptake of *minipublics*. Deliberative legitimacy often fails to transfer to higher political levels because electoral competition operates under different incentive structures. However, expanded rational choice theory suggests that norm evolution is possible—over time, deliberative successes at smaller scales could influence broader political norms.

# Comparing the Two Theories

Both intersectionality and expanded rational choice theory offer valuable insights into the challenges of participatory policymaking. Intersectionality highlights structural power dynamics, showing why participatory mechanisms often fail to gain institutional traction. It provides a lens for understanding why deliberative spaces are not inherently equal and how legitimacy operates in exclusionary ways. Expanded rational choice theory explains institutional resistance in terms of self-interest but also offers a mechanism for change, suggesting that norm evolution and learning processes can gradually reshape political incentives.

Ultimately, intersectionality provides a critical diagnostic tool, exposing inequalities and power asymmetries in participatory policymaking. However, *expanded rational choice theory* offers a more prescriptive framework, taking a deductive approach based on fixed options and logic, and expanding on this to explain how change can occur over time. While participatory policy making faces significant structural barriers, Gintis' model suggests that institutions are not static—norm shifts, incentive changes, and learning processes can gradually make participatory approaches more viable.

To critique expanded rational choice theory, it's important to recognize its potential as a model that can aggregate a large number of views to provide insights into human behaviour. Its deductive nature allows for a structured approach to understanding decision-making, where individuals are assumed to make rational choices aimed at maximising their utility.

However, this approach often becomes so encompassing that it risks losing predictive power, as it struggles to account for the full complexity of human motivation and the nuances of social, psychological, and institutional factors. In a way, it can be seen as a close fit to Hoppe’s critique, which highlights the oversimplification of participatory processes in a manner that disregards underlying power structures. Although expanded rational choice theory, as proposed by Gintis, offers a more comprehensive model by incorporating social norms, evolutionary biology, and psychology, it still faces limitations when addressing the diverse and dynamic nature of human behaviour.

Intersectionality, on the other hand, offers a more robust framework to complement rational choice theory by providing a lens through which we can understand the unique lived experiences of individuals. It highlights the intersections of multiple social identities—such as race, class, gender, and institutional positioning—and the ways in which power and inequality shape individual and group experiences. This perspective not only provides a richer understanding of the inequalities inherent in participatory processes but also offers the potential to integrate various theoretical and methodological approaches (Phoenix, 2006) based on multiple realities. By adopting a more interpretivist stance, intersectionality can provide the ‘glue’ needed to bring together diverse theoretical models, making it a valuable complement to rational choice theory, and a helpful theoretical counter to Hoppe’s epistemological stance, grounded in realism and political-institutionalism. By comparing and bringing together these approaches, we arguably get to a more nuanced framework for understanding the complexities of policy making in democratic societies, helping to bridge the gap between abstract theory and real-world decision-making.

**One Final Thought**

In conclusion, I want to provide an alternative perspective that I hope provides an intriguing way to bring these two theoretical approaches together and enrich the analysis with regards to the subject of participation. Isaac Reed’s epistemological stance in *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (2011) focuses on the idea that knowledge is not fixed but is instead shaped through an ongoing, interpretive process that acknowledges multiple realities and evolving understandings. Reed argues that social knowledge develops dynamically, influenced by the interactions and interpretations of individuals over time. Reed’s approach offers a valuable lens for understanding participatory policymaking. His emphasis on the fluid, interpretive nature of knowledge aligns well with intersectionality, which highlights how different social identities intersect to shape individuals’ experiences and perceptions of power. By embracing the ongoing process of interpretation, Reed’s approach complements the notion that participatory mechanisms, when effectively implemented, can challenge and overcome structural inequalities. As participants engage in deliberation, their understanding of policy issues—and the very issues themselves—can shift, revealing deeper complexities and potential solutions. This interpretation-driven approach could provide a fresh angle for addressing institutional resistance, by highlighting the potential of participation to generate adaptive, dynamic responses to ever-evolving social and political challenges.

While expanded rational choice theory provides insights into the strategic behaviour of political actors within institutional constraints, Reed’s interpretivist stance adds depth by highlighting the value of ongoing interpretation and adaptation in response to these challenges. Participatory approaches, by allowing for the fluid exchange of perspectives, has the potential to gradually reshape institutional behaviour, creating a more dynamic, responsive governance system. In this way, both intersectionality and Reed’s epistemology suggest that participatory processes are not merely about including different voices, but about fostering a continuous process of learning and adaptation that can dismantle entrenched power structures and create more inclusive, democratic policy outcomes.

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