



Influencing Change: The Power of Public Opinion in South African Policy development

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between public opinion and policy implementation across developing democracies, drawing comparative insights from South Africa and Thailand. Public opinion shapes policy effectiveness, legitimacy, and government accountability, yet its actual impact differs across institutional and political contexts. Using a qualitative comparative design, this research analyses policy documents, survey data, and prior empirical studies to assess how citizen attitudes affect policy execution and responsiveness. Findings reveal that both countries maintain formal mechanisms for public engagement but differ in bureaucratic capacity, transparency, and responsiveness. In Thailand, decentralized governance fosters localized policy adaptation, whereas South Africa faces implementation barriers due to administrative inefficiency and political polarization. The study concludes that successful policy implementation depends on institutional responsiveness and the ability to convert public preferences into administrative outcomes. Policy recommendations highlight trust-building, stakeholder inclusion, and digital participation to strengthen policy legitimacy. The paper contributes to comparative governance research by linking public opinion with the practical dynamics of policy implementation in developing democracies.

Keywords: accountability, administrative, communication, legitimacy, responsiveness

Introduction

Public opinion is a cornerstone of democratic governance, shaping both the legitimacy and accountability of public institutions. In democratic systems, citizens' values and expectations guide policy priorities and administrative behavior. When effectively incorporated, public opinion enhances transparency, responsiveness, and institutional credibility. Conversely, when ignored, it erodes trust, weakens compliance, and undermines the legitimacy of government actions (Rhamadhani & Edeh, 2024). For developing political systems, where institutional maturity is still evolving, understanding how public opinion interacts with policy implementation is critical for strengthening governance and social stability.

In many developing contexts, the connection between citizen preferences and government action remains fragile due to institutional weaknesses, limited administrative capacity, and political interference. Although democratic reforms have expanded electoral participation across Africa and Asia, citizens' influence on everyday policy decisions often ends at the ballot box (Motadi & Sikhware, 2024). Public opinion may shape elections but rarely guides implementation once governments assume office. This disjunction creates a persistent gap between public expectations and administrative outcomes, reducing service quality, accountability, and democratic legitimacy.

Policy failures in emerging democracies are often less about flawed design than about weak responsiveness to public sentiment. Bureaucratic inertia, limited feedback mechanisms, and centralized decision-making marginalize citizen voices throughout the policy cycle. Consultation processes frequently serve symbolic rather than substantive roles, offering few opportunities for citizens to affect resource allocation or regulation (Hofer et al., 2024). This disconnect fosters disengagement and policy fatigue, rendering public opinion a latent but underutilized force for effective governance.

Most scholarship on democratic responsiveness has focused on established Western democracies, where institutional systems are more robust and participatory mechanisms are entrenched. These studies show that governments often adjust agendas in response to shifts in citizen preferences, especially in areas like welfare, taxation, and environmental policy. However, comparable research on developing democracies remains limited, despite their distinct political dynamics shaped by inequality, patronage, and administrative fragility (Shibambu, 2024). This gap represents an important area for comparative inquiry.

Examining how public opinion shapes policy implementation in emerging democracies is essential for several reasons. Many states have introduced reforms to improve participation and accountability often enshrined in constitutional provisions or decentralization laws yet the real impact of these measures remains uncertain. In politicized environments, the integration of public preferences can either enhance legitimacy or fuel conflict, depending on institutional responsiveness (Odeyemi et al., 2023). Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into democratic consolidation and governance reform.

South Africa and Thailand provide instructive comparative cases. Both are hybrid democracies that have institutionalized participatory governance but face uneven policy outcomes. South Africa's Batho Pele ("People First") principles and Public Participation Framework (2013) emphasize accountability and citizen involvement, yet challenges persist due to corruption, weak bureaucratic capacity, and uneven local governance. Thailand's Decentralization Act (1999) mandates community participation in planning and budgeting, though local engagement remains constrained by elite dominance and hierarchical political culture (Thusi et al., 2023). Comparing these two systems illuminates how institutional design mediates the relationship between citizen attitudes and administrative performance.

Public opinion in this study encompasses not only citizens' expressed preferences but also perceptions of trust, fairness, and legitimacy. When citizens perceive governments as responsive, they are more likely to comply with regulations, support new initiatives, and engage in civic life. Conversely, perceived neglect fuels protest and disengagement, destabilizing the policy environment. Policy implementation refers to the process of translating policy goals into administrative action (Gebrihet, 2024). Its success depends on aligning policy intent with citizen expectations through communication, participation, and mutual trust.

In developing democracies, this alignment is often disrupted by fragmented institutions, fiscal constraints, and politicized bureaucracies that prioritize compliance over responsiveness. These "implementation deficits" highlight that administrative reform alone is insufficient; effective governance also requires integrating public attitudes and institutional incentives into policy execution. This study investigates how public opinion influences policy implementation in developing democracies, focusing on South Africa and Thailand. Specifically, it examines how citizen preferences shape administrative responsiveness, how institutional structures mediate this influence, and what comparative lessons can strengthen participatory governance elsewhere.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the role of public opinion in shaping policy implementation outcomes.
2. To compare institutional responsiveness between South Africa and Thailand.
3. To identify factors that enhance or constrain the translation of public expectations into administrative action.

The findings aim to contribute to the literature on comparative governance by demonstrating how public attitudes interact with institutional capacity to shape policy performance. The analysis also offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen participatory mechanisms and accountability. Ultimately, it underscores the importance of cultivating responsive institutions capable of integrating public opinion across all stages of policymaking from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Background

Public opinion and policy implementation are interdependent components of democratic governance. The degree to which citizen preferences influence policy outcomes depends on institutional design, administrative capacity, and the openness of political systems to societal input. This study draws upon four complementary theoretical perspectives: Policy Responsiveness Theory, Institutional Theory, the Participatory Governance Model, and the Policy Implementation Framework (Ndzabela et al., 2025). Together, they provide a foundation for understanding how public attitudes shape and are shaped by state performance in developing democracies.

Policy Responsiveness Theory emphasizes the alignment between citizen preferences and government actions. Democratic legitimacy is strengthened when policymakers are responsive to citizens' expressed demands. However, responsiveness relies on the existence of institutional channels that convert public preferences into administrative action. In many developing democracies, this relationship is weakened by limited feedback systems and bureaucratic politicization that distort responsiveness. Institutional Theory provides a structural lens for examining how formal rules and informal norms shape administrative behavior. Institutions comprising legal frameworks, procedures, and social conventions define authority, accountability, and information flow between state and society (Mbae et al., 2025). Where institutions are weak or centralized, policy decisions tend to reflect elite dominance rather than citizen input. Conversely, systems characterized by transparency, decentralization, and horizontal accountability facilitate responsiveness and compliance.

The Participatory Governance Model extends this analysis by stressing the role of civic engagement in public decision-making. It argues that empowered participation transforms citizens from passive recipients into active co-producers of policy (Nisticò, 2022). Mechanisms such as public hearings and citizen councils allow deliberation and feedback, but in many developing contexts, these forums exist only formally, constrained by hierarchical cultures and scarce administrative resources. As a result, participation can become procedural rather than transformative.

Finally, the Policy Implementation Framework identifies the administrative and procedural factors critical to translating policy objectives into outcomes. Successful implementation requires clarity, coordination, and adequate resources, supported by communication and feedback. Failures often result from fragmented implementation chains or weak coordination. Responsiveness and participation are thus integral to implementation capacity, ensuring that government actions remain aligned with public priorities. Collectively, these frameworks offer an integrated analytical lens: Policy Responsiveness Theory outlines the normative expectation of alignment between citizens and the state; Institutional Theory situates this alignment within the governance structure; the Participatory Governance Model identifies the mechanisms through which participation occurs; and

the Policy Implementation Framework defines the administrative conditions necessary for policy success (Domorenok et al., 2021). Synthesizing these perspectives helps move beyond rhetorical advocacy of participation toward a pragmatic understanding of institutional responsiveness in developing democracies.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies across Africa and Asia demonstrate wide variation in responsiveness to public opinion. In many African democracies, formal participatory mechanisms coexist with limited administrative capacity and patronage-based politics, which restrict meaningful citizen influence. Recent research highlights that while democratization has expanded participatory opportunities, bureaucratic inefficiency continues to constrain responsiveness. South Africa's Batho Pele principles and Public Participation Framework (2013) institutionalize consultation and service accountability, yet implementation remains inconsistent (Hansen et al., 2022). Municipal-level participation often suffers from politicization and inadequate resources. Afrobarometer data (2022) reveal that only a minority of citizens feel their opinions influence local governance, signalling persistent disconnection between participatory policy and practice.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand's Decentralization Act (1999) has strengthened local involvement through village development committees and participatory budgeting. These institutions promote civic inclusion, though elite capture and hierarchical norms continue to limit equality of participation. The Asian Barometer (2021) confirms moderate but stable levels of institutional trust in Thailand, suggesting that participation contributes to legitimacy even amid partial responsiveness.

Comparative analyses show that trust and communication are pivotal mediators of responsiveness. Governments that ensure transparent communication and accessible feedback mechanisms achieve stronger compliance and legitimacy. Conversely, opaque systems reinforce public scepticism. Moreover, evidence indicates that participatory institutions must be embedded rather than symbolic temporary or donor-driven mechanisms often fail to produce long-term policy impact (Tissayakorn, 2025). Decentralization has been promoted as a strategy to strengthen participation and efficiency, but success depends on adequate fiscal and administrative capacity. Without these, local governments risk replicating central-level inefficiencies. Effective decentralization therefore requires local autonomy coupled with citizen oversight and equitable resource distribution.

Conceptual Synthesis

The theoretical and empirical insights collectively suggest that public opinion is a necessary but insufficient condition for effective policy implementation. While democratic legitimacy requires responsiveness to citizens, institutional strength and bureaucratic competence determine whether public preferences translate into real outcomes. In developing democracies, three interrelated factors define this process:

1. Institutional openness, which enables citizen voices to be expressed and heard.
2. Administrative capacity, which ensures those voices are acted upon effectively.
3. Trust, which sustains continuous interaction between state and society.

These dimensions are captured in the conceptual framework (Figure 1), which posits that public opinion influences policy outcomes through institutional responsiveness, moderated by trust and administrative capacity (Huffel, 2024). This integrated model draws on the four theoretical foundations discussed earlier, providing a structure for comparative analysis of South Africa and Thailand.

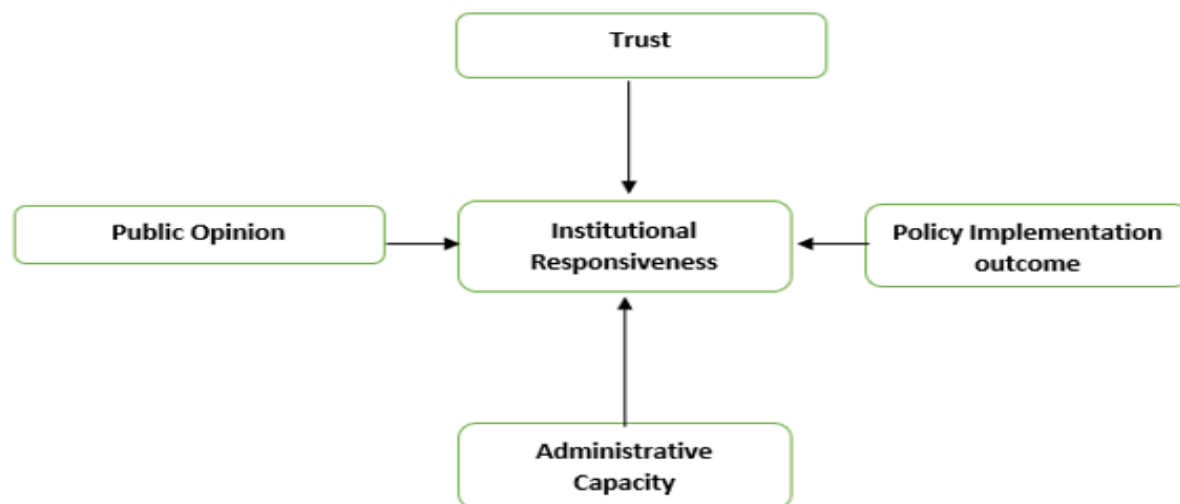


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating how public opinion influences policy implementation outcomes through institutional responsiveness, moderated by trust and administrative capacity.

Collectively, the reviewed studies emphasize that participation alone does not guarantee responsiveness. What matters is whether institutions possess the administrative strength and integrity to internalize public input. The comparative analysis that follows examines how these theoretical relationships manifest in practice within two developing democratic contexts.



Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to explore how public opinion shapes policy implementation in developing democracies, focusing on South Africa and Thailand. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables a deeper understanding of the contextual, social, and institutional dimensions of governance processes that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods. Comparative analysis enhances this understanding by identifying both convergences and divergences in how two distinct governance systems operationalize citizen participation and institutional responsiveness.

South Africa and Thailand were deliberately chosen as cases due to their shared democratic aspirations and ongoing governance reforms aimed at improving accountability, alongside their differing administrative traditions. Both countries have institutionalized participatory frameworks South Africa through the Batho Pele Principles and the Public Participation Framework (2013), and Thailand through the Decentralization Act of 1999. Despite these similarities, their implementation outcomes vary: South Africa experiences bureaucratic rigidity and declining public trust, whereas Thailand demonstrates relatively stronger local engagement but persistent elite dominance in decision-making. The comparison thus provides meaningful insights into how institutional design and political culture mediate the influence of public opinion on policy outcomes.

Data Collection

The research utilized secondary qualitative and quantitative data drawn from credible institutional, academic, and policy sources. Secondary data collection was appropriate for this study because it allowed for efficient and comprehensive analysis across multiple data types, ensuring a balanced examination of institutional perspectives and citizen attitudes.

Documentary analysis was conducted on major policy frameworks, including South Africa's and Public Participation Framework (2013), and Thailand's Decentralization Plan and Procedure Act (1999). These documents provided information about the formal mechanisms through which public input is solicited and integrated into policy implementation. Supplementary materials from audit offices, parliamentary committees, and civil service commissions in both countries were reviewed to understand administrative procedures and oversight mechanisms related to citizen participation.

In addition, data from two large regional surveys were incorporated to reflect citizen perceptions of government responsiveness. Afrobarometer Round 8 (2022) provided data on trust in government, policy satisfaction, and accountability in South Africa, while Asian Barometer Wave 6 (2021) offered comparable insights from Thailand regarding civic engagement, political participation, and institutional confidence. The use of these datasets enhanced the comparative validity of the study by offering parallel indicators across both cases.

Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports published between 2010 and 2024 were reviewed to situate the analysis within broader scholarly debates on participatory governance, institutional trust, and democratic responsiveness. Sources such as UNDP governance reports and OECD policy evaluations enriched the contextual interpretation of findings by linking empirical evidence to established theories of governance and policy implementation.

Analytical Framework

The study adopted a thematic and comparative analytical framework to interpret the data systematically. Thematic analysis was applied following approach, which involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns across the data. This process led to the identification of four major dimensions connecting public opinion and policy implementation: communication, leadership, accountability, and engagement. Communication captures the flow of information between government institutions and citizens, leadership reflects administrative and political commitment to responsiveness, accountability represents feedback and monitoring mechanisms that align actions with public needs, and engagement denotes the inclusiveness and sustainability of participatory practices.

Thematic coding was conducted both deductively, based on the study's conceptual framework, and inductively, allowing new insights to emerge from the data. This hybrid strategy ensured theoretical consistency while maintaining openness to unanticipated contextual findings. The comparative analysis complemented the thematic approach by synthesizing the results from both case studies to highlight cross-national similarities and differences. Particular attention was given to three dimensions: the structure and functionality of participatory institutions, the responsiveness of bureaucratic and political actors, and citizens' perceptions of policy legitimacy. Through this dual-level analysis, the study established how institutional context mediates the translation of public opinion into policy implementation outcomes.

Validity and Reliability

Ensuring methodological rigor was essential to the study's credibility. Validity and reliability were strengthened through several interrelated strategies. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings from policy documents, public-opinion surveys, and scholarly literature, minimizing the risk of bias from any single source. Transparency was maintained through detailed documentation of data selection and coding procedures, enabling replication and review. Peer debriefing was conducted with two governance scholars who reviewed the analytical logic and interpretations to enhance credibility. Furthermore, thick description was employed to contextualize findings within the political and administrative realities of South Africa and Thailand, thereby improving the transferability of insights to similar developing democracies. Collectively, these measures ensured that interpretations were grounded, verifiable, and methodologically sound.



Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study was limited to two national cases, representing southern Africa and Southeast Asia. While this selection provides rich comparative insight, it constrains the generalizability of the findings beyond the studied contexts. The reliance on secondary data implies that the analysis depends on the completeness and accuracy of existing documentation. Variations in terminology, language translation, and cultural interpretation of concepts such as “public opinion” or “participation” may also affect comparability between the two cases. However, these limitations were mitigated through methodological triangulation, the inclusion of diverse data sources, and critical contextualization during interpretation. The focus on two politically and administratively distinct developing democracies ultimately enhances theoretical generalization and deepens understanding of how participatory governance operates under differing institutional conditions.

Results and Discussion

Institutional Mechanisms for Public Participation

Both countries have established formal frameworks to strengthen public participation in governance and policy implementation, aiming to enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen inclusion. In South Africa, participatory governance is anchored in principles of consultation and openness; however, the implementation of these principles is uneven across institutions. Participation frequently remains limited to preliminary consultations, with little influence on final decision-making. Feedback and monitoring systems are underdeveloped, constraining citizens’ ability to shape policy outcomes once enacted. In contrast, the comparative case features a more decentralized framework that embeds participation within local governance. Community-based structures such as local councils and village committees enable citizens to engage directly in budgeting, development planning, and service delivery. These mechanisms foster continuous dialogue between citizens and administrative authorities but remain vulnerable to elite capture and bureaucratic conservatism (Zwane & N, 2023). Overall, the comparison reveals that while both systems endorse participatory ideals, only the decentralized model institutionalizes them in practice. Effective participation depends not merely on formal policy design but on institutional capacity and the degree to which participatory norms are embedded in everyday administrative routines.

Bureaucratic Responsiveness and Administrative Capacity

Bureaucratic responsiveness is a central determinant of how effectively public opinion is translated into policy outcomes. In South Africa, administrative inefficiency, politicized appointments, and rigid hierarchies weaken responsiveness and hinder policy execution. Overlapping mandates and weak inter-agency coordination produce decision-making delays and inconsistent implementation, eroding citizen trust. Officials often prioritize political compliance over citizen accountability, diminishing legitimacy and responsiveness. In contrast, the comparative case exhibits stronger bureaucratic professionalism and institutional stability. Local administrations possess sufficient autonomy to adapt programs to community needs, promoting flexibility and responsiveness. Although central fiscal control occasionally restricts subnational independence, a career-based civil service insulated from political volatility fosters administrative learning and policy continuity. This comparison underscores that public participation is meaningful only when bureaucratic systems possess the capacity and discretion to act upon it. Rigid, politicized structures render engagement symbolic, while adaptive and accountable bureaucracies enable genuine responsiveness (Brenton et al., 2022). Ultimately, administrative capacity serves as the key mediator between democratic input and governance effectiveness, determining whether public opinion translates into real policy impact.

Public Trust, Legitimacy, and Policy Outcomes

Trust serves as the foundation of effective policy implementation, shaping both citizen cooperation and the legitimacy of governance systems. Public confidence in institutions directly influences individuals’ willingness to participate in decision-making processes and comply with policy directives. In South Africa, persistently low institutional trust fuelled by corruption scandals, poor service delivery, and limited transparency has weakened policy legitimacy and civic participation. Survey data indicate that citizens who distrust government actors are less likely to engage in consultations or community initiatives, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where disengagement further undermines institutional credibility. In contrast, the comparative case shows moderate and stable levels of trust supported by cultural values emphasizing cooperation, respect for authority, and collective responsibility. These cultural foundations promote compliance and mutual accountability between citizens and administrators. Nonetheless, transparency lapses especially in fiscal management can erode this equilibrium. Overall, trust functions both as a prerequisite and an outcome of good governance. Sustaining it requires consistent transparency, ethical leadership, and responsiveness, enabling governments to transform participatory frameworks into effective and legitimate policy outcomes.

Political and Economic Constraints

Political instability and economic constraints remain persistent structural barriers to effective policy implementation in developing democracies. In South Africa, frequent leadership turnover and cabinet reshuffles have repeatedly disrupted policy continuity, generating uncertainty and undermining bureaucratic stability. Each political transition introduces new priorities, causing ongoing programs to lose momentum and fragment institutional coordination. This pattern aligns with institutional performance theory, which emphasizes that sustained responsiveness depends on political will, organizational stability, and administrative professionalism. Consequently, reforms often stall midway, creating inefficiencies and overlapping mandates that weaken public confidence.

Economic volatility further exacerbates these challenges. Fiscal austerity, rising debt, and revenue shortfalls constrain governments' ability to finance and implement policies effectively. Programs intended to promote welfare frequently face underfunding, delayed execution, or discontinuation. Departments compete for scarce resources, prioritizing short-term political visibility over long-term developmental goals. Research on fiscal policy confirms that limited fiscal space weakens responsiveness to public opinion, particularly when resource distribution is politically rather than developmentally driven.

In contrast, the comparative case demonstrates stronger macroeconomic discipline and a decentralized fiscal framework that grants local governments partial autonomy. This arrangement allows continuity in essential services even during economic contractions. However, disparities between affluent and rural regions persist, emphasizing the need for equitable redistribution mechanisms. Overall, fiscal predictability, decentralization, and transparent resource allocation are indispensable for translating policy commitments into consistent implementation and ensuring that public opinion remains an actionable force in governance.

Cultural and Institutional Dimensions of Policy Legitimacy

Cultural norms and institutional legitimacy significantly shape public attitudes toward policy implementation and perceptions of government fairness. In South Africa, enduring inequalities and diverse social identities have produced widespread perceptions of exclusion and procedural injustice, prompting citizens to express dissent through protests, litigation, and media advocacy. These adversarial interactions underscore a deeper demand for transparency and equitable participation, as hierarchical administrative systems are often viewed as inaccessible and unresponsive. In contrast, the comparative case demonstrates how cultural traditions emphasizing harmony, consensus, and respect for authority facilitate smoother policy implementation and compliance with government programs. However, such consensus-oriented systems may inadvertently suppress dissent and limit innovation. The analysis suggests that cultural alignment between citizens and institutions enhances legitimacy when governance practices resonate with societal values, fostering trust even amid imperfect outcomes. Conversely, legitimacy erodes when institutional behavior contradicts expectations of justice and equality. Ultimately, legitimacy functions as a dynamic social contract, maintained through cultural sensitivity, transparency, and accountability essential conditions for sustaining trust and effective policy implementation in evolving democratic contexts.

Comparative Synthesis of Findings

Synthesizing these results reveals both convergence and divergence in how public opinion influences policy implementation. Both countries acknowledge the normative importance of citizen participation and have institutionalized frameworks to support it. However, differences in administrative structure, political culture, and fiscal stability generate contrasting outcomes.

In South Africa, the policy system remains predominantly centralized, with participatory practices largely confined to formal consultation processes. Bureaucratic fragmentation, political volatility, and fiscal instability have reduced responsiveness, while declining trust has weakened citizen cooperation. Administrative behavior tends to emphasize procedural compliance rather than adaptive learning, leading to limited translation of public input into policy outcomes.

By contrast, Thailand demonstrates a more integrated and participatory model of governance. Decentralized institutions allow local bodies to incorporate public opinion directly into planning and implementation. Bureaucratic stability and moderate trust levels facilitate iterative learning between citizens and administrators, while fiscal decentralization supports consistent service delivery even amid political fluctuations. These comparative dynamics are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Policy Responsiveness and Implementation in South Africa and Thailand

Dimension	Case 1: South Africa	Case 2: Thailand
Policy Framework	Centralized consultation mechanisms with limited feedback	Decentralized participation embedded in local governance
Responsiveness	Constrained by bureaucratic rigidity and political interference	Adaptive, facilitated by local administrative autonomy
Trust in Government	Declining due to corruption and inefficiency	Moderate, sustained by cultural cohesion
Implementation Capacity	Limited by fiscal constraints and administrative turnover	Strengthened by bureaucratic stability and diversified financing
Citizen Engagement	Symbolic consultation with weak accountability	Institutionalized engagement through local structures
Policy Continuity	Disrupted by political instability	Maintained through professional bureaucracy

The synthesis underscores that effective policy implementation depends not only on participatory design but also on institutional competence and trust. Public opinion becomes impactful only when administrative systems have the capacity and autonomy to absorb, interpret, and act upon it.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

The findings align with key governance theories explaining how public opinion interacts with institutional design to shape policy outcomes. Policy Responsiveness Theory suggests that effective governance depends on how closely policy decisions reflect citizen preferences. In South Africa, responsiveness is weakened by bureaucratic compliance and political

interference, whereas Thailand's decentralized administrative model promotes better alignment between citizen input and policy adaptation. Institutional Theory emphasizes that durable, professional, and transparent institutions enhance implementation capacity and legitimacy. The results confirm that institutionalized accountability and consistent governance norms strengthen responsiveness. Participatory Governance Theory highlights a shift from symbolic to co-productive engagement; Thailand exemplifies this transformation, while South Africa illustrates the limits of procedural participation. Finally, the Policy Implementation Framework stresses coordination, communication, and resource alignment as key conditions for success. Contemporary evidence indicates that political ideology moderates responsiveness, as policymakers selectively interpret citizen preferences. Effective governance, therefore, stems from institutional integrity, administrative learning, and political neutrality rather than participation alone.

Interpretation and Broader Implications

The analysis demonstrates that effective policy implementation in developing democracies depends less on formal participatory structures and more on the administrative and cultural capacity to operationalize them. Public opinion influences outcomes only when institutions are transparent, responsive, and autonomous. In South Africa, improved implementation requires administrative depoliticization, reduced bureaucratic bottlenecks, and mechanisms that integrate citizen feedback into decision-making, supported by transparency and reliable service delivery. In contrast, Thailand must address elite capture and promote inclusivity by ensuring fiscal equity and enhancing local transparency. Three lessons emerge for developing democracies: institutional responsiveness must be reinforced by bureaucratic professionalism and fiscal stability; participatory mechanisms must include feedback loops that clearly demonstrate citizen influence; and public trust must be cultivated through ethical leadership and equitable governance. The cyclical relationship among trust, participation, and responsiveness determines policy success: responsive institutions build trust, trust enhances participation, and participation reinforces legitimacy. Sustaining this cycle transforms public opinion from symbolic engagement into a driver of accountable and adaptive governance.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of public opinion on policy implementation across two developing democracies, focusing on how institutional responsiveness, bureaucratic capacity, and trust mediate this relationship. The comparative analysis demonstrates that while both contexts recognize the normative importance of citizen participation, their implementation trajectories differ markedly due to variations in administrative structure, fiscal stability, and political culture. In South Africa, participatory governance remains primarily consultative and centralized, with weak feedback mechanisms and limited administrative flexibility. Bureaucratic politicization and recurring leadership changes have disrupted policy continuity, while fiscal constraints and corruption have further eroded public trust. The result is a governance system that acknowledges participation but struggles to operationalize it effectively.

By contrast, Thailand's decentralized governance framework allows public opinion to be embedded within local decision-making processes. Administrative stability, professional bureaucracy, and moderate levels of trust have collectively strengthened responsiveness and policy coherence. However, elite dominance and uneven inclusivity persist, suggesting that even successful participatory systems require constant vigilance against institutional complacency and unequal power distribution.

The comparative findings highlight several critical insights. First, institutional responsiveness not merely the existence of participatory laws is fundamental to translating public opinion into effective policy outcomes. Institutions that foster open communication, transparency, and adaptability are more likely to sustain legitimacy and public cooperation. Second, bureaucratic professionalism and fiscal stability serve as the operational foundation for responsiveness. Without these, even well-designed participatory mechanisms risk becoming symbolic. Third, trust functions as both cause and consequence of effective policy implementation. When citizens perceive fairness and reliability in government actions, they are more inclined to cooperate, reinforcing the legitimacy of governance systems.

Policy Implications for Developing Democracies

For governments in developing democracies, the results offer several policy implications.

1. Institutionalize feedback loops: Participation must extend beyond consultation. Governments should create structured mechanisms to communicate how citizen input informs policy decisions, closing the "responsiveness gap."
2. Strengthen administrative professionalism: Depoliticizing bureaucracies and investing in merit-based recruitment, training, and performance evaluation can enhance responsiveness and policy continuity.
3. Enhance fiscal decentralization: Providing local governments with predictable and equitable financing mechanisms promotes autonomy, innovation, and sustained service delivery.
4. Build and sustain public trust: Transparent decision-making, open data access, and consistent delivery of public services are essential to rebuild trust eroded by corruption or inefficiency.
5. Promote inclusive civic engagement: Participation must be designed to include marginalized voices especially women, rural populations, and minority communities to prevent elite capture and enhance representativeness.



Theoretical and Practical Contribution

Theoretically, this study contributes to debates on democratic responsiveness and policy implementation by integrating public opinion into an institutional framework that emphasizes administrative learning and adaptation. It demonstrates that participatory governance is effective only when bureaucracies possess both the autonomy and ethical orientation to act upon citizen preferences. Practically, it underscores the need for governments to invest not only in participatory structures but also in the administrative and fiscal mechanisms that sustain them over time.

Ultimately, effective governance arises from a reciprocal relationship between citizens and institutions. When governments listen, adapt, and deliver, citizens respond with cooperation and trust. This virtuous cycle strengthens legitimacy, enhances service delivery, and deepens democracy. Conversely, when institutions fail to internalize public sentiment, participation becomes procedural and legitimacy deteriorates.

In conclusion, public opinion serves as more than a measure of democratic vitality it is a dynamic governance tool. When effectively integrated into policymaking, it transforms governance from a hierarchical process into a collaborative system of accountability, transparency, and shared responsibility. Developing democracies that cultivate institutional trust, fiscal resilience, and participatory inclusivity will be best positioned to achieve both policy effectiveness and democratic sustainability in the twenty-first century.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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