

How does the project-based system drive grassroots consultative democracy?—a community practice of institutional transformation

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Abstract. Grassroots consultative democracy, as a micro-level practice carrier of whole-process people's democracy, requires further theoretical interpretation of its institutional innovation pathways. Drawing on the five-layer logic of whole-process people's democracy, this study selects Fangxing Community in Baohe District, Hefei City, Anhui Province as an empirical case to examine the driving role of the project-based system in grassroots consultative democracy. The findings show that the case community has constructed a vertically and horizontally integrated organizational system characterized by "five-level party organization linkage + multi-actor coordination." With the project-based system serving as a key institutional transformation hub, it operates through a triple mechanism of "organization–institution–process" transformation, thereby driving the grassroots consultative democracy system to achieve a four-stage leap: service foundation building → project-based venture creation → organizational cultivation → institutional iteration. Based on the findings, this study suggests that, from an organizational perspective, the policy supply system should be improved, a resource guarantee network should be established, and incentive mechanisms should be innovated. From a institutional perspective, a sound supervision and evaluation system should be developed. From a process perspective, the capacity-building system for consultative democracy should be strengthened, and an innovative knowledge management platform for consultative democracy should be constructed.

Keywords: grassroots governance, project-based system, grassroots consultative democracy, institutional transformation

1. Introduction

In 2023, during an inspection in Shanghai, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of integrating whole-process people's democracy into the modernization of urban governance and building a governance community in which everyone participates, everyone takes responsibility, everyone contributes, and everyone shares benefits. The 2025 Government Work Report likewise stresses the need to "enhance the governance capacity of municipal social governance." The modernization of the grassroots governance system and governance capacity constitutes a fundamental safeguard for grassroots development [1]. Whole-process

people's democracy is a great creation through which the Party unites and leads the people in pursuing, developing, and realizing democracy [2], reflecting the strategic orientation of China's democratic political development [3]. Accordingly, translating the institutional advantages of whole-process people's democracy into governance effectiveness at the grassroots level is a foundational task for advancing the modernization of the grassroots governance system and governance capacity.

As "an important form of practicing whole-process people's democracy" [4], consultative democracy vividly embodies its value attributes and represents a distinctive form and institutional advantage of socialist democracy [5]. Academic research in China on grassroots consultative democracy generally follows two main strands. The first is a normative approach, focusing on conceptual definition and functional interpretation. Scholars generally argue that grassroots consultative democracy refers to the extension of deliberative democratic practices into grassroots settings such as urban and rural communities and public institutions. It is a collective action process in which multiple grassroots actors engage in rational dialogue and interactive collaboration on consultation issues, reach consensus, and thereby influence public decision-making and grassroots governance [6]. It carries significant political value in promoting scientific and democratic decision-making [7], resolving conflicts [8], enhancing public reason [9], and improving governance capacity and effectiveness [10], and has notably advanced multi-actor collaborative governance [11]. The second strand adopts an empirical approach, exploring practical models of grassroots consultative democracy. Drawing on local practices such as Anhui's Tianchang experience and Zhejiang's village-community "consultation stations," scholars have summarized models including Party-building-led consultation [12], Party-led mass consultation, and aggregation-based consultation [13]. However, the practical dilemmas of grassroots consultative democracy have also attracted scholarly attention, particularly structural imbalances among consultative actors [14], insufficient institutional safeguards [6], procedural bottlenecks in consultation processes [15], and implementation deficits in policy outcomes [16]. In some cases, phenomena such as formalistic consultation, passive consultation, and habitual consultation persist [17], constraining the effectiveness of grassroots consultative democracy. In response, some scholars argue that technological governance can enhance consultative effectiveness at the grassroots level, proposing the embedding of organization, institutions, culture, and technology into urban and rural community consultation governance systems [18].

As "a new state governance regime," the project-based system aims to allocate resources through project formats, thereby effectively integrating relationships across central and local levels as well as various social sectors [19], and reshaping the operational mechanisms of grassroots governance [20]. As a new element of the consultative democracy system, the project-based system demonstrates strong performance advantages in advancing the modernization of the grassroots governance system and governance capacity. It has become a widely adopted top-down governance mechanism spanning multiple policy fields [21]. Among its forms, resident self-governance projects constitute an important component of China's project-based system [22], integrating dispersed grassroots actors, resources, and actions through a bottom-up approach [23], thereby constructing a co-governed, co-built, and shared governance structure. In practice, models such as the "Autonomy Fund" project and the "Le Mama Garden" project have emerged [24], achieving notable results in optimizing resource allocation and improving public service quality [25].

Existing literature has largely focused on the resource mobilization function of the project-based system, with limited attention to its institutional transformation function, and even less systematic analysis of the coupling logic between project-based operations and consultative democracy institutions. Notably, within the complex governance field of urban subdistricts and communities, the dynamic interactions among multiple governance actors in an expanded autonomy space provide fertile ground for refining grassroots consultative

democracy systems. This study selects Fangxing Community in Baohe District, Hefei City, Anhui Province as a case study to reveal the co-constructive logic between the project-based system and consultative democracy institutions, as well as the mechanisms of institutional transformation, thereby offering empirical insights for policy-making. The fieldwork was conducted from June 2024 to December 2025 across ten residential communities in Fangxing Community. As the second large-scale subdistrict-level community in Hefei, Fangxing Community was established in May 2015, covering a total area of 11.8 square kilometers, comprising ten residential communities, with a registered population of 85,600 and a resident population of approximately 110,000. The rationale for selecting this case lies in its representativeness in illustrating the transition from the traditional "street-neighborhood" management system to a modern "community-based" governance model. In 2020, it was recognized as one of the city's first pilot subdistricts and communities for Party-building-led grassroots governance demonstration. In 2021, it was designated as a pilot site for whole-process people's democracy at the grassroots level in Hefei. This indicates that the community has strong research value in practicing whole-process people's democracy and promoting innovation in grassroots consultative democracy.

2. Theoretical foundations and analytical framework

2.1. The five-layer logic of whole-process people's democracy

Whole-process people's democracy refers to a form of democracy under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, which, in accordance with laws and institutional arrangements, expands and extends the temporal and spatial dimensions of direct popular participation through democratic consultation. It combines deliberation and voting-based decision-making, and maximizes the people's role as masters of the country in managing state and social public affairs throughout the entire process, thereby achieving a Pareto-optimal democratic effectiveness [26]. Through a sound political participation mechanism and accessible channels for public engagement, whole-process people's democracy continuously expands both the breadth and depth of people's participation in state and social governance, ensuring that citizens enjoy substantive rights to information, participation, expression, and supervision [27]. The theory of whole-process people's democracy contains a five-layer progressive logic:

First, people-centeredness as the core value. From a value perspective, the essential principle of whole-process people's democracy lies in adhering to a people-centered approach and ensuring that the people occupy the principal position in both state and social governance. As its fundamental attribute, "peoplehood" runs through the entire system in an all-dimensional, whole-process, and full-chain manner. Grassroots consultative democracy, with its diversified and accessible participation channels, integrated and coordinated participation processes, and plural and convenient participation forms, fully embodies both plurality and people-centeredness. This constitutes the foundational starting point of whole-process people's democracy.

Second, institutional innovation as the operational foundation. From an institutional perspective, the normativity and systematic nature of institutional arrangements provide a solid foundation for the effective operation and functional transformation of whole-process people's democracy. The effective functioning of grassroots consultative democracy is inseparable from precise institutional guarantees provided by governments at different levels. This demonstrates the critical importance of institutions in ensuring effective implementation and functional transformation of whole-process people's democracy at the grassroots level, serving as a necessary safeguard for realizing a people-centered approach.

Third, a dynamically closed-loop structure as the mode of operation. From a process perspective, whole-process people's democracy is characterized by iterative and closed-loop structures, enabling it to function

across the entire chain of national and social governance. At the same time, democratic rights are fully embodied "before decision-making," "during decision-making," and "after decision-making." This tightly interconnected closed-loop mechanism effectively aggregates public opinion, transforms popular will into collective will, and converts state intentions into socioeconomic outcomes and voluntary public action [28]. Through this dynamic closed-loop operation, grassroots consultative democracy is able to function effectively and continuously.

Fourth, Party-building leadership as the driving force of innovation. From both value and process perspectives, grassroots consultative democracy is an important manifestation of whole-process people's democracy and a key safeguard of citizens' democratic rights. Party-building leadership plays a decisive role in ensuring the effective operation of grassroots consultative systems and enhancing governance efficiency. It drives the vivid practice of whole-process people's democracy at the grassroots level and serves as a core force for its innovation and development.

Fifth, transformation of governance effectiveness as the value goal. From a performance perspective, whole-process people's democracy functions as a governance mechanism of democracy [29]. Its "one core with multiple actors" governance structure enables the integration of Party leadership mechanisms, process linkage mechanisms, factor coordination mechanisms, and supervisory feedback mechanisms [30], thereby ensuring the effective operation of grassroots consultative democracy systems.

In summary, as a new form of socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics in the new era, whole-process people's democracy expands both the theoretical system and practical field of Chinese democracy. It forms a dialectical unity between macro-level institutional design and micro-level practice innovation with grassroots consultative democracy. Whole-process people's democracy provides legitimacy and institutional supply through value guidance and institutional support, while grassroots consultative democracy feeds back into institutional improvement through organizational empowerment and mechanism innovation, forming a mutually reinforcing feedback loop.

2.2. A three-dimensional analytical framework from the perspective of whole-process people's democracy

Based on the five-layer logic of whole-process people's democracy, this study extracts three key dimensions—organization, institution, and process—to reveal the internal logic of project-based operation in urban grassroots consultative democracy systems, including actor mobilization, resource aggregation, endogenous rule formation, and process closure.

2.2.1. *Organizational system: mobilization and empowerment of consultative actors*

The organizational structure is a fundamental component of urban grassroots consultative democracy systems and provides structural guarantees for their operation. The Communist Party of China, as the core leadership force in the modernization of national governance [31], plays a central and leading role in grassroots consultative governance [32]. On the one hand, it adheres to comprehensive Party leadership and strengthens the grassroots Party organization system. On the other hand, it leverages its organizational coordination capacity to build a Party-building-led autonomous organizational structure [33], fully utilizing the leadership advantages of Party organizations and the role of Party-building in enhancing governance systems and governance capacity [34]. This enables the organizational mobilization of diverse consultative actors and the integrated allocation of various internal and external community resources [35], thereby constructing a multi-actor grassroots consultative democracy system. At the organizational level, the key focus is on how to build an effective organizational linkage structure so as to embed the project-based system into grassroots consultative democracy and achieve efficient mobilization and empowerment of multiple actors.

2.2.2. Institutional design: internalization of consultative rules and resource allocation

Institutions refer to the various policies and normative frameworks involved in the development and implementation of grassroots consultative democracy systems, including both national-level policy frameworks and those formulated by local governments at different levels. Institutional elements provide external drivers and regulatory constraints for consultative democracy [36], directly affecting its effectiveness [37]. Institutional development in consultative democracy is central to top-level design, as it regulates actor behavior and enhances the efficiency of multi-actor participation and consultation processes [38]. At the institutional level, the focus lies on explaining how policies at different administrative levels promote the embedding of the project-based system into grassroots consultative democracy, thereby enabling coordinated governance among diverse actors.

2.2.3. Process closure: refined governance of the full consultation process and dynamic feedback

The process dimension is the core component of grassroots consultative democracy systems and fully reflects the principles and spirit of consultation. The consultation process is both a rational decision-making process aimed at maximizing public interest through dialogue and a process in which residents, as substantive actors, participate in grassroots governance [39]. At the process level, attention is given, on the one hand, to how the project-based system drives optimization of organizational structures, resource allocation, and procedural arrangements in urban grassroots consultative democracy, thereby making it more standardized and effective; and on the other hand, to how it promotes dynamic advancement and timely adjustment of consultative systems to better align with grassroots governance needs.

The "organization–institution–process" framework serves both as the analytical framework of this study and as the operational framework of project-based governance in urban grassroots consultative democracy systems. It not only provides a practical reference for improving the institutional system of whole-process people's democracy but also enriches its theoretical development.

3. Transformation mechanism, effectiveness, and optimization pathways of the project-based system driving grassroots consultative democracy

3.1. The evolution of grassroots consultative democracy driven by the project-based system

3.1.1. Consolidating the grassroots consultative platform through service-oriented governance

Grassroots Party organizations and local governments consolidate the foundation of consultative democracy by responding to governance challenges, among which the construction of a social service system constitutes a key institutional innovation. Field research shows that through three phases of development planning from 2016 to 2020, the community established a tiered service system of "1 Center–10 Stations" (one community social service center and ten residential service stations), achieving 100% service coverage. On this basis, the community has continuously advanced resident self-governance procurement projects and introduced multiple social work service organizations from within and outside the province, delivering various community services in a project-based manner.

Within the framework of service-oriented governance, Fangxing Community has actively incorporated common governance problems and typical issues identified in grassroots practice into a consultative agenda list. It has innovatively constructed a digitally-physical integrated consultation platform for "Good Consultation for Matters of Concern" based on a "2+2+N" model. The first "2" refers to online and offline consultation platforms; the second "2" refers to two distinctive consultation carriers, namely the Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Council Member Studio and the Xintian Council Member Studio; "N" refers to

multiple deliberation and consultation points distributed throughout the community. This has led to the formation of a resource-integrated community governance community, generating a synergistic effect among physical space, human resources, and institutional innovation. As a result, grassroots governance has shifted from fragmentation to integration in goal orientation, from dispersion to coupling in organizational structure, from single to plural actors in governance participation, from passive to proactive issue generation, from informal to standardized institutional operation, and from purely physical to hybrid virtual-physical spatial carriers.

3.1.2. Advancing grassroots consultative democracy through gradual project-based social innovation investment

Research indicates that using small-scale public welfare projects as carriers and introducing social organizations to provide full-cycle technical empowerment to the implementers of consultative innovation projects represents a viable pathway for constructing grassroots consultative democracy systems.

First, a resident self-governance special fund was established. In May 2016, Fangxing Community, in collaboration with the Anhui Lebang Charity Foundation, established the "Lezhi Fangxing" Resident Self-Governance Special Fund based on a 1:1 matching funding mechanism. On one hand, it guided community self-governance projects: social organizations and residents within the community applied for funding support from the special fund, and a review committee composed of residents, funders, and experts evaluated and decided on applications. From 2016 to 2021, the fund supported community social organizations with a total of 649,000 RMB, effectively promoting their development and enhancing residents' self-governance capacity. On the other hand, it promoted the professional development of the "Five Micro" projects. The "Five Micro" projects (micro-governance, micro-services, micro-renovation, micro-innovation, and micro-public welfare) adopted a tripartite funding mechanism consisting of the community matching fund ("Lezhi Fangxing"), the livelihood security fund ("Nuangxing Project"), and community charitable donations. A demand-driven participation mechanism was established through full-process empowerment covering project application, implementation, and evaluation, thereby forming a closed-loop governance system for resident participation. Second, the community piloted the project-based transformation of consultative democracy. Since 2021, the community has established a "four-stage progressive" innovation mechanism consisting of agenda collection, proposal bidding, process supervision, and performance evaluation. Under this mechanism, consultative democracy projects such as the "Mobile Deliberation Hall" and "Every Fourth Day Matters Discussion" have been implemented.

3.1.3. Advancing grassroots consultative practice through the "secretary project" mechanism

Grassroots Party organizations, as leading forces in grassroots governance, integrate governance resources through the project-based system. Field research shows that since 2019, the community has innovatively implemented a "Party-building + project-based system" integration mechanism, incorporating residents' urgent and pressing concerns into annual "Secretary Projects." From 2019 to 2023, a total of nine "Secretary Projects" were implemented, achieving full coverage of all residential communities. During implementation, the community Party committee extended the organizational chain to achieve full Party-building coverage, activated governance elements through the resource chain, and ensured project effectiveness through the responsibility chain, thereby forming a "three-chain integration" mechanism. It also established a participation structure of "1+5+N" (one Party organization core, five categories of standing participants, and multiple dynamic participating organizations).

In summary, in response to the fragmentation of grassroots governance, the community integrates and activates diverse governance resources through the operational mechanism of the project-based system, dynamically responds to residents' needs, and gradually establishes an effective grassroots consultative

democracy system. This not only addresses practical governance challenges but also deepens the conceptual foundations of consultative democracy in practice and advances the governance culture of grassroots consultation.

3.2. Transformation mechanism of the project-based system driving grassroots consultative democracy

Within the operational framework of "organization–institution–process," the community takes the project-based system as a carrier and, through organizational restructuring, institutional innovation, and process optimization, demonstrates the substantive characteristics of urban grassroots consultative democracy.

3.2.1. *Restructuring the grassroots organizational system and functional positioning*

Field research indicates that the community has reconstructed an organizational architecture of "One Committee, One Council, One Center," forming a matrix governance structure. Vertically, a five-level linkage mechanism enhances policy penetration, while horizontally, a co-governance council promotes multi-actor collaboration. First, the community Party committee plays a core leadership role. It has established a "three-directional resource absorption" mechanism: drawing policy resources from higher levels, integrating resources from resident units laterally, and activating micro-resources from residents downward, thereby providing strong organizational support for grassroots governance. Second, the community co-governance council has established a multi-actor co-governance mechanism. It adopts a "3+X" representative structure (Party organizations 30%, resident units 30%, resident representatives 40%, with X representing dynamically participating actors), promoting collaborative governance among diverse stakeholders. The council is responsible for aggregating the opinions and needs of different groups, planning and implementing public welfare projects, and supervising and evaluating the work of the community service center. Third, the community service center further expands administrative service functions. Relying on public service provision, it extends more diversified community-based social services for residents.

In addition, the community Party committee achieves more refined organizational mobilization through the five-level linkage system. Based on the "One Committee, One Council, One Center" structure, the community has further developed a five-tier linkage system consisting of: community Party committee – residential district Party organizations – community/block Party branches – building Party groups – Party member service households. As of December 2025, Party organizations in 33 residential communities (or areas) have been fully institutionalized, extending Party organizational influence to the grassroots "last mile." This five-level linkage system enables the community Party committee to use 33 grid units, 236 building Party groups, and 197 Party member service households as connecting nodes for Party-building-led grassroots governance. Through this networked organizational structure, the Party committee is able to respond rapidly to and address residents' practical needs. Furthermore, the community has constructed a functional Party organization system characterized by "policy-oriented + service-oriented + hub-oriented" functions. Policy-oriented Party organizations ensure the legality of consultative projects through institutional design and policy interpretation; service-oriented Party organizations enhance participation and satisfaction by being closely aligned with residents' daily needs; and hub-oriented Party organizations incubate and support community social organizations, promoting the organizationalization and routinization of resident consultation.

3.2.2. *Improving the institutional system of grassroots consultative democracy*

Institutional arrangements ensure the standardized operation of grassroots consultative democracy systems. Reports of the 18th, 19th, and 20th National Congresses of the Communist Party of China have consistently emphasized the need to "promote extensive, multi-level, and institutionalized development of consultative

democracy," and the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee further proposed to "improve the system of grassroots democracy."

Empirical findings show that the Anhui Provincial Party Committee and Provincial Government have issued documents such as the "Implementation Opinions on Strengthening Urban and Rural Community Consultation" and the "Opinions of the Anhui Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China on Advancing Consultative Political Development of the People's Political Consultative Conference," which provide strong institutional support for the construction of grassroots consultative democracy systems. At the level of Fangxing Community, in 2019, the "Implementation Plan for Project-Based Operation of Grassroots Party-Building Work in Fangxing Community, Baohe District" was issued, formally institutionalizing the application of the project-based system in grassroots Party organization development. In December 2021, the "Work Plan for Fangxing Community Demonstration Site of Party-Building-Led Whole-Process People's Democracy Practice" was formulated. Through institutional means, existing practical experience was consolidated and upgraded, providing a clearer institutional framework and guiding principles for the further development of grassroots consultative democracy systems. From the practical trajectory of Fangxing Community's consultative democracy system, the entire institutional construction process has continuously standardized and institutionalized grassroots consultative practices, ultimately distilling successful project-based practices of grassroots consultative democracy into codified institutional norms.

3.2.3. Process mechanism for reshaping the grassroots consultative democracy system

First, identifying governance problems and effective local demand. Addressing the urgent concerns of community residents and affiliated units is one of the core functions of grassroots consultative democracy. Field research shows that the pilot community focuses on key livelihood issues and environmental governance, actively mobilizing multiple actors—including community social organizations, resident representatives, co-construction units, and property management enterprises—to assess governance problems and local needs. In particular, during the demand assessment stage of consultative democracy innovation projects, each project team relies on residential Party branches and adopts multiple data collection methods, such as on-site community visits, online public opinion solicitation, and data extraction from grid-based governance systems. This process integrates governmental policy orientations with actual community needs, thereby forming a scientifically grounded list of consultative topics. For example, the "Joint Governance of Golden Corners and Silver Edges" project team in Rui'an Residential Community proactively communicated with local units such as kindergartens and primary schools to understand their practical needs during implementation. Similarly, during the needs assessment phase of the "Neighborhood Garden Project," the Party organization of Kangyuan Residential Community distributed questionnaires via QQ groups, WeChat groups, and mini-programs, systematically identifying residents' shared demands for environmental improvement within the neighborhood.

Second, setting project objectives and implementation plans for consultative democracy. Based on the results of community needs assessment and combined with internal and external governance resources, organizing and mobilizing multiple actors to participate in the formulation of consultative democracy projects and developing scientifically designed project plans constitute both a key response mechanism to grassroots governance demands and a core expression of institutional effectiveness in consultative democracy. In the practice of consultative democracy innovation projects, the community has established annual governance targets under the "Five Micro" framework based on project lists and the characteristics of each residential area, providing clear direction for project design. Taking the "Joint Governance of Golden Corners and Silver Edges" project in Rui'an Residential Community as an example, the project is led by the Party branch secretary of the residential community, who forms a project team with members of the "two committees."

Through a "threefold embedding" mechanism—organizational embedding (joint Party branch establishment), resource embedding (co-construction agreements), and responsibility embedding (list of rights and duties)—institutionalized participation of affiliated units is achieved. By contrast, the "Neighborhood Garden Project" relies on a five-step closed-loop mechanism consisting of agenda collection, agenda setting, deliberation and consultation, voting on proposals, and implementation supervision. Through graded consultation meetings, eight exposed vacant land areas were selected for ecological greening and renovation, forming a replicable model of micro-scale spatial renewal. In this way, the dynamic matching between institutional supply and demand responsiveness enables deep participation of multiple consultative actors throughout the governance process, both resolving governance challenges and continuously improving the quality of the community living environment.

Third, developing and empowering human resources for grassroots consultative democracy. The community has established a professional talent support mechanism for consultative democracy projects. It has constructed a "1+5+N" talent reserve system, in which Party representatives and similar actors serve as the political core, five categories of professional forces provide structural support, and multiple social actors form the foundational base, thereby establishing an institutionalized and professional talent support structure. In addition, the community has created a comprehensive community academy to empower talent development. Founded in 2019, the Fangxing Community Academy operates through a "four-in-one integrated education community" (community Party school, citizen academy, senior university, and governance academy). Through diversified pathways such as external recruitment, resource integration, and internal cultivation, it has built a faculty pool of 177 members, including 30% academic scholars, 40% practitioners, and 30% community experts. As of December 2025, the academy has developed a tiered curriculum system covering full governance scenarios, with a focus on specialized courses addressing key challenges such as livelihood issues and ecological protection. In terms of training targets, it focuses on seven categories of participants, including members of community committees and social organizations, thereby laying a solid talent foundation for addressing complex grassroots governance problems.

Fourth, implementing grassroots consultative democracy projects through a full-process closed-loop mechanism. Grassroots consultative democracy projects deeply integrate the values of deliberative democracy while highlighting the central leadership role of grassroots Party organizations in governance innovation. These projects are characterized by a "dual-core driving" mechanism: on the one hand, they practice consultative democracy through procedural justice and increase the frequency of grassroots consultation; on the other hand, they strengthen institutional advantages through Party leadership and enhance coordination efficiency of Party organizations. Field research shows that such project practices not only improve the quality of the community environment but also effectively strengthen residents' sense of belonging and collective identity, thereby enhancing their willingness and sense of responsibility to participate in public affairs. In the "Joint Governance of Golden Corners and Silver Edges" project, the Party organization of Rui'an Residential Community coordinated responsibilities such that property management enterprises were responsible for design and construction, schools undertook operation and educational functions, and the community led process management, ultimately forming a full life-cycle governance closed loop. This collaborative mechanism not only strengthens interaction efficiency among multiple actors but also lays the foundation for the project's sustainability. Similarly, in the "Neighborhood Garden Project," under the leadership of the Party organization of Kangyuan Residential Community, volunteer recruitment and public mobilization were carried out through building-level Party branches, significantly expanding project influence and stimulating residents' agency, successfully promoting the renovation of eight vacant spaces. In addition, the community has formulated the "Fangxing Community Party-Building-Led Whole-Process People's Democracy Project

Implementation Schedule," which standardizes the management of consultative innovation projects through a structured procedural framework.

Fifth, establishing an open and dynamic evaluation mechanism. Research shows that the community Party committee has established a dynamic evaluation framework involving multi-actor coordination in the assessment of consultative projects. First, node-based evaluation: residential Party organizations establish mechanisms for proposal adoption, implementation tracking, and feedback collection to ensure that consultative outcomes are institutionalized and translated into policy references. Second, mid-term evaluation: the community Party committee organizes representatives from government, academia, industry, and the public to participate in mid-term project evaluation, forming a closed-loop mechanism of "evaluation–feedback–optimization." Third, expansion of positive project impact: evaluation teams composed of department leaders, third-party experts, and project stakeholders develop and implement a five-dimensional assessment framework (brand identity, conceptual innovation, institutional improvement, enriched platforms, and tangible effectiveness), thereby driving the evolution of consultative democracy toward more advanced institutional forms.

3.3. Governance effectiveness of the project-based system in driving grassroots consultative democracy

Research indicates that the project-based system reconstructs grassroots consultative democracy through a dual mechanism of demand identification and consensus building, manifested in the following ways.

First, precisely capturing the complexity of community governance demands. Taking the Jiayuan Dushi Phase III residential community as an example, in response to the absence of waste sorting stations, the Jiayuan South Party branch implemented a four-step mechanism of "joint application triggering consultation → scheme disclosure → multiple rounds of revision → efficient implementation," enabling the station to be constructed and put into operation within 30 days. Second, facilitating interest coordination among multiple actors and consolidating social consensus. By inviting representatives from government, academia, media, and the public to participate in project evaluation (such as the "Every Fourth Day Matters Discussion" in Rui'an Residential Community), a structured consultation process of "proposal presentation – questioning and response – scheme optimization" was established. This mechanism successfully resolved 12 major disputes, including housing project suspensions and refund conflicts. As of December 2025, the community had implemented a total of 13 consultative projects covering four major governance domains. In spatial governance projects, for instance, 200 new parking spaces were added and five public fitness facilities were renovated. In addition, projects addressing conflict resolution, livelihood services, and environmental improvement were also implemented, all of which are closely linked to residents' vital interests and key grassroots governance issues.

During the implementation of grassroots consultative democracy projects, the community has successfully incubated 108 community-based social organizations focused on neighborhood mutual assistance and consultative functions, and developed more than 4,000 registered volunteers. The project-based operation of consultative democracy has effectively ensured orderly grassroots governance, optimized the allocation of governance resources, stimulated the enthusiasm and vitality of multiple governance actors, and significantly improved overall governance efficiency.

3.4. Optimization pathways for the project-based operation of grassroots consultative democracy systems

From an organizational perspective, structured empowerment should be advanced. First, in terms of policy supply innovation, a closed-loop mechanism of "data collection—demand diagnosis—policy formulation" should be explored. Standardized operational guidelines for grassroots consultative democracy should be issued, and the legal validity of consultation procedures should be clarified through local legislation. Second, regarding resource guarantee upgrading, a tripartite supply model integrating a "dynamic talent database + special fiscal support + smart toolkit" should be implemented, and domestic large-scale AI models should be utilized to enable intelligent matching of consultative resources. Third, in terms of incentive mechanism restructuring, a tiered incentive system of "innovation incubator—achievement transformation chain—demonstration and diffusion network" should be designed, along with a star-rating evaluation system for consultative cases.

From an institutional perspective, standardized governance should be implemented. An evaluation system should be established featuring "quarterly monitoring (tracking key indicators)—annual evaluation—annual retrospective assessment (based on a difference-in-differences model)." Policy pilot programs should be promoted to drive continuous institutional iteration. From a process perspective, a dual-driven approach combining capacity building and knowledge management should be adopted. In terms of capacity development, a "4C competency matrix" training system should be constructed, including: consultative skills (conflict mediation and deliberation rules), cultural cognition (democratic awareness and community identity), digital literacy (operation of intelligent consultation platforms), and project management (full-cycle governance). In terms of knowledge management, a "Consultation Wisdom Cloud" platform should be developed, integrating three core modules: a case knowledge base that collects best local project practices; an online deliberation room supporting 5G-based holographic consultation simulation; and an intelligent matching engine enabling precise knowledge dissemination. Together, these measures promote the sustained development and continuous improvement of grassroots consultative democracy.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that, from an organizational perspective, the project-based operation of urban grassroots consultative democracy is supported by a robust organizational system. The vertically and horizontally integrated grassroots organizational structure established in the community provides a solid platform for the effective introduction of the project-based system. Party organizations play a leading role by broadly mobilizing multiple consultative actors to participate fully and deeply in the entire project cycle. This dynamic yet well-ordered model of organizational participation has become a key factor in the successful functioning of urban grassroots consultative democracy systems. From an institutional perspective, the case community has successfully constructed a hierarchical institutional framework for urban grassroots consultative democracy and embedded the project-based system into this framework, forming a three-level progression from practical wisdom to operational rules to institutional system. This aligns with the strategic deployment of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to "improve whole-process people's democracy." From a process perspective, the evolution of the project-based system demonstrates a dynamic coupling among organization, institution, and process. It follows a staged trajectory of 1.0 service foundation building (2016–2018) → 2.0 project-based innovation and incubation (2019–2021) → 3.0 organizational cultivation (2022–2023) → 4.0 institutional iteration (2024–present), gradually enhancing the effectiveness of grassroots governance. Compared with existing research on

grassroots consultative democracy, this study places greater emphasis on context-specific practices of consultative democracy at the grassroots level, with a particular focus on the underlying organizational structure, project-based institutional transformation, and the collaborative dynamics among diverse consultative actors.

However, this study also has certain limitations. Methodologically, the explanatory power of a single-case study is constrained by the specific governance context of the Yangtze River Delta region. Theoretically, the study does not sufficiently explore the embedding mechanisms of digital consultation technologies such as smart contracts and consensus algorithms. Future research is encouraged to adopt mixed-method designs (QCA combined with social network analysis), and to incorporate blockchain and artificial intelligence technologies to construct traceability systems for consultative processes, thereby deepening institutional innovation research in the dimension of technological governance.

In summary, the case demonstrates that the project-based system, through a three-dimensional synergistic transformation mechanism of "organization–institution–process," effectively validates the institutional resilience of grassroots consultative democracy and provides a micro-institutional anchor for the development of whole-process people's democracy theory. The practice-oriented pathway of "demand sensing—consultation—resilience cultivation" offers a replicable and scalable "soft technology" solution for the modernization of grassroots governance.

During the 15th Five-Year Plan period, with the goal of advancing the modernization of grassroots governance in the new era, efforts should be made to expand the scope of consultative practices within grassroots organizations, enhance the organizational and institutional capacity of consultative democracy at the subdistrict level, and further broaden orderly channels for citizens' political participation, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of grassroots governance. Specifically, three directions are proposed: First, continuously strengthen the leadership capacity of grassroots Party organizations. Subdistrict Party committees and relevant functional departments should integrate consultative resources and consolidate a Party-building-led consultative democracy system that mobilizes multiple actors at the subdistrict level. Second, continuously enhance the responsiveness of consultative agendas. Grassroots consultative democracy should be positioned as a practical pathway for implementing the Party's mass line in the new era, while redefining the functional orientation of subdistrict Party and government departments to strengthen responsiveness to cross-community livelihood demands and ensure that consultative topics effectively address governance challenges. Third, dynamically optimize the governance of consultative projects. A scientifically designed and efficient project-based transformation mechanism for grassroots consultative democracy should be refined and institutionalized, thereby consolidating project outcomes while preserving flexible space for institutional innovation in consultative practices, ultimately improving consultative effectiveness. In this way, the people-centered value orientation of grassroots consultative democracy can be more fully realized and demonstrated.

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