Between promise and practice: a scoping review of the democratic outcomes of youth participation in local governance

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A B S T R A C T

Youth participation in governance is widely endorsed by international institutions and scholars alike, yet its democratic outcomes remain poorly understood. This article presents a scoping review of 48 empirical studies on youth participation in local governance across 24 countries, using a structured framework to analyse individual, community, and government-level outcomes. The analysis identifies a range of rationales behind youth participation, including normative (e.g., upholding rights), instrumental (e.g., policy improvement), and substantive (e.g., competence development, civic participation, and empowerment) rationales, which often overlap within individual studies. Most studies report both positive and negative outcomes, underscoring how the design of participatory processes shapes both experiences and impacts. Rather than treating participation as an inherently democratic good, the article advocates for a closer examination of institutional design logics, gatekeeping dynamics, and the conditional nature of positive outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on democratic innovation and public governance and opens new directions for theory-building and comparative research.

1. Introduction

Despite the growing political commitment to youth participation, as stated in recommendations and strategies from the Council of Europe (2020), European Committee of the Regions and European Youth Forum (2022), European Union (2018), OECD (2022b), and the United Nations (2018), there is still a considerable lack of clarity regarding actual practices and outcomes (Fig. 1).

Youth are a particularly relevant group when assessing the state of democracy (Gauci et al., 2022). Young people are underrepresented (or not represented at all), and many lack a voice in elections. Therefore, politicians have fewer motivations to dedicate resources toward encouraging youth civic engagement and political involvement. For example, in Europe, there has been a disinvestment in civic education and youth engagement in democratic governance (Council of Europe, 2021). The European Youth Forum is one among many voices warning against the shrinking civic space for young people (Deželan et al., 2022). Only 35 % of young people trust their government globally, and strengthening youth participation is key to intergenerational justice

(OECD, 2020; OECD, 2022a).

Still, young people feel engaged in civic and political life, especially at the local level (European Parliament, 2021). In recent years, they have often been regarded as assertive citizens who are also more open to exploring democratic innovations (Crowley & Moxon, 2017). Although young people are often standby citizens in traditional political participation (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), several examples of their engagement with alternative platforms make it difficult to argue they are generally disengaged from political and public life (Marien et al., 2010). Given young people's willingness to reshape democracy and fight for social justice (Dalton, 2020), it is important to assess how governments are responding to this civic energy (Quintelier, 2007; Sloam, 2014).

This scoping review aims to explore and synthesize the relevant empirical literature on these themes, focusing on the sub-national scale, which is considered more prone to public participation (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). It attempts to answer the following question: What are the democratic outcomes of youth participation in local governance? We employ the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews' (PRISMA-ScR) protocol

(Tricco et al., 2018) and Nabatchi and Amslers' (2014) 'Framework for Understanding Differences in Local Direct Public Engagement' to analyze a dataset of empirical studies and chart both the rationales behind youth participation and its democratic outcomes. These are defined here as normative, instrumental and substantive impacts, resulting from political and administrative processes, that hinder, preserve or expand democracy (Fung, 2016; Warren, 2017). These are operationalized from a list of 27 criteria to identify any positive or negative change at individual, community, or government levels (see Table A4 of the Methodological Appendix).

By systematizing and synthesizing the empirical literature on the democratic outcomes of local youth participation, this study makes a significant contribution to both practice and research. In line with calls for 'positive public administration' (Douglas et al., 2021), our findings can help public officials to better understand the rationale(s) for and potential outcomes of youth participation and self-assess and (re)design their practices. For researchers, this scoping review contributes to reconnecting political science and public administration scholarship (Peters et al., 2022), positioning youth participation as a critical arena for assessing the quality of local democracy. A second scholarly contribution lies in the set of 27 theory-driven criteria that we have assembled to feed Nabatchi and Amslers' (2014) framework of public participation in local governance. Ultimately, the scoping review highlights the research frontier on the democratic outcomes of youth participation, thereby paving the way for further investigation.

Beyond simply cataloguing outcomes, this review engages with a deeper conceptual puzzle: if youth participation is normatively valued and widely promoted, why does it so often yield disappointing governance outcomes? Our synthesis reveals a pattern of recurring gaps between the promise and practice of participatory governance. By focusing on the local level and utilizing a structured outcome framework, this review provides conceptual clarity on how different rationales influence participatory design – and where and why these designs often fail to deliver. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about power-sharing, institutional responsiveness, and the democratic function of participation in contemporary governance.

2. Youth participation and its outcomes: what we know

While direct citizen participation in public policy is not new (Appleby, 1947; Arnstein, 1969; Verba, 1967), the past two decades of public administration research have emphasised the need for closer ties between government and the public. A wealth of conceptual work across disciplinary traditions argues that public engagement can transform institutions, improve social justice and build trust in government (Frederickson, 1976; Bingham et al., 2005; Bryson et al., 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). This interest coincides with a broader sense of democratic crisis, marked by rising authoritarianism, populism, and public disillusionment (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Dryzek et al., 2019; Council of Europe, 2021; Freedom House, 2022; Moynihan, 2022; OECD, 2022a; Ventriss et al., 2019).

Youth participation refers to including young people in decisions that affect their lives and communities (Checkoway, 1998, 2011; Hart, 1992). This process intercepts three concepts: youth, participation, and local government. The definition of 'youth' is context-dependent. In this study, we adopt a broad definition that includes both children and young people up to 30 years-old, as citizens and rights-holders, thus merging the definitions of UNICEF (0–18 years old), the Council of Europe and the European Union (13–30 years old), the United Nations (15–24 years old), and the OECD (15–29 years old). We intentionally refrained from specifying a minimum age, allowing the empirical literature itself to delineate the lower bounds of youth participation practices.

Regarding participation, we focus on direct engagement in public policy, which is most relevant to the practice of public administration (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). This includes participatory processes that are open to all young people, or to a random or representative sample of them, and that involve engagement in any phase of the policy cycle. It excludes indirect participation and other forms of civic or political engagement not directly connected to public bureaucracies, such as involvement in advocacy groups, civil society organizations, political parties, or social movements. Accordingly, we adapt Roberts' (2004) definition of public participation and conceptualize youth participation as the practice of power-sharing between public officials and young people to make substantive policy decisions and engage in collective
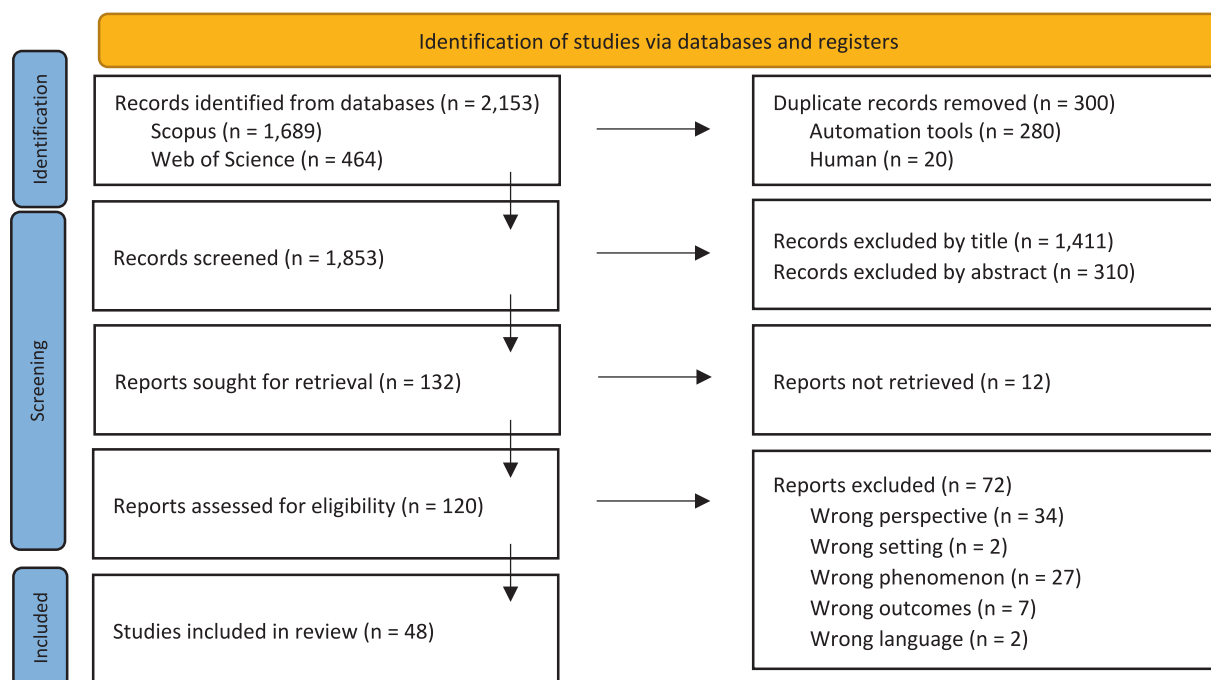

Fig. 1. PRISMA Flowchart of the Article Selection Process.

problem-solving.

This definition of public participation is situated within broader debates on governance, understood as a polycentric, multi-actor, and networked policy arrangement involving public, private, and civic actors, and characterized by dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative problem-solving aimed at producing public value, mutual accountability, and democratic goods (Bingham, 2005; Sirianni, 2009). It also relates to our understanding of democracy as a system of government in which political authority derives from the people and is exercised through representative or direct mechanisms that uphold political equality, participation, the rule of law, transparency, and accountability (Dahl, 1989). By contrast, illiberal democracies retain electoral or representative structures but suppress civil and political liberties, restrict public accountability, and limit citizens' ability, including that of young people, to influence policy or challenge authority (Schmitter & Karl, 1991; Zakaria, 1997). Undemocratic regimes extend these restrictions further by concentrating power in centralized, top-down structures that offer few formal avenues for citizen input. Importantly, youth participation can be found across all these contexts. While its meaning, scope, and impact vary significantly depending on regime type, the empirical literature documents youth participatory practices in democratic, illiberal, and undemocratic settings alike.

Finally, 'local government' refers to the administrative, legislative, and executive actions and decisions at the local level, which we narrow to city or municipal authorities. This conceptualization recognizes the central role of local units of government in collaborative governance and democratic innovations (da Cruz et al., 2023; da Cruz & Rode, 2024). Although public participation can occur independently of public officials, local authorities can embed, scale, and sustain these processes (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Sirianni, 2009; UNICEF, 2017).

The literature on youth participation identifies five interconnected rationales for these processes: 1) youth competence development; 2) policy improvement; 3) strengthening democracy; 4) upholding of rights; and 5) youth empowerment (Bárta et al., 2021; Checkoway, 2011; Zeldin et al., 2007). Competence development stems from the fact that meaningful civic engagement improves civic, personal, and social competences and generates social capital (Damon, 2004; Youniss et al., 2002). Policy improvement can occur because young people hold relevant policy insights based on their lived experience and are able to mobilize assets for collective action, which can be determinant for effective collaborative governance (Sirianni, 2009). The strengthening democracy rationale flows from participatory and deliberative theories that perceive democracy as a process of building civic capital and stronger democratic institutions (Arnstein, 1969; B. R. Barber, 2004; Pateman, 1970). The rights-based rationale is related to the legal obligations of both duty-bearers (government) and rights-holders (young people), with the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child serving as the standard for youth rights, including democratic participation. Finally, youth empowerment pertains to power distribution and the ability of young people to transform their own lives, thus connecting to empowerment theory (Fung & Wright, 2001; Sørensen, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000).

But is youth participation delivering meaningful outcomes in practice? Advocates claim it has produced positive outcomes for individuals, communities, and governance. Young people involved in these processes, they state, have developed their competences, achieved high levels of political efficacy, built a sense of connectedness, and improved their well-being (Youniss et al., 2002). For young people experiencing vulnerability, participation offers voice, recognition, and a chance to advocate for better public services and amenities (Fung, 2015). At the community level, it has been shown that youth participation can expand the civic space and improve engagement, grassroots leadership, and social cohesion (Carlson, 2006). Specifically, at the local level, researchers have found that investing in youth is a key factor for building civic capital in cities (Engbers, 2016). Finally, for governance, it brings new ideas, specialized knowledge, and resources, which, in turn, can improve the responsiveness of delivery units and the trust between citizens and government (Checkoway et al., 2005; Sirianni, 2009; Zeldin, 2004). Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence of a divide between rhetoric and practice (Bessant, 2004; Ferreira et al., 2012), as well as mismatched expectations and perceptions (Vromen & Collin, 2010).

Naturally, participatory governance also presents multiple challenges, risks, and costs. To be meaningful, it demands new accountability mechanisms, competences, coordination, and the delegation of power and resources (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Peters et al., 2022; Wang & Bryer, 2013). Crucially, it risks co-optation or manipulation by elites or bureaucrats, conferring a veneer of legitimacy that can entrench decisions and limit their reversibility (Arnstein, 1972; Font et al., 2017; Young & Tanner, 2022). Powerful actors can also constrain participation by establishing exclusionary eligibility standards or limiting the scope of the exercise (Fung, 2015; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Percy-Smith, 2010). Further risks can arise with the emergence of self-referential groups, problems of 'bubble democracy', or other instances of flawed participation (Bryer, 2011; Innes & Booher, 2004). These risks must be mitigated because the democratic consequences can be severe. Accumulated bad experiences may lead young people to opt for exit over voice or loyalty (Sørensen, 1997; Warren, 2011). Given that the first contact with democratic life, in democratic regimes, occurs during youth, the quality of early experiences, such as in local youth councils, student unions, and interactions with public officials, is likely to shape the political identities of many throughout their lifetime (Matthews & Limb, 2003).

The literature on public participation tells us that the experience of participants and the outcomes of participatory governance are heavily influenced by political and administrative choices (Fung, 2015; Peters et al., 2022). Participation works when governments listen and ensure responsive, satisfying processes (King et al., 1998; Stivers, 1994). In reality, governments at all levels still hesitate in fully committing to these processes (Fung, 2015).

There is still a limited number of systematic reviews on particular facets of public participation (Ianniello et al., 2019; Medaglia, 2012; Migchelbrink & de Walle, 2022; Osborne & Strokosch, 2022; Schafer, 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015). At the time of writing, the existing scoping and systematic reviews of youth participation do not focus on its democratic outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018; Canosa et al., 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Hohenhaus et al., 2023; Macauley et al., 2022; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Weiss, 2020; Yamaguchi, Bentayeb, et al., 2023; Yamaguchi, Tuong, et al., 2023) – and only a handful focuses on the local governance scale (Anyon et al., 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Hohenhaus et al., 2023; Macauley et al., 2022; Weiss, 2020; and Yamaguchi, Tuong, et al., 2023). Accordingly, our methodological approach reflects both the lack of previous reviews targeting democratic outcomes and the potential of such a review to clarify key concepts and knowledge gaps in this field (Chang, 2018; Munn et al., 2018).

Although there are several analytical frameworks in the literature that can be deployed for the study of youth participation in local governance (T. Barber, 2009; Barros et al., 2022; Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Lansdown, 2018), we adopt Nabatchi and Amslers' (2014) structure to process key individual, community, and government-level impacts (Table 1). This framework was used in previous systematic reviews and can be considered from an input-process-output-outcome

Table 1
Framework for Understanding Public Engagement in Local Governance (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014).

Context and setting				
Sponsors, conveners, and their motivations for direct public engagement	Process design	Outcomes Impacts on individual participants	Impacts on community capacity	Impacts on government and governance

logic model perspective (Migchelbrink & de Walle, 2022; Schafer, 2019).

3. Methods

Systematic reviews are a robust and transparent method for synthesizing the state of knowledge and supporting evidence-based decision-making and generating new research questions (Moher et al., 2015; Page, McKenzie, et al., 2021; Page, Moher, et al., 2021). We followed the PRISMA-ScR protocol (Tricco et al., 2018), which is well-suited for exploratory research aimed at mapping evidence and identifying knowledge gaps (Chang, 2018; Munn et al., 2018). The use of systematic reviews is growing in public administration research (van Thiel, 2022), and shows potential for further use in political science research (Dacombe, 2016).

Our eligibility criteria were informed by the PerSPE(C)TiF question frame, a structured method designed to integrate multiple perspectives and support comprehensive analysis and decision-making (Booth et al., 2019): studies of local youth participation involving both young people and local authorities, reporting at least one individual, community, or government-level democratic outcome. Our timeframe spans between 1969–2023, considering Arnstein's (1969) influential article 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation'. We target empirical research in political science, public administration, and related fields, in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, to expand the synthesis beyond the Anglo-Saxon literature.

The search was conducted in April 2023 on Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection databases to increase the number of relevant studies in the final dataset (Rethlefsen et al., 2021) and identified a total of 2,153 records. Automatic deduplication removed 280 records and manual deduplication removed a further 20. The remaining 1,853 records were manually screened by title (which removed 1,411 entries), abstract (resulting in the removal of an additional 310 entries), and full-text (resulting in the removal of 72 entries). Twelve records were not retrievable. We achieved a final pool of 48 studies, which were included for data extraction and analysis.

We piloted a data extraction template (Table A5 of Methodological Appendix) with 12 randomly selected studies (25 % of total) and refined it accordingly. Data were then screened and coded from the full text of all 48 eligible studies. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize quantitative data, including cross-tabulation for the democratic outcomes (van Thiel, 2022). We also used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; van Thiel, 2022) to develop a codebook with 27 criteria that draw from the public participation and youth participation literatures and are used to operationalise the 'Framework for Understanding Differences in Local Direct Public Engagement' (Table A4 of the Methodological Appendix). The criteria capture both positive and negative outcomes, including participatory experiences, the translation of participation into public policy, and broader democratic or quality-of-life impacts. Full details on eligibility, sources, and screening appear in the online Methodological Appendix.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Report characteristics

A longitudinal analysis shows that research on youth participation outcomes is relatively recent (see Table 2). Although our search extended back to 1969, the earliest study included dates from 2001. This pattern likely reflects the trajectory of the field: while a second generation of scholarship on meaningful public participation emerged in the 1990 s (King et al., 1998; Stivers, 1994), the youth participation literature was still in its early stages at that time (Checkoway, 1998; Hart, 1992). At the same time, this is clearly an emerging field, as evidenced by the fact that 73 % of studies were published in the last decade, and nearly half (49 %) in the last five years. Using Clarivate's 2022 Journal

Table 2
Record characteristics.

Report characteristics	*n* (%)	Study
Publication date		
2012–2022	35 (72.9)	2–7; 9; 11; 13–15; 17–20; 25–30; 32–36; 39–43; 45–48
2001–2011	13 (27.1)	1; 8; 10; 12; 16; 21–24; 31; 37; 38; 44
Source		
Article	44 (91.7)	1–6; 8–28; 30–44; 46; 48
Book chapter	2 (4.2)	45; 47
Conference proceedings	2 (4.2)	7; 29
Main journals		
Children and Youth Services Review	4 (9.1)	5; 10; 11; 44
Children's Geographies	2 (4.5)	15; 24
Environment & Urbanization	2 (4.5)	8; 12
Pedagogia Social – Revista Interuniversitaria	2 (4.5)	9; 32
Journal impact factor (Clarivate JCR 2022)		
Q1	10 (20.8)	5; 10; 11; 17; 30; 32; 33; 40; 44; 46
Q2	7 (14.6)	4; 8; 12; 14; 23; 39; 42
Q3	9 (18.8)	1; 3; 15; 19; 24; 25; 27; 31; 43
Q4	3 (6.3)	13; 35; 37
Not ranked	19 (39.6)	2; 6; 7; 9; 16; 18; 20–22; 26; 28; 29; 34; 36; 38; 41; 45; 47; 48
Regional distribution		
Africa	1 (2.1)	34
Asia	2 (4.2)	41; 48
Europe	20 (41.7)	1; 7; 9; 12; 14; 16; 22; 25; 28; 29; 32; 33; 35; 36; 40; 42–45; 47
North America	14 (29.2)	2–6; 10; 11; 15; 17–19; 31; 37; 46
Oceania	5 (10.4)	21; 23; 24; 27; 30
South America	6 (12.5)	8; 13; 20; 26; 38; 39

Citation Reports, we found that while 39.6 % of the studies were not in ranked journals, 35.4 % appeared in Q1 or Q2 outlets.

Geographically, the 48 studies span 24 countries across five global regions. As expected, Europe (41.7 %) and North America (29.2 %) are the dominant regions in the sample. Oceania and South America also contribute substantially, each accounting for over 10 % of studies. The United States, Brazil, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the Netherlands are the most represented countries. Only two studies offered international comparisons: Argentina and Uruguay (Corvera, 2014) and Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela (Cabannes, 2006). 42 studies (88 %) are deployed in free countries, three (6 %) in partly free countries (Ecuador, Indonesia and Kosovo), and another three (6 %) in not free countries (Thailand, Venezuela and Zimbabwe), according to the Freedom in the World Index (Freedom House, 2025), attesting an unbalanced, but still existing practice and research interest in youth participation in both democratic and undemocratic regimes.

4.2. Study characteristics

By design, all studies included have an empirical component. As summarised in Table 3, they span various academic fields, but most fall into education, public administration, social work/policy, and urban studies – which together account for nearly 73 % of the sample. Public administration (n = 11) and political science (n = 1) together comprise a

Table 3
Study characteristics.

Study characteristics	n (%)	Study
Field of knowledge		
Education	7 (14.6)	6; 9; 25; 27; 29; 32; 45
Psychology	2 (4.2)	1; 16
Public Administration	11 (22.9)	7; 14; 22–24; 26; 34–36; 38; 41
Social Work	8 (16.7)	2–5; 10; 11; 43; 44
Urban Studies	9 (18.8)	8; 12; 13; 17–19; 30; 31; 47
Other	11 (22.9)	15; 20; 21; 28; 33; 37; 39; 40; 42; 46; 48
Main concepts of participation		
Children participation (Hart, 1997, 1992)	3 (6.3)	4; 31; 44
Children participation (UN 1989)	4 (8.3)	15; 23; 43; 48
Youth participation (Checkoway, 2011, 1998; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Checkoway et al, 2005)	6 (12.5)	2; 3; 10; 11; 28; 48
Others	32 (66,7)	2–7; 13; 14; 16; 19–22; 24–27; 29; 30–36; 38–41; 43–45
Unclear concept	10 (20.8)	1; 8; 9; 12; 17; 18; 37; 42; 46; 47
Main theoretical frames		
Ladder of Children Participation (Hart, 1997, 1992)	6 (12.5)	16; 23; 25; 31; 32; 34
Others	24 (50.0)	2–6; 14; 16; 17; 19; 23; 25; 27–32; 35; 36; 38–40; 43; 44
Unclear theoretical frame	23 (49.7)	1; 7–13; 15; 18; 20–22; 24; 26; 33; 37; 41; 42; 45–48
Youth participation mechanisms		
Children Council	4 (8.3)	1; 12; 13; 32
Civic Engagement/Education Program	3 (6.3)	5; 6; 16
Community-based Participatory Research	4 (8.3)	31; 37; 42; 46
Co-production	2 (4.2)	14; 29
Participatory Planning	7 (14.6)	1; 8; 12; 13; 18; 19; 40
Charrettes, Discussion Fora, Focus Group, Policy Development Groups	4 (8.3)	12; 17; 23
Public Forum (including Town Halls)	2 (4.2)	17; 41
Public Hearings	2 (4.2)	17; 20
Youth Conference	2 (4.2)	12; 24
Youth Council (including Youth Assembly, Youth Commission)	20 (41.7)	2; 3; 7–11; 15; 21–28; 34–36; 47
(Youth) Participatory Budget	5 (10.4)	4; 8; 9; 39; 45
Other	1 (14.6)	9; 17; 23; 24; 33; 43; 48
Unclear participatory mechanisms	3 (6.3)	30; 38; 44
Research strategy		
Case study	31 (64.6)	2–4; 8; 10;11; 13; 14; 18–22; 24–29; 31; 34–36; 38–41; 43; 45; 47; 48
Desk research	4 (8.3)	1; 12; 30; 44
Experiment	2 (4.2)	16; 33
Participatory action research	3 (6.3)	37; 42; 46
Survey	8 (16.7)	5–7; 9; 15; 17; 23; 32
Sample: N		
Small N (1–10 units)	31 (64.6)	1; 3; 4; 8; 10; 13; 14; 18; 19; 21; 22; 24–29; 31; 33–36; 38–42; 45–48

Table 3 (*continued*)

Study characteristics	n (%)	Study
Medium N (11–50 units)	8 (16.7)	2; 7; 11; 12; 20; 37; 43; 44
Large N (>50 units)	9 (18.8)	5; 6; 9; 15–17; 23; 30; 32
Sample: age groups		
0–5 years old	1 (2.1)	19
6–12 years old	12 (25.0)	10; 12; 13; 16–19; 21; 23; 24; 42; 48
13–18 years old	26 (54.2)	3; 4; 6; 7; 10; 12; 14; 17–25; 27–29; 34; 37; 38; 42; 46–48
19–24 years old	11 (22.9)	7; 10; 14; 17; 20; 21; 25; 27; 37; 38; 47
25–30 years old	7 (14.6)	7; 14; 20; 25; 33; 38; 47
31–35 years old	2 (4.2)	7; 33
Unclear age groups of the sample	19 (39.6)	1; 2; 5; 8; 9; 11; 15; 26; 30–32; 35; 36; 39–41; 43–45
Youth participation perspective		
Bottom-up (young people)	14 (29.2)	6–8; 10; 16; 18–20; 27; 36–38; 40; 42
Top-down (public officials)	10 (20.8)	2; 5; 9; 11; 13; 15; 17; 23; 32; 44
Both (public officials and young people)	21 (43.8)	3; 4; 12; 14; 21; 22; 24–26; 28; 29; 31; 33–35; 39; 41; 43; 46–48
Unclear YP perspective	3 (6.3)	1; 30; 45
Methods		
Content analysis	23 (47.9)	2; 3; 5; 7; 11; 12; 14; 18; 20; 21; 25; 26; 28; 31; 33; 35; 36; 39; 42–44; 46; 48
Focus group	14 (29.2)	4; 12; 21; 24; 27; 28; 31; 34; 37; 41–43; 46; 48
Interview	29 (60.4)	2–4; 10–15; 19; 20; 24–29; 31; 33–35; 37; 39; 41–43; 46–48
Observation	17 (35.4)	3–5; 12; 13; 16; 24; 27–29; 31; 37; 38; 42; 43; 47; 48
Questionnaire	25 (52.1)	5–7; 9; 15–19; 21–25; 29; 31–33; 35–38; 40; 43; 46
Secondary analysis	15 (31.3)	1; 2; 4; 5; 8; 13; 15; 20; 34–37; 39; 43; 48
Systematic review	1 (2.1)	30
Mixed methods	35 (72.9)	2–5; 7; 11–16; 18–21; 24–29; 31; 33–39; 41–43; 46–48
Triangulation	26 (54.2)	2–5; 12; 13; 15; 16; 20; 21; 24; 25; 27–29; 31; 33–37; 39; 42; 43; 46; 48
Unclear methods	1 (2.1)	45

quarter.

A variety of related concepts are used, including 'children participation', 'civic engagement', 'citizen participation', 'collaborative governance', 'co-creation', 'co-production', 'participatory democracy', 'political engagement', 'public participation', 'youth engagement', 'youth participation', among others. The most cited definitions of youth participation are Barry Checkoway's (1998, 2011) (12.5 % of the sample), the United Nation's (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (8.3 %), and Roger Hart's (1992); Hart and Schwab (1997) concept of children participation (6.3 %). Around 21 % of studies did not define youth participation explicitly. Regarding theoretical frames, Hart's Ladder of Children Participation (1992), which adapts Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, is the most frequently employed (12.5 %).

Youth councils are the most frequently analysed participatory mechanism (41.7 %), followed by participatory planning (14.6 %),

participatory budgeting (10.4 %), children councils (8.3 %), and community-based participatory research (8.3 %). More than half of the studies involve permanent advisory structures such as assemblies, boards, councils, commissions, or committees. Most emphasise youth voice in decision-making over youth action in implementation.

In terms of research design, 64.6 % are case studies, followed by surveys (16.7 %), desk research (8.3 %), and participatory action research (6.3 %). Two-thirds of the studies employ small N samples (1–10 units), while medium N samples (11–50 units) account for 16.7 % and large N samples (more than 50 units) for 18.8 %. The ages of the young people featured in the analyses ranged from 4 to 35 years old, with most studies focusing on adolescents (13–18 years, 54.2 %), followed by children (6–12, 25.0 %) and young adults (19–24, 22.9 %) (some studies overlapped these age brackets). The perspectives captured vary: 43.8 % include both youth and officials, while 29.2 % focus on youth and 20.8 % on public officials alone. Most studies (72.9 %) apply mixed methods, and over half (54.2 %) use triangulation. Interviews (60.4 %), questionnaires (52.1 %), and content analysis (47.9 %) are the most frequent data collection techniques.

4.3. Outcomes

Nearly 92 % of studies cite multiple rationales for youth participation, reflecting an integrated view that combines democracy, empowerment, governance, human development, and rights. The most common rationales are policy improvement (58.3 %) and rights-based approaches (54.2 %), followed by competence development, strengthening democracy, and youth empowerment (each cited in half of the studies). This confirms that youth participation is seen both as a means and as an end, balancing normative (rights), instrumental (policy improvement), and substantive (civic participation, competence development, youth empowerment) objectives. Some regional patterns emerge, however: for example, only 28.6 % of US studies invoke rights-based justifications, compared to 55–80 % in other regions, perhaps reflecting the fact that the US has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Table 4).

The vast majority of studies (79.2 %) report both positive and negative outcomes, suggesting that youth participation is not inherently beneficial or harmful, but rather dependent on its implementation. Still, positive effects (n = 450) outnumber negative ones (n = 167) by almost 3 to 1. A closer look shows that positive impacts generally reflect the benefits of participation in terms of experience, outputs, and outcomes. Negative impacts typically reflect poor engagement or implementation, lack of follow-through, and bureaucratic resistance rather than harmful consequences of participation per se.

Following Nabatchi & Amsler's framework, we categorised outcomes at individual (87.5 % of studies), community (70.8 %), and government levels (100 %) There were 248 references to individual-level outcomes (194 positive, 54 negative), 95 to community-level outcomes (89 positive, 6 negative), and 274 to government-level outcomes (167 positive, 107 negative) – Table 5 breaks down these statistics and identifies the

Table 4

Rationale for youth participation.

Rationale for youth participation	n (%)	Study
Rationale for youth participation		
Competence development	24 (50.0)	1–3; 6; 8–12; 15–17; 20; 21; 23–25; 27; 29; 31; 32; 35; 44; 48
Policy improvement	28 (58.3)	3; 8; 12; 13; 17–24; 27–37; 40–42; 46; 47
Strengthening democracy	24 (50.0)	2; 3; 5; 6; 8–10; 16; 20–22; 25; 26; 28; 32; 33; 35; 36; 38; 39; 41; 44; 45; 48
Uphold rights	26 (54.2)	1; 2; 7; 8; 12; 13; 15; 16; 18–21; 23–26; 30; 32; 34; 40–45; 48
Youth empowerment	24 (50.0)	3–5; 8; 10; 12; 14–17; 19; 21; 22; 28; 29; 32; 38–40; 42; 43; 45–47

Table 5

Democratic outcomes of youth participation in local governance.

Youth participation democratic outcomes	Positive		Negative	
	n (%)	Study	n (%)	Study
Individual-level outcomes				
Active citizenship				
Civic engagement	36 (75.0)	1–22; 25; 28–31; 33; 37; 40–43; 45; 46; 48	9 (18.8)	1–4; 7; 20; 27; 33; 34
Political efficacy	26 (54.2)	1–6; 8; 10; 14; 15; 17–22; 25; 26; 28; 30; 31; 37; 41–43; 47	15 (31.3)	1–4; 6; 7; 11; 12; 18; 20; 26–28; 30; 33
Trust in Government	7 (14.6)	4; 6; 12; 18; 22; 33; 41	6 (12.5)	1; 4; 6; 12; 20; 28
Competence development				
Civic competences	35 (72.9)	1–5; 7–13; 15–20; 22; 24–26; 29–33; 37; 40–43; 45; 46; 48	6 (12.5)	1; 3; 27; 28; 33; 34
Entrepreneurship competences	9 (18.8)	4; 5; 8; 18; 19; 21; 29; 31; 40	0 (0.0)	––
Personal and social competences	26 (54.2)	1–4; 6; 8–10; 12; 14–19; 27–32; 40–43; 48	2 (4.2)	19; 27
Inclusion				
Access to Rights	14 (29.2)	1; 2; 4; 8; 9; 12; 13; 17; 19; 21; 25; 32; 43; 45	4 (8.3)	2; 3; 20; 30
Social capital	26 (54.2)	1–8; 10; 12; 16–19; 21; 22; 24–26; 28; 30–32; 43; 47; 48	0 (0.0)	––
Well-being	15 (31.3)	1; 4; 5; 8; 9; 11; 12; 14; 16; 24; 30; 32; 33; 41; 42	12 (25.0)	4; 6; 10–12; 19; 20; 24; 27; 28; 34; 42
Missing individual-level outcomes	7 (14.6)	23; 34–36; 38; 39; 44	28 (58.3)	5; 8; 9; 13–17; 21–23; 25; 29; 31; 32; 35–41; 43–48
Community-level outcomes				
Capacity building				
Collective intelligence	16 (33.3)	2; 5; 8; 10–13; 18; 21; 29–31; 37; 42; 46; 48	0 (0.0)	––
Mobilization of resources	14 (29.2)	1–4; 8; 10; 12; 13; 21; 31; 34; 37; 41; 45	0 (0.0)	––
Networks	5 (10.4)	3; 19; 21; 32; 41	0 (0.0)	––
Community engagement				

Table 5 (*continued*)

Youth participation democratic outcomes	Positive		Negative	
Civic space	23 (47.9)	1–4; 9; 11–14; 16; 19–21; 26; 28; 29; 32; 34; 38; 41; 42; 45; 46	2 (4.2)	11; 26
Collective action	12 (25.0)	2; 4; 8; 10–12; 14; 15; 21; 31; 37; 41	1 (2.1)	20
Community organizing	3 (6.3)	20; 38; 47	2 (4.2)	28; 38
Community improvement				
Access to public goods and services	16 (33.3)	1; 8; 9; 12–19; 30–32; 34; 37	1 (2.1)	38
Missing community-level outcomes	14 (29.2)	6; 7; 22–25; 27; 33; 35; 36; 39; 40; 43; 44	43 (89.6)	1–10; 12–19; 21–25; 27; 29–37; 39–48
Government-level outcomes Governance				
Accountability	11 (22.9)	1; 2; 7; 8; 10; 12; 19; 21; 22; 33; 41	8 (16.7)	1; 19; 20; 24; 26; 28; 34; 36
Collaborative culture	24 (50.0)	2–4; 7; 8; 10; 12; 14; 17–19; 21; 23; 25; 31; 32; 35; 36; 41; 42; 45–48	17 (35.4)	4; 8; 9; 11; 17; 20; 23; 24; 26–28; 34–36; 43; 44; 48
Responsiveness	6 (12.5)	1; 4; 8; 21; 30; 42	6 (12.5)	15; 17; 20; 24; 26; 28
Policy				
Effectiveness	4 (8.3)	14; 17; 32; 33	0 (0.0)	––
Equity	21 (43.8)	1; 2; 8; 10; 12–14; 16–19; 21; 23; 25; 26; 30; 32; 37; 39; 42; 45	15 (31.3)	2; 3; 9; 17; 20; 21; 23; 24; 26; 27; 30; 32; 34; 38; 48
Legitimacy	11 (22.9)	4; 6; 8; 12; 14; 17; 19; 32; 33; 35; 41	3 (6.3)	1; 6; 20
Policy insights	29 (60.4)	1–5; 8; 10–13; 17–22; 25; 29–33; 35–37; 41; 42; 46; 48	1 (2.1)	34
Youth participation				
Deliberation	14 (29.2)	2; 4; 5; 8; 10–12; 14; 21; 25; 28; 31; 39; 47	25 (52.1)	1; 2; 4; 7; 9; 11; 15; 17; 21; 24; 26–28; 30–32; 34–36; 38; 39; 43; 44; 47; 48
Oversight	3 (8.3)	10; 21; 36	0 (0.0)	––

Table 5 (*continued*)

Youth participation democratic outcomes	Positive		Negative	
Policy outputs	20 (41.7)	1; 2; 4; 5; 8; 10; 12–17; 19; 21; 26; 31; 35–37; 42	11 (22.9)	1; 4; 12; 18; 20; 21; 24; 27–30; 34
Representation	24 (50.0)	2–4; 7; 8; 14; 16; 18–22; 25; 26; 32; 33; 35; 37–40; 43; 46; 48	20 (41.7)	3–5; 7; 8; 10; 11; 20; 21; 23–26; 28; 30; 34; 38; 39; 43; 47
Missing government-level outcomes	5 (10.4)	9; 24; 27; 34; 44	11 (22.9)	13; 14; 16; 22; 33; 37; 40–42; 45; 46

studies associated with each outcome.

At the individual level, the most consistent positive outcomes are improvements in civic engagement (75.0 %) and civic competences (72.9 %). Other common benefits include gains in personal/social competences, political efficacy, and social capital (all cited in over 50 % of studies). Many youths report increased knowledge of citizenship, local policy challenges, democracy and local governance, greater confidence, and stronger leadership, communication, and teamwork competences. Participation also broadens networks, linking youth with peers, officials, and experts, and fosters a stronger sense of agency.

However, the literature also points to negative outcomes like lack of political efficacy (31.3 % of studies), negligible effects on well-being (25.0 %) and superficial engagement (18.8 %). Some studies report a perceived inability to influence policy, disappointment, or disengagement, particularly when youth feel distrusted or tokenised. Other reported negatives include stress from balancing participation and school/social life, and feelings of frustration, confusion, or alienation. Even positive experiences could bring emotional or time burdens.

At the community level, key benefits include expanded civic space (47.9 %), improved access to services and public goods (33.3 %), and collective intelligence (33.3 %). Youth participation supports community outreach and inclusion of young people experiencing vulnerability. Young people offer insight into public needs across all generations in policy areas such as accessibility, mobility, and social justice – often reframing cities as civic spaces for all. Only five studies report negative community-level impacts, most of which concern limited community organising or unfulfilled expectations.

At the government level, top positive outcomes include enhanced policy insights (60.4 %), stronger collaborative cultures (50.0 %), and better representation (50.0 %). However, some of these are also the areas with the most frequent negative outcomes. Limited deliberation (52.1 %), weak representation (41.7 %), and lack of collaboration (35.4 %) reflect frequent gaps between rhetoric and implementation. In some cases, participatory spaces are tightly controlled, symbolic, or under-resourced – reinforcing power asymmetries rather than addressing them.

Where well-supported, youth participation has enabled local governments to generate ideas, adjust services, build networks, and experiment with new governance forms. Yet many structures lack agency or visibility, and youth often remain unaware of their opportunities to contribute. The poorest outcomes occur when officials fail to recognise youth as competent citizens and when participation is disconnected from policymaking, lacks follow-through, or excludes young people experiencing vulnerability.

In sum, the most frequently cited positive outcomes are civic engagement (75.0 %), civic competences (72.9 %), and policy insights (60.4 %), while the most frequent negative outcomes, all at the government level, are poor deliberation (52.1 %), limited representation

(41.7 %), and weak collaborative culture (35.4 %).

Linking back to our research question, the findings suggest that public officials can design participatory mechanisms in ways that enhance individual-, community-, and governance-level outcomes. At the individual level, youth-centred approaches that ensure clear communication, meaningful deliberation, and consistent follow-up and feedback can help manage expectations and strengthen young people's sense of political efficacy and trust in local government. Youth well-being and competence development should also be treated as core elements of a participatory design. Community-level outcomes warrant further investigation, but our evidence indicates that youth participation can serve as a platform for strengthening civic capital, including community organising, networking, and collective action. At the governance level, youth participation can move beyond practices limited to information-sharing or consultation, contributing instead to improved representation, deliberation, collaboration, and responsiveness.

5. Discussion

This scoping review reveals strong individual-level outcomes (especially civic engagement and competence development) alongside persistent challenges in deliberation, representation, and collaborative culture. This tension warrants deeper theoretical and practical reflection.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The balanced distribution of rationales found in the literature – spanning competence development, policy improvement, strengthening democracy, upholding rights, and youth empowerment – suggests that youth participation is conceptualized as both a means and an end. Our finding that policy improvement (58.3 %) slightly exceeds rights-based approaches (54.2 %) suggests that instrumental motivations may be more prominent than previously acknowledged.

The divergence between positive individual-level outcomes and more mixed government-level outcomes points to an important theoretical consideration: youth participation appears most successful when it operates as a developmental process for young people themselves but faces significant barriers when attempting to influence governance structures and decision-making processes. This suggests the existence of what we might call a "participation-power paradox", wherein young people gain valuable civic competences and engagement opportunities through participatory processes, yet frequently encounter institutional resistance when attempting to translate their participation into substantive policy influence. This aligns with Arnstein's (1969) and Hart's (1992) foundational work on participation ladders and extends them by highlighting how participation outcomes are shaped by context and vary across dimensions, underlining the call for youth-centred practices (Augsberger, et al., 2018).

Such a paradox resonates with Fung's (2015) analysis of power distribution in participatory governance and Sørensen's (1997) work on democracy and empowerment. The frequency of negative mentions of deliberation (52.1 %) and limited political efficacy (31.3 %) in our findings indicates that while local governments may promote youth participation rhetorically, they often fail to implement the structural changes necessary for meaningful power-sharing. This theoretical insight extends beyond youth participation specifically, potentially informing broader debates about democratic innovations and their capacity to transform governance structures (Bussu et al., 2022; Jäske & Setälä, 2020; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Moreover, our findings suggest that youth participation holds appeal across different political ideologies and governance approaches. The 24-country span suggests youth participation is not ideologically bound. Conservative, liberal, and progressive governance approaches all appear to value youth participation, though potentially for different reasons. Conservative approaches often emphasize responsibility and civic duty, while liberal approaches focus on individual development and agency. In contrast, progressive frameworks prioritize empowerment and social justice. This theoretical flexibility may explain why youth participation has gained traction globally despite differing political contexts. Yet it raises the question of whether this flexibility promotes meaningful implementation or encourages symbolic adoption.

5.2. Alignment with existing literature

Our findings both confirm and extend previous literature on youth participation. The strong evidence we found for positive individual-level outcomes, particularly in civic engagement (75.0 %) and civic competences (72.9 %), aligns with the developmental benefits proposed by Checkoway (2011) and Youniss et al. (2002). Similarly, the positive influence on policy insights (60.4 %) supports Sirianni's (2009) argument that youth bring valuable lived experiences to governance.

Our findings regarding the disconnect between generally positive individual outcomes and more mixed government-level outcomes are key for public administration research and practice. While previous literature often presents participation as either broadly beneficial (Checkoway et al., 2005; Zeldin, 2004) or primarily problematic (Bessant, 2004; Ferreira et al., 2012), our analysis reveals a more complex reality, in line with Bruselius-Jensen et al. (2021) and Percy-Smith et al. (2023). Youth participation simultaneously produces positive developmental outcomes for individuals while failing to transform governance structures in many contexts. This suggests that the "rhetoric-reality divide" identified by some scholars (Bessant, 2004; Vromen & Collin, 2010) may be more precisely understood as a divide between individual benefits and structural impact.

Additionally, our finding that 79.2 % of studies report both positive and negative outcomes supports the view that participation is a neutral technology whose impact depends on its implementation. This aligns with arguments by Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) and Fung (2015) that the design and execution of participatory processes significantly influence their outcomes. Our results extend this understanding by identifying specific design elements that appear most problematic, particularly in the areas of deliberation, representation, and collaborative culture.

5.3. Rationales and outcomes: meeting expectations?

Comparing rationales and outcomes yields important insights. The high prevalence of positive individual-level outcomes, particularly in civic engagement and competence development, suggests that youth participation is relatively successful in meeting the developmental and empowerment rationales. However, there appears to be a mismatch between expectations and outcomes regarding policy improvement and strengthening democracy and the upholding of rights rationales. While policy improvement is the most cited rationale (58.3 %), government-level outcomes show significant shortcomings in deliberation, representation, and collaborative culture. It is worth mentioning that, among the 27 criteria, deliberation is the single criterion with a negative comparison between scores (–22.9), while responsiveness has the same positive and negative scores. This suggests that while youth participation may be justified on the grounds of improving policy, strengthening democracy, and ensuring youth rights, these aspirations often remain unfulfilled in practice.

The rights-based rationale presents a particularly interesting case. Our findings indicate substantial challenges in representation (41.7 % negative mentions), suggesting that young people experiencing vulnerability often remain excluded from participatory processes. This undermines the rights-based rationale, which advocates for all young people to have a say in decisions that affect them. The regional variation in rights-based rationales—with only 28.6 % of US studies mentioning rights compared to much higher percentages in Europe, Oceania, and South America—suggests that cultural and legal frameworks

significantly influence how participation is conceptualized and implemented.

This suggests that youth participation may be more readily accepted for its symbolic and individual benefits than for its potential to bring about structural transformation, which raises the question of whether participation primarily serves as a form of civic education rather than genuine democratic engagement. As Warren (2011) notes, the accumulation of participatory experiences that fail to produce tangible policy outcomes may eventually lead young people to disengage from formal political processes altogether. Nevertheless, the significant positive outcomes at the community level, particularly in expanding civic space (47.9 %) and improving access to public goods and services (33.3 %), suggest that youth participation can bridge the gap between individual development and governance transformation when properly designed and implemented. These community-level outcomes represent a middle ground where youth participation yields tangible benefits beyond individual development, without necessitating fundamental changes to governance structures.

In conclusion, our analysis reveals that youth participation in local governance represents a complex and sometimes contradictory field of practice. The combination of multiple rationales and mixed outcomes suggests that youth participation involves diverse approaches and aspirations. Moving forward, both research and practice should focus on designing participatory processes that not only foster individual development but also create pathways for meaningful influence on governance structures and policy outcomes. This will require addressing the persistent challenges in deliberation, representation, and collaborative culture identified in our analysis, as well as developing more robust mechanisms for translating youth voice into substantive policy change.

6. Conclusion

Youth participation is a valuable arena for assessing the quality of democracy at the local level. Our findings show that, despite persistent barriers, youth involvement can enhance civic engagement and competences while contributing valuable insights to local policymaking. These effects align with the perspectives of civic agency and collaborative governance.

The mixed picture emerging from our analysis provides important guidance for future work. While we documented positive outcomes at the individual level, the significant challenges in deliberation, representation, and collaborative culture raise critical questions about the distribution of power in participatory processes. The mismatch between political efficacy scores and responsiveness metrics suggests limitations in translating youth voice into policy change and collective action. This disconnect highlights a central tension in participatory governance: youth are encouraged to speak, but not necessarily empowered to shape policy. This raises a fundamental question: are local officials willing to cede real power to young people?

The five rationales for youth participation – competence development, policy improvement, strengthening democracy, upholding rights, and youth empowerment – offer distinct entry points for mainstreaming these practices. From a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing competence development and empowerment can motivate young people's initial participation, while rights-based and democracy-strengthening arguments can support advocacy for more inclusive mechanisms. From a top-down perspective, policy improvement rationales may resonate most with public officials seeking practical benefits. The evidence suggests that outcomes are more positive when multiple rationales are integrated and reflected in the participatory design. Public officials, as gatekeepers, should prioritize reducing the most common failures: limited deliberation, representation gaps, and weak collaborative culture.

Finally, our review has limitations that should be acknowledged. The search strategy, focused on Scopus and Web of Science, excluded studies from other databases and grey literature. The decision not to include fields such as education, environment, and health in the search filters may have narrowed our sample. Adding keywords in French, Portuguese and Spanish may also expand results. In addition, in line with the PRISMA-ScR protocol, where critical appraisal is optional (item 12; Tricco et al., 2018), we did not conduct a formal assessment of each study's methodological quality. However, the review draws exclusively on empirical, peer-reviewed research sourced from two high-quality academic databases. This approach provides a baseline level of quality assurance, even though individual studies were not appraised in detail. As a result, the findings should be viewed as mapping the field rather than definitive evidence.

Future research should seek to identify why some municipalities achieve more positive outcomes. Several hypotheses emerge from our findings: (1) integrating multiple rationales yields better results than relying on a single justification; (2) attention to power-sharing, deliberation, and representation improves government-level outcomes; (3) political commitment and institutional support mediate the relationship between participation inputs and outcomes; and (4) youth councils work best when linked to formal decision-making. Further research is needed to understand how age, particularly the distinctions between childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, and how political context, whether democratic or undemocratic, affect the dynamics and outcomes of youth participation.

Methodologically, future work should adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative process insights with cross-case comparisons of outcomes. The field also requires further explanatory work to clarify the causal mechanisms linking design to outcomes. Doing so would not only strengthen the bridge between political science and public administration but also help build a cumulative theory on youth participation as a form of democratic innovation. In this respect, our review offers a structured foundation for future comparative and theory-building work in the study of local democratic governance.

Ethical considerations

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Declaration of competing interest

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governance in Colombia's vanguard intermediary cities'). Any findings, interpretations and conclusions presented in this article are entirely those of the authors.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108738.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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