

FROM APATHY TO ACTION: APPLYING BEHAVIORAL PUBLIC POLICY TO INCREASE CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN RECESS FORUMS

Ficky Septalinda¹, Emi Hidayati², M. Iqbal Fardian³

Ibrahimi Islamic University^{1,2}, Banyuwangi

septaficky@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Conventional theories of participatory democracy often rely on the rational choice model, assuming that citizens participate when the expected benefits outweigh the costs. However, evidence from Indonesia's recess forums-legislative outreach mechanisms meant to solicit citizen input-shows persistently low levels of engagement, indicating behavioral frictions beyond simple cost-benefit reasoning. This paper adopts a Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) framework to analyze cognitive, emotional, and social barriers to citizen participation. Drawing from behavioral economics and psychology, we identify key biases such as present bias, social norm ignorance, and distrust aversion that inhibit public involvement. We propose a set of low-cost, scalable behavioral interventions-nudges, framing techniques, personalized reminders, and feedback loops-to redesign recess mechanisms for enhanced civic engagement. Empirical illustrations and pilot designs are provided based on field observations in East Java. This study contributes to a post-rational understanding of public participation and offers practical implications for democratizing local governance through behaviorally informed institutional reforms.

Keywords: Behavioral Public Policy, Participatory Democracy, Nudge, Citizen Engagement, Recess Forum

INTRODUCTION

Public participation is a fundamental element in deliberative democracy and inclusive governance. In Indonesia, one of the formal mechanisms to capture citizen participation is the recess forum, which is an activity of members of the Regional

People's Representative Council (DPRD) to absorb the aspirations of the community directly in their constituencies. This forum is designed to strengthen the representative relationship between constituents and representatives, and become an instrument for mainstreaming community voices in the planning and budgeting process (Putri, 2020). In practice,

however, recess forums are often malfunctioning because they are trapped in the logic of political clientelism, where citizens' aspirations are exchanged for promises of individualized favors and electoral loyalty (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019).

This tendency not only undermines the substance of participatory democracy, but also shows the failure of institutional design in ensuring equitable and deliberative public engagement. In many cases, participation in recess forums is more exclusive and selective, involving only citizens who have political or personal ties with legislators (Hadiz and Robison, 2013). Other citizens who do not have such socio-political relations tend to be apathetic or do not feel they have the space to express their collective needs. Meanwhile, recess forum procedures that are top-down and lack public accountability also strengthen the dominance of local elites.

The limitations of the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) in explaining public participation arise from its foundational assumption that individuals will engage in activities when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs (Lang et al., 2018; Schubert, 2017). This model presents a narrow view of human behavior, overlooking the nuanced cognitive, emotional, and social factors that influence decision-making in contexts such as civic engagement and political participation. Notably, RCT often fails to account for the complexities within real-world interactions, where emotional and experiential factors play a significant role (Lang et al., 2018; Weimer, 2019). Scholars argue that this results in an incomplete understanding of citizens' behaviors in public forums, as participation can be swayed by social norms, perceived shared values, and emotional connections, which are not easily quantifiable (Gopalan and Pirog, 2017; Grelle and Hofmann, 2023).

In light of these shortcomings, the Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) framework has emerged as a potent alternative, focusing on the amalgamation of behavioral psychology and behavioral economics to design and analyze policies in practice. The BPP paradigm rests on the premise that understanding human behavior requires

recognizing the cognitive and emotional biases that govern decision-making processes beyond rational evaluations (Battaglio et al., 2018). For instance, nudging – a key component of BPP – involves strategically structuring choices to help guide individuals toward desired behaviors while preserving freedom of choice, acknowledging individuals' psychological limitations and biases (Scott and Boyd, 2020; Sunstein, 2014). This approach underscores the importance of transparency in policy-making and the inclusion of public input, which contribute to policy acceptance and enhanced engagement (Chen et al., 2021).

The BPP approach departs from the assumption that individuals are *Homo Heuristicus*, namely creatures who make decisions with limited rational capacity (bounded rationality), influenced by cognitive biases (such as present bias, status quo bias, and ambiguity aversion), as well as by social norms and the level of trust in institutions (Kahneman, 2011; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). In the context of recess forums, many citizens do not participate not because they do not care, but because they experience information fatigue, do not see the direct impact of their involvement, or because they feel that their voice will not matter. Therefore, behavioral diagnosis is needed to identify these barriers and design contextual and ethical nudging strategies.

In addition, this study applies the framework of Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980) to understand how citizens' participation decisions are strongly influenced by their interactions with implementing actors on the ground – in this case, the staff and team of legislators who organized the forum. In addition, the Theory of Participatory Governance (Fung, 2006) will be used to evaluate the extent to which the recess forum fulfills the principles of inclusiveness, deliberation, and responsiveness. By integrating the Behavioral Public Policy approach and participatory institutional theories, this article aims to develop intervention strategies that can strengthen the democratic function of recess forums. A case study in East Java is used to map ongoing practices and test the effectiveness of behavioral-based intervention designs in improving the quality of citizen participation. Ultimately, this article contributes to the discourse on post-rational public administration, and offers practical solutions for institutional reform based on social reality and citizen behavior.

Previous studies on participation in recess forums in Indonesia tend to focus

on legalistic, normative, or clientelistic aspects of structural relations (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019; Hadiz and Robison, 2013). Research conducted by Putri (2020) has highlighted the low quality of deliberation in recess forums, but has not systematically explored the cognitive and psychological reasons behind ordinary citizens' non-participation. One significant aspect of this discourse is the role of participatory budgeting, particularly noted in studies such as that by Septalinda et al., which emphasize the lack of explicit regulations governing participation in forums like the Banyuwangi regency DPRD (Septalinda et al., 2023). This study indicates that even when participation is attempted, it often remains constrained to mobilization and instruction without genuine engagement from constituents, highlighting a gap between normative expectations and practical realities (Septalinda et al., 2023). Similarly, Pradana's research on participatory budgeting practices in Malang City corroborates this sentiment; it underscores the predominance of governmental decision-making over participatory efforts, suggesting that while forums exist, they often lack substantial community influence (Pradana, 2022).

Meanwhile, the international literature on Behavioral Public Policy has grown rapidly, especially in the areas of public service and tax compliance (OECD, 2021; Oliver, 2017), but its application in the context of local political participation in developing countries is still very limited. This article fills this gap by offering an integrative approach that combines BPPs with participatory institutional theory to diagnose and intervene in the causes of low participation in recess forums. In doing so, it makes a conceptual and practical contribution to the behavioral-based political participation literature, and opens up space for more inclusive and locally adaptive democratic design. This article specifically answers the questions: (1) What are the behavioral barriers that discourage citizens from participating in recess forums? (2) How do clientelism and discretionary practices of field implementers shape participation bias?

(3) What intervention strategies can be developed through a Behavioral Public Policy approach to increase the inclusiveness and responsiveness of recess forums?

Adopting an integrative approach that combines Behaviorist Political Participation (BPP) theory and participatory institutional theory can greatly enhance our understanding of the factors leading to low levels of citizen engagement in the political process. This theoretical amalgamation emphasizes not only the psychological and cognitive reasons behind individual participation but also the

structural dynamics that facilitate or hinder such involvement. By dissecting the interplay between individual behaviors and institutional designs, we can uncover insights that inform more inclusive and context-sensitive democratic frameworks.

Firstly, research indicates that socio-economic status (SES) significantly influences political participation outcomes, particularly in the context of digital engagement. Morris and Morris demonstrated that individuals from lower SES backgrounds experienced enhanced political knowledge and engagement when granted increased Internet access, positioning the Internet as a potential equalizer in political participation (Morris and Morris, 2013). This finding aligns with the notion that participatory institutional frameworks can leverage technological tools to bridge the engagement gap among diverse population segments. Conversely, participatory governance models that overlook these aspects may exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly in areas where internet penetration remains low.

Moreover, a study of participatory institutions indicates that their effectiveness is often misjudged when solely assessed through formal decision-making authority. Mayka's study on Colombia's Planning Councils reveals that even institutions perceived as weak can foster citizen engagement in meaningful ways, suggesting that intrinsic community dynamics often dictate participation levels ((Mayka, 2019). This highlights that understanding the contextual and psychological mechanisms—such as trust and perceived responsiveness—can lead to more effective participatory designs than rigid institutional structures alone. In addition, incorporating participatory action research principles can deepen our insight into citizen engagement obstacles. This methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of local contexts and barriers to involvement, often revealing that civic disconnect is not merely a result of structural deficiencies but also of individual perception and agency. Although the proposed reference Devereux et al. (2013) is not directly relevant to civic engagement, the argument that qualitative and participatory evaluation methods could offer deeper insights remains valid within theoretical discourse on citizen participation.

For instance, Pickering found that contemporary social movements often arise amidst declining civic participation, underscoring the critical need for theoretical re-evaluation to account for informal avenues through which citizens seek to engage politically (Pickering, 2022). By acknowledging the intersection of individual cognitive frameworks with participatory mechanisms, enhanced public policies can be crafted that address both the symptoms of non-participation and the underlying psychological factors influencing citizen behavior. Addressing these elements can

facilitate a robust framework for public policy that is inclusive and contextually relevant, ultimately leading to higher engagement levels across all demographics.

The structure of this article is organized to build the argument systematically. The second section presents a literature review and theoretical framework that includes criticism of Rational Choice Theory, the concept of Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) (Lipsky, 1980), and integration with the theories of Street-Level Bureaucracy and Participatory Governance. The third section explains the research methodology, including the qualitative approach, data collection techniques, and thematic analysis procedures. The fourth section presents the field findings and diagnosis of citizen behavior in the recess forum, including the identification of cognitive biases, clientelism practices, and forum implementer discretion. The fifth section presents theoretical discussions and implications of BPP-based interventions, as well as critical reflections on participatory institutional transformation. The article concludes with a sixth section that summarizes conclusions, offers policy recommendations, and highlights theoretical contributions to the discourse of post-rational public administration at the local level.

This article contributes a novel perspective by applying Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) to analyze distorted participation in Indonesia's legislative outreach forums (forum recess). By integrating BPP with Street-Level Bureaucracy and Participatory Governance, the study offers an analytical framework that explains how cognitive biases, institutional discretion, and participatory design interact to shape citizen behavior. This combination enables the development of behaviorally-informed interventions to improve inclusivity and responsiveness. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to adopt such an integrative behavioral-institutional approach in the context of Indonesian subnational governance.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory and reflective orientation to deeply understand the behavioral barriers and institutional distortions that influence community participation in DPRD recess forums. This approach was chosen because it is able to thoroughly explore the subjective meanings, social context, and construction of interactions between citizens,

legislators, and field implementers (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This research does not aim to test statistical hypotheses, but rather to explore the experiences, perceptions, and cognitive strategies of citizens in dealing with participatory forums that are full of institutional bias. Instead, it aims to explore subjective experiences and cognitive responses in local participatory settings.

The research location was purposively selected in Banyuwangi Regency, East Java, because this area shows socio-political diversity, variations in citizen engagement practices, and documentation of recess forums in the local budgeting process. The purposive sampling aims to capture a rich context (Patton, 2015) and reflect variations in the level of citizen participation. Field research was conducted from January to March 2024, with a total of 30 informants. The informants consisted of 15 residents with diverse characteristics (active, passive, and uninvited residents), 7 DPRD members and their staff, and 8 forum organizers from village officials and local figures.

Data collection was triangulated through four main techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with residents, legislators, and forum organizers to explore experiences, perceptions, and logics of participation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Second, participatory observation was conducted by directly attending five recess forums in five different villages to observe the dynamics of interaction, the flow of the forum, and the spontaneous attitudes of residents. This technique allows researchers to capture non-verbal aspects and micro-contexts that influence participation (Angrosino, 2007). Third, document study is used to examine forum archives such as invitation lists, aspiration recaps, visual documentation, and follow-up reports. Fourth, innovative approaches in the form of behavioral mapping tools were used, such as citizen empathy maps, attendance/non-attendance decision simulations, and WA message-based reminder prototypes. This technique aims to identify behavioral biases such as present bias, ambiguity aversion, and distrust heuristics that are not easily recognized through conventional methods (OECD, 2021; Thaler, 2008).

The data obtained were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The stages of analysis included data transcription, open coding, categorization of key themes such as "reasons for absence", "experiences of clientelism", "responses to invitations", and "responses to

interventions", and mapping of relationships between behavioral biases, institutional practices, and forum quality. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of techniques (Denzin, 2017), member checking with key informants, and peer debriefing between researchers to avoid interpretive bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Ethically, this research prioritizes the principle of informed consent, maintaining the confidentiality of respondents' identities, and respecting local socio-cultural norms throughout the data collection process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bias and Ambiguity in Residents' Perceptions of the Recess Forum

Most of the residents interviewed stated that they did not clearly understand the purpose and benefits of the recess forum. For many respondents, the recess forum is only perceived as a routine activity of legislators "going to the field," not as a deliberative space to convey policy aspirations. The information conveyed is usually general and formalistic, resulting in ambiguity aversion-the tendency to avoid something uncertain.

"If we come, we just follow along. It's not necessarily that our proposal will be included," (Interview, April 2025).

This finding shows the presence of present bias and status quo bias, where residents tend to be passive because the benefits of the forum are not perceived immediately. In this context, information framing and communication channels that are not designed in a behaviorally-sensitive manner exacerbate low participation.

Selectivity and Clientelism Practices in Forum Implementation

The practice of selecting recess forum participants is not open and random, but relies heavily on networks of political affiliation and personal relationships between legislators and local elites. Residents who do not show electoral loyalty or who are not symbolically seen to be "in favor" of certain legislators tend not to be involved.

This is reflected in the statement of one resident who said:

"I have never been invited to a recess forum. I have a choice, but I have

never visibly supported legislative members. If invited, I would like to attend in person. I would also like to express my opinion, my input to them (DPRD members)." (Interview, April 2025).

This statement shows that the exclusivity of the forum not only creates a political divide, but also creates an internalized experience of exclusion-that is, when citizens feel they have no place just because they are not symbolically affiliated.

This situation reinforces the finding that the recess forum has been trapped in clientelistic relations, where participation is exchanged for political loyalty, rather than based on civic rights. This practice systemically weakens the inclusiveness of the forum, as it ignores those who genuinely want to contribute but do not have "political access".

Field Implementers' Discretion and Implementation Distortions

DPRD staff and village officials have a high degree of discretion in determining the format, timing, and who attends the forum. These decisions are often not based on principles of inclusivity or geographic equity, but rather on efficiency and political calculation.

This analysis is in line with Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980), where field implementation actors become "de facto policy makers" through routine actions, informal interpretations and resource allocation.

As a result, the quality of the forum depends heavily on who is implementing it, rather than solely on the formal regulations or procedures of the DPRD.

Citizen Responses to Interventions and Participation Experiences (revision and expansion)

Although recess forum participation is often perceived as exclusive and selective, not all residents view it negatively. Some informants consider the recess forum to be a more concrete and direct tool than other participatory mechanisms, such as development planning meetings (musrenbang).

One resident said:

"It is more concrete to be directly conveyed through the recess forum compared to the musrenbang forum... If the musrenbang is already... 1000% will not be realized... it's useless to attend. Through recess, it's simpler to meet members of the DPRD... especially if we become their team... our proposals will definitely be realized." (Interview, June 2025).

This statement shows that there is recognition of the procedural effectiveness of the recess forum, especially because of its political and practical proximity to decision-makers. However, this effectiveness is conditional - especially for those who are in the orbit of clientelism, such as being part of the success team (timses) of DPRD members.

This means that citizens see the recess forum as not just an aspirational forum, but an access strategy to resources, which is more effective when accompanied by socio-political relations with legislators. This reinforces the finding that clientelistic logic is inherent in the practice of recess forums, and shows how citizens navigate the space for participation in the context of unequal power relations.

Behavioral Findings Based on Behavioral Public Policy Approach

The Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) approach allows for a deeper analysis of why citizens do not participate, how they respond to forum invitations, and the cognitive and social strategies used to decide whether or not to attend. The following are the main behavioral findings obtained through behavioral diagnosis:

Present Bias: Disinterest because forum outcomes are perceived to be indirect

Many citizens stated that the benefits of attending the recess forum were not immediate, so they tended to delay or ignore participation. Residents are more interested in attending forums or meetings that provide concrete results (such as direct assistance) than forums with uncertain results.

"Yes, if you're just conveying your aspirations, what's the point? Most of the time it won't be followed up," said one resident." (Interview, April 2025).

This finding shows the presence of present bias, which is the tendency of citizens to

overvalue short-term benefits over long-term benefits.

Ambiguity Aversion: A dislike of forums where the process and impact are unclear.

Residents are reluctant to attend forums where procedures are unclear, there is no transparency of results, and no feedback. Many citizens stated that they did not know where their "aspirations would go", or whether the recess forum actually had an impact on budget policies.

"I came once, but after that I don't know how it went. It's like it evaporated," said one informant." (Interview, April 2025).

This suggests ambiguity aversion, where uncertainty about outcomes or processes leads to reluctance to engage.

Distrust Bias: Distrust of the forum's effectiveness and legislative intentions

Many citizens expressed skepticism towards the recess forum, as they perceived that the forum's outcomes were merely a formality or had already been "arranged". When trust in the good intentions of DPRD members is low, participation decreases.

"If you are not close to the council, it is useless... We talk but no one listens." (Interview, April 2025).

Distrust of institutions, especially DPRD, reinforces non-participation, even among citizens who are interested in getting involved.

Unformed Social Norms

There are no strong social norms in the community to encourage, remind, or normalize participation in recess forums. Residents who attend are usually invited directly, not because they feel that "participating in the recess forum is important and commonplace".

This shows that participation has not become a social norm, and there is no peer pressure or social reinforcement that encourages citizens to be actively involved.

Status Quo Bias: Uncomfortable with changes in routine

Some residents stated that they were not used to participating in public forums, and

preferred to remain in their routines. Even when forums have been held in the village, there is still reluctance because they are not used to attending.

"If I'm not invited directly, I don't come, because I don't know the business." (Interview, April 2025).

This indicates a status quo bias, which is the tendency to maintain existing conditions, despite opportunities for change.

Positive Response to Mild Interventions

In contrast, when behavioral interventions such as:

- Framing the invitation with an emotional message ("*your vote will determine the future of our village*"),
- Personal reminders via WA,
- Certificate of residents' aspirations,

Some residents who were previously passive wanted to be involved. They felt that the forum became more personalized, meaningful, and had clear objectives and benefits.

"According to one resident, it was the first time they felt reminded as a citizen, usually only leaflets are thrown away," (Interview, April 2025).

This proves that although behavioral biases exist, they can be overcome by policy design that is more sensitive to the way citizens think.

DISCUSSION

Clientelism as Adaptive Rationality: Reading Reality Through Behavioral Public Policy

Recess forums at the local level are formally designed as instruments of participatory democracy to bridge the aspirations of citizens to the legislature. However, in practice, this forum has become an arena for the reproduction of exclusive and selective patron-client relations. Access to the forum, the delivery of aspirations, and

even the realization of programs, often depend on political closeness and electoral loyalty to legislative members. This condition shows that the recess forum has shifted from the principle of representation to a means of disguised political exchange (Septalinda et al., 2024).

The findings also reinforce the importance of analyzing the actors implementing the forum in the field—such as council staff, village officials, or informal figures—who have great discretion in determining who is invited, how the forum is run, and which aspirations are forwarded. In the framework of Street-Level Bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), these implementers are not mere forum technicians, but *de facto* policy actors who shape interactions and the direction of representation. Such non-standardized discretion allows for systemic bias in the implementation of the forum, where political affiliation is the main requirement for inclusion. This creates a hidden exclusion of citizens who do not have political access, even if they have legitimate aspirations. In this context, the discretion of the implementer reinforces clientelistic logic while weakening the inclusiveness of the forum.

In this context, Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) provides a new lens to understand the phenomenon of clientelism not merely as a form of political pathology, but as a rational adaptation to a dysfunctional institutional environment. Citizens facing situations of uncertainty, lack of transparency, and low public accountability, tend to use social heuristics such as personal loyalty or dependence on figures as a way to access resources. As asserted by Kahneman (2011) and Simon (1955), under conditions of bounded rationality and information asymmetry, individuals will act "reasonably" within the limits of what they understand. The findings of this study show that citizens actually consider the recess forum to be more concrete than the *musrenbang*, as long as they are close to legislators. In this logic, clientelism is not only maintained by elites, but also supported by citizens as a form of socio-political pragmatism. Thus, the BPP approach helps us understand that seemingly exclusive political participation actually reflects an adaptation to a system that does not guarantee procedural justice and institutional transparency.

Behavioral Biases and Psychological Barriers: A Micro-Diagnosis of Non-Participation

The Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) approach opens up space for a more in-depth

analysis of low citizen participation in recess forums, by highlighting behavioral barriers that have often gone unnoticed in studies of political participation (Oliver, 2017; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Through field observations and behavioral mapping techniques, a number of cognitive biases were identified that play a major role in shaping the decision to attend or not attend. One of the most dominant is present bias, which is the tendency of citizens to ignore the long-term benefits of participation because they do not feel the immediate impact of the forum (Kahneman, 2011; Thaler, 2008). In addition, many citizens experience ambiguity aversion, which is a reluctance towards forums where procedures are unclear and do not promise concrete results, thus triggering avoidance of participation. Mistrust of legislators' good intentions is also an important factor, known in behavioral studies as distrust bias, where disappointing past experiences create skepticism towards recess forums as valid aspiration spaces (Sunstein, 2014). On the other hand, status quo bias encourages some citizens to remain in their routines, avoiding participation because they feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable engaging in public forums (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). This condition is exacerbated by weak social norms in the community, which makes participation in recess forums not a collective habit that is supported by social encouragement and reinforcement from the surrounding environment. These five biases suggest that citizen participatory behavior cannot be explained solely through the framework of material incentives, but must be understood in the context of perceptions, emotions, and social norms that shape citizens' experiences of public institutions (Kahneman, 2011; Oliver, 2017). Thus, strategies to increase participation need to consider these complex psychological and social aspects, so that public policies can be designed more responsively and contextually to the needs and behavioral logic of citizens in the context of local democracy.

Behavioral Intervention as a Corrective to Clientelism

One of the ethical and strategic strengths of BPP is its ability to intervene without direct confrontation of power structures, but rather by re-engineering the way citizens and institutions interact. Some proposed interventions based on the findings include:

Forum Invitation Redesign: Change selective invitations to default invitations for all residents through the neighborhood information system.

Strengthening Collective Framing: Emphasizing that the forum is a collective property, not an exclusive channel: "This forum is open to all residents, without political conditions."

Aspiration Feedback Loop: Provides documentary evidence that even proposals from citizens with no political affiliation can be realized.

Positive Norm Messaging: Showcasing the fact that people from different backgrounds participated: "70% of the people who attended were not part of the success team."

All of the above strategies aim to disrupt the dominance of clientelistic logic subtly and gradually, without alienating residents who have become accustomed to the system.

BPP opens up the possibility of transforming the recess forum into a transitional space- from an arena controlled by the logic of exclusivity and patronage, to a representative forum that emphasizes inclusion, procedural justice, and institutional trust. Recess forums do not have to wait for major structural reforms to become more democratic. The BPP approach allows them to be gradually transformed into more inclusive and deliberative representational spaces. Through design engineering that is sensitive to the way citizens think and the working logic of implementers, recess forums can serve as micro-reform laboratories-where clientelistic practices can be corrected without creating structural resistance. The integration of BPP, clientelism theory, and street-level bureaucracy results in an intervention model that is not only technocratic, but also political and ethical. In this way, the recess forum can shift from a transactional arena to a democratic learning space, where citizens are valued as subjects of policy, not just electoral objects. By using the BPP as a tool to navigate this transition, change does not have to wait for major reforms, but starts with small design changes that target the psychological interaction points between citizens and institutions. This is in accordance with the principle of low-cost, high-impact policy tools that characterize BPPs (OECD, 2021).

Recess forums at the local level are ideally instruments of participatory democracy that allow citizens' aspirations to be channeled directly to their representatives. However, in practice, these forums often do not run in an inclusive and deliberative

manner. Field findings show that citizen participation in the recess forum is highly dependent on political selectivity, personal relationships, and certain social positions. Citizens who do not have relationships with council members or local officials often feel they do not have access. This is where Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) becomes relevant not only as a normative framework, but as a diagnostic and intervention tool that understands the dynamics of recess forums more realistically - that is, as the result of interactions between citizens' behavioral biases, clientelism practices, and the discretion of policy implementers in the field.

Understanding that low citizen participation in recess forums is influenced by cognitive biases and social barriers, the Behavioral Public Policy approach offers a series of interventions that are low-cost, but have significant impact when designed with the local context in mind. One of the main strategies is the use of nudging - a way of encouraging behavior change without imposing choice - through the redesign of invitation and information delivery mechanisms (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). For example, previously selective recess forum invitations can be changed to community-based default invitations, such as open announcements in neighborhood WhatsApp groups, thus fostering the perception that attendance is a general norm, not a privilege. In addition, the use of messages with emotional and social framing, such as "your vote determines the future of our village," has been shown to increase citizens' intention to attend, as it touches on aspects of identity and collective ownership (OECD, 2021; Sunstein, 2014).

Another intervention is the simplification of the participation process-both logistically and psychologically. Many citizens avoid forums because they find the procedures complicated or the outcomes unclear. Therefore, simplification strategies can be implemented through the reduction of bureaucratic forms, the creation of visual maps of aspiration flows, and the provision of concrete feedback to citizens on the status of their proposals. Even symbolic interventions such as certificates of participation or public acknowledgement of citizen aspirations that are acted upon, can reinforce the perception that participation is not only heard, but also valued. In the BPP literature, these actions fall under the category of feedback loops and boosts, which not only influence immediate behavior, but also increase the capacity of citizens in the long term (Oliver, 2017).

Particularly in the context of forums that are rife with clientelism, social norms-based

interventions have strong corrective potential. Conveying facts such as "70% of forum participants are not part of the success team" or showcasing the success of aspirations from ordinary citizens, can shift the perception that only those close to legislators are heard. This kind of intervention does not challenge the power structure frontally, but is able to distort clientelistic logic through a more inclusive and fair choice design. Thus, the BPP approach functions not only as a technocratic tool to increase participation, but also as an ethical and political strategy to transform the recess forum into a more democratic space of representation.

However, biases in citizen behavior do not emerge in an empty space. They are shaped and reinforced by dysfunctional institutional practices. In this case, the Street-Level Bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1980) helps explain how the implementation of the recess forum is colored by the discretion of field actors-both staff members of the council, village officials, and local figures-who have informal authority to determine who is invited, whose aspirations are recorded, and which proposals are continued. This discretion is not always exercised in the public interest, but is often influenced by political interests and electoral loyalties. In practice, the recess forum becomes a venue for the reproduction of patron-client relations, where access to public policy is determined by personal closeness, not substantive needs. Implementers use "technical decisions" as a space for political maneuvering, which in Lipsky's theory (1980) is referred to as a strategy of survival under structural pressure, but in this context produces procedural injustice.

BPP in this context is not present to replace the policy function, but rather offers a new way of reading and improving forum design in a micro and contextual way. It positions citizens not as targets of normative education, but as individuals who need to be empowered through changes in a more equitable choice architecture. Through minor interventions such as changing the way of inviting (from selective to universal), providing personally tailored reminders, simplifying the aspiration form, to visualizing the follow-up process, forums can be engineered to be more inclusive and encourage the participation of ordinary citizens. Even at the implementation level, interventions can take the form of standardizing procedures to limit too much discretionary space, such as RT/RW-based open registration or transparent reporting of citizen aspirations.

In this framework, the BPP becomes a bridge between rigid formal structures and

flexible socio-political realities. This approach is not naive to the existence of clientelism, but rather recognizes that patron-client logic has become part of the local political ecosystem. Therefore, the solution is not simply through regulation or democracy training, but requires gradual change through behavioral design interventions that are contextual, ethical, and acceptable to citizens and forum implementers. In this way, the recess forum can shift from a transactional arena to a more equitable, responsive and deliberative participatory space. The integration between BPP, clientelism, and street-level bureaucracy makes the recess forum not only an object of criticism, but also a micro- reform laboratory that can be changed from below, through a deeper understanding of the way citizens and implementing actors think. Thus, BPP is not only a technocratic tool, but also an ethical and political strategy to improve the quality of democracy at the local level.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that low citizen participation in recess forums is not solely caused by ignorance or apathy, but is the result of complex interactions between citizen behavioral biases, clientelistic practices, and the discretion of policy implementing actors at the local level. The recess forum, which is supposed to be a space for people's representation, has shifted into an arena for patronage exchange, where access to aspirations and budgets is often determined by political proximity, not the urgency of public needs.

In terms of behavior, citizens face cognitive barriers such as present bias, ambiguity aversion, and trust deficit, which make them reluctant to engage in forums that are considered not to provide concrete results. On the other hand, the implementation of recess forums is characterized by high discretion from field actors, including DPRD staff, village officials, and local figures, who selectively screen participants based on political loyalty. This reinforces entrenched structures of clientelism in many areas, making the recess forum more of an electoral mechanism than a democratic forum.

It is in this context that Behavioral Public Policy (BPP) plays a role as a diagnostic and intervention tool. This approach offers a way to understand citizen rationality in a non- neutral context, and suggests the design of light but impactful interventions, such as changes to invitation mechanisms, simplification of aspiration channels, and strengthening of inclusion norms. By combining behavioral diagnosis, street-level

bureaucracy theory, and institutional insights on clientelism, this research produces a framework for recess forum reform that is not only technocratic, but also contextual and political.

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