# THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY ON THE PROACTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF EMPLOYEES

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**Abstract:**

Proactive employee behaviour provides immense benefits to organisations at both macro and micro levels of analysis. Studies have suggested workplace democracy one of its significant antecedents. However, research on the workplace democracy–proactive employee behaviour relationship has been grossly neglected. The current study employed the proactive behaviour theory to address the general association between workplace democracy and proactive employee behaviour in Iraqi higher educational institutions, based on assessments of the constructs at the global level of analysis. Scoping review was used in sourcing relevant literature upon which the hypothesis was developed. In testing the hypothesis, data were collected from a sample of 244 faculty (F$_{female}$, 29.02%; M$_{male}$, 70.98%) drawn from Al-Qadisiyah University, using validated measures of workplace democracy ($\alpha$ = 0.915) and proactive behaviour ($\alpha$ = 0.787). PLS-SEM in SmartPLS was used in the analysis and test of the hypothesis. The results confirm that workplace democracy significantly and positively impacts the proactive behaviours of employees at the Al-Qadisiyah University ($\beta$ = 0.011, $t$ = 2.799, $p$ = 0.005). Based on the discussion of the results, several recommendations were proffered.

**Keywords:**

Workplace Democracy, Proactive Behaviour, Organisational, Co-Worker Oriented, Individual

## Introduction

Frega (2021) considers employee involvement in organisations' decision-making processes as a necessary pillar of workplace democracy. The active involvement of employees in organisational processes is seen as a mechanism for enhancing their job performance and as a

crucial basis for achieving organisation-wide objectives (Mueller and Neuschaeffer, 2021; Uribetxebarria *et al.*, 2021). Employee participation facilitates sustainable employee engagement (Chin and Yusof, 2022), satisfies employees, and strengthens their affective commitment to their employing organisations (Grund and Titz, 2021). Indeed, the degree to which workers have achieved or are allowed participation, especially in the organisation's decision-making structure, is considered a direct reflection of the democratic underpinnings of the organisation (Timming, 2015). The latitude workers enjoy under a system of workplace democracy is assumed to imbue them with proactive tendencies that could potentially find expression in increased employee creativity and innovation (Flocco *et al.*, 2021).

Workplace democracy denotes a set of principles that ensure workers have democratic rights and privileges in their workplace (Timming and Summers, 2020). The ongoing debate over workplace democracy is often portrayed as a confrontation between opposing ideals. The impact on employees' dignity and self-respect, the elimination of power differentials, and the effective representation of workers' interests in company-wide decisions are highlighted by proponents (Frega *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, opponents argue that company-wide choices require technical and managerial competence (Gerlsbeck and Herzog, 2020); efficient and effective decision-making requires agile and quick processes, thus delegating decision-making to specialised executives a must (Timming and Summers, 2020). Notwithstanding the opposing stances in the literature, the theories underpinning most research on workplace democracy generally accept that democratic processes result in better choices. The reason is that democratic institutions can extract broadly disseminated information and use people's cognition (Gerlsbeck, 2016).

Therefore, a democratic climate in organisations is an important condition that facilitates the effective functioning of the employee (Çavuş and Biçer, 2021). This organisational climate is all the more important today's organisations characterised by rapid changes and developments that could potentially render organisational procedures and processes malfunction. Indeed, it has been reported that a positive organisational climate significantly conditions employees to engage in politically manipulative behaviours that may not benefit the organisation (Tripathi and Tripathi, 2022). Conversely, given the right democratic climate, employees could potentially become proactive and contribute immensely to achieving organisational ends. Such proactive behaviours may include individual proactive behaviour, proactive behaviour directed to employees, and proactive organisational behaviour. Thus, the benefits of proactive employee behaviour could be felt at both macro and micro levels of organisational processes.

However, despite the importance of workplace democracy to the emergence of proactive employee behaviours, the literature on this important relationship as found on the Scopus (one the largest databases of scholarly content) is very scanty. To illustrate, an open all-field search for studies on the workplace democracy–proactive behaviours relationship published in Scopus-indexed sources in the last two decades (2002–2021) yielded only 18 documents, most of which originate from western countries (Figure 1). The search string used: (ALL ("workplace democracy" OR "organisational democracy" OR "organisational democracy") AND ALL ("proactive behaviour" OR "proactive behavior")). This result is especially more surprising when viewed from the global insistence on democracy as the most preferred principle for organising public life. There seems to be no such research from Iraq.
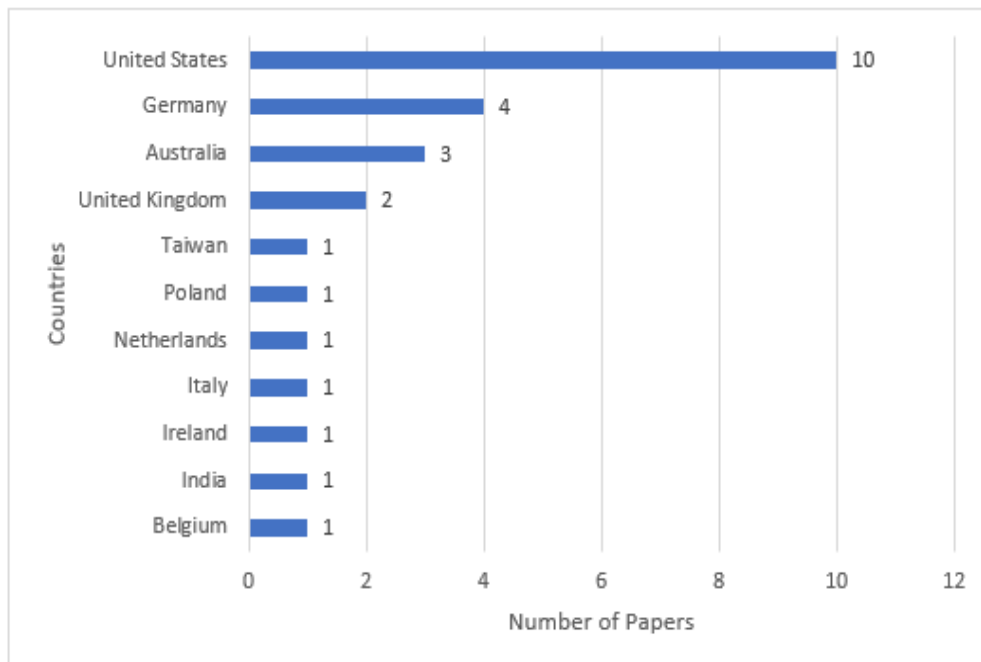
**Figure 1: Publications on the Workplace Democracy–Proactive
Behaviour Relationship (2002-2021)**

Thus, not only is the dearth of studies globally on workplace democracy keenly evident, but it is not even taken off locally in Iraq. Perhaps, this trend is consequent upon the increasing authoritarianism in universities as senior administration endeavoured to control faculty behaviours through the imposition of targets and performance metrics (McCann *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of research on workplace democracy and its outcomes from universities in Iraq (the focal organisations in this study) is surprising as they are currently in the process of consolidating their reformed structures based on the principles of decentralisation and devolution of responsibilities and powers (Al-Janabi and Anderson, 2011). This study modestly contributes towards addressing this gap. In view of this, this study relied on extant theoretical and empirical works to address the gap identified. Specifically, the study was guided by the following two research questions. The first question was addressed through the scoping research of the literature and informed the conceptual definitions, and the research hypothesis developed and tested. The second research question was addressed by the results of the empirical investigation carried out.

1. What are the theoretical foundations of workplace democracy and proactive behaviour?
2. Is there any relationship between workplace democracy and proactive behaviour of employees at Al-Qadisiyah University?

**Literature Review**
The eclectic scoping review technique was used to target papers that address the subject of this study. According to Colquhoun *et al.* (2014, pp. 1292, 1294), scoping review "addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area" by following a five-step procedure: namely, identifying the research question; identifying relevant studies; study selection; charting the data; and collating, summarising results and reporting results (Cooper *et al.*, 2021). Based on the suggestion of Cairo *et al.* (2020), the studies collected through scoping were complemented by materials from the grey literature, including books, theses, monographs and encyclopaedia. These

materials collectively formed the basis upon which the theoretical and empirical evidence of the paper were built and the first research question addressed.

### *Workplace Democracy*

Frega (2021) gives a four-level conceptualisation of workplace democracy that reflects four ways of economic organisation. First, Frega (2021) sees workplace democracy as practices that allow workers to participate, directly or indirectly, in organisational decision-making processes. Second, he sees it as the allowance of trade union activities in a given economic sector. Third, the author sees workplace democracy as a system that allows workers to obtain shared ownership of their workplaces. Finally, Frega (2021) sees workplace democracy as a "voice" that allows employees to express their grievances without fear of hostile backlash from management. However, the "voice" should be promotive and not prohibitive (Um and Naqvi, 2020). The current study is informed by the first and fourth conceptualisations in Frega's (2021) schema. The paper, therefore, understands workplace democracy workers' credible participation in organisational-level decision-making structures. It is an arrangement through which the democratic aspirations of employees (such as autonomy, freedom, and involvement in decision-making) could be achieved.

Workplace democracy, which allows for genuine self-determination in management and at the task level, offers advantages unrelated to Frega's (2021) third schema (i.e., shared ownership). In addition to the affective organisational commitment such schemes engender in employees (Sobering, 2021), it is also a means of building the requisite workforce competencies and the spirit of personal responsibility towards developing one's workplace. Such diverse attributions of benefits arising from the concept of workplace democracy imply that it is a multi-dimensional construct. As for the dimensions of workplace democracy, six have been identified (Safari *et al.*, 2018): namely, decentralised control, criticism system, organisational justice, free exchange of information, independent communities, and rights of the individual.

The first dimension of workplace democracy addresses the structural issue of employee involvement in organisational decision-making. A decentralised control system ensures the distribution of responsibilities and powers that fall on a horizontal, vertical and geographical basis in the organisation to facilitate the achievement of the goals of the employees and the organisation (Ohrling *et al.*, 2021). This study reinterprets Nepomnyashchyy *et al.*'s (2021) quadrangular decentralisation process at the organisational level as involving the establishment of a basic unit-level system for managing an organisation's operations in a decentralised manner; the entablement of a balanced system of service delivery system; the institution of sustainable resource utilisation monitoring system across operational units of the organisation; and the establishment of clear lines of authority and reporting relationships for efficient management of individual employees. The combined implication of these four decentralisation processes provides the climate where the employee's potentials flourish (Ohrling *et al.*, 2021). The second dimension (i.e., criticism system) of workplace democracy provides a credible and beneficial channel where employee voices could be heard and their opinions and ideas channelled adequately across the decision-making hierarchy without the possibility of negative consequences (McGranahan, 2020). Such a channel ensures that alert employees readily approach the appropriate authorities with observations about potentially dysfunctional organisational processes. It also helps in building a supportive climate that encourages forward-thinking employees to champion new ideas that could push the boundaries of the organisation's performance (Bilge *et al.*, 2020).

The third dimension of workplace democracy is organisational justice. Engaging employees through workplace democracy may prove futile in the absence of organisational justice (Deepa, 2020). For instance, where employees are punished for voicing their legitimate concerns (an apparent injustice), one of the consequences is that employees become suspicious of organisational policies, including those relating to workplace democracy (Hussain and Shahzad, 2022). On the contrary, employees tend to be proactive and innovative in a climate of true organisational justice (Ye *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, the roles played by organisational justice in organisational processes have been well documented since the emergence of the concept. The concept is studied from distributive, procedural, and interactive dimensions (Colquitt, 2001). Distributive justice ensures equity in the allocation of democratic dividends (Hu and Han, 2021), procedural justice guarantees employee voice in the decision-making processes (Urbanska *et al.*, 2019), and interactive justice assures employees of fair treatment and equal chance of belongingness (Ceva, 2019).

The free exchange of information is the fourth dimension of workplace democracy. Unfettered access to information, at the least on a need-to-know basis, helps in carrying employees along, particularly with regards to understanding the organisation's vision and mission as well as information critical to the work-related decisions the employees have to make (Dahou and Hacini, 2018). Indeed, access to information is an employee right that could only be diminished at the expense of sustainable organisational performance. The question of employee rights brings us to the fifth dimension: the individual worker's right to maintain beneficial relations with co-workers. This right contributes to workplace democracy by allowing employees to connect with colleagues, build friendships, satisfy their need for affective well-being, and make them thrive at work (Badri *et al.*, 2022). Workplaces that do not support these employee rights may lead to workplace ostracism which eats away employees' commitment (Haldorai *et al.*, 2020). Finally, as the sixth dimension of workplace democracy, some measure of community independence is required so that members are encouraged to bond with each other and work as a team towards better performance and the involvement of all employees (Safari *et al.*, 2018). The Independence climate in organisations facilitates employee voice (Peng and Wei, 2020), which is critical to workplace democracy.

### *Proactive Behaviour*

Employees who take the initiative to solve current problems or institute new ways of doing things, often going against the current organisational practices, are generally described as having proactive behaviours (Crant, 2000). Because proactive behaviour describes self-initiative, future-focused attitudes and attempts to change how work optimises performance, it is a critical and decisive aspect of organisational behaviour (Brosi *et al.*, 2018). Thus, proactive behaviour enhances the organisation's self-directed procedures and represents a confluence of organisational work roles and employees' interests. The proactive behaviour of the individual is considered a critical asset necessary in bringing about organisational innovation and ensuring sustainable organisational performance (Guo *et al.*, 2019), thereby guaranteeing the organisation's future and its development (Helland *et al.*, 2021).

While the literature contains several characterisations of the proactive employee behaviour construct (e.g., Parker *et al.*, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2006), this study relied on Kanten and Alparslan's (2013) three-dimensional model. This choice is because the model, based on the earlier work of Belschak and Den Hartog (2010), clearly distinguishes between proactive behaviours that benefit the organisation, the individual and the dyads/teams co-employees in the workplace. Additionally, Kanten and Alparslan's (2013) model align well with the six

dimensions of workplace democracy as the logical antecedents of employees' proactive behaviour. The three dimensions include the organisational, the co-worker oriented, and the individual proactive behaviours.

According to Kanten and Alparslan (2013), employee initiatives directed at improving current organisational activities or introducing better ones are termed proactive employee behaviours. Tu *et al.* (2020) show that conscientious employees are more likely to be proactive in favour of their organisation. Kanten and Alparslan (2013) also explain that the support and help an employee renders to their colleagues, which are not mandated by their official job descriptions, are called co-worker oriented proactive behaviours. Szulc (2021) suggests that such behaviours must not be seen to be motivated by self-interest; otherwise, the behaviours cannot be classed as co-worker oriented, as demonstrated in Jia *et al.*'s (2021) study. Lastly, Kanten and Alparslan (2013) explain that the actions initiated by the individual employee at personal development and which contribute to their job performance are known as individual proactive behaviours. Guo *et al.* (2019) provide a recent instance of such behaviours.

*Research Model*

As a criterion-driven exploratory study, this study focused on explaining proactive employee behaviour based on the workplace democratic practices in an organisation. According to the proactive behaviour theory advanced in Parker *et al.* (2010) and Parker *et al.* (2006), contextual variables are one of the groups of antecedents to proactive behaviour in employees. The theory postulates that leadership, interpersonal climate, social processes, and others collectively and severally facilitate the emergence of proactive behaviours in employees. The construct that captures these contextual workplace variables is workplace democracy, as demonstrated in Weber *et al.*'s (2020) meta-analysis that returns "civic and democratic behaviours ($\rho$ = .21)" as a significant influence on employee behaviours. Indeed, several studies have modelled the antecedents of proactive employee behaviours, emphasising variables associated with organisational democracy. The most recent of these studies include Ahmed *et al.* (2019), Kapogiannis *et al.* (2021), Liu *et al.* (2019), Safari *et al.* (2018), Smithikrai (2022), and Um and Naqvi (2020). Thus, this study hypothesised a direct relationship between workplace democracy and proactive employee behaviours, as illustrated in Figure 2.
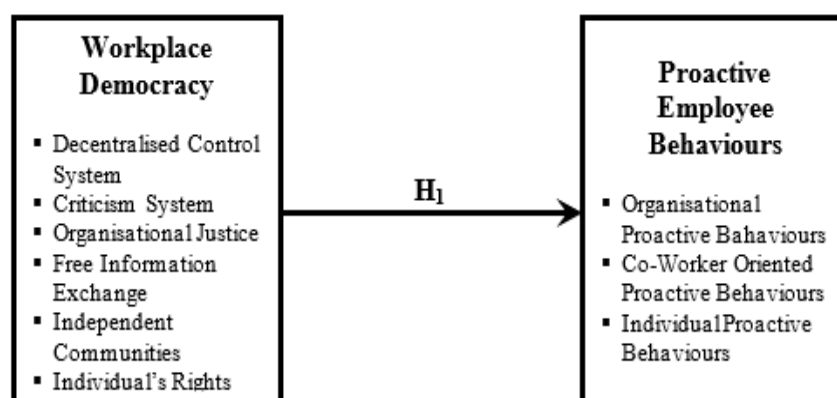


**Figure 2: Hypothetical Framework**

Additionally, the empirical literature suggests an apparent correlation between the two constructs, with proactive employee behaviour as the criterion variable and workplace democracy as the predictor variable. Nevertheless, as an exploratory study, the study

considered the relationship among the two constructs not at the dimensional level but at the global level of analysis. Indeed, the reliabilities for workplace democracy in Safari *et al.* (2018) were given at construct level and not at dimensional level, thereby suggesting that the variable could be effectively treated at the global level of analysis. Thus, the study explored the association between workplace democracy and proactive employee behaviour based on data collected from a sample of faculty members at Al-Qadisiyah University, Iraq. Accordingly, the study advanced and tested the following hypothesis:

H$_1$:    There is a positive and significant relationship between workplace democracy and proactive employee behaviour at Al-Qadisiyah University, Iraq.

**Research Methodology**
The quantitative research method was followed. Using survey questionnaires, the data collected from a sample of faculty members at Al-Qadisiyah University were analysed using descriptive statistics (including measures of centralisation and dispersion) and inferential statistics (such as measures of correlation). The hypothesis was tested using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS.

*Study Location and Sample*
The research was conducted within the precinct of Al-Qadisiyah University. This University was chosen primarily due to the ease of access, especially today with all the mobility restrictions associated with the government's strategies for combating the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic. Further, the faculty at the University are conversant with the relevant aspects of scientific research related to the objectives of this study. Data were collected cross-sectionally between February 1, 2021 and July 4, 2021, from 244 teaching staff. Stratification sampling technique was applied in selecting the respondents based on the departments they serve.

*Research Instrument*
A questionnaire consisting of three sections (see Table 1) was used in collecting primary data. The first section was designed to capture respondents' demographic data, including their gender, age, educational attainment, and current position in their respective faculties and departments. The second section features an adopted measure of workplace democracy taken from Safari *et al.* (2018). The third section contains the adopted indicators measuring proactive employee behaviour taken from Kanten and Alparslan (2013).

**Table 1: Questionnaire Structure and Sources of Construct Measures**

| Constructs | Dimensions | Sources |
|---|---|---|
| Proactive Behaviour | Organisational proactive behaviour; Co-worker oriented proactive behaviour; Individual proactive behaviour | Kanten and Alparslan (2013) |
| Workplace Democracy | Decentralised control system; Criticism system; Organisational justice; Free exchange of information; Independent communities; Individuals' rights | Safari *et al.* (2018) |
| Demographics | Gender; Age; Scientific title; Academic degree. | Field study |

*Proactive Employee Behaviour:* The study employed Kanten and Alparslan's (2013) 18-item scale in measuring this construct. The scale, built upon Belschak and Den Hartog's (2010) work, consists of three dimensions relating to employees' proactive behaviours that benefit the organisation, co-workers and themselves. The respondents rated their agreement with the 18

items (e.g., "Express opinions where it might be useful for organisation.") on a Likert scale that ranged from *1 = Strongly disagree* to *5 = Strongly agree*. Kanten and Alparslan (2013) report adequate reliability indices of 0.83, 0.85, and 0.87 for organisational, co-worker, and individual proactive behaviours.

*Workplace Democracy*: The study used Safari *et al.*'s (2018) 18-item inventory in measuring workplace democracy. The inventory consists of six dimensions listed in Table 1. The respondents evaluated their opinions regarding organisational democracy with the 18 items (e.g., "Clear mechanisms designed to address complaints and problems.") on a Likert scale that ranged from *1 = Strongly disagree* to *5 = Strongly agree*. Safari *et al.* (2018) reported acceptable reliabilities for the inventory ($\alpha = 0.87$, AVE = 0.53).

## Research Results

### Respondents' Demographics
The researcher distributed 425 questionnaires and collected back 224 valid and useable ones, thus achieving a 52.71% response rate. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the response rate is adequate. The respondents consisted of 70.98% males and 29.02% females, indicating the dominance of the male gender in the faculty of Al-Qadisiyah University (Table 2). Also, it was observed that the sample respondents were mostly young people for both male ($\overline{x}_{age}$ = 39.63, SD = 6.65) and female ($\overline{x}_{age}$ = 39.20, SD = 5.34) respondents. Slightly over half of the total respondents (52.68%) hold doctorate degrees in their respective fields of specialisation. The remaining respondents (47.32%) were holders of master's degrees. About a third (34.82%) of the total respondents belong to the professorial cadre (Assistant Professors, Associate Professors, and Professors). Below this cadre are the lecturers (consisting of lecturers and senior lecturers).

**Table 2: Respondents' Demographics**

| Variables | Categories | Value | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 159 | 70.98 |
| | Female | 65 | 29.02 |
| Mean Age | Male | 39.63 (SD = 6.65) | |
| | Female | 39.20 (SD = 5.34) | |
| Educational Degrees | PhD | 118 | 52.68 |
| | Master | 106 | 47.32 |
| Position | Professorial | 78 | 34.82 |
| | Lecturer | 146 | 65.18 |

### Reliability Analysis
Cronbach's coefficient $\alpha$ is the statistic used in assessing construct reliability in this study. The results presented in Figure 2 show that the Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the two variables measured at global levels exceeds the threshold of 0.70 established in Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Similar results were obtained for six dimensions of the sub-variables, while the remaining three sub-variables (criticism system, individual rights, and individual proactive behaviour) all meet the lowest minimum threshold of 0.60 situationally allowed (Berger and Hänze, 2015).
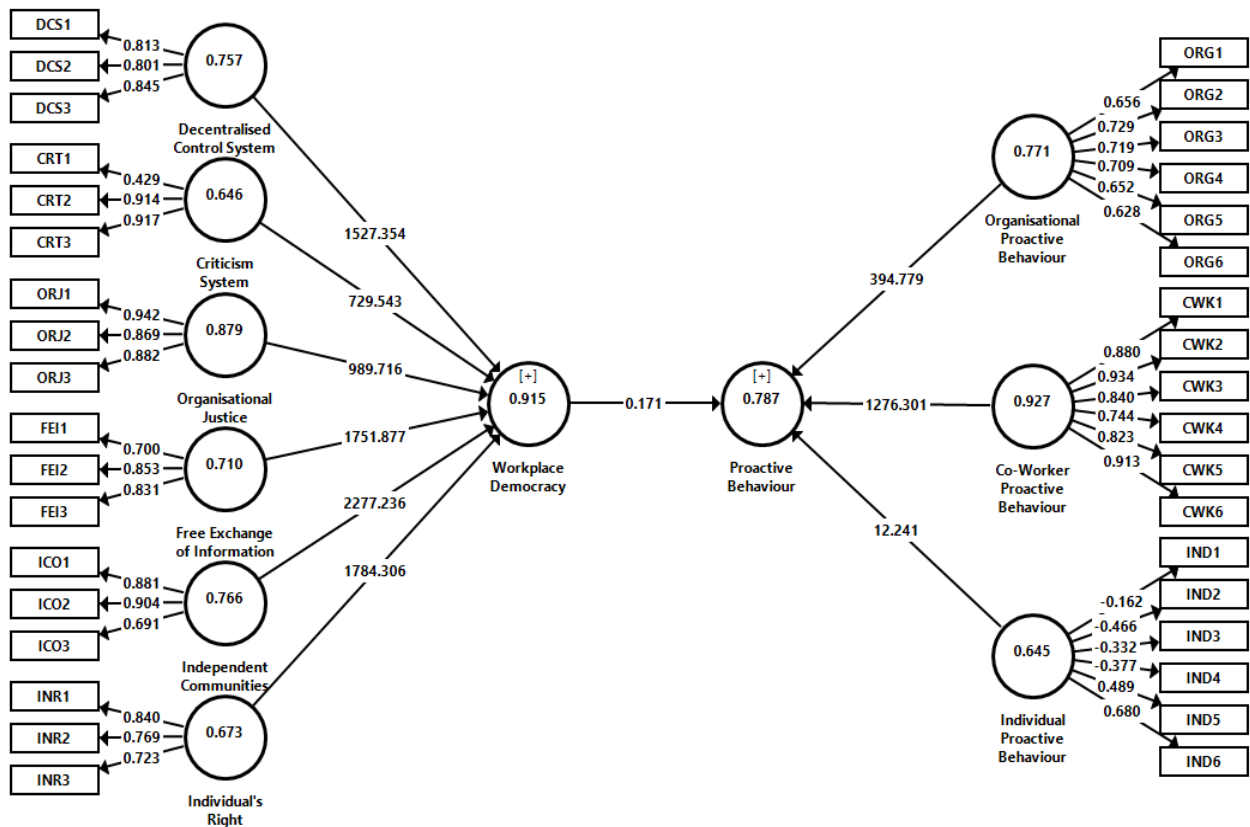
**Figure 2: Measurement Model Showing Constructs' α (in circles)**

*Path Coefficient and Hypothesis Test*

The paper used PLS-SEM in SmartPLS (v. 3.3.6) to analyse the workplace democracy–proactive employee relationship by calculating the path coefficients. The coefficients represent the strength of the relationship tested. The analysis was carried out based on the reflective–formative higher-order construct approach in which construct dimensions are treated as first-order reflective constructs. In contrast, workplace democracy and proactive employee behaviour were treated as formative higher-order constructs based on the repeated indicator approach (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2021). The results of the hypothesis test (Table 3) supports the effects of workplace democracy on the proactive behaviours of employees.

The study applied the non-parametric bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS with 1000 repeated sampling in computing the *t*-value of the significance test. The hypothesis test results in this study are given in Table 3. Workplace democracy significantly and positively impacts the proactive behaviours of employees at the Al-Qadisiyah University ($\beta = 0.011$, $t = 2.799$, $p = 0.005$), thereby confirming the study hypothesis.

**Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Test**

| Path | Mean | SD | t | p-Value | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Workplace Democracy => Proactive Behaviour of Employees | 0.011 | 0.003 | 2.799 | 0.005 | Supported |

## Discussion

In this study, the author analysed the effects of workplace democracy on the proactive behaviours of employees. The author concludes that the constituent elements of workplace democracy (i.e., a decentralised control system, a criticism system, organisational justice, free exchange of information, independent communities, and individual's rights) collectively have a significant positive impact on all facets of proactive employee behaviours (including organisational proactive behaviour, co-worker oriented proactive behaviour, and individual proactive behaviour). This outcome is consistent with the assumptions of the proactive behaviour theory advanced in Parker *et al.* (2010) and Parker *et al.* (2006). The outcome is equally consistent with the findings of (Ahmad *et al.*, 2020), who studied the proactivity of public servants (including university personnel) in Iraq. Ahmad *et al.* (2020) counted formalisation (one of the antitheses of organisational democracy) as a negative antecedent of employee proactivity.

Going beyond the Iraqi and educational contexts, several prior studies (e.g., Bauer *et al.*, 2019; Bjørkelo *et al.*, 2010; Kapogiannis *et al.*, 2021; Mallin *et al.*, 2014), carried out outside higher education contexts and within the ambience of western cultures (which are radically different from the eastern cultures of the Arab World), have empirically supported the notion that a democratic workplace culture creates credible spaces where employees readily take initiatives geared towards pushing organisational objectives forward, or helping colleagues, or making the individual a better corporate citizen through self-initiated personal development. Thus, this study could tentatively assume the global character democratic practices in the workplace. What remains curious is the lukewarm response of researchers to this important psychological and human resource matter.

## Practical Implications

In this section, the researcher highlights key recommendations for higher education managers towards developing the requisite proactivity in employees. The study has pointed out that beneficial employee proactivity may not emerge under the stultifying formalism of the official hierarchy that is seldom responsive to the exigencies of sustainable service delivery. The outcomes of this study support the importance of workplace democratic practices as facilitators for the emergence of proactive employee behaviour. Accordingly, the management of universities could trigger proactivity in their faculty by engrafting the elements of democratic work practices into the official hierarchy. Treating units and departments as independent communities with clear targets and deliverables could greatly facilitate ownership and guard against the shortcomings of a decentralised system. Thus, the practical implications of this study are built upon the predictive potentials of the six facets of workplace democracy.

It is settled science that operational decisions are best carried out at their respective responsibility centres in the organisational hierarchy, thereby facilitating true decentralisation of control. In this way, faculty members at departmental and unit levels may develop habits of taking initiatives that help them and help their units and departments do better. Additionally, the criticisms individual faculty members may bring against extant practices are best appreciated by those close to the affected service centres. This will mitigate the potential dysfunctional response to complaints and resistance against novel suggestions. With time, faculty members will begin to see it as their duty to initiate advancements on behalf of their working groups.

Even as employees feel duty-bound to give their best to their organisations, it is equally important that their individual rights be safeguarded. Workplace justice in all its three forms gives assurance in this direction and underpins a broad spectrum of workplace outcomes, including employee proactivity. In this regard, it is recommended that the allocational decisions of university management should not be fair but must be seen to be fair, taking due cognisance to merits earned by an employee as a result of initiatives they have undertaken that benefits the University. Approval procedures for novel suggestions should equally be made open to all and difficult to none. Such an open workforce management approach seldom fails to seed the much-needed interactions and collaborations among faculty members and across units and departments. A key ingredient towards this end is the free exchange of information among and between units, departments, and faculty members.

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