Democracy, engagement and the energy transition

Working paper

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Abstract:
The REFORMERS project, aimed at improving energy efficiency through community engagement in a residential neighborhood in Heiloo with mostly privately-owned homes. This raised fundamental questions about what genuine engagement entails. Duurzaam Heiloo experiences were that community meetings were consistently attended by the same individuals—mostly those who had already taken sustainable actions. Well-intentioned efforts by officials and volunteers often primarily attract already motivated citizens, unintentionally alienating broader segments of the population. These dynamic risks deepening social polarization and amplified by media attention, may even fuel populist resistance to sustainability initiatives. This paper argues that successful energy transitions require deliberative democratic innovations that complement existing representative structures. Additional frameworks such as the participation ladder can be used. This paper marks an initial theoretical step toward bridging the gap between philosophical insights and practical approaches to participatory governance in the context of the energy transition.

Introduction

Democracy appears increasingly under strain. Terms like fake news and openly lying politicians have become commonplace. In the United States, a newly elected president can swiftly reverse key environmental regulations, often undoing policies from the previous administration. In the Netherlands, a national energy debate in 1983, which cost over ƒ27 million advocated sustainable energy[1]. Yet, implementation was limited, and nuclear energy remained on the agenda with recently proposals for four new plants. Technologies like heat pumps, once promoted, are now dismissed by new political leaders as "idiotic."[2] With climate change intensifying and disasters mounting, the question becomes: how should politics respond? Basically, this is about democratic and enlightenment immaturity — defined by Kant as the inability to use one's reason without the guidance of another—persists among citizens. They are often treated, and act, more as passive consumers than as active participants. Enlightenment, in Kantian terms, remains an unfulfilled task.

The paper is structured in four parts:

1. Challenges to Democracy analyzes the growing influence of wealthy libertarian actors on democratic processes. It highlights how elite lobbying and populist messaging are reshaping public discourse and undermining green policies.
2. The Eternal Struggle Between State and Society, drawing on Acemoglu & Johnson (2023), examines power dynamics between state, society, and corporate actors. It critiques the reduction of citizens to consumers and explores the limited success of local energy transition initiatives, emphasizing the need for stronger deliberative democratic mechanisms.
3. From Vision to Implementation synthesizes previous insights to propose a practical pathway for implementing energy transitions, advocating for models such as citizens' assemblies.

The paper concludes with reflections and identifies directions for further research.

Chapter 1: Challenges to Democracy and Sustainability

This chapter explores four interrelated themes. First, drawing on Democracy for Sale (Geoghegan, 2020), it examines how large campaign budgets influence democratic processes, particularly in a society shaped by information technology and new communication systems. Second, it revisits the enduring tension between

[1] https://www.kernenergieinnederland.nl/faceted_search/results/taxonomy%3A249
[2] https://nos.nl/video/2521438-wilders-haalt-warmtepomp-aan-tegenover-energiewoordvoerder-bontenbal

propaganda and the ideal of self-government, a concern and questions what remains of Kant's Enlightenment ideal of independent thinking in an age dominated by influencers. Third, it highlights the importance of identifying who holds the power to shape emerging production systems and communication technologies (Acemoglu & Robinson, Wankel evenwicht, De eeuwige strijd tussen staat en samenleving, 2020). Finally, the section proposes a model linking democratic governance to the energy transition.

1.1 Democracy for Sale and the Influence of Lobbying on the Energy Transition

This section indicates how large-scale campaign funding and the strategic use of information and communication technologies affect democratic decision-making, particularly in the context of sustainability and energy transition. *Democracy for Sale*, Geoghegan (2020) describes the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the role of opaque international financial flows, often originating from American Christian-libertarian groups. These actors support political campaigns from Latin America to Eastern Europe and the United States, advancing an agenda of deregulation and climate denial. Notably, the Brexit campaign was fueled by such support[3], including a £3.6 billion digital campaign orchestrated by Dominic Cummings, using Facebook and data analytics from Cambridge Analytica, a firm later investigated for illegal data use.

This libertarian strategy—distinct from traditional conservatism—is deliberate and well-coordinated. According to Geoghegan (2020), key components of this strategy include:

1. funding academics to generate ideologically aligned intellectual material;
2. translating complex theories into accessible formats via libertarian think tanks such as the Cato Institute[4], grounded in the doctrines of Hayek (Caldwell, 2010) and Friedman[5];
3. sponsoring grassroots organizations to influence policy agendas and lobby political elites.

Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron explicitly noted the pervasiveness of lobbying, highlighting how former ministers and advisers are embedded in policy-making processes, not merely petitioning from the sidelines but directly involved in drafting legislation.

This form of influence is not unique to the UK. In the Netherlands, the so-called "revolving door"[6] phenomenon—where former politicians transition into positions of influence in the private sector—further undermines democratic transparency. For instance, former Minister van Nieuwenhuizen left office to work for the Dutch energy sector's trade association[7]. Elco Brinkman, former CDA leader, chaired the construction industry's trade organization, later succeeded by Maxime Verhagen, also a former CDA minister. Similarly, Diederik Samson (PvdA) became an advisor to the HVC (a company for waste incineration and district heating), while also chairing the national climate table on the built environment[8]. Ed Nijpels, former VVD politician, served as chair of all national climate tables. These actors, deeply familiar with governmental structures, represented major energy, construction, and infrastructure stakeholders at the advisory tables.[9] Their presence and influence are not necessarily conspiratorial but reflect a structural bias. As the saying goes, a poultry farmer views chickens differently than a mother at a petting zoo. The result is a policy environment inclined toward familiar, centralized, large-scale technical solutions—such as district heating networks[10]—which often reflect vested interests rather than local needs.

This raises important questions about the status of autonomous public reasoning in a media-saturated democracy. Plato warned of the dangers of propaganda for self-governance, and Kant's Enlightenment ideal of independent thought—*sapere aude*, "dare to know"—now contends with the pervasive influence of digital media, influencers, and lobbying networks. As Bernstein (2021) illustrates in *The Delusion of Crowds* (Bernstein, 2021), collective hysteria and media hype can transform trivialities into perceived national crises. Friedman (2021), in *Religion and*

[3] https://nos.nl/artikel/2548739-musk-spreekt-met-brexit-populist-farage-over-grote-donatie
[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cato_Institute
[5] https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAC0112857F2D3EAA and https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAC0112857F2D3EAA
[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolving_door_(politics)
[7] https://nos.nl/artikel/2502916-minister-bemoeide-zich-toch-met-energiesector-voor-ze-lobbyist-werd
[8] https://archief.transport-online.nl/site/81472/samsom-gaat-afvalverwerker-adviseren/
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the Rise of Capitalism (Friedman, 2021), shows how belief systems shape economic ideologies. In this context, the sustainability discourse is no longer merely technical, but deeply political, contested, and shaped by power structures.

1.2 Propaganda and the Crisis of Self-Government

In *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (Stanley, How fascism works, 2020), Stanley explores the mechanisms by which fascist regimes gain and consolidate power—often in ways that undermine democratic debate on critical issues such as climate change. Building on his earlier work in *How Propaganda Works* (Stanley, 2015), he argues that propaganda plays a central role in this process. Stanley draws on Plato's skepticism of democracy, suggesting that the freedom inherent in democratic systems—particularly freedom of speech—can be exploited by demagogues who appeal to public fears and resentments. Democracy's openness can paradoxically lead to its own downfall, as it provides space for a "strongman" to rise by manipulating the public discourse. Once in power, such figures can dismantle democratic institutions and replace them with authoritarian structures. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, once cynically noted: "This will always be one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its mortal enemies the means by which it was destroyed."

Stanley shows how modern fascist-leaning movements continue to use this dynamic. By invoking a mythical, idealized past—often grounded in patriarchal, racially or religiously homogenous visions—such ideologies foster a sense of cultural loss and nostalgia. Propaganda in this form destabilizes public trust and redirects anger toward scapegoated groups. In today's complex, globalized world, however, these nostalgic models no longer offer viable solutions. Even if such pasts were ideal—which is highly debatable—they cannot address the realities of modern energy problems. Fascist leaders can obscure this by replacing truth with power, lying without consequence. This is precisely what Immanuel Kant warned against: the relinquishing of one's reason and autonomy in favor of unquestioned obedience. In this sense, propaganda not only threatens democracy but also the Enlightenment project itself—particularly in the domain of sustainability discourse, where rational deliberation and self-governance are essential for an energy transition.

	Excludable	**Not Excludable**
Rival	Private goods	Common consumer goods
Not Rival	Tolls	Public goods

Table 1. Excludability and Rivalry of Goods.

That is important because sustainability is a public good: it is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. In cases like sea dikes, the collective nature of the problem is self-evident, and the solution—a collectively funded dike—is straightforward. However, in issues such as domestic CO_2 reduction, the responsibility is often individualized (e.g., installing a heat pump at private owned homes as in Heiloo), blurring the line between private and collective action. This hybrid nature requires a robust public sphere—a space for rational, power-free deliberation, as envisioned by Habermas (Habermas, 1981) (Heysse, Rummens, & Tinneveld, 2007) (Kunneman, 1985). Yet such a space is increasingly compromised. The internet, dominated by commercial interests and algorithmic propaganda, fragments discourse and reinforces echo chambers (Varoufakis, 2024). Instead of enabling deliberation, digital platforms often amplify distrust and misinformation. Therefore, it is crucial to foster a public culture that emphasizes citizen responsibility, not merely consumption. This involves more than rhetorical appeal; it requires creating institutional and social spaces where citizens can actively shape sustainability policy.

1.3 Power and Progress in the Organization of Production and Communication

As Acemoglu and Johnson (Acemoglu & Johnson , 2023) (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020)(2023) argue that the organization of production and communication technologies often either serves the interests of dominant elites or lays the foundation for shared prosperity. The direction that technological development takes—whether it reinforces centralized infrastructures such as district heating and large-scale cable networks or promotes decentralized alternatives like heat pumps and local storage—depends on who holds the power to influence those decisions. Power, in this sense, is the capacity of individuals or groups to achieve their goals, often not through coercion but through agenda-setting, media control, and institutional credibility. In modern societies, the exertion of influence typically takes the form of persuasion rather than force. Ideas gain traction when they are repeated frequently, are embedded in compelling narratives, and are endorsed by high-status individuals or institutions (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). The persuasive power of media, think tanks, and government committees lies not

only in their access to public platforms but also in their ability to define what is considered credible or rational. For instance, a citizen proposing an alternative energy solution is far less likely to receive attention than a national climate committee chair who enjoys institutional legitimacy, regardless of the intrinsic value of the proposal.

Social networks, both formal and informal, play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of innovation. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) illustrate how "big finance" captured the policy agenda during and after the global financial crisis, as bank executives, economists, and legislators operated within overlapping elite networks. These networks amplified a specific economic ideology, reinforcing systemic risk and enabling a rapid return to the pre-crisis status quo. The ability to set the public agenda—deciding what questions are asked and which options are considered legitimate (agenda setting) —represents a significant form of soft power that often goes unchallenged.
The spread of ideas through imitation further compounds these dynamics. As humans, we are evolutionarily predisposed to learn from prominent individuals, often conflating visibility and prestige with competence. This tendency makes societies vulnerable to misinformation and oversimplified solutions, especially when public discourse is dominated by a narrow set of actors. As Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) note, persuasion can be as insidious as coercion: it hides partisan or misguided decisions under the guise of consensus or expert knowledge, making them harder to detect and reverse (Acemoglu & Robinson). The enduring dominance of large-scale, centralized approaches to energy and infrastructure, despite counterarguments like Schumacher's (1973) *Small Is Beautiful* , reflects the structural inertia embedded in agenda-setting institutions and their capacity to convince both themselves and others of their righteousness. In this context, technological progress is not inherently emancipatory. It is filtered through institutional power structures, rhetorical strategies, and social learning mechanisms that determine which innovations flourish, and which are suppressed. Consequently, addressing challenges such as the energy transition requires more than technical solutions; it demands critical reflection on who shapes discourse, whose interests are served, and how society can reclaim the direction of progress.

1.4 A Systems Model of Democracy and the Energy Transition

Insights from the literature suggest that the interplay between democratic institutions, the public sphere, and the energy transition can be conceptualized as a dynamic system (see Figure 1). In this system, powerful economic actors often promote a *libertarian thinktank* model characterized by minimal state intervention and unregulated market forces. These actors are frequently supported by *well-funded think tanks* and with the media they *influence the mainstream.* As a result, citizens increasingly perceive themselves not as active participants in democratic deliberation but as consumers, whose expectations are shaped by market logic rather than civic responsibility. This *weakens democratic parties and strengthens populist parties.* This increased power of populist parties has a *negative effect on the public sphere* and decreases *funding for research in sustainability including discrediting* this kind of research. The *power of action for sustainability decreasing*.

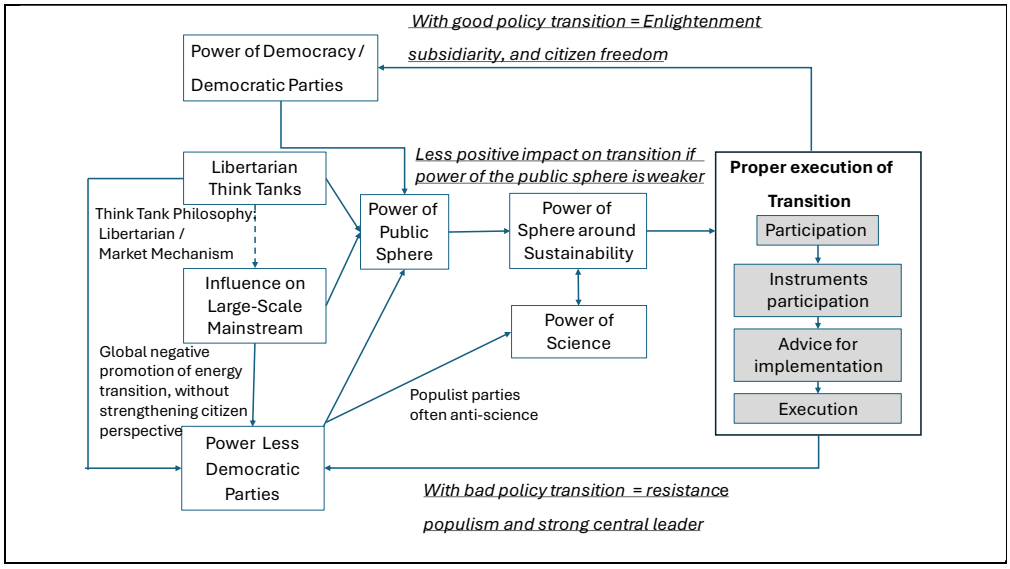

Fig.1. Democracy and energy transition in system terms

Starting with a local community, one can contribute to democracy by tackling the energy transition well. If a *good participation* strategy is applied in every municipality and district, with the *right instruments*, *advic*e and guidance during the implementation and a *successful final implementation*, then that *strengthens the traditional democratic parties* that can then *improve the political atmosphere*. That in turn strengthens the local energy policy. If one does it even further by a consumerist - technical approach, then the *power of less democratic* parties is strengthened.

2. The Eternal Struggle Between State, Society, and Civil Society

The energy transition therefore requires not only technological innovation, and selling these to residents, but also a profound social and institutional transformation. This is a problem of balance between the state with its institutions including large companies and society, which is discussed in the next paragraph. , followed looking after the concept of civil society and the role of politic parties. This concerns strengthening civil society, which is the second item on the agenda in this chapter. The following chapter will discuss a number of tools to achieve this.

2.1 The Eternal Struggle Between State and Society: A Precarious Equilibrium

The foundational model presented in *The Eternal Struggle Between State and Society* (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020) builds on Thomas Hobbes' conception of the Leviathan. Hobbes (1985 [1651]) argued that in the state of nature—where individuals act solely from self-interest—life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In such a condition, constant fear and the threat of violence reign, as there exists no overarching power to instill order. To escape this anarchy, individuals collectively submit to a sovereign authority—the Leviathan—a centralized power capable of maintaining peace and security through fear and coercion. However, Hobbes' solution carries its own danger: the Leviathan, once empowered, may become tyrannical. Thus arises the fundamental dilemma: how to construct a state strong enough to avoid chaos but constrained enough to prevent despotism. Acemoglu and Robinson (2020) revisit this dynamic by highlighting how state and society must exist in constant tension. When either becomes too dominant, political imbalance and institutional failure ensue. **Fig 2** conceptualizes this tension as a simplified model with two axes: the horizontal representing the power of society—its norms, mobilization, and institutional counterweights—and the vertical representing the power of the state and large companies —its elite control and institutional capacity.

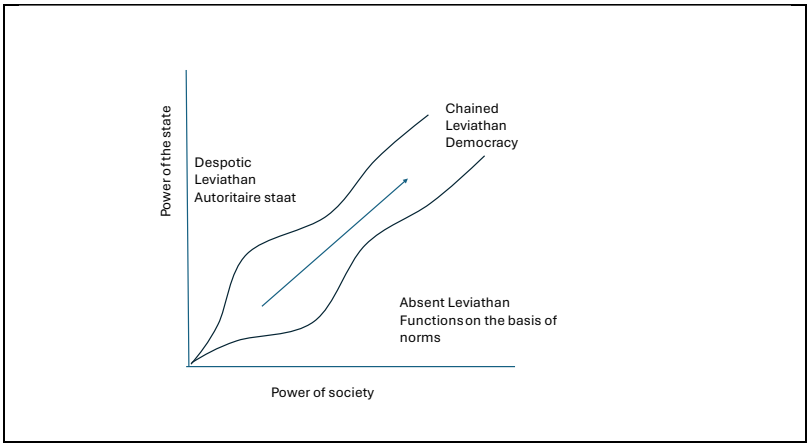

Fig. 2. Struggle State and society and a balance

This model underscores a core paradox of modern governance: societies require strong states to ensure order and provide collective goods, yet these states must be tamed by equally strong social institutions to remain accountable. Acemoglu and Johnson metaphorically capture this with the "Red Queen Effect" from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: in the face of ever-accelerating change, both state and society must run constantly to maintain equilibrium. If society fails to keep pace—through civic engagement, normative critique, and institutional resilience—the Leviathan risks becoming unchained and despotic. This is especially evident in advanced democracies, where the intertwining of state and market power has led to citizens being reframed as consumers (Barber, 2007), and public services outsourced to market logics that privilege efficiency over equity. This development fuels a dynamic where powerful economic actors—banks, energy conglomerates, and other "too-big-

to-fail" institutions—are propped up by the state, while smaller, socially innovative alternatives are crowded out due to lack of scale.

This asymmetry undermines the capacity of society to act as a meaningful counterbalance, accelerating environmental degradation, social inequality, and democratic erosion. Authors such as Galbraith (1961, 1976), Nussbaum (2011), and Rotmans (2010) warn of the social and ecological consequences of such imbalances, while Habermas (1981, 2011) describes how the system world colonizes the lifeworld—reducing civic discourse and democratic engagement to managerial and economic imperatives. In response, thinkers like Kant (as discussed in Hofman, 2018) advocate for an enlightened public that can resist such colonization through rational critique and civic responsibility. The challenge, then, is to foster a dynamic equilibrium where both the Leviathan and civil society are strong, responsive, and constrained—each running just fast enough to preserve freedom, justice, and sustainability in an interconnected world. The energy transition, like the Enlightenment, begins with liberation from self-imposed ignorance. As Immanuel Kant put it, Enlightenment is "man's emergence from his self-inflicted immaturity." Today, too, we are called to think for ourselves, take responsibility, and act with awareness of the consequences of our behavior. Our energy choices—how we travel, heat our homes, and consume—have direct effects on people and the planet. Reflecting on these actions is not just wise; it is a moral duty. We act not out of fear, but because we understand what is at stake. The energy transition is not merely a technical or economic challenge, but an ethical one. Real change depends on citizens and policymakers recognizing their role in the bigger picture—and acting accordingly.

2.2 The Concept of Civil Society

In *Democracy and Associations*, Warren (2001) extends the Enlightenment legacy of Kant through Parsons and Habermas, providing a sociological-philosophical account of civil society as a space crucial to democratic functioning. Kant's categorical imperative—"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" imposes a rational, universalizable ethics necessary for coexistence. However, as moral interpretations diverge, Kant's imperative alone does not guarantee consensus. Habermas (1981) addresses this gap with his theory of communicative action, advocating for a discourse free from domination—*herrschaftsfreier Diskurs*—in which actors pursue truth, rightness, and sincerity through rational deliberation. This ideal discourse is reserved not for market transactions or bureaucratic procedures, but for the *lifeworld*—the shared social space of everyday understanding. Habermas argues that this lifeworld is increasingly colonized by the system—media, markets, and state institutions—thus unbalancing the democratic order and allowing Leviathan to reassert its unchecked dominance with disastrous consequences for sustainability.

Building on Habermas and Parsons, Warren conceptualizes civil society as a dense network of associations—clubs, NGOs, trade unions, voluntary groups—which serve as mediating structures between the individual and state. These associations play a vital role in democratizing society by fostering civic engagement and decolonizing the lifeworld. This requires an active citizenry capable of collective reasoning and democratic participation beyond mere consumption or representation. Kant already recognized that such autonomy must be cultivated: "Man is the only being who needs education" (*Über Pädagogik*, 1803). Learning democratic practices requires more than theoretical knowledge; it demands experience and participation. Studies on knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and cooperative learning in education (Hofman, 1998; Hofman & Van Leeuwen, 1998; Hofman, Foks, & Kokhuis, 2000) emphasize the importance of situated learning and social interaction. It is therefore naïve to assume that democratic competencies can be developed in isolation; they must be practiced within intimate and intermediate levels of society (see **Fig. 3)**. Habermas referred to coffee houses as early sites of the *public sphere*, where citizens could deliberate public affairs—a precursor to what we now refer to as civil society. *Citizens' assemblies* also around the energy transition exemplify how collective, deliberative action at the community level can revitalize democracy, provided that institutional frameworks allow sufficient decision-making autonomy.

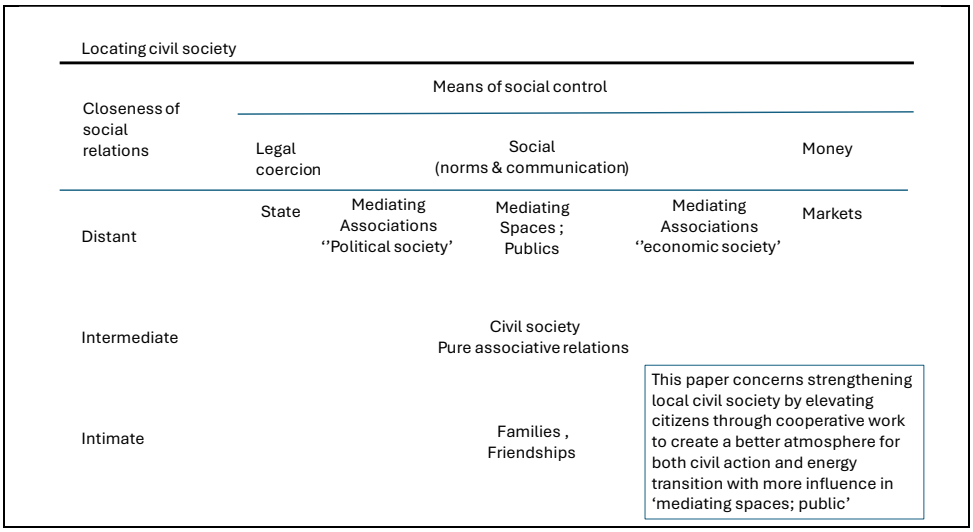

Fig. 3. Location civil society

Political parties are reluctant to adopt this vision from the Enlightenment but fail to respond adequately. While rhetorically opposed to fascism, citizens are fatigued by repetitive anti-populist narratives that yield few tangible results. Accustomed to the immediacy of online services, many citizens perceive political processes as inefficient. When traditional parties fail to deliver, electoral support shifts elsewhere. Many traditional political parties in practice failed to uphold their Enlightenment heritage.

- Social democrats have emphasized consumer welfare over democratic participation, treating citizens as clients rather than co-authors of collective decisions with bad results (Hurenkamp, 2017).
- Christian democrats have undermined the principle of subsidiarity—allocating decisions to the lowest effective level—by supporting municipal mergers and scaling up public administration, distancing governance from citizens.
- Liberals, meanwhile, have promoted market mechanisms, but these increasingly involve monopolistic actors influencing passive consumers via media manipulation rather than fostering competitive, autonomous exchange.

In sum, the failure of mainstream parties to realize their ideological commitments has prevented the emergence of a vibrant civil society that spans from intimate to intermediate levels (**Fig. 3**), where democratic capacities could be nurtured. As a result, collective goods such as environmental sustainability cannot be secured by top-down mandates or digital engagement alone. In the absence of participatory frameworks, citizens disengage or turn to populist alternatives when their interests are unmet, underscoring the urgency of reinvigorating democratic life through civil society.

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3. From Vision to Implementation

Having discussed the democratic challenges inherent in the energy transition and introduced the concept of civil society, this chapter outlines possible pathways forward. These are structured in five subsections. First a general model is presented (**Fig. 5**) in which the citizen assembly is the most democratic, but is must fit in the situation, so a conscious decision has to be made on or before the particpation ladder which quantifies the degree of citizen involvement in projects. Important is the framing of citizens leading to self-fulfilling prophecies of 'incapable citizens' and negative advisory relationships in policy processes. At the end, diffusion of innovations always take time and not everybody takes te same speed, demonstrated by Rogers' framework [11].

[11] Practical participatory methods, see Looyens and Van de Walle (2023).

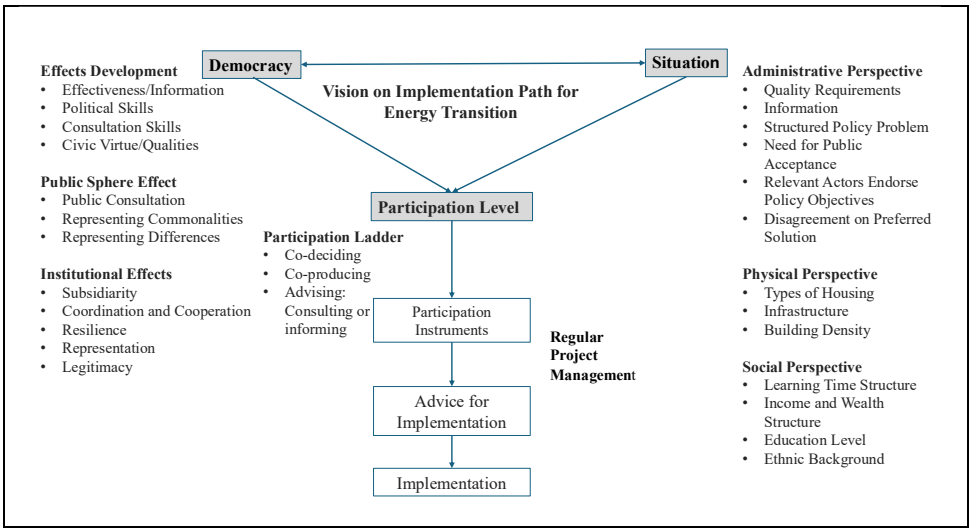

Fig. 5 Diagram structured approach to democracy and energy transition.

3.1 From General Model to Implementation

Central to implementation is a vision of democracy that incorporates civil society, institutional design, and the particularities of the local context. The proposed model emphasizes that democratic legitimacy and public support for the energy transition are not ancillary goals, but integral components of its success.

The implementation approach is based on three core steps:

1. Defining Democratic Objectives
   The first critical question for policymakers is: *Do we aim to strengthen democracy and civic participation together with the energy transition?* According to Warren (2009), democratic participation can serve multiple goals—such as building legitimacy, generating knowledge, ensuring inclusiveness, and promoting civic virtue. Current energy transition policies, however, often focus narrowly on technical and efficiency-oriented goals, neglecting these broader democratic dimensions. A reframing is required to prioritize participatory governance as a means of enhancing democratic quality, not merely as a tool for implementation.
2. Contextualizing the Local Situation
   Effective solutions must be embedded in the local context. Three dimensions are particularly relevant:
   a. Administrative Perspective
   Local decision-making must ensure both democratic legitimacy and technical effectiveness. Administrators must balance citizen input with decision quality and process manageability.
   b. Physical and Infrastructural Conditions
   The spatial and physical configuration of neighborhoods matters significantly. A village with low-rise housing and dispersed settlement patterns will require fundamentally different solutions—such as individual heat pumps or microgrids, rather than a high-density urban area suited for centralized district heating. The feasibility of technologies depends on pre-existing infrastructure and logistical realities (Geels, 2005).
   c. Social Composition and Cohesion
   The socioeconomic profile of a neighborhood—including income levels, education, and social capital—affects its capacity for participation. For instance, affluent and well-educated communities may require less facilitation and support than socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. This resonates with the work of Putnam (2000) on social capital, which underlines the importance of trust, networks, and civic engagement in enabling collective action.

A significant challenge arises when national programs are implemented by municipal officials without adequate adaptation to local circumstances. Often, municipal professionals are more closely aligned with national agencies—who offer resources and technical guidance—than with the communities they serve. Instead of co-creating local solutions with residents, local governments may become implementers of top-down technical policies. To counter this, municipalities should prioritize establishing **citizens' assemblies (burgerberaad)** as a

primary democratic instrument, with national frameworks functioning as supportive structures rather than as directives.

3. Determining the Appropriate Level of Participation
   Based on the contextual analysis, policymakers must decide on the appropriate degree of public participation. This can be operationalized using frameworks such as the participation ladder (Arnstein, 1969; Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2001), which ranges from informing to full citizen control.

3.2 The Participation Ladder

The *participation ladder* is a conceptual framework used to assess the degree to which citizen engagement is genuine and effective (Sherry Arnstein1969).

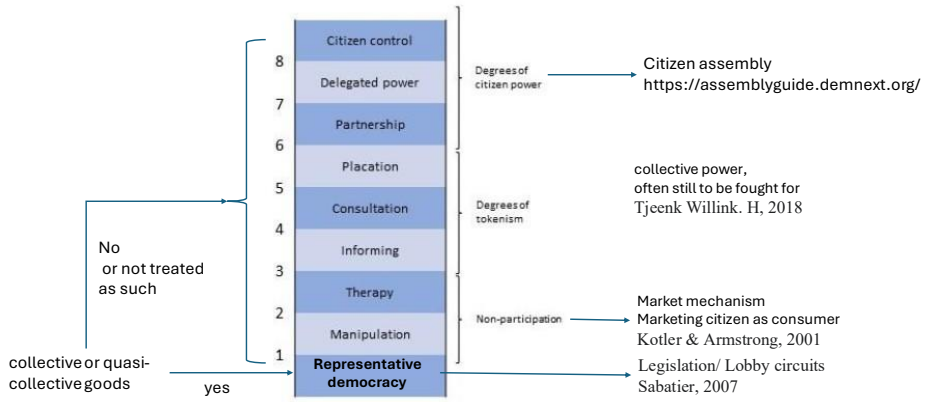

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Fig. 6 View of Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Citizen Participation'. Source: based on (Arnstein, 1969) extended for this paper.

It classifies participation into hierarchical levels, broadly be grouped into three categories.

1. citizen power where the highest is *citizens' assemblies*, where randomly selected residents are empowered to deliberate on pressing issues—such as sustainability or the energy transition—and to co-decide within a pre-established framework provided by the government. Crucially, this process requires representativeness (not merely including organized interest groups) and a commitment from public authorities to respect the outcome, assuming the deliberations adhere to agreed parameters.
2. tokenism reflects more symbolic or superficial forms of engagement. Public participation meetings often fall into this category, where the primary aim is to legitimize pre-determined policies rather than to invite genuine input (Tjeenk Willink, 2018). Such mechanisms give the illusion of inclusion while maintaining elite control.
3. non-participation encompasses practices such as manipulation or what is often framed as public 'education'. These strategies tend to rely on marketing techniques and psychological framing to steer public opinion without genuine deliberative engagement. In these forms, citizens are treated less as democratic participants and more as passive recipients of pre-packaged government messaging or marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001).

This distinction is crucial, particularly when democratic legitimacy is at stake. Too often, participation instruments are deployed late once key decisions have already been made—rendering them ineffective or even counterproductive. Genuine engagement requires upfront consideration of democratic values and civic involvement, which is frequently overlooked in practice.

3.3 Framing Citizens and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

In long-term societal challenges such as climate change, citizens arguably have the strongest intrinsic motivation to pursue long-term solutions—for the sake of future generations or grandchildren. In a well-functioning democratic society, citizens should therefore play a central role in shaping these transitions. Drawing from Kantian ethics, individuals must be treated not merely as means but as autonomous agents with moral duties toward the

common good. In line with Habermas's theory of communicative action, it is within the *lifeworld*—the shared space of cultural meaning and social interaction—that the direction of policy should be normatively anchored.

Yet governments frequently prioritize institutional stakeholders such as companies and consultants, often under the rationale of efficiency or scale. While such actors may offer financial and organizational capacity, their interests are narrower than those of the general citizenry. For example, in addressing issues such as grid congestion, governments may favor large-scale infrastructure solutions driven by industry demand rather than exploring more distributed, citizen-centered models of energy generation and storage, even if decentralized systems are more cost-effective and scalable, Framing theory and social psychology help explain how this marginalization of citizens can lead to a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Kant already noted that individuals categorize and simplify social complexity through mental schemata. Modern psychology confirms that people tend to see members of outgroups as homogeneous while recognizing diversity within their ingroups—a phenomenon that contributes to stereotyping and simplified social representations. Moreover, expectations influence behavior: if governments perceive citizens as disinterested or incapable, and engage with them accordingly, citizens may internalize these expectations and disengage—a classic example of the self-fulfilling prophecy.
This dynamic can have several detrimental effects:

- Erosion of trust: Citizens who feel disregarded may develop cynicism or hostility toward public institutions, reducing initiatives such as the energy transition.
- Reduced cooperation: Perceived neglect or misrepresentation can lead to non-compliance or passive resistance, impeding the implementation of essential policies.
- Negative policy feedback: Policies crafted without meaningful citizen input may fail to reflect local realities, leading to ineffective solutions and reinforcing governmental skepticism about public engagement.
- Stifled innovation: When citizens are not recognized as active agents in the policy ecosystem, their capacity to drive or shape innovation—especially in fields like energy—remains untapped.

Once citizens have become alienated from participatory mechanisms, reversing this process becomes increasingly difficult. Research in environmental psychology indicates that entrenched group identities can obscure individual attitudes and motivations. When social identity becomes salient, individuals are more likely to conform to group norms, even when these contradict personal values (Steg & De Groot, 2019). This depersonalization effect may suppress environmentally responsible behavior if the group norm does not support it. To counteract this, governments must intentionally reframe their relationship with citizens—from passive consumers to active co-creators—and design participatory frameworks that genuinely incorporate civic agency. Residents are specialists when it comes to their own situation and local environment and when they are really involved they often know more than the professionals. Only the democratic potential of civil society can be realized in addressing complex challenges like the energy transition.

3.4 Advisory Relationships

Understanding advisory relationships in democratization processes requires analytical models that capture the interaction between expertise and agency. Such a model distinguishes between instrumental and strategic dimensions of advice, yielding four distinct advisory roles. These roles are closely linked to the level of citizen expertise and the nature of the problem being addressed—ranging from technical fixes to systemic societal challenges such as the energy transition.

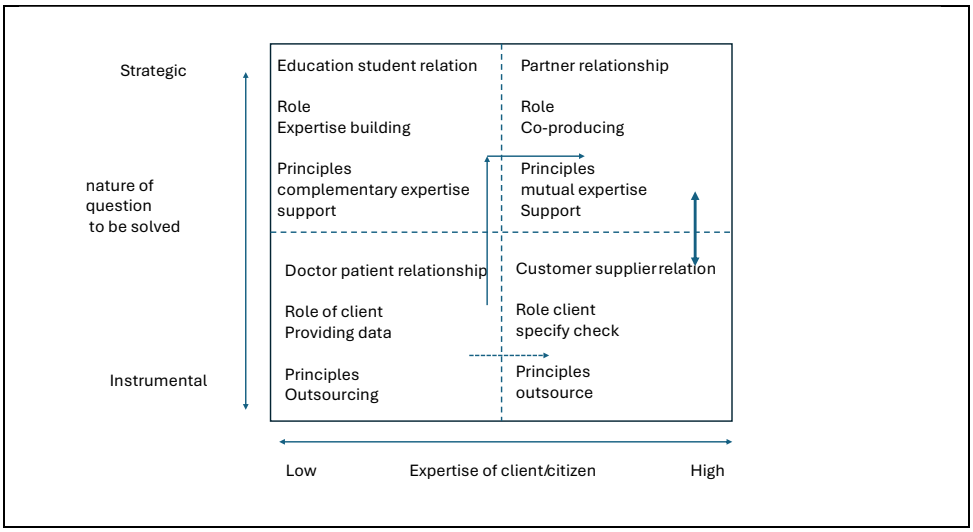

Fig 7. Relationship type of problem to be solved and the expertise inhabitants

1. The Doctor–Patient Relationship where citizen is positioned as a passive recipient of expert knowledge—analogous to a patient receiving treatment. This consumerist approach dominates many current practices in energy coaching. For instance, the "fix brigade" respond to immediate symptoms (e.g., high energy bills, drafty rooms) without fostering long-term behavioral or structural change. Once the problem appears resolved or energy prices fall, citizens revert to previous habits. Engagement remains superficial.
2. Strategic Engagement and Participatory Expertise requires moving beyond instrumental fixes to foster strategic citizen participation. Residents develop substantive knowledge of both environmental and democratic issues, shifting from short-term remedies to long-term goals such as sustainability and resilience. This involves reframing the problem—not merely as one of energy efficiency—but as a collective social and environmental objective. Deliberation should focus not on abstract global issues but issues in the neighborhood level. Local governments must expand participatory space and actively support citizen initiatives. However, existing advisory structures, such as energy coaches, often remain too focused on the instrumental level and lack capacity or mandate to foster strategic co-learning (Fischer, 2000; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003).
3. Co-Production of Knowledge is when citizen expertise reaches a sufficiently advanced level, the relationship between advisors and the public becomes one of co-production. Here, knowledge flows bi-directionally: professional and lay expertise are recognized as complementary, and collaborative problem-solving becomes possible (Ostrom, 1996; Jasanoff, 2003). This stage supports shared ownership of both the problem and its solutions.
4. Equitable Outsourcing and Self-Governance where citizen capacity, communities can assume responsibility, with public institutions acting as facilitators rather than directors. Outsourcing is not imposed top-down but aligned with local needs and capabilities. However, in practice, municipalities often outsource in generic, instrumental terms—offering, metaphorically, "cough syrup" without explaining why "quitting smoking" is a more sustainable choice.

3.5 The Diffusion of Innovations a long term project

The diffusion of innovations theory, originally formulated by Everett Rogers (2003), offers a valuable framework for understanding how new ideas and technologies spread across social systems. Although traditionally applied to the adoption of products, its conceptual structure can be extended to the societal uptake of democratic values and practices.

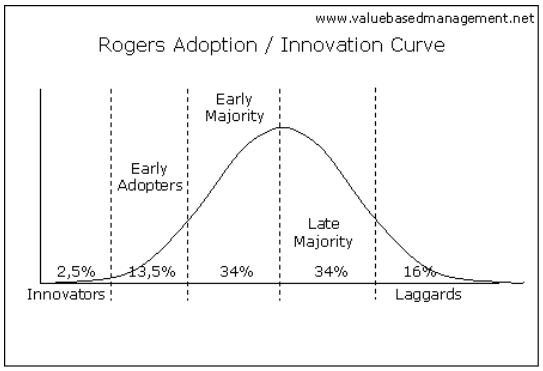

Fig.8 Rogers innovation curve

Rogers identifies five core elements in the diffusion process: the innovation itself, communication channels, time, the social system, and adopter categories. The innovation-decision process unfolds in five stages—knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation—each of which can be paralleled in the context of civil society development. While traditional marketing approaches (e.g., Kotler & Armstrong, 2001) focus on aligning products with consumer lifestyles, civil society development concerns shared processes of deliberation around collective goals—such as sustainability or democratic governance. In this view, environmental challenges can serve as catalysts for civic engagement and deliberative innovation. Not everyone follows the process at the same pace. Roger developed the normal course as shown in figure. Moralized behaviors—such as those linked to sustainability and democracy —may initially slow adoption by triggering resistance. Yet, once a critical mass is reached, these same moral imperatives can accelerate adoption by increasing normative pressure on laggards. Policymakers can facilitate this process by implementing early system-level changes that reduce the inertia of the status quo and enable faster transitions. This perspective informs strategies for civil society development, as it recognizes both the initial resistance and the potential for rapid societal transformation once strategic engagement gains momentum.

4. Conclusion

The energy transition unfolds within a contested public sphere shaped by powerful and often opposing forces. These include libertarian think tanks with substantial financial resources promoting climate-skeptical narratives through new media, as well as traditional forms of lobbying by large interest groups. Such actors also exert significant influence on the direction of technological development, innovation, and research agendas. This paper identifies key conditions that shape the socio-political atmosphere surrounding the energy transition and argues that, when properly managed, the transition can foster a more constructive public discourse. Conversely, poorly executed policies may exacerbate polarization and empower political actors resistant to sustainability efforts.
Drawing on the conceptual framework of the persistent tension between state (system) and society (lifeworld) (Habermas, 1981; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020), this paper emphasizes the need for a dynamic equilibrium. As societal complexity increases, the state requires more regulatory capacity, while society must simultaneously develop mechanisms for effective countervailing power. The "Red Queen" metaphor highlights this ongoing race: both state and society must evolve continuously to maintain balance. Presently, the state—often in alliance with market actors—appears to outpace civil society, underscoring the urgent need to strengthen democratic participation and civic engagement to also expand the possibilities for sustainability policy.

A reflection on the legacy of the Enlightenment reveals that while material progress has been achieved, the elevation of civil society has lagged. Liberals, social democrats, and Christian democrats have each contributed in part but have not fully addressed the democratic and ethical challenges of sustainability. The energy transition, as a collective endeavor rooted in the common good, presents a unique opportunity but also a necessity to renew democratic practices and empower citizens. Effective participation is essential—not only for legitimacy but also as a driver of learning and capacity-building. A participatory approach should avoid paternalistic framing of residents as uninterested or incapable, which risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, participation should aim for strategic, long-term engagement, fostering competencies that grow over time. This requires advisory strategies that go beyond technical expertise to include social and democratic dimensions. It is important to develop more tools to make the above general models more specifically applicable and to test them for wider use.

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