

**Testimony by Cristian Palazzi (Platoniq Foundation) before the
Committee on the Audit of Democratic Quality, the Fight against
Corruption, and Institutional and Legal Reforms of the Congress of
Deputies [Session No. 11 – 17 March 2026]**

Good morning, honourable members,

first of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me to this Committee, as forums such as this are particularly well-suited to reflecting on the evolution of our democratic institutions.

Allow me to begin by paying tribute to a key figure in contemporary democratic thought.

This weekend saw the passing of Jürgen Habermas, perhaps the philosopher who has contributed most profoundly to our understanding of the relationship between democracy, deliberation and the public sphere.

For decades, Habermas championed an idea that is particularly relevant today: that democratic legitimacy rests not solely on the vote, but on the quality of the public deliberation processes that precede political decisions.

Deliberative politics consists of an exercise *in which citizens can become what they themselves wish to be: politically responsible members of a community of free and equal individuals.*

Well-designed citizen participation, as the OECD also reminds us, **enhances** the legitimacy of public decisions, **strengthens** institutional trust and **enables** the integration of distributed social knowledge into the formulation of public policies.

From this perspective, democratic quality cannot be assessed every four years, but must be measured using other indicators: the number of training programmes for citizens in democratic skills, the number of participatory processes that include historically under-represented groups, and accountability—not only for the decisions taken, but also for the multifaceted impact they have on people's lives. Ah, and finally, though perhaps most importantly, the amount of public resources dedicated to it.

Let me give you an initial figure: according to the CIS, only 22.5% of Spaniards have actively participated in politics in the last year (signing

petitions, attending meetings, taking part in campaigns, etc.). However, over 80% say they would be willing to get involved in collective decision-making if given the opportunity.

What, then, is happening to democratic participation in Spain?

Before answering this question, I would like to state that the Congress's First Open Parliament Plan represents a significant opportunity to move towards a broader conception of institutional democracy: a democracy that is more transparent, more participatory and more responsive to society.

And for that reason, I would like to briefly touch upon three challenges that lie ahead:

The gap between participation and real influence in public decision-making.

The lack of education in democratic culture and practice, particularly among younger people.

And the need to bring the mechanisms of citizen participation closer to the public, especially through local authorities.

Before presenting this brief analysis, let me briefly mention the work we carry out at the Platoniq Foundation

The Platoniq Foundation is an international non-profit organisation based in Spain that has been working for over fifteen years in the field of democratic innovation and civic technology, with developments such as the Goteo crowdfunding platform, the coding of the Decidim and Consul citizen participation platforms, and the design of real participatory processes.

Our work lies at the intersection of two fields that have long evolved separately: on the one hand, the development of participatory infrastructures (both physical and digital), and on the other, experimentation with deliberative methodologies based on cultural practices and applied creativity.

This approach aligns with an idea increasingly present in European cultural policies, and in national frameworks such as the Cultural Rights Plan, where access to culture should not be understood solely as cultural consumption, but also as the right to actively participate in life and in processes of collective creation.

Platoniq is also part of the Ampliando Democracia network, a coalition of civil society organisations that promotes public debate on how to strengthen citizen participation in Spain and how to integrate new forms of deliberation into the institutional system.

For all these reasons, our Foundation wishes to contribute to this debate by sharing the experience we have accumulated in developing civic technologies and designing participatory processes that can reinforce the objectives of the Open Parliament Plan, particularly regarding citizen participation in parliamentary work.

As I was saying, I will now elaborate on the first point I wished to highlight: the gap between participation and real influence in public policy. One of the most significant factors explaining this gap is the perception of a lack of influence over public decisions. The most recent OECD report on trust in public institutions, from 2024, shows that those who feel the political system does not allow them a voice trust the government 42 percentage points less than those who do perceive that capacity for influence.

It is true that there are a variety of initiatives, but if we want democratic institutions to promote genuine participation, we must be able to use the citizen participation frameworks available to us in a more conscious and effective manner. Let us consider, if only briefly, the reality of ILPs. Since 1984, 140 ILPs have been submitted in Spain. Do you know how many have been successful and incorporated into law? 4. 500,000 signatures per initiative and 4 incorporations. There has been much talk of the latest regularisation of migrants in Spain, but has the immigration law been amended?

On the one hand, institutions invite citizens to participate. On the other hand, the results of that participation do not always find a clear channel

to ensure that these contributions have a verifiable impact on political decisions.

The result?

Citizen participation, originally conceived as a tool to strengthen pluralism, ends up generating frustration because expectations of influence are not visibly reflected in public decisions.

Second challenge

The second challenge relates to a less visible dimension of democracy, yet one that is fundamental to its long-term sustainability: the democratic education of citizens. Institutions can design increasingly sophisticated participatory mechanisms. But none of these instruments will function fully unless there is a democratic culture that enables citizens to recognise these spaces, understand how they work, and feel capable of engaging with them.

Democratic participation is not merely an institutional matter. It is also a civic skill.

It involves knowing how to listen to different viewpoints, argue, deliberate, devise collective solutions, understand the complexity of public decisions, as well as knowing and being able to use the available channels for participation.

In an increasingly individualistic world, citizens lack the necessary knowledge to realistically address the social dimension in which they live.

The result?

Very high support for democracy, but relatively low day-to-day political participation, especially among young people. According to INJUVE data, less than 4% of young people belong to political parties and almost two-thirds do not participate in any association.

What does this mean?

It is not that young people reject democracy, but that traditional channels of participation are no longer functioning as spaces for democratic engagement.

Politics is not merely a set of institutions, as Hannah Arendt told us, but a space where citizens learn to “be together and with one another as diverse individuals”.

Democratic education programmes in secondary schools, spaces for deliberation within educational settings, democratic learning initiatives based on cultural or collaborative practices, experiences that allow young people and citizens to directly experience participatory politics – that is what is needed to reverse political disengagement, irrational polarisation and the current discrediting of democratic values.

Do you know what we have learnt at the School of Creativity and Democracy that we promote through Platoniq? That the majority of students who go through our training courses want to get more involved in participatory processes than they did before. And that bringing together different opinions in well-designed contexts does not generate more confrontation; on the contrary, it generates constructive dissent for all parties.

Honourable Members...

Third point

The final question facing us today is precisely how to design spaces where this collective deliberation can unfold in all its diversity: of voices, of experiences, of languages; how to fit this into the dynamics already supported by existing public institutions and services; and even how to propose participation programmes with social security incentives for companies, as already exists with subsidised continuing education, to encourage participation in public policy.

In recent years, various works in democratic theory, such as those by Hélène Landemore, have highlighted the importance of broadening the channels through which institutions can integrate society’s collective intelligence into the formulation of public decisions. And by broadening

channels, we do not mean merely opening more suggestion boxes or more portals with data that few can process, but rather integrating new forms of expression into public policy.

Allow me to give a very brief example. In some projects developed by Platoniq, we have used methodologies inspired by legislative theatre, in which citizens act out social situations that reflect specific public issues.

Based on these scenes, the public can intervene, modify the situations presented and propose collective solutions that can subsequently be translated into public policy recommendations. This type of process allows people who might not otherwise participate in traditional administrative formats to nevertheless contribute actively to the democratic debate.

That is what I mean: not being afraid to let creativity into citizen participation. Institutional recommendation But to achieve this, we need to think of participation not merely as a set of ad hoc mechanisms, but as a democratic infrastructure that is stable, usable, accessible and accountable.

The Open Parliament Plan undoubtedly represents a significant step forward in terms of institutional transparency and access to public information. But if the recent evolution of contemporary democracies teaches us anything, it is that transparency, whilst indispensable, is not sufficient on its own to strengthen the democratic bond between institutions and citizens.

The next logical step in this process of institutional openness should be to strengthen the infrastructures of deliberative participation, making it necessary to consider recurring, deliberative mechanisms, equipped with clear rules, institutional continuity and a real capacity to influence the public decision-making process.

This is not about replacing representative institutions, but rather complementing them, reinforcing their legitimacy through deeper interaction with the society they serve. In various countries, instruments

of citizen participation have already been developed that move in this direction.

In Belgium, for example, the Ostbelgien region has established a permanent Citizens' Council linked to its regional parliament, tasked with convening deliberative processes on relevant public issues on a recurring basis. In Ireland, deliberative citizens' assemblies have helped drive far-reaching constitutional reforms and have remained a useful and necessary tool in public policy. Or in Finland, where its Open Ministry platform has become a benchmark for participatory legislation, having a real impact on issues as crucial to social cohesion as equal marriage, for example.

These experiences show that citizen deliberation: can become a valuable complement to the functioning of representative institutions; can contribute social knowledge and a diversity of perspectives; and can lend greater legitimacy to public decisions.

We therefore believe that the time has come to take a step forward in Spain.

We propose exploring the creation of a Citizens' Council of the Congress of Deputies. A permanent body where citizens selected by civic lottery could set an agenda for public deliberation on complex public issues by convening assemblies or citizens' dialogues, which would submit their recommendations in a binding manner (at least to be debated and voted on) to the relevant parliamentary committees.

The experience of the Belgian model shows that such an infrastructure can operate on relatively modest budgets, around €140,000 per year in the case of Ostbelgien, demonstrating that the development of deliberative institutions does not necessarily require large investments, but above all institutional will and clarity in democratic design.

This Council should be conceived as a stable, non-partisan democratic infrastructure, designed to strengthen the link between citizens and the

legislative process, and its operation could be structured around three complementary dimensions.

Firstly, the regular organisation of citizen deliberative processes.

Spain already has experience in this area driven by public administrations: citizens' assemblies at various levels, participatory processes or popular legislative initiatives; but what we propose is to move towards a coherent governance of democratic deliberation, capable of integrating these experiences within a **plural, independent institutional structure oriented towards the general interest**.

Secondly, this infrastructure could be underpinned by civic participation technologies that guarantee a fundamental element of democratic legitimacy: the traceability of ideas throughout the institutional process.

Once again, Spain already has high-quality digital tools developed in the public sector, such as Decidim or Consul, used by numerous local and regional administrations. The aim would be to extend these platforms and make them fully accessible within the state's institutional architecture.

And, thirdly, we propose incorporating participatory methodologies based on cultural practices, capable of broadening the languages of democratic deliberation and thus facilitating the participation of social sectors that do not always feel comfortable within traditional institutional formats.

People do not deliberate solely through legal or administrative language. They also do so through narratives, experiences, cultural expressions and creative practices. Initiatives such as legislative theatre, citizens' laboratories, deliberative podcasts or civic walks are examples of methodologies that allow us to recover a dimension of our democratic life that is often forgotten: its affective and community-based dimension.

Honourable Members, you may be thinking that there was already a City Observatory in Madrid, whose regulations were approved by the Municipal Governing Board. An observatory whose function was to oversee municipal policies, draw up reports with proposals, evaluate citizens' ideas and even call for consultations.

However, our proposal is not intended to be of a supervisory nature. We propose creating a space for constructive dialogue, where everyone is heard and which is designed for everyone.

Closing remarks

In short,

A truly open democracy is not one in which institutions merely inform society of what they do, but one in which society can participate meaningfully.

Opening up Parliament means that a country's democratic intelligence does not lie solely in its institutions, but in the experience, knowledge and judgement of its people.

Our democracy faces increasingly complex challenges, and to tackle them with legitimacy we will need institutions capable of listening, deliberating and integrating the collective intelligence of Spanish society.

That is why the issue before us today is not merely how to make the workings of Parliament more transparent, but how to strengthen our democratic processes so that citizens can participate more and better, in an informed, pluralistic and responsible manner.

As Habermas reminded us, democratic legitimacy stems from the quality of the deliberative processes that precede collective decisions.

The more capable we are of opening up these spaces for deliberation, of incorporating new voices and of building dialogue to sustain the institutions that govern us, the stronger, more legitimate and more resilient our democracy will be.

Thank you very much.