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Toward Holistic Stakeholder Engagement: Integrating Participation, Inclusion, and Democracy

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Abstract

Research on the manifestations and hurdles of stakeholder engagement remains scant and fragmented. In this introduction to the Special Issue on stakeholder engagement, we conceptualize the concept through three related modes: participation, inclusion, and democracy. Each mode reflects different aspects of stakeholder engagement, generating benefits for both organizations and their stakeholders. Yet, each mode also faces challenges. We propose an integrative framework that unifies these modes of stakeholder engagement, emphasizing areas of synergy and potential conflict. The article concludes by advancing directions for future business and society research on stakeholder engagement.

Keywords

democracy, inclusion, participation, stakeholder engagement

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Introduction

Stakeholder engagement is a multifaceted phenomenon. Broadly, this process refers to *the symbolic or substantive involvement of and by actors within organizational activities in which they are interested, or by which they are affected*. Building on Greenwood's (2007) groundwork, prior studies have begun to examine the aims, activities, and impacts of how organizations and their representatives create opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to organizational activities, practices, and strategies (Kujala et al., 2022). However, in the view of stakeholder engagement proposed above, stakeholders may also engage themselves. For example, they may participate in democratic governance processes that shape an organization's policies and practices (Dawkins, 2015) or mobilize as activists (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). Hence, stakeholder engagement can be initiated by an organization's managers, its various stakeholders, or both. This complexity makes stakeholder engagement a compelling yet challenging research topic.

Research on stakeholder engagement is more timely and more relevant than ever for at least two seemingly opposite reasons. First, stakeholder engagement has become a trend in organizational life. This trend shows up in areas such as strategy making (Hautz et al., 2017; Noland & Phillips, 2010), entrepreneurship (Hughes et al., 2022; Leonidou et al., 2020), innovation (Haumann, et al., 2015; Trittin-Ulbrich & Böckel, 2022), and corporate social responsibility (de Roo et al., 2024; Edinger-Schons et al., 2020). The growth of stakeholder engagement in evermore organizational processes is backed by prior work that has shown how involving stakeholders produces desired outcomes such as creativity and innovation (Loureiro et al., 2020; Wohlgemuth et al., 2019), adaptation (Griffin et al., 2021), efficiency and efficacy (Scherer & Vögtlin, 2020), and compliance with moral obligations (Moriarty, 2014).

Second, current developments expose the precarious nature of stakeholder engagement, a process long taken for granted, especially in democratic societies. Growing inequalities, natural disasters, armed conflicts, mass migration, fake news, and societal polarization (Joaquim et al., 2024; Schoeneborn et al., 2024) have contributed to the (re)rise of authoritarian and autocratic regimes, which seek to undermine or even eliminate stakeholder engagement (Sallai & Schnyder, 2021). These developments further intensify challenges with stakeholder engagement, such as conflicts driven by divergent values and interests (Bundy et al., 2013), fragile common ground and commitments (Grimm & Reinecke, 2024), and the potential dilution of responsibilities and decisions (Couture et al., 2023). Given these threats to stakeholder engagement, focusing attention on the activities, practices, and strategies through which stakeholders participate is more relevant than ever.

Despite a growing interest in stakeholder engagement (Esper et al., 2024; Kujala et al., 2022; Leonidou et al., 2020; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014), it remains an underdeveloped field in business and society research. Specifically, as largely reflected in the contributions to this Special Issue, stakeholder engagement takes a variety of forms, namely, in terms of participation, inclusion, and democracy. While research on stakeholder engagement has begun to shed light on either one or the other mode in isolation (Dawkins, 2015; Fujimoto et al., 2019; Viglia et al., 2018), it has yet to theorize the ways in which these modes contribute to engaging stakeholders in a deeper and more systematic way, as well as how these modes relate to each other. Indeed, the growing array of digital and analog methods for ways of engaging stakeholders (Castelló et al., 2016), along with the need for engaging marginalized or powerless voices (Crane, 2013; Eikelenboom & Long, 2023), underscores the demand for more comprehensive understandings and explanations of how stakeholder engagement is performed in organizational life.

This Special Issue aims to serve as a springboard for theory building and research on stakeholder engagement. Our goal is to bring together contributions that illuminate different modes of stakeholder engagement and their interplay. In this introductory article, we discuss participation, inclusion, and democracy as complementary yet incomplete modes of stakeholder engagement and relate them to the articles in this Special Issue. We argue that only by integrating all three modes can one achieve what we call "holistic" stakeholder engagement. Finally, we outline directions for further research on stakeholder engagement.

Three Modes of Stakeholder Engagement

Despite growing attention to stakeholder engagement in business and society research, understandings and explanations of its activities, practices, and strategies remain scant and fragmented (Kujala et al., 2022). Much of the literature equates stakeholder engagement with "participation" (Loureiro et al., 2020) without clearly defining what participation entails. Others attempt to distinguish stakeholder engagement from "other constructs," such as stakeholder inclusion and democracy (Kujala et al., 2022, p. 1142).

In this article, we deviate from prior work by viewing participation, inclusion, and democracy as complementary yet incomplete parts of stakeholder engagement. Doing so enables us to develop more systematic and nuanced understandings and explanations of how stakeholder engagement is performed. Specifically, we consider participation, inclusion, and democracy as different modes or ways of stakeholder engagement. The three modes, we argue, do not represent a progression on a continuum from "low" to "high"

levels of engagement. Instead, each mode makes genuine contributions and highlights certain aspects of stakeholder engagement, while obscuring others. We, therefore, provide a brief overview of each mode of stakeholder engagement separately (see Table 1) as a starting point for the ensuing discussion on future research directions and potential areas of interconnection and conflict between them.

Stakeholder Engagement Mode 1: Participation

"Participation" refers to the gathering and provision of input in the form of ideas and information (Quick & Feldman, 2011). Against this understanding, participation may appear less substantial than its portrayal in the stakeholder engagement literature, which often ascribes a more active, contributory role to stakeholders in organizational activities (see Kujala et al., 2022). Yet, as prior research shows, input generated through participation can inform an organization's programs, policies, and strategies (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019). Hence, participation in the way understood here may allow stakeholders to shape important organizational issues and processes.

As prior research shows, manifestations of participation vary. It may take the form of a feedback process, in which organizational actors such as managers seek feedback and stakeholders such as employees or customers provide it (Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004). Participation can also occur in and through sites, arenas, and channels such as polls and focus groups, regular meetings, as well as workshops and open house days (Provasnek et al., 2018). Aided by recent technological developments, crowdsourcing has become another contemporary practice of obtaining diverse inputs from multiple stakeholders (Matzler et al., 2016), for instance, through pages on social media that accompany firm events (Viglia et al., 2018). While these manifestations reflect solicited participation, the gathering and provision of ideas and information may not necessarily be invited. For example, activists may vehemently express their discontent with, become active in, and, in doing so, partly shape an organization's agenda (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). Likewise, resistance within and around organizational processes in the form of counter-hegemonic discourses generates input that may or may not feed into an organization's programs, policies, and strategies (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

Despite notable differences, these manifestations share the understanding that participation is a relational process, one that comes into being in and through social interaction. For example, feedback processes can only be viewed as participatory if some actors involved give and others take feedback. For crowdsourcing to be considered as participation, it is not enough

Table 1. Three Modes of Stakeholder Engagement: Participation, Inclusion, and Democracy.

	Participation	Inclusion	Democracy
Definition	Gathering and provision of input in the form of ideas and information	Giving voice to stakeholders through the cocreation of issues, priorities, and procedures	Conceding decision-making rights to stakeholders
Key aspects	Feedback-seeking, activism and resistance	Fostering dialogues based on a shared sense of belonging	Direct, consensus, or deliberative democracy
Unit of analysis	Social interaction	Social interaction	Decision-making
Frame of reference through which each mode shows up	Resonance in organizational activities	Equity in organizational activities	Legitimacy of decisions made
Sample articles	Bailey and Lumpkin (2023); den Hond and de Bakker (2007); Viglia et al. (2018)	Arenas et al. (2013); Fujimoto et al. (2019); Griffin et al. (2021)	Dawkins (2015); Matten and Crane (2005); Scherer and Vögtlin (2020)

to simply set up a platform; it requires a "crowd" that is willing and able to actively provide input, as well as organizational actors who are willing and able to engage with this input. Hence, in stakeholder engagement, participation requires self-selection by those who may eventually participate, but such self-selection is far from self-evident (Friesl et al., 2023). Participation, therefore, requires cultivating the propensity and competencies of potential participants (Bailey & Lumpkin, 2023; Splitter et al., 2024), as well as continuously providing opportunities for them to contribute input (Massa & O'Mahony, 2021). Likewise, activism that remains isolated from the criticized party risks becoming activism for its own sake, lacking the influence on organizational processes that it seeks. And resistance when detached from what is resisted may be no more than the metaphorical valve for letting steam off. Hence, while often directed toward social change, participation may unintendedly reproduce established ways of doing things (Daudigeos et al., 2021).

Hence, for participation to be substantive rather than merely symbolic, stakeholder input must influence organizational activities. We argue that participation, as a mode of stakeholder engagement, manifests through resonance in organizational activities. That is, to call a process "participation" requires the sought and provided input to matter at least in some respects. It is all too easy to comply with trends toward greater openness (Whittington et al., 2011) by setting up participatory processes whose inputs are never seriously considered. Conversely, one may doubt the sincere nature of inputs potentially provided by click workers and bots in crowdsourcing processes. This does not mean that inputs have to fundamentally change the course of organizational activity for participation to occur. As stakeholders involved through participation are not included in the activities and decisions on which they provide input, it remains up to those who perform the activities and make the decisions to determine whether and how they use these ideas and information (Hautz et al., 2017). Yet, for participation to reveal itself, involved actors must genuinely engage with each other in that they are receptive to varied input: information on organizational processes on which stakeholders base their input, and ideas by stakeholders that are considered in the organization's programs, policies, and strategies.

Stakeholder Engagement Mode 2: Inclusion

Stakeholder inclusion is a mode of stakeholder engagement that entails the right to contribute to organizational activities and the right to oppose. This, again, relates to Quick and Feldman (2011), who referred to inclusion as the cocreation of an organization's issues, priorities, and procedures by giving

voice to stakeholders. As such, stakeholder inclusion is a concept that cuts across individual, relational, collective, and structural levels (Nishii & Leroy, 2022) and is a multidimensional concept involving givers, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders (Fujimoto et al., 2019).

Stakeholder inclusion occurs in various contexts. For example, at the workplace, managers might define opportunities for inclusion in strategy making or the cocreation of policies around diversity or care (Castelló et al., 2016; Murphy & Arenas, 2010). Likewise, in multistakeholder initiatives aimed at developing governance schemes such as standards, principles, ratings, and certifications (Dawkins, 2015; Fujimoto et al., 2019), this mode involves giving voice to stakeholders (King & Lenox, 2000) and cocreating global framework agreements or transnational accords with them (Ashwin et al., 2020; Schuessler et al., 2023). Central to these stakeholder inclusion attempts is to foster dialogues (Golob & Podnar, 2014) not just by command, but around a shared sense of belonging that enables stakeholders to be vocal in contributions to organizational activities (Fujimoto et al., 2019).

Although stakeholder inclusion is intuitively appealing, prior research shows that it is difficult to attain (Mena & Palazzo, 2012). This is because attempts to include stakeholders create tensions with efficiency (Henry et al., 2022) and because making such attempts work requires exclusion (Adamson et al., 2021). Such exclusion may, for instance, happen by prioritizing certain stakeholders, as well as their value systems and sensitivities to social problems, over others (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Pek et al., 2023), and giving voice to stakeholders in some organizational activities but excluding them from procedural considerations (Dobusch et al., 2019).

Hence, as a mode of stakeholder engagement, inclusion reveals itself through signs of equity. As others argue, stakeholder inclusion ensures that all stakeholders have an "equal opportunity to engage in the discourse" (Hahn & Weidtmann, 2016, p. 101; Shore et al., 2018), regardless of their backgrounds or identities. While this may be an unattainable ideal, stakeholder inclusion must demonstrate at least minimal equity to unleash its full potential. This enhances perceptions that solutions or rules developed with stakeholders are of higher quality and more widely accepted by those affected (Arenas et al., 2020). This applies not only to the content of deliberations but also to their procedural quality (Mena & Palazzo, 2012).

Stakeholder Engagement Mode 3: Democracy

Finally, building on earlier scholarly debates (see Banerjee, 2008; Mohr, 1977), interest in the concept of stakeholder democracy is growing. Stakeholder democracy suggests that stakeholders should have decision-making power

within organizational activities, potentially on equal terms (Kroll & Edinger-Schons, 2024). Prior research suggests that this can enhance decision quality (Pergelova et al., 2019) and promote stakeholder emancipation (Felicetti, 2018). Thus, democracy represents a mode of stakeholder engagement in which stakeholders, including those beyond formal organizational boundaries, are given decision-making rights in organizational governance (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Manifestations of stakeholder democracy as a mode of stakeholder engagement vary markedly. Some studies refer to the adoption of rules and principles of direct or consensus-based democracy within organizations (Dawkins, 2014, 2015) as, for instance, in the context of board composition and top management teams (Moriarty, 2014) or quests for "workplace democracy" more generally (Battilana et al., 2022). Furthermore, joining and being active in unions is a partially legally protected way for employees to have their interests represented in organizational decisions. Yet, inspired by the continual decrease of union membership relative to employment growth (International Labour Organization, 2023), others argue that the adoption of democratic principles is not enough to realize democracy as a mode of stakeholder engagement. They highlight the importance of generating mutual understanding and consensus building (Passetti et al., 2019), drawing attention to the Habermasian idea of deliberative democracy in which authentic democracy is realized in and through communication (Mena & Palazzo, 2012; Patzer et al., 2018).

While manifestations of stakeholder democracy differ, they fundamentally encapsulate the idea that stakeholder engagement essentially plays out in an organization's decision-making processes. This conceptualization advocates for the active involvement of stakeholders in decision-making, beyond mere inclusion or participation in organizational activities. Prior work suggests that this requires not only democratic principles but also deliberative spaces that facilitate continual contributions by both organizational actors and stakeholders, and perhaps even a democratization of structures and processes at large (Corus & Ozanne, 2012; Felicetti, 2018).

Sincere democracy as a mode of stakeholder engagement, then, emerges where organizational decisions are considered legitimate not only by managers but also by all relevant stakeholders (Desai, 2018). Prior work shows that democratization increases the legitimacy of organizational decisions because these decisions align with stakeholders' interests as well (Edinger-Schons et al., 2019). Yet, as Hielscher et al. (2014) highlighted, the relationship between democratic decision-making and decision legitimacy may not be self-evident because the often friction-prone nature of democratic processes can lead firms and stakeholders to be collectively better off using more

"efficient" decision-making methods. Democratic decision-making can, arguably, slow down processes, stall decisions, and even result in the (mis) use of significant organizational resources (Crucke & Knockeart, 2016; Harrison & Freeman, 2004). This then reinforces the view that outright democracy is unattainable in organizations and, thus, needs to be balanced with hierarchical control (Ramus et al., 2021). Hence, for stakeholder democracy to be genuinely in place, the mere intention to secure decision legitimacy is not enough: it also requires that both organizational actors and stakeholders perceive democratically derived decisions as legitimate.

Contributions to the Special Issue: Integrating the Three Modes to Understand Holistic Stakeholder Engagement

In elaborating three modes of stakeholder engagement, we suggest that stakeholder engagement involves different benefits and challenges. From these insights, we infer that the three modes are complementary yet incomplete, and that their combination is needed to realize the greater potential of stakeholder engagement. When all three modes are integrated, we speak of "holistic stakeholder engagement."

In Figure 1, we map out all three modes, highlighting their unique contributions and intersections. First, combining participation with inclusion expands participatory efforts by ensuring that stakeholders have equal opportunities to contribute actively to organizational activities. Yet, this combination may miss the provision of stakeholders with decision-making rights. Therefore, it still runs the risk of involving stakeholders only in ceremonial rather than substantive ways, potentially making no difference in organizational activities.

Second, combining inclusion with democracy fosters both equity and legitimacy by enriching inclusive practices that allow stakeholders to contribute to organizational activities with decision-making rights. However, this combination misses participation as another mode of stakeholder engagement. In doing so, it may be performed without sufficient informational input from stakeholders.

Third, combining participation with democracy allows for democratic decision-making processes that are sufficiently informed by stakeholders' inputs. Yet, this combination misses stakeholder inclusion. Therefore, it does not ensure that democratic decision-making processes give equal attention to all provided inputs. Consequently, combining participation with democracy without ensuring inclusion risks enabling only the more dominant stakeholders to disproportionately influence organizational activities.

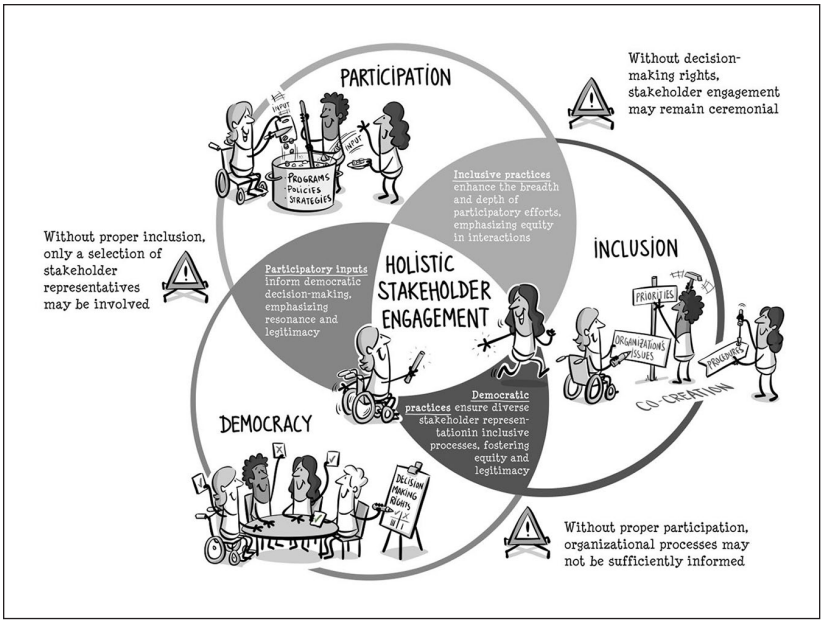

Figure 1. Intersections of Participation, Inclusion, and Democracy as Modes of Stakeholder Engagement.

Finally, the central overlap represents the holistic approach to stakeholder engagement where all three modes—participation, inclusion, and democracy—are combined. Hence, "holistic stakeholder engagement" gives voice to stakeholders through participation, allows them to contribute to organizational activities through inclusion, and grants decision-making rights through democracy. A key question then arises: Is this combination truly attainable? As discussed earlier, each mode of stakeholder engagement presents its own challenges. While combining these modes may offset some difficulties, it could also cumulate and perhaps even exacerbate others. Therefore, this combination might be considered more as an ideal to strive toward, rather than a consistently achievable goal.

Given the aspirational nature of combining all three modes of stakeholder engagement, some contributions to this Special Issue on "stakeholder engagement"[1] appropriately focus on understanding and explaining specific modes (Billiet et al., 2025; Pietilä et al., 2025; Bader et al., 2025). Others, however, provide evidence for a combination of stakeholder participation, inclusion, and democracy, and discuss how it can be attained (Järvelä et al., 2025; Radoynovska; 2025).

To begin with, Pietilä et al. (2025) examine *stakeholder participation*, specifically exploring facets of power involved in this mode of stakeholder engagement. Drawing on strategy discourse and paradox research, they analyze the strategy process of a social and health sector organization, revealing contradictions between the ideals of openness through stakeholder engagement and the control-oriented nature of traditional strategy making. Their analysis identifies different types of participation, ranging from more substantive to more symbolic. Furthermore, they elaborate the "engagement–control paradox," where traditional strategy making methods lead to participation as a means of exerting control. In this way, Pietilä et al. contribute to the research on participation as a mode of stakeholder engagement by informing the "dark side" (Kujala et al., 2022) of involving stakeholders.

Bader et al. (2025) extend our understanding of *stakeholder inclusion* by specifying how relational practices shape stakeholder engagement. They do so by examining the strategy process of a city, focusing specifically on the city's civic engagement process, which was based on practices of including experts, citizens, and politicians through means such as workshops, labs, and work streams. Through their analysis, Bader et al. (2025) identify three relational practices as well as their implications for stakeholder engagement. Their work not only sheds light on relational dynamics in stakeholder engagement but also demonstrates how stakeholder engagement may paradoxically lead to disengagement.

Billiet et al. (2025) expand *stakeholder democracy* by addressing a central question: Why do organizations engage with stakeholders? Specifically, through their conceptual work, they build theory on the conditions under which cooperatives as democratically organized entities can be functional. Their premise is that, while democratic decision-making can reduce cooperatives' efficiency, these organizations may nevertheless be considered attractive in competitive environments where such entities provide greater possibilities for co-deciding and less exploitation. Specifically, their analysis of decision-making costs and exploitation costs suggests that cooperatives are functional especially in times of crisis when the value of alternatives decreases, and under the consideration of noneconomic value provided by cooperatives. Yet, Billiet et al. also argue that the value of cooperatives may be compromised by "democratic failures" that increase decision-making costs.

The two remaining articles in this Special Issue provide insights into what we call "holistic stakeholder engagement," that is, a combination of all three modes of stakeholder engagement. Specifically, Radoynovska (2025) examines *stakeholder participation, inclusion*, and *democracy* in the context of multistakeholder enterprises (MSEs). She argues that in MSEs, all three modes must often be performed simultaneously due to the blurred boundaries

between organizational representatives and stakeholders and because stakeholder engagement cannot be selectively used merely as a means to achieve predefined objectives. Consequently, stakeholder engagement draws attention to potential gaps between MSE leaders' expectations of living up to its ideals versus the "reality" of its performance. Based on a study of leaders of 28 French MSEs, Radoynovska shows how varying leader sensemaking strategies are crucial for the enactment of (revised) stakeholder engagement strategies in order to maintain coherence or address misalignments between expectations and reality.

Finally, Järvelä et al. (2025) bring together *stakeholder participation, inclusion, and democracy* by focusing on the indirect influence of public governance measures on stakeholder engagement. They examine how public sector actors use participatory governance to influence private stakeholder engagement beyond public governance processes. To do so, they introduce the concept of "silent steering" to describe how indirect effects on stakeholder engagement occur. Silent steering looks at indirect ways of influencing. The research is based on an in-depth case study of Finnish mining governance from 1995 to 2020. Through this case study, the authors show how public actors can have other forms of influence beyond using policy, agenda setting, or partnering, by orchestrating the desired results through the use of intermediaries and indirect mechanisms, including role giving, example giving, and expectations giving. Giving special rights in public governance processes empowers certain stakeholders, influencing the perceived power and establishing priority orders in stakeholder engagement. In this way, public participatory processes serve as models for engaging stakeholders in decision-making and raise expectations about who the relevant stakeholders are and what the engagement agendas are.

Moving Forward: Future Research on Stakeholder Engagement

A more nuanced view on participation, inclusion, and democracy provides a deeper and systematic understanding of varying modes of stakeholder engagement. These modes draw attention to different manifestations of stakeholder engagement, as well as varying frames of reference through which stakeholder engagement reveals itself. In addition, the framework of holistic stakeholder engagement advanced in this article (see Figure 1) highlights several promising directions for future research on each mode of engagement, their interplay, and the tensions between them.

First, greater conceptual clarity on modes of stakeholder engagement highlights the need to study each in greater depth. Specifically, what activities, practices, and strategies facilitate stakeholder participation, inclusion,

and democracy are undertaken? What antecedents and conditions enable each mode of engagement, and how do they contribute to more holistic stakeholder engagement? Additionally, what are the boundary conditions, implications, and consequences of these performances? The contributions to this Special Issue have made some progress toward advancing understandings and explanations in these areas by examining power dynamics (Pietilä et al., 2025), relational practices (Bader et al., 2025), and functional outcomes (Billiet et al., 2025) across different modes of stakeholder engagement. Yet, these are just some of the many potential enablers, practices, and outcomes that surround and constitute these modes. The framework advanced in this article, we hope, will enable future research on stakeholder engagement to build on the contributions included in this Special Issue in order to systematically extend prior work on participation, inclusion, and democracy as modes of stakeholder engagement.

Second, future research may build on the greater clarity on different modes of stakeholder engagement provided in this article for more nuanced examinations of their interplay (e.g., see Järvelä et al., 2025; Radoynovska, 2025). Can stakeholder participation in the form of input generation eventually culminate in stakeholder inclusion as a more dialogical contribution to organizational activities, or even in the provision of decision-making rights under stakeholder democracy? If so, how and under which conditions does that happen, and with what implications for organizational activities? Conversely, in which ways does stakeholder democracy build on stakeholder inclusion or participation? Is it plausible to concede decision-making rights without a contributory inclusion of and by stakeholders in organizational dialogues, or without opportunities for stakeholders to generate input? Likewise, how are processes of stakeholder inclusion interlinked with the means provided by stakeholder participation? What are the antecedents and conditions that determine how modes of stakeholder engagement build on each other, and with what consequences?

Third, gaining an appreciation of the interplay between modes of stakeholder engagement will draw greater attention to tensions between them, many of which business and society research has yet to explore. For example, given that inclusion may also give rise to, and partly even requires exclusion (Dobusch et al., 2019), in what ways might stakeholder inclusion disable processes of participation and democracy—such as when democratic decisions only gain legitimacy by excluding certain actors, like corporations (Barlow, 2022)? (How) can stakeholder democracy overrule or undermine participation as a mode of stakeholder engagement, particularly when participation is at least partly performed in symbolic ways? Conversely, input generation through stakeholder participation may obstruct deeper involvement by and with stakeholders, especially when the ability to voice critique is seen

as "sufficient"—even when such critique cannot be far-reaching because those who are allowed to raise critique are expected to criticize their own activities (see Daudigeos et al., 2021). Despite the broader trend to adopt modes of stakeholder engagement (see Stjerne et al., 2024), what are the psychological, organizational, and societal mechanisms that prevent shifts toward these modes?

Fourth, future research could explore tensions related to stakeholder engagement more broadly. Digital tools and technologies, such as social media and online communities, may facilitate stakeholder engagement. However, they also contribute to broader social dynamics, such as polarization and the rise of populist and antidemocratic climates, which can undermine the effectiveness of this process (Schoeneborn et al., 2024). This development highlights the need for a more nuanced engagement with the role of digital tools and technologies in and between modes of stakeholder engagement (Castelló & Lopez-Berzosa, 2023; D'Cruz et al., 2022). Furthermore, the concept of stakeholder engagement often conflicts with conventional logics of organizing and managing, many of which come into play simultaneously when stakeholders are involved in organizational activities (Ramus et al., 2021). This raises questions about how these competing logics are, or can be, reconciled. Relatedly, stakeholder engagement elicits tensions of autonomy and control. On the one hand, it can be viewed as an act of emancipation, where stakeholders gain a say in organizational activities to varying extents, rather than simply being considered in organizational decisions. On the other hand, it can be seen as a perfidious means for managers to extend their control beyond organizational boundaries, subtly but significantly steering conversations and decision-making processes (see Pietilä et al., 2025). If this is so, how can stakeholder engagement fulfill stakeholder theory's promise of creating win–win situations (see Freeman, 1984)? Such tensions also bring attention to moral gaps between normative ideals of stakeholder engagement on the one side and its potentially abusive performance on the other, such as disconnections between "good intentions" and broken promises or the exploitation of stakeholders' free labor. Additionally, stakeholder engagement elicits temporal tensions—not only between stakeholders' competing views and understandings of time (Ramus et al., 2021) but also between the certainty and uncertainty of prospective outcomes gained through stakeholder engagement. On the one hand, stakeholder engagement helps reduce uncertainty by gaining access to stakeholders' views on and responses to organizational activities and may actively be stimulated for that reason (de Roo et al., 2024). On the other hand, stakeholders' involvement, in whatever form, sows the seeds for eventually performing organizational activities in ways that differ from what was originally

envisioned, thus potentially eroding efforts related to such involvement. How do organizational actors and stakeholders enact such temporal tensions, and with what implications for continued participation, inclusion, or democracy?

Conclusion

Despite considerable interest in stakeholder engagement, this process has remained under-theorized. Building on the insights from this Special Issue, the framework presented in this article provides greater clarity on participation, inclusion, and democracy as key modes through which stakeholder engagement is realized. Furthermore, this framework highlights the key benefits and limits of these modes, illustrating their complementary yet incomplete nature. Finally, it points to ways in which these modes intersect to form what we call "holistic stakeholder engagement." We hope this framework will inspire further research to more thoroughly explore the processes and modalities of stakeholder engagement.

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Note

1. For this Special Issue, we received 57 submissions from different parts of the world and from different scholarly domains. Submissions addressed many themes, such as typologies of stakeholder democracy, family firms' engagement with stakeholders, or the development of engagement platforms. After a thorough review process involving 65 expert reviewers (thank you!), five great papers have been accepted for publication. Somewhat surprisingly, these five articles all focus on stakeholder engagement in European contexts such as Belgium, Germany, France, and Finland. One of the included articles is conceptual in nature, whereas the others are qualitative studies. Although a fair amount of quantitative work was also submitted, it eventually did not make it into this Special Issue. These observations already give rise to some recommendations for further research, stimulating greater methodological and geographical diversity.

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