Public Participation in AI Governance: A Meta-Analysis of Citizen Engagement Initiatives

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Abstract

As AI increasingly influences critical areas such as law enforcement, healthcare, and policymaking, its governance remains largely controlled by technocrats, limiting public participation. This paper examines the challenges and effectiveness of existing citizen engagement initiatives in AI governance, identifying key barriers such as technical complexity, accessibility issues, and performative participation. We analyze case studies from various global initiatives, highlighting successes and limitations. Our contributions include synthesizing best practices and proposing strategies to enhance meaningful public engagement in AI policymaking. Results indicate that while some initiatives foster transparency and inclusivity, many struggle with long-term impact and equitable representation. Strengthening participatory mechanisms is crucial to ensuring AI policies align with public values and ethical standards.

ACM Reference Format:
Mst Rafia Islam and Azmine Toushik Wasi. 2025. Public Participation in AI Governance: A Meta-Analysis of Citizen Engagement Initiatives. In *Proceedings of Sociotechnical AI Governance Opportunities and Challenges for HCI Workshop at the ACM CHI conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (STAIG'25).* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 4 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn

1 Introduction

AI is no longer a futuristic concept but a tangible part of our daily lives, influencing critical sectors such as job recruitment, law enforcement, healthcare, education, and beyond. As AI systems increasingly make decisions that affect personal lives and societal structures, concerns have grown regarding their governance, which remains largely in the hands of policymakers, technologists, and corporate leaders. This concentration of control raises significant issues related to transparency, fairness, accountability, and ethics, particularly when many AI models function as "black boxes" whose internal decision-making processes are opaque and inaccessible to the general public [3, 6]. The lack of clear understanding and oversight not only prevents the proper assessment of biases and risks but also stifles the potential for community-led improvements in these systems.

The need for democratic oversight is more urgent than ever, given that the expertise and decision-making power are concentrated in a few tech giants and academic institutions, thereby sidelining the broader public and reinforcing existing power imbalances [17]. Although several initiatives have emerged globally—ranging from public workshops and online forums to ethics councils aimed at increasing public involvement in AI policymaking—these efforts often fall short of truly inclusive engagement. The technical complexity of AI, combined with challenges such as limited AI literacy, economic and linguistic barriers, and the risk of mere "participation theater," means that many public consultations are superficial and fail to translate into meaningful policy changes [10, 14]. This gap is further widened by the digital divide, which restricts access for marginalized communities, making it difficult for their voices to be heard and for their concerns to be adequately addressed.

In this paper, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of various citizen engagement initiatives in AI governance, drawing insights from diverse case studies to identify both successful strategies and persistent challenges. Our contribution lies in synthesizing lessons from these initiatives and proposing robust, scalable frameworks that can foster sustained, inclusive public participation in AI policymaking. We highlight innovative practices—such as citizen assemblies, deliberative forums, and participatory technology assessments—that can bridge the gap between technical experts and the general public. Furthermore, our work discusses the importance of continuous engagement, transparent decision-making, and the integration of educational programs to empower citizens and ensure that AI systems are governed in a manner that reflects the collective needs and values of society. By advocating for these changes, we aim to contribute to the development of ethical and accountable AI governance structures that mitigate bias, protect rights, and promote equitable outcomes for all.

2 Background and Motivation

Public engagement in AI governance is critical given AI's profound ethical, social, and economic impacts—it not only shapes human behavior and reinforces biases but also affects fundamental rights [15]. Despite this, decisions about AI governance are frequently made behind closed doors with minimal public input, contributing to controversies like those surrounding facial recognition and the spread of AI-driven misinformation. In response, various governments and institutions are now exploring methods to involve citizens in AI regulation discussions, as well-structured public participation can enhance accountability, align policies with societal values, and build trust in AI systems [14]. However, achieving meaningful engagement remains challenging due to the technical complexity of AI, which can deter non-experts, and the limited access marginalized communities have to participation platforms [11]. Consequently, to ensure that AI governance is both inclusive and effective, there is an urgent need for frameworks that empower diverse voices and translate public concerns into concrete policy changes [8]. Ongoing, transparent dialogue between policymakers, industry leaders, and the public—supported by improved digital literacy and robust

STAIG'25, April 27, 2025, Yokohama, Japan
2025. ACM ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x/YY/MM
https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn

ethical regulations—is essential for creating a truly democratic AI governance system that reflects the needs and values of society [4].

3 Insights from Public Engagement Initiatives

In our analysis of real-world public engagement initiatives, we gained valuable insights into citizen participation in AI governance, highlighting both successes and challenges. These case studies help us assess the effectiveness of current models and identify areas for improvement.

EU White Paper Consultation. The EU's 2020 White Paper Consultation on AI aimed to gather input on AI's ethical, legal, and technical challenges, receiving over 1,200 responses from corporations, civil society organizations, and individuals [1]. However, it faced criticism for not adequately including marginalized communities, with concerns that the process reflected the interests of mainly middle-class, educated citizens. The key takeaway is the need for engagement processes that prioritize marginalized voices. Governments can improve outreach by using simpler language, translating materials, and ensuring that feedback from these communities informs policy decisions for more inclusive AI governance[12].

Canada's Open Dialogue Workshops. In 2021, Canada launched Open Dialogue Workshops to promote citizen engagement in AI policy [2]. These workshops aimed to involve a wide range of participants, from high school students to professionals, in discussions on AI's ethical and societal implications and potential regulatory approaches. A key feature was the inclusion of young people, particularly high school students, to shape a future-oriented AI policy. However, while the workshops attracted diverse voices, they struggled with long-term engagement due to a lack of follow-up mechanisms to ensure that input translated into policy changes. Canada's experience highlights the need for sustained engagement. Without continuous feedback loops, consultations risk becoming performative exercises, and governments must ensure transparency and accountability in the policy-making process.

France's 2025 AI Action Summit Global Consultation. The 2025 AI Action Summit Global Consultation, launched by France in 2024, aimed to engage a global audience in AI governance, attracting 10,000 citizens and over 200 AI experts. The consultation focused on AI's societal impact, including job displacement, data privacy, and ethical concerns. A major challenge was managing the diverse perspectives of participants from various cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. While the summit raised awareness and generated insights, translating these into actionable policy has been difficult, with much of the discourse still in early stages. This case highlights the importance of effective moderation and synthesis in large-scale consultations. Governments must develop methods to distill key concerns and recommendations from diverse perspectives, ensuring outcomes are actionable and inclusive.

Belgian Citizens' Assembly on AI. Belgium's 2023 Citizens' Assembly on AI brought together 60 randomly selected citizens to deliberate on AI policies [13]. This assembly exemplified deliberative democracy, facilitating discussions on AI's ethical, social, and legal implications, guided by expert briefings. While it generated valuable policy suggestions, scalability was a challenge due to resource constraints, and there were concerns about inclusivity as minority groups were underrepresented. The key takeaway is the importance of scalability. Deliberative models like citizens' assemblies provide valuable insights but are limited by resources. Combining these processes with digital tools could expand participation while maintaining depth in discussions.

CIFAR AI & Society Workshops. The CIFAR AI & Society Workshops (2018-2019) aimed to foster interdisciplinary discussions on AI's societal implications. Organized by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, the workshops brought together experts from academia, industry, and policymaking to discuss AI's ethical, legal, and social aspects. While the workshops produced valuable outputs like research reports and policy briefs, they lacked direct public representation, limiting their impact on fostering trust and ensuring AI governance frameworks reflected diverse concerns. The key takeaway is that expert-driven discussions are essential but should be complemented by participatory mechanisms, such as citizen panels, to ensure governance frameworks incorporate both technical expertise and public perspectives.

vTaiwan. Launched in 2015, it is a digital democracy platform that gathers public input on technology-related policies, including AI, through an open online consultation process [5]. It enables real-time or asynchronous debates among citizens, experts, and policymakers, using AI tools to synthesize viewpoints and identify consensus. vTaiwan has influenced digital policy reforms in Taiwan, such as Uber regulations and fintech policies. However, its success depends on the government's willingness to act on recommendations, and it faces challenges in ensuring equal representation due to digital literacy and internet access barriers. The platform highlights the potential of digital participatory governance but needs stronger institutional commitment and outreach to offline communities to enhance inclusivity.

3.1 Insights from Case Studies

Each initiative examined presents distinct approaches to fostering public engagement in AI governance, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. The EU White Paper Consultation demonstrated the potential of large-scale feedback mechanisms but struggled to effectively engage marginalized communities, raising concerns about equity in shaping AI policy[9]. Canada's Open Dialogue Workshops prioritized inclusivity through open discussions but faced difficulties in maintaining long-term public engagement, requiring sustained institutional commitment and continuous outreach. France's 2025 AI Action Summit aimed for global participation but faced challenges in synthesizing diverse perspectives into actionable policies. Belgium's Citizens' Assembly used structured discussions to involve the public but raised scalability concerns due to resource and institutional support requirements[7]. CIFAR AI & Society Workshops were intellectually rigorous but expert-driven, sidelining the general public's perspectives and highlighting a tension between technical expertise and inclusive governance. In contrast, the vTaiwan initiative successfully used online platforms for large-scale deliberations on AI policies, yet its impact depends

Table 1: AI Policy Consultations and Their Impact

Initiative	Year	Participants	Participation Method	Key Barrier Identified	Policy Impact
EU White Paper Consultation	2020	1,200+ responses	Online public consultation	Limited representation from marginalized communities	Informed EU AI regulatory framework but lacked targeted policies for underrepresented groups.
Canada's Open Dialogue Workshops	2021	437 participants	In-person and virtual workshops	Difficulty sustaining long-term engagement	Contributed to Canadian AI policy discussions but had minimal direct legislative impact.
France's 2025 AI Action Summit Global Consultation	2024	10,000 citizens, 200+ AI experts	Large-scale digital and in-person consultations	Managing diverse perspectives across different regions	Increased global awareness and highlighted policy gaps, but implementation remains slow.
Belgian Citizens' Assembly on AI	2023	60 randomly selected citizens	Deliberative citizen assembly	Scalability of deliberative democracy models	Produced detailed policy recommendations; some were integrated into national discussions.
CIFAR AI & Society Workshops	2018-2019	Experts-focused	Academic and expert panel discussions	Lack of public representation	Fostered interdisciplinary discourse but had limited influence on public policy.
vTaiwan	Since 2015	Thousands of citizens & experts	Online deliberation platform	Dependent on government willingness to adopt recommendations	Successfully influenced several digital policy reforms in Taiwan.

on the government's willingness to act on public recommendations, stressing the need for stronger institutional accountability in participatory AI governance.

4 Challenges and Lessons for Future Engagement

Public participation in AI governance holds promise, but challenges must be addressed for inclusivity and effectiveness. A key issue is involving marginalized communities, who often lack digital access, technical literacy, or representation in AI discussions. Many initiatives attract well-educated, tech-savvy participants, excluding those most affected by AI decisions. Targeted outreach, multilingual resources, accessible platforms, and community-driven strategies are needed to engage underrepresented groups. Additionally, one-time consultations often fail to influence long-term decision-making, leading to disengagement. Continuous participation mechanisms like recurring forums, advisory councils, and AI policy watchdogs can institutionalize public input. Transparency and accountability are vital for meaningful engagement. Without clear evidence that public input shapes policies, consultations risk being seen as superficial. Governments must document contributions, provide policy updates, and create feedback loops to show how citizen perspectives influence decisions. Deliberative models like citizens' assemblies are effective but face scalability challenges. Investing in digital platforms, hybrid models, and structured decision-making can expand participation while maintaining meaningful discussion. Ultimately, success depends on political will and institutional commitment to act on public recommendations, ensuring AI governance serves all stakeholders.

5 Concluding Remarks

As AI evolves, so must its governance, shifting the focus from whether public participation is necessary to how it can be meaningful and inclusive. AI systems impact critical areas like healthcare, justice, and employment, yet governance remains dominated by technocrats, corporations, and policymakers, sidelining those most affected. Genuine public engagement is crucial for ethical AI development [16] and avoiding reinforced inequalities. However, technical complexity, AI literacy gaps, and tokenistic consultations limit involvement. To address these challenges, AI governance must prioritize transparency, accessibility, and sustained participation through mechanisms like citizen assemblies and open-source initiatives. Educational programs and explainability efforts can empower citizens. Ultimately, inclusive public participation is essential to ensure AI benefits society fairly and equitably.

Acknowledgments

We express our sincere gratitude to HerWILL Inc. and Computational Intelligence and Operations Laboratory (CIOL) for their invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and continuous assistance throughout this work.

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