

Participatory Democracy: Citizens Shaping Their Community

COMPREHENSION • VOCABULARY • DISCUSSION

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Reading Passage

Read the passage carefully. Each paragraph is labelled with a letter for easy reference.

A

When most people hear the word democracy, they imagine stepping into a polling station every few years, ticking a box, and then returning to daily life. Traditional elections are important, but they are only one chapter in a much longer story. Around the world, a growing number of towns and cities are experimenting with participatory democracy—a model in which ordinary residents help design policies, set priorities, and even decide how public money is spent. The movement began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the late 1980s, yet its influence now stretches from small French villages to bustling Asian megacities. Its central promise is simple: if citizens are invited to share responsibility, they will develop a stronger sense of ownership and trust in their local government.

From Complaints to Co-Creation Consider the fictional city of Riverford. For years, residents voiced frustration about potholes, overcrowded parks, and rising bus fares. Community meetings were poorly attended, and the town council often made decisions behind closed doors. In 2020, however, the mayor introduced a participatory budgeting program worth ten percent of the annual infrastructure fund. Over four months, neighborhood groups proposed specific projects, such as solar-powered bus shelters and safer cycling lanes. Citizens then voted online and in libraries for their favorite ideas. The winning projects were built within a year, and subsequent surveys showed that satisfaction with local services rose by twenty percent. This example illustrates two key benefits. First, participatory processes turn vague complaints into concrete proposals. Rather than simply grumbling about public transport, residents research costs, identify suppliers, and weigh trade-offs. Second, the exercise teaches practical skills. Participants learn how to read a budget, negotiate deadlines, and communicate with officials—abilities that last well beyond a single project.

Diversity at the Decision-Making Table One frequent criticism of public consultations is that they tend to attract “the usual suspects”: retirees with spare time, activists, and interest groups. Participatory democracy aims to widen the circle. In Riverford, the city partnered with local schools, faith centers, and a migrant association to reach voices that were often missing. Information sessions were held in multiple languages, child-care was provided during evening meetings, and voting booths were installed in sports halls as well as online. As a result, turnout among residents under thirty doubled, and participation by recent immigrants rose sharply. Such inclusion is not merely symbolic. Studies in Spain and Canada show that when decision-making bodies look like the communities they serve, outcomes are more equitable. For instance, neighborhoods with fewer cars tend to favor investments in public transport, while areas with older populations might prioritize better lighting and benches. A diverse panel can balance these competing needs, reducing the sense that one group always wins at another’s expense.

Challenges on the Road to Collaboration Despite inspiring success stories, participatory democracy is no magic wand. Organizing dozens of workshops and counting thousands of votes consumes staff time and money. If a city launches an ambitious process without adequate funding, the quality of debate may suffer, and public trust can quickly erode. Furthermore, elected officials sometimes feel threatened. They worry that sharing power will blur accountability: who should voters praise—or blame—if a co-created project fails? To address these concerns, many municipalities adopt a hybrid approach: citizens propose and prioritize, but professional engineers and planners ensure feasibility. Riverford’s cycling lanes, for instance, were adapted by traffic experts to meet safety standards. Transparency remains crucial. All decisions, including reasons for rejecting certain ideas, are published in plain language so

participants understand how their input shaped the final outcome. Technology: Tool or Trap? Digital platforms promise to make participation faster and cheaper. In Estonia, an online portal allows residents to suggest laws and collect electronic signatures. Yet the same technology can exclude people without reliable internet or digital skills. Therefore, technologists and civic leaders advocate a blended model—combining online surveys with face-to-face forums, radio call-ins, and even postal ballots. Ultimately, technology should amplify, not replace, human dialogue. Looking Ahead Participatory democracy will not abolish elections, nor should it. Representative bodies provide stability and a broad strategic vision. However, evidence from Riverford and dozens of real-world cases suggests that citizen involvement between elections leads to smarter spending, higher satisfaction, and stronger social bonds. In an age of polarization and misinformation, offering residents a genuine seat at the table might be one of the most effective ways to rebuild faith in public institutions.

Vocabulary Glossary

Key words and phrases from the passage. Study them before attempting the exercise below.

WORD / PHRASE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE SENTENCE
participatory	involving people in making decisions or doing activities together	<i>The new school program is more participatory, allowing students to help decide on projects.</i>
priorities	things that are more important than others and need attention first	<i>Her priorities changed after she had children; family came first.</i>
co-creation	making or creating something together with other people	<i>The group worked on the art project as a co-creation, sharing ideas and materials.</i>
feasibility	the possibility that something can be done or achieved	<i>Before building the bridge, engineers studied its feasibility.</i>
equitable	fair and giving everyone equal treatment	<i>They tried to make the competition equitable by giving everyone the same resources.</i>
accountability	being responsible for what you do and able to explain your actions	<i>The manager had accountability for the team's performance.</i>
blended	mixed together to form a combination	<i>The teacher used a blended approach, combining online and face-to-face classes.</i>
polarization	the division of a group into opposing sides	<i>The issue led to polarization among the community members.</i>

Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blank

Use one word or phrase from the glossary above to complete each sentence. Each item is used only once. Answers are on the final page.

1. The meeting was _____, allowing everyone to share their ideas and opinions.
2. After considering the _____ of the project, the council decided to proceed with the plans.
3. The charity aims to make healthcare more _____ for all people.
4. The student project was a _____ effort, involving different classes working together.
5. The government must take _____ for its policies and their outcomes.
6. The _____ model combined traditional lectures with online learning sessions.

Comprehension Questions

These questions are different from the online practice test. Choose the best answer (A, B, C, or D). Answers and explanations are on the final page.

Question 1

What was the initial reaction of Riverford's residents to the participatory budgeting program?

- A. They were uninterested and did not participate.
- B. They proposed many projects and actively participated.
- C. They protested against the new program.
- D. They were confused about how it worked.

Question 2

What was a key method used in Riverford to include diverse voices in decision-making?

- A. Holding meetings only in the town hall.
- B. Providing childcare during meetings.
- C. Excluding younger residents.
- D. Limiting participation to local officials.

Question 3

Why might elected officials feel uneasy about participatory democracy?

- A. It requires them to spend more time in meetings.
- B. It could blur who is responsible for outcomes.
- C. It increases their workload significantly.
- D. It makes them less popular with voters.

Question 4

How does participatory democracy affect community satisfaction according to the passage?

- A. It has no effect on community satisfaction.
- B. It decreases satisfaction due to disagreements.
- C. It increases satisfaction by involving citizens in decisions.
- D. It makes satisfaction levels unpredictable.

Question 5

What is the author's view on the role of technology in participatory democracy?

- A. Technology should completely replace human interaction.
- B. Technology is unnecessary in participatory processes.
- C. Technology should support but not replace personal dialogue.
- D. Technology creates more problems than it solves.

Discussion & Writing Prompts

Each prompt references a specific detail from the passage above. Use for classroom discussion or a short written response (150–200 words).

1. Paragraph B describes how Riverford's participatory budgeting led to increased satisfaction with local services. Do you think a similar approach could improve public services in your area, and why?

2. The passage mentions that technology should amplify, not replace, human dialogue in participatory democracy. How do you think technology can be used effectively to engage more citizens without excluding anyone?

3. According to Paragraph D, a diverse decision-making panel leads to more equitable outcomes. What challenges might arise in ensuring diverse representation, and how could they be addressed?

Answer Key

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Q1 B

Q2 B

Q3 B

Q4 C

Q5 C

VOCABULARY EXERCISE

FIB1 participatory

FIB2 feasibility

FIB3 equitable

FIB4 co-creation

FIB5 accountability

FIB6 blended

Comprehension Question Explanations

Why the correct answer is right — and why each wrong option is incorrect.

1. What was the initial reaction of Riverford's residents to the participatory budgeting program?

✓ B — They proposed many projects and actively participated.

The passage states that neighborhood groups proposed specific projects during the participatory budgeting program.

✗ A — They were uninterested and did not participate.

The passage describes active participation, not a lack of interest.

✗ C — They protested against the new program.

There is no mention of protests against the program.

✗ D — They were confused about how it worked.

The passage does not indicate confusion about the program.

2. What was a key method used in Riverford to include diverse voices in decision-making?

✓ B — Providing childcare during meetings.

The passage mentions providing childcare during meetings to include diverse voices.

✗ A — Holding meetings only in the town hall.

The passage describes multiple venues, not just the town hall.

✗ C — Excluding younger residents.

The passage notes efforts to increase participation among younger residents.

✗ D — Limiting participation to local officials.

The passage describes efforts to include, not limit, participation.

3. Why might elected officials feel uneasy about participatory democracy?

✓ B — It could blur who is responsible for outcomes.

The passage mentions officials' concern about blurring accountability.

✗ A — It requires them to spend more time in meetings.

The concern described is about accountability, not time in meetings.

✗ C — It increases their workload significantly.

The passage does not mention an increased workload as a concern.

✗ D — It makes them less popular with voters.

The concern is about accountability, not popularity.

4. How does participatory democracy affect community satisfaction according to the passage?

✓ C — It increases satisfaction by involving citizens in decisions.

The passage notes that satisfaction with services increased after participatory initiatives.

✗ A — It has no effect on community satisfaction.

The passage describes an increase in satisfaction, not no effect.

✗ B — It decreases satisfaction due to disagreements.

The passage indicates an increase, not a decrease, in satisfaction.

✗ D — It makes satisfaction levels unpredictable.

The passage suggests a positive, not unpredictable, effect on satisfaction.

5. What is the author's view on the role of technology in participatory democracy?

✓ C — Technology should support but not replace personal dialogue.

The passage suggests technology should amplify human dialogue, not replace it.

✗ A — Technology should completely replace human interaction.

The passage advocates for a combination of technology and human interaction.

✗ B — Technology is unnecessary in participatory processes.

The passage supports using technology, but with human interaction.

✗ D — Technology creates more problems than it solves.

The passage acknowledges challenges but supports a blended approach.

MORE B2 LEVEL READING PRACTICE

Letters Refugee Camp Family Story Hope — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/letters-refugee-camp-family-story-hope>

Global Health Preparedness Lessons Recent Pandemics — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/global-health-preparedness-lessons-recent-pandemics>

Climate Migration Communities Move — <https://www.esl-tests.com/reading/b2/climate-migration-communities-move>