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FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION For Freedom.
Global Innovation Hub

Guide to Digital Participation Platforms

When to Use Them, How to Choose & Tips for Maximum Results

September 2025

With expanded AI guidance

People Powered is a global hub for participatory democracy — the direct participation of community members in making the policy decisions that affect their lives. We build the power and impact of organizations and leaders around the world who are building a more participatory democracy, through programs such as participatory budgeting, participatory policy-making, participatory planning, and citizen assemblies. Learn more at **peoplepowered.org**.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet. Learn more at **undp.org** or follow at **@UNDP**. The opinions, analyses and recommendations contained in this document do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the United Nations Development Programme, its Executive Board, or Member States.

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The primary author of this guide is **Matt Stempeck**.

This publication provides a comprehensive overview of digital participation platforms and related services, including some that are for-profit. This information is provided as a useful resource to users of the publication, but should not be interpreted as endorsement. Neither People Powered nor UNDP endorses any entity, individual, company, industry, or third party, including their brand, products, or services.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, governments and other institutions have leveraged digital platforms to engage citizens[1], residents, and constituents in decision-making. Platform developers, open source contributors, consultants and program administrators now comprise an ecosystem that invites the public to take on a greater role. They are increasingly digitizing existing programs like participatory budgeting[2], and envisioning entirely novel engagement patterns made possible by AI.

The maturity of the digital participation platform sector can be seen, for instance, in the endowment of international foundations to steward open source platforms like Decidim and CONSUL. And in the launch of an industry trade alliance, Association Civic Tech Europe, to collectively represent many of the for-profit platforms.

Around the world, entrepreneurs and civic hackers have developed a growing array of digital participation platforms to serve growing demand for people power. These tools help administrators within all levels of government, plus civil society organizations and other institutions, engage constituents. Collectively, they address almost any participatory method imaginable, including support for digitizing fully offline engagement methods. Digital participation platforms are being used before, during, and after participatory processes to enhance activities like urban planning, budget prioritization, citizen assemblies, and co-developing policy. And they're rapidly introducing AI-powered features to help participants and administrators alike run more frequent and more meaningful engagements.

While we often hear about technological platforms developed in wealthier countries, they have been used to enable participatory decision-making in a wide variety of global contexts. At their best, platforms enable decision-makers or communities to facilitate:

- Stakeholder engagement.
- Forging consensus or compromises.
- Collective deliberation and decision-making.
- Effective communication with the public.
- Transparent project tracking and monitoring.
- Department-spanning internal coordination.
- Sensemaking to legibly share the results of a process.

If you are looking to engage your community, or are interested in how digital tools can strengthen community engagement, this guide is for you. It explains what digital participation platforms are and walks you through how to choose, set up, and run them.

1 We use the term "citizen" to describe a person who participates in civic life, regardless of their legal status in a given jurisdiction.

2 Oficina, *Participatory Budgeting World Atlas 2020* (Oficina, 2020), accessed July 10, 2025, https://www.oficina.org.pt/publicacoes/participatory-budgeting-world-atlas-2020.

WHAT'S NEW

The first version of this guide was written in 2021 and published in early 2022. This second edition represents a significant update and expansion. The global People Powered community voted to update this resource to reflect the availability of AI features to streamline the work involved in running a process, and hopefully to enhance participants' experiences. This section includes discussion of the significant concerns and risks that come along with relying on AI in the context of participation processes. We've also updated the guide to reflect non-AI tech updates, like improvements in integrations across multiple participation tools.

We've also taken the opportunity to expand the collection of case studies woven throughout this guide, with a priority on examples situated in the Global Majority. This edition includes new insights from cases in Thailand, Germany, Northern Ireland, Uganda, Taiwan and Colombia.

Any resource on enabling democracy needs to be developed with awareness of the larger political situation, and we've updated this resource to address the unfortunate reality of backsliding democracies, increasing autocracy, and growing prevalence of threats to physical and digital security, as well as fundamental human rights. That includes an updated and expanded cybersecurity section, including a dedicated "What you can do about it" section to guide preparation.

There have been positive developments since the publication of this guide's first edition. Tech policy has grown more complicated, but also more relevant. For example, in major jurisdictions around the world, nation states and multilateral bodies have passed stronger regulations protecting data privacy and child safety online, or to modernize government procurement of technology. We've added a concise guide to relevant policy you should know about, and where to turn for regular updates and analysis. You'll also find greater discussion of data governance, and a new list of "Questions to ask about AI functionality" in the Appendix section: **How to evaluate a platform.**

Since 2021, People Powered has also developed a number of digital participation resources to support this guide. This includes a Participation Playbook module to help people design a digital participation action plan, ratings and foundational courses on digital participation. We are taking this opportunity to refresh and expand them. That includes new annexes, including a Glossary and an overview of where to find single-purpose engagement tools that fall outside the scope of this effort.

We've reviewed thousands of participatory democracy tools and platforms, and offer this guide to spotlight inspirational case studies and provide an overview of the entire market for your consideration (see the updated Appendix: **Matrix of platforms**).

Lastly, this new edition reflects the developing partnership between People Powered and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) around the promotion of digitally enabled civic engagement. UNDP's country presence, long-standing engagement with a wide range of public institutions and on-going work on safe and inclusive digitalization can add significant value to the efforts this guide is intended to support.

PEOPLE POWERED

People Powered is a global hub for participatory democracy, defined as direct participation of community members in making policy decisions that affect their lives. We support innovative practices of participatory and deliberative democracy, like participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, and collaborative policy-making. We help practitioners address common challenges and shift power toward historically marginalized communities.

Our mission is to expand people's power to make government decisions by supporting organizations and governments that are building participatory democracy around the world. We envision a world where all people and communities have the power to address their needs, uphold their rights, and pursue their dreams through inclusive and responsive government institutions. We approach our work through the values of inclusion, collaboration, problem-solving, equity, and learning.

UNDP

As the lead United Nations agency on international development, UNDP works in 170 countries and territories to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. We help countries develop policies, leadership skills, partnerships and institutional capabilities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP's mandate is to end poverty, build democratic governance, rule of law, and inclusive institutions. We advocate for change, and connect countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For this edition, we would like to thank the primary author of the guide, Matt Stempeck, the Digital Participation Committee, and the People Powered community for their input and feedback. In particular, we want to recognize Ana Doria, Reema Patel and Caroline Khene for their thoughtful review. The primary author of this guide, Matt Stempeck, would like to thank Melissa Zisengwe, Nikhil Kumar, and Osakiodeme Ikhinmwin from the People Powered team for their input, resources, and guidance on the second version of the guide.

We also acknowledge the review process and inputs received from the Open and Inclusive Public Sphere Team, within the Governance, Rule of Law and Peacebuilding Hub of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), led by Sarah Lister. Detailed inputs and comments were provided by Emanuele Sapienza, Soledad Gattoni, Kiri Ginnerup, Pauline Deneufbeurg, Javier Brolo, Alberto Cottica and Banu Maarouf. Particular thanks are extended to the members of the UNDP Digital Office, Keyzom Ngodup and Helin Su Aslan.

This resource was made possible thanks to the support of the Global Innovation Hub of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. The Hub, based in Taiwan, focuses on digital transformation and innovation for democracy. Our partners at Friedrich Naumann Foundation have also supported the People Powered team to develop additional resources to amplify the impact of this project, including free online courses and a Participation Playbook module. Along with People Powered's platform ratings, these resources provide practical digital participation guidance, help advocates and policymakers choose online participation platforms that best suit their need, and guide users to develop action plans for launching or improving digital participation. We are grateful to Ya-wei Chou and the FNF Global Innovation Hub team for their detailed review and support.

In addition, we are grateful to the digital participation platform developers and administrators who shared their expertise and perspective with us in interviews. An immense thank you goes to Rapudo Hawi of Kijiji Yeetu (Kenya), Joanitah Success Nsasiirwe of SEMA (Uganda), Jason Wagner of District of Siegen-Wittgenstein (Germany), Lukas Salecker of DeliberAIde, Ireland Twiggs of Ireland Cooperation (Northern Ireland), Evelien Nieuwenburg of Dembrane, Armando Navarro and Angela María Beltrán Ortega of Open State and Public Innovation in Fundación Corona (Colombia), Colin Megill of Computational Democracy Project (United States), Thanisara GG Ruangdej of WeVis (Thailand), Peter Cui Jia Wei of vTaiwan (Taiwan), Sofía Corona of Code for All Network (Mexico), Jonathan Piron of Particitiz (Belgium), Colombina Schaeffer of Ciudadanía Inteligente (Chile), Mateusz Wojcieszak of Fundacja Pole Dialogu (Poland), Ming Zhuang of Social Equity and Participation Center (China), Margo Loor of CitizenOS (Estonia), Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and HyunSuk Hwang of Parti Co-op (South Korea), and Denique Souta of Slashroots (Jamaica).

For the previous edition of the guide, we would like to thank Alberto Ford, Diana Dajer, Mustapha Khamissa, Kelly McBride, Anastasia Fadeeva, Katya Petrikevich, Kayla Knight, Dimitri Lemaire, Stefano Stortone, and Pam Bailey, the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute for their contributions.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

We wrote this guide for anyone looking to connect people to power in their community — whether they be from local government, a civic group, or an organization. We pay extra attention to the experiences of those in local government, because that's a key context through which people can exert power. We've also focused on Global Majority platforms and case studies wherever possible, while acknowledging that the imbalance of global resources may mean that platforms from wealthier countries are over-represented.

SCOPE

While there's an ever-growing number of government- and democracy-related technologies, this report is focused on those designed to support collective decision-making and deliberation. To narrow down the diverse array of participation-enabling technologies and provide readers with flexible solutions, we've limited our scope to platforms that offer a variety of engagement options, instead of single-purpose tools. We have added an appendix resource, where you can find dedicated tools for common use cases, like conducting a survey.

This guide is also focused on engagement platforms specifically designed to facilitate meaningful participation, even though we acknowledge that some participatory processes successfully repurpose fundamental digital tools, like mainstream messaging apps and productivity platforms toward the same goals.

To keep this guide as useful as possible to readers looking to select a tool, we've limited our discussion to the platforms that anyone can download or subscribe to, rather than limited-availability offerings. Subscriptions are usually provided via Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) models, in which the platform provider hosts the software on behalf of the customer in exchange for a monthly or annual fee. Likewise, we've only included actively maintained options in this review, although we've woven hard-won lessons from now-defunct digital platforms throughout the report.

Context is everything, so we attempt to address considerations for a variety of geographic and political situations around the globe. We endeavor to feature the platforms that help public officials and civil society organizations include members of the public in meaningful decision-making. There are many digital tools that allow institutions to consult their communities, or to report specific issues to governments, but we believe it is critical to expand community members' power beyond providing input or voting for candidates. Thus, this guide does not cover political advocacy platforms, internal government tech tools, or issue-reporting apps. Participation is only the first step toward people power; citizen engagement must lead to action.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is a long, very detailed guide! It does not need to be read from start to finish, in the order in which it is presented. That could be overwhelming! Review the **Table of Contents**, choose the sections that seem most relevant to the stage you are at in your project, the questions you are pondering, and the challenges you face. Then drop in on them, skim the contents, determine if they cover the information you most need, settle in, and read! Later, as you progress or encounter new issues, you can re-read the content and/or select other sections to review and discuss. Don't forget to take notes, and send us your feedback.

METHODOLOGY

The writer retained to translate this body of knowledge into words, Matt Stempeck, curates the Civic Tech Field Guide, a global inventory of over 10,000 hand-categorized civic engagement tools and projects. In that role, he closely follows the maturing field of participation platforms. Thus, this guide benefited from his years of research into digital participation platforms. It builds upon previous research Matt conducted for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In addition, the guide is informed by extensive secondary research gathered from participatory democracy communities, as well as by interviews with and presentations by platform developers, hosts, and users.

Overview of Digital Participation

Chapter 1

WHY OPEN UP PARTICIPATION?

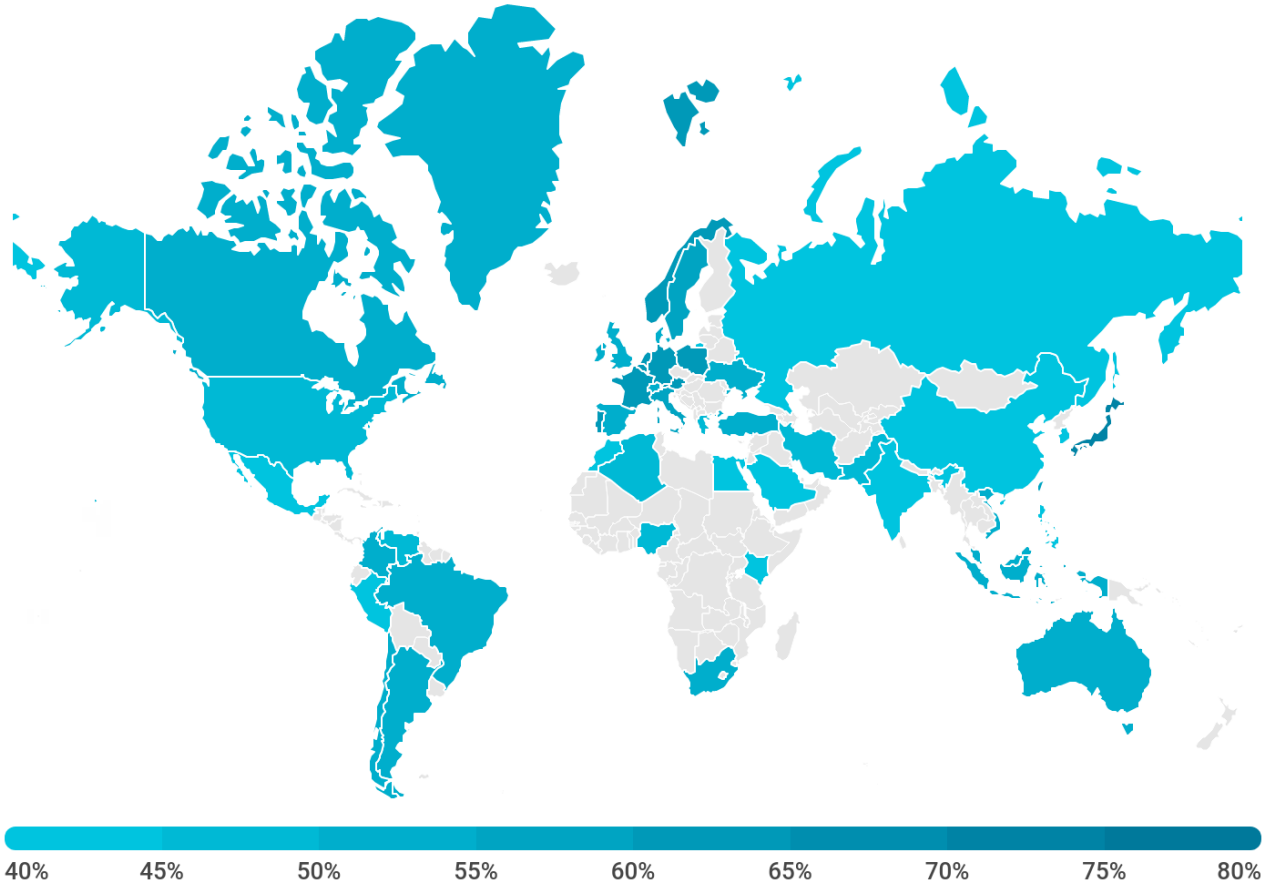
Engaging constituents through digital channels can require significant work before, during, and afterwards to encourage people's active involvement. And any strategy to involve more people in decision making often consumes significant time and energy, not to mention budgets.

So why do it? Global reports find that a majority of people around the world, and especially those living in democratic nations, feel like

"they have no voice in politics and that their governments are not acting in their interest." [3]

Do you feel that the voice of people like you matters in politics?

% who responded "Never" or "Rarely"



Graph produced by Dalia Research for the Global Perceptions of Democracy report.

source: Dalia Research 2018

3 Dalia Research, Alliance of Democracies, and Rasmussen Global, "Global Perceptions of Democracy."

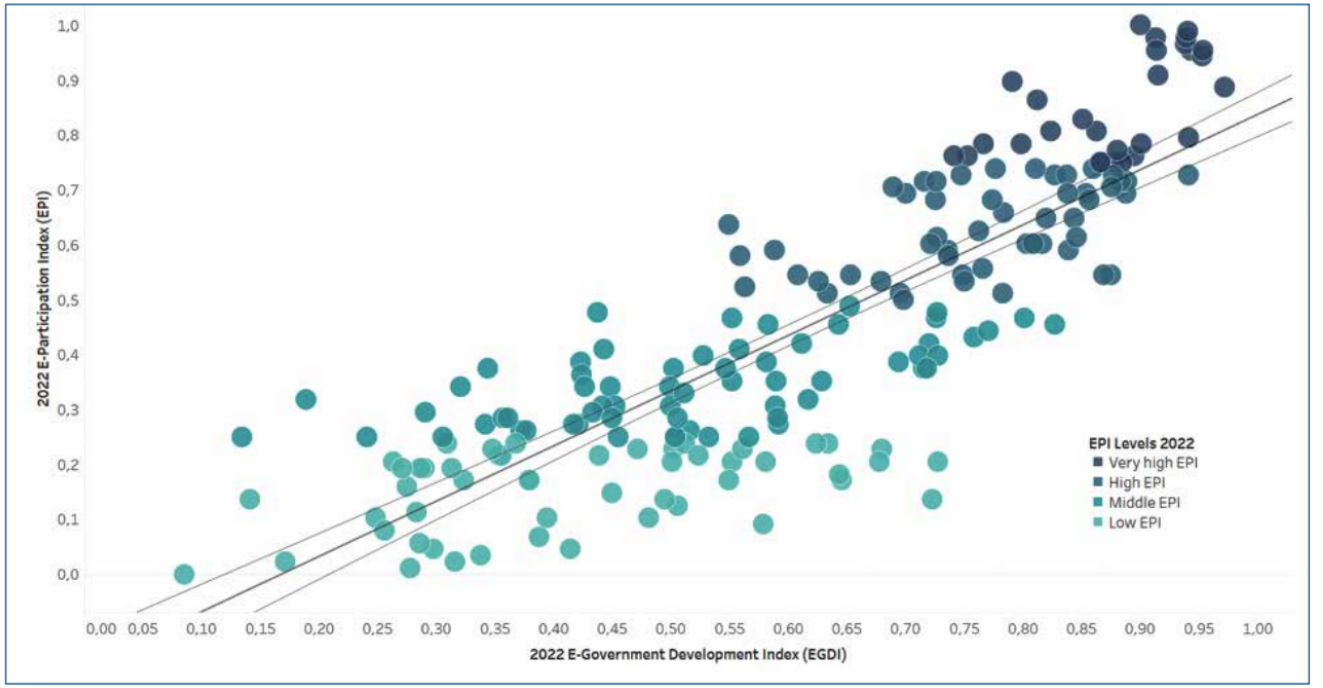
The UNDP's 2024 Human Development Report likewise found that half of people worldwide report having no or limited control over their lives, with over two-thirds feeling that they have little influence in the decisions of their government.[4]

The UN Sustainable Development Goals include targets and indicators related to participation. SDG target 16.7 calls for "ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels"[5]. Nation states and other institutions looking to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals must work to introduce participatory decision-making, and participation platforms are one of the best ways to achieve this goal at national scale.

4 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2024). Human Development Report 2023–24: Breaking the Gridlock – Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world. New York: UNDP.

5 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/

Figure 1.32 Distribution of 193 Member States based on EGDI and EPI values, 2022



Source: 2022 United Nations E-Government Survey.

Graph produced by UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs for the E-Goverment Survey 2022 report.

Research suggests that governments and institutions that introduce more open and inclusive decision-making see an abundance of interrelated benefits. Residents and participants are more likely to:

- Gain civic skills they can use in other arenas, including leadership capacity.[6,7]
- Have higher confidence in and satisfaction with local governance.[8]
- Report access to higher-quality public infrastructure.[9]
- Have a better understanding of their own rights and duties.[10]
- Enjoy stronger ties to their communities

6 Wampler, *A Guide to Participatory Budgeting*, 16.
7 Ploskyy et al., "Participatory Budgeting," 50.
8 Shulga et al., "Can Local Participatory Programs Enhance Public Confidence," 36–37.
9 Shulga et al., 28.
10 Wampler, *A Guide to Participatory Budgeting*, 16.

In addition, governments and institutions are more likely to:

- Directly address the needs of under-served or hard-to-reach communities. [11,12,13]
- Include people's opinions in their problem-solving[14], and in doing so create more effective public services.[15] [16]
- Experience less corruption, thus allowing limited public resources to be stretched further.[17]
- Enjoy better dialogue between participants and government leaders.[18]

11 Wampler, 27.
12 Mackenzie, "Rural Public Transport Procurement -Putting Communities Firmly in the Driving Seat."
13 Ploskyy et al., "Participatory Budgeting," 50.
14 Shulga et al., 34.
15 Mackenzie, "Rural Public Transport Procurement -Putting Communities Firmly in the Driving Seat."
16 Ploskyy et al., "Participatory Budgeting," 50.
17 Wampler, A Guide to Participatory Budgeting, 27.
18 Shulga et al., 32.

Researchers have observed these benefits around the world, from rural Russia, to large American cities, to entire countries like Brazil. Open participation takes different shapes in different contexts. In Brazil, for example, participatory budgeting programs were launched in places as varied as its wealthy South and impoverished Northeast. This wide variety of contexts suggests that open participation is flexible enough to meet local needs in diverse places.

On a global level, the United Nations E-Participation Index found a strong correlation between governments' improvement of digital services with their adoption of digital participation platforms. The greater a national government's level of digital development, the greater their score on the E-Participation Index.[19] Governments offering better digital services are more likely to adopt digital participation platforms, and vice versa. Outliers exist, however, and this finding does not imply causation in either direction.

19 From https://desapublications.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/Web%20version%20E-Government%202022.pdf
Via Ricardo Poppi's presentation at AI and Online Participation: impacts and emerging challenges for cities and democracy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6pRBHHWeEQ 10/16/2024

WHAT IS A DIGITAL PARTICIPATION PLATFORM?

The modern digital participation platform emerged in the mid-2000s. E-democracy and civic tech practitioners introduced websites and apps to help engage participants beyond just broadcasting information one-way. The goal was to evolve beyond traditional in-person meetings, surveys, and other methods of collecting resident feedback. This allowed public institutions to invite people to submit their votes and comments via their computers and smartphones. Digital platforms allow residents to participate in collective activities like:

- Proposing new projects.
- Deliberating to agree on shared decisions.
- Planning how to use public spaces.
- Voting on how to spend public budgets.
- Prioritizing potential options.
- Drafting policies and legislation.

Although digital platforms were originally conceived of as ways to supplant analog participatory processes, it's become clear in recent years that the best approach is often a hybrid one that brings together the strengths of online and offline experiences to best serve communities. This guide discusses how digital platforms can support in-person engagement.

WHY USE DIGITAL PARTICIPATION PLATFORMS?

Digital participation platforms offer a variety of benefits. When used well, digital platforms expand the reach and inclusiveness of civic engagement, allowing more people—including those who may not attend town halls or public hearings—to have their say. They can make participatory processes more transparent, provide accessible records of inputs, and support more continuous engagement over time.

For example, everyone with internet access can track a public project's status as it's developed and launched (or stalled!). Likewise, participation platforms often serve as communication hubs for participating communities to meet, communicate, and organize.

Developers of digital participation platforms promise other benefits, such as:

- Reaching more people than via meetings, because residents can take part when they're not busy and without traveling.
- Lower costs compared to traditional outreach methods.
- Integration with other participatory democracy processes, such as by collecting ideas for in-person deliberation.
- Automated analysis of large amounts of resident feedback.
- Easier follow-up communications with residents based on their interests and ideas.
- More open and transparent decision-making.

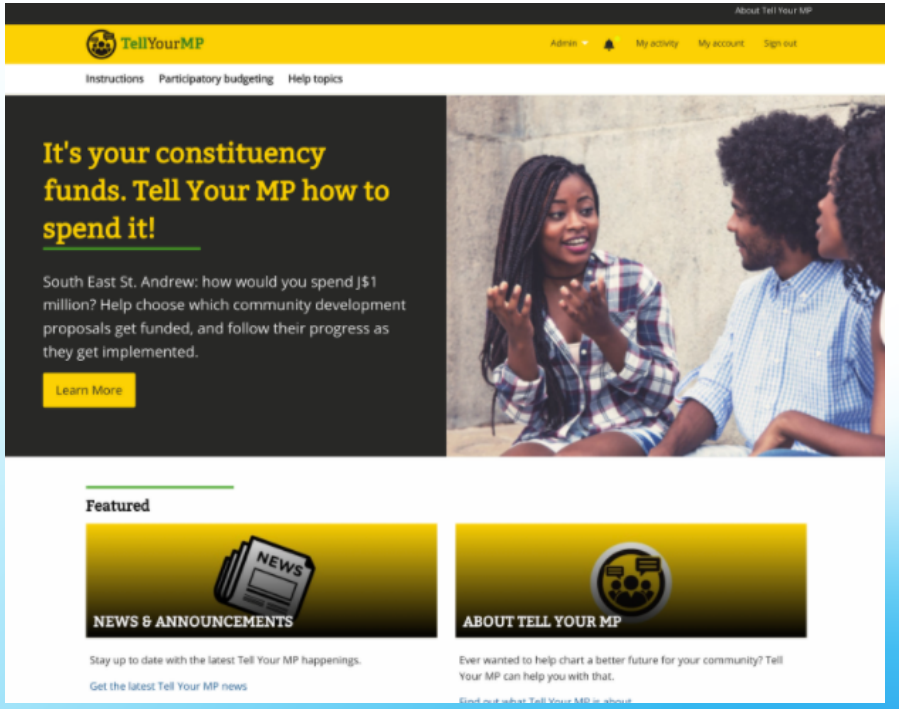
+ Spotlight
Reaching beyond the usual crowd

One of the key benefits of digital participation platforms is that they allow asynchronous participation. This means people can participate whenever it's convenient for them. Compared to public meetings, which are often scheduled at inconvenient times for some demographics, digital platforms are "always on." (If you do run in-person meetings, consider varying the time of day at which they're held so that different groups of people have a chance to attend.)

This was one of SlashRoots's main considerations as the group worked to improve the implementation of Jamaica's Constituency Development Fund (dedicated to human and infrastructure development at the local level)[20]. Public meetings generally attracted only senior citizens, with students and working professionals unable or unwilling to attend sessions held in the middle of weekdays.

By using a digital participation platform, SlashRoots was able to give these groups a way to submit their suggestions for consideration. This resulted in 34 community development suggestions, including 10 submitted by members of the hearing-impaired and blind communities.

The platform also made what was usually top-down spending of public funds more inclusive. Although the number of accounts (required for voting) and votes cast were roughly the same as attendance at in-person consultations, people participating via the digital platform were able to more easily prioritize and allocate spending on suggested projects.



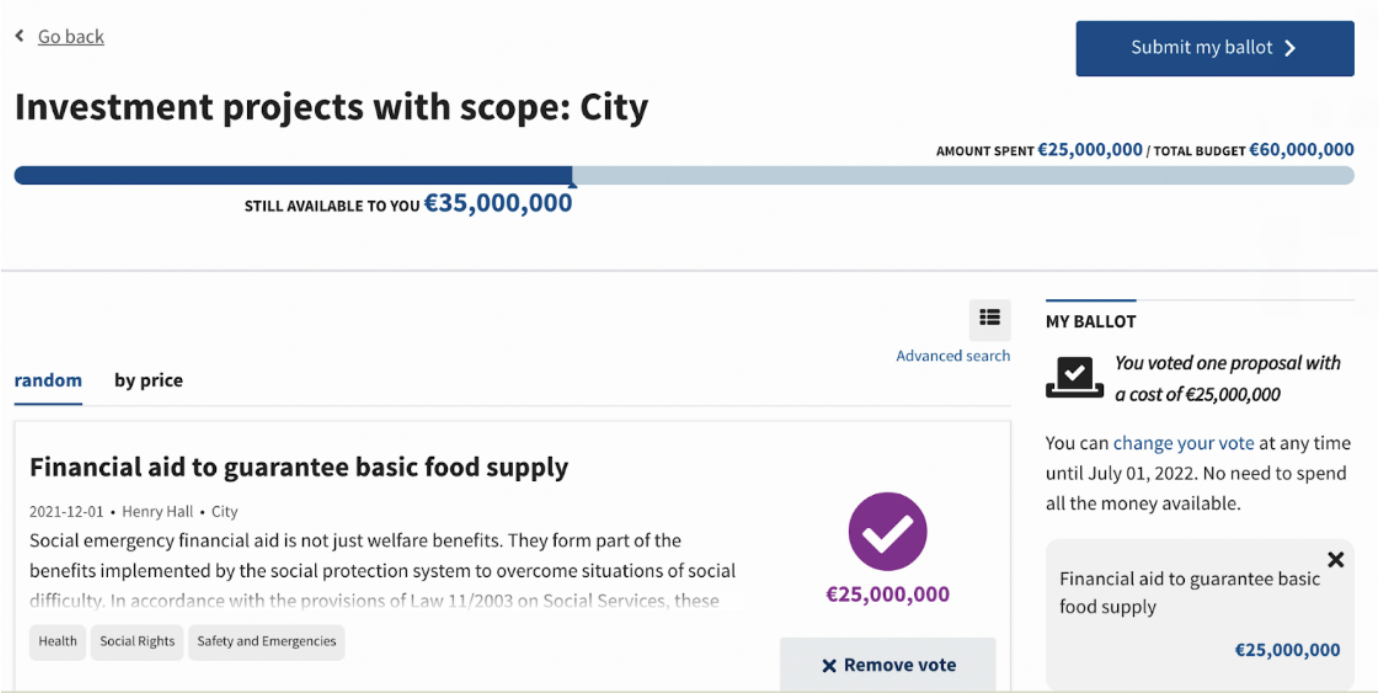
SlashRoots connected local engagement to Jamaica's Constituency Development Fund process to improve public involvement and monitorial oversight of the process. Screenshot courtesy SlashRoots.

20 Denique Souta, interview by author, Jamaica, November 18, 2021.

Besides digitizing traditional engagement tactics, online platforms offer new modes of participation. For example, consider the group decision-making tool Pol.is. It invites people to draft value statements that others can vote on and rally around. An example is, "Rideshare drivers should make a living wage." The platform then uses algorithms to map existing (but unrecognized) areas of consensus between otherwise opposing stakeholders.

When used effectively, digital platforms can amplify the benefits of public participation, resulting in better-informed decisions and more trust in public institutions.

Digital platforms also can make it easier and cheaper for officials to open up decision-making more often. A wider range of people can thus share their perspectives, better informing decisions before governments finalize plans. People hopefully trust government more when they have had the opportunity to take part early on in a process. And increased public attention to decision-making and implementation can contribute to more responsive governments.



In an example of digitized participatory programs, CONSUL Democracy participants vote on how to allocate public funds.

Participatory decision-making is not a panacea

As with any human endeavor, processes designed to increase and broaden participation are often imperfect. They are frequently designed by those who already hold power, sometimes at the expense of those who do not.

Institutional history of marginalization and exclusion can distort well-intended efforts to share power.

For this and other reasons, participatory democracy has its limits. For participation to be effective, it needs to be inclusive, meaningful, free, and supported by committed leadership and institutional backing. For example, simply expanding inclusion without delegating meaningful power to participants can have unintended negative consequences.[21] Engaging people to participate in a corrupt system could be perceived as an endorsement of that system.

Thus, not all of the promised benefits have been achieved. Inviting people to share power requires more than creating an accessible website. And holding governments accountable is a separate issue altogether. To be effective, participation platforms must be used to do more than collect input. They should be embedded in a broader ecosystem of governance that values transparency, accountability, and public dialogue. Platforms can help open up spaces for participation, but their impact depends on how they're used: Whether they enable communities to shape decisions, whether the information they gather leads to action, and whether the overall process they represent ultimately strengthens trust in institutions.

There are drawbacks to digital participation, which we will discuss in the considerations section of this guide. Still, digital participation platforms can be a worthwhile investment, and our goal with this guide is to increase the chances that they will contribute to positive results.

You may not need a dedicated digital participation platform

While the platforms we discuss in this guide can be used to invite new participants and make administration easier, there are plenty of cases of institutions doing more with less. If you don't have the budget or tech resources to implement a digital participation platform, you might also find success engaging people through the tech they're already using. Around the world, participation advocates have successfully used apps like WhatsApp, Weibo, Microsoft Teams, or basic online forms to accomplish many of the same goals we discuss here. These "old-school" tech tools function as digital participation platforms when people use them to engage, even if they aren't marketed for that purpose. Meaningful engagement can occur wherever and however people are motivated to participate.

21 Goldfrank, "Inclusion Without Power?"

For example, the City of Bogotá, Colombia launched an AI-powered chatbot, Chatico, to engage residents where they already are: on apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger. Residents can participate in engagement campaigns and easily access the city's public information and services via Chatico. The city has used it to invite citizens to shape its development plan, participate in the participatory budgeting process, and join citizen assemblies. By connecting to nearly universal messaging apps and meeting people where they are, Bogotá enabled access for thousands of citizens who had not traditionally engaged in public decision-making processes, and boosted participation by 43% compared to past efforts.

WHAT CAN DIGITAL PARTICIPATION PLATFORMS DO?

So, what can we actually do with digital participation platforms? Platform developers have digitized existing analog methods, like public consultations and surveys. Voting is possible on extensive sets of opinion statements, allowing participants to express their values and researchers to produce nuanced maps of community sentiment.[22]

Many platform developers combine an assortment of tools into a product suite. Think of it like a "productivity package" that includes word processing, spreadsheets, and presentation software. With a suite, a host can offer a single service that enables many kinds of participation. In contrast, modular product suites allow you to use only the features you want to activate at a given time. For example, it's common to see a digital participation platform including modules that facilitate:

- Forming participant groups
- Collecting ideas from participants
- Inviting participants to endorse ideas they support
- Creating surveys or polls
- Developing project pages to implement ideas

There are many digital participation methods. For this guide, we've organized them by the degree of engagement they enable. To do this, we adapted the Spectrum of Public Participation developed by the International Association for Public Participation.[23] The IAP2 developed this scale to help evaluate public participation programs. The organization worked to ensure that the scale's underlying values span national, cultural, and religious identities.

In order of least to most people power, platforms can be used to inform, consult, invite oversight from, co-create with, and empower participants.

22 See the Pol.is app, among others.

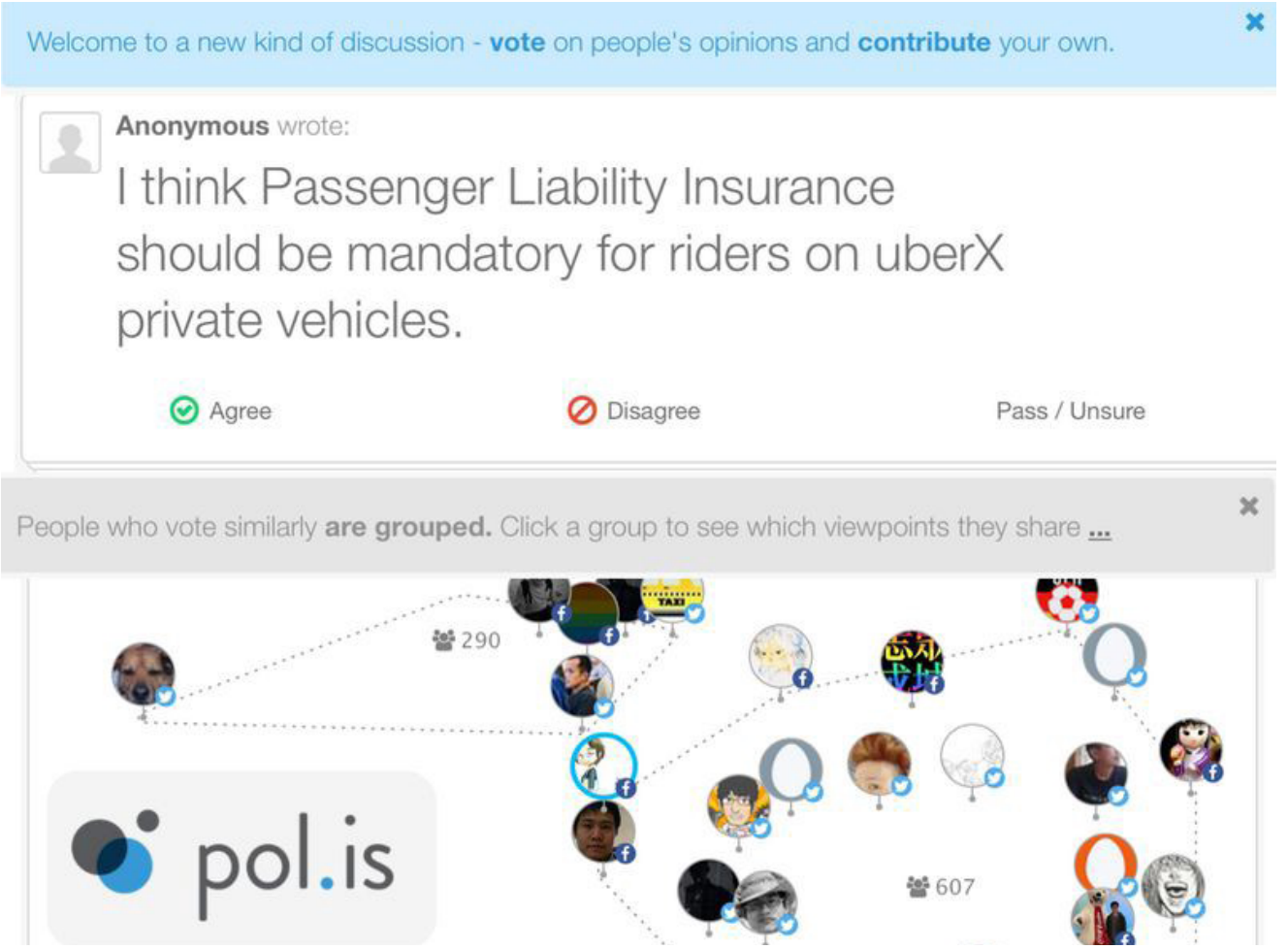
23 International Association for Public Participation, "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation."

These degrees of participation aren't linear or mutually exclusive. A platform might facilitate consultation and co-creation but not accountability, for example.

Many digital participation platforms are designed to support institutions providing information and gathering feedback from participants. Few digital participation platforms truly empower people on their own. To realize the benefits of participatory power, don't limit your platform's focus to civil affairs, like reporting potholes. Let people make meaningful decisions.[24]

Below are some examples of specific features of each level of participation. We order the chart from least to most people power.

24 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 147.



Screenshots of how the Pol.is platform is used in the vTawian process to facilitate voting and mapping of consensus among stakeholders. Image credit: Audrey Tang.

FEATURES BY LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Inform people	
Participants can do things like:	**Hosts can do things like:**
• Track project implementation. • Subscribe to project updates and notifications. • See proposals related to the one they're currently viewing. • Participate in conferences.	• Maintain transparent project timelines. • Notify subsets of the community interested in staying involved with a given project. • Create project pages. • Host conferences.
Consult people	
Participants can do things like:	**Hosts can do things like:**
• Join feedback panels. • Vote to prioritize public actions. • Respond to surveys and polls. • Map issues by location. • Comment on proposals and ideas.	• Consult participants. • Conduct surveys and polls to collect data on community preferences. • Invite comments. • Integrate offline outreach channels, like phone calls and meetings. • Map potential and ongoing projects to their locations in the community.

Create accountability

Participants can do things like:	Hosts can do things like:
• Track whether an issue gets resolved. • Re-open issues that weren't adequately answered or resolved. • Ask public questions of decision-makers, with others able to join in. • Explore budgets and other planning documents before they're enacted. • Freely export their data.	• Invite questions and respond candidly. • Assign participants' questions and issues to the appropriate internal points of contact. • Track whether issues are resolved and questions answered. • Invite overview of budgets and other planning documents early in the decision-making process.

Co-create with people

Participants can do things like:	Hosts can do things like:
• Organize their own meetings. • Form working groups to tackle specific items. • Develop relationships with others and grow them off-platform. • Engage with experts and/or stakeholders to get feedback. • Share ideas and projects for possible implementation.	• Share professional assessments of participants' proposals. • Delegate work to participant working groups. • Invite participants to propose and develop projects for public funding.

Empower people

Participants can do things like:	Hosts can do things like:
• Self-organize using features like private messaging and groups. • Challenge the framing of an entire process • Create alternative or original proposals. • Rally support around proposals. • Engage in debate via processes that take these interactions into account to inform decisions. • Allocate budgets. • Write resolutions and legislation in collaboration with others. • Cast votes on resolutions and referendums.	• Meaningfully adapt, alter, or pause a participatory process based on people's feedback. • Connect digital participation, like online votes for a project, back to analog institutions.

While this is an impressive and ever-growing list of features, keep in mind that many platforms incorporate only a small subset of these options. Our interviews indicate that surveys and polls are the most popular tools. Note, however, that while digital participation platforms are worth considering for collective decision-making, there are simpler, cheaper, and more straightforward solutions if you're only interested in conducting a community survey (see Appendix: **Where to find single-purpose tools**).

And of course, offering all of these options doesn't mean they will be used. A member of one organization told us that it was attracted to a particular platform in part because it allowed participants to be notified of the progress of ideas they found interesting. However, the organization discovered that no one actually used the feature, which caused local government officials to lose interest in populating the platform with the information needed to make the process engaging. Your local context will likely play a larger role than which software and features you use, so it's worth considering the strategy behind your participatory process before deciding on a digital platform.

+ Spotlight
Connecting online action to real-world results in Spain

In 2016 Decide Madrid, built on the CONSUL platform, gave city residents the power to draft and vote on legislative proposals. Citizen proposals that attracted at least 26,000 online votes (or 1% of Madrid's registered voters) went to a binding public poll. Residents could vote on the proposal by mail, at a physical polling station, or online. If the majority of voters approved, the proposal went to the city council to make it law. In this way, Decide Madrid connected people's participation to very real power.

The Decide Madrid digital voting process was clearly connected to real-world results[25].

A resident votes in the Decide Madrid process, which won the UN Public Service Award in 2018[26].

25 Image from OpenDemocracy.

26 Diario de Madrid, June 7 2018.

+ Spotlight
Translating online energy into institutional power in Brazil

Centuries-old political institutions and new internet platforms don't always fit together seamlessly. To help bridge this gap, in 2013 Brazil's Câmara dos Deputados created an innovation team, LAB Hacker. The project managed to fuse online participation with a democratic institution founded in 1826.

They enlisted 200 of parliament's legislative advisors. These advisors helped ensure that citizens' digital participation fed into the parliament's legislative mechanics. For example, a rapporteur would determine if citizens' digitally delivered input was successfully incorporated into a bill's final text. Although not direct democracy, these intermediaries helped transfer online public engagement to offline institutions.

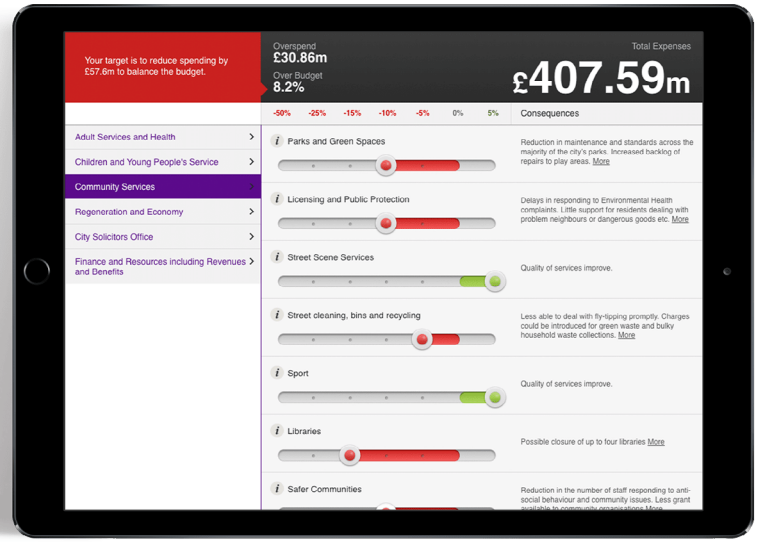


Image: Delib

+ Spotlight
Inviting public engagement when there aren't enough resources

Public participation is more harmonious in times of plenty. But when there aren't enough resources to go around, conversations can get heated.

One participation platform with experience in hosting difficult conversations is Delib, developed in collaboration with the British government. Its Simulator product lets public officials invite participants "inside" to see the trade-offs of various decisions. Residents weigh in on which projects to prioritize in resource-limited scenarios.

The platform allows participants to use simple sliders that assign a weight to various options. This lets people rank the items they care about most. They also see the consequences of their choices on their other priorities.

Users may then adjust the sliders to get as much done as possible. In doing so, they experience conditions similar to those that government officials face in their own deliberations. This kind of guided public decision-making can inform choices when budgets are tight (as they were in Liverpool, when the city budget was cut substantially).

Democracy isn't only measured by the final decision. Instead, it's also important to consider the journey -- the often difficult process of debate, conversation, and collective decision.

BEFORE YOU START

Whether you work for a government or another type of institution, there are some important things to consider when evaluating digital participation platforms. Many of these issues come up when hosting any participatory decision-making process. But they may need extra attention if you're considering a digital platform.

THINK THROUGH YOUR PROCESS

It's important to sufficiently plan your program before selecting a digital platform to implement it. Creating a meaningful and accessible participatory process deserves careful consideration. After all, asking people to join a digital platform and share ideas or vote for proposals is not an insignificant request (especially if individuals are hesitant based on past experiences that have been less than satisfactory). The People Powered online resource center includes a selection of guides, manuals, case studies, and other tools that can help you design a participatory process. You can filter them based on language, country, and type of institution, among other factors.

At the same time, you may feel pressure to demonstrate immediate results. To assure you have enough time to design an effective participatory process, consider starting small with a pilot program. Beginning with a limited pilot can make it less likely you'll be accused of mis-allocating resources, while giving you space to learn what works for your context and participants.[27]

It can also help you manage high expectations while you learn what works and what doesn't.

With pilot projects, or prototypes of digital platforms, your goal is to demonstrate and further develop the efficacy of the participatory experience.

Put the participant experience first, and build out the platform based on that.[28] *Participants' experiences when engaging in the process are paramount.*

Another tip is to win the support of key decision-makers early in their term (if they're elected) or role. This may offer the opportunity to be more bold versus later in their term, when they're considering re-election or future career moves[29].

27 Diana Dajer, interview by author, Colombia, October 25, 2021.

28 Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and Hyun-Suk Hwang of Parti Co-op, interview by author, South Korea, November 15, 2021.

29 Diana Dajer, interview by author, Colombia, October 25, 2021.

COMMIT TO INVITING PARTICIPATION FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Ciudadanía Inteligente even requires mayoral endorsement to join the Abre Alcaldías project, as it demonstrates that there's sufficient political support to get started.[30]

By researching your context and designing an appropriate process first, you can determine if or how digital platforms can support your program. This way you can choose your tools based on what you want to accomplish[31].

Before launching a participation platform, remember that how you run the process will communicate volumes to the people you're engaging.

Bad reasons to run an open process include:

- Trying to demonstrate support for decisions that have already been made (called "open washing"[32]). Digital participation platforms are an expensive and labor-intensive way of doing this.
- Showing that you're listening, but without making any adjustments to plans or follow-up actions based on participant input. People lose trust when this happens. It makes them less likely to participate in the future.
- Expecting digital tools to result in accountability and oversight when dealing with corrupt governments or other bad-faith actors. If this describes your situation, you're better off partnering with existing advocacy organizations to identify an alternative strategy.
- Collecting data from a community, and doing nothing with it. There are easier ways to do this, such as a simple survey.

Good reasons for running an open process include:

- Wanting to achieve real constituent buy-in for a pending decision.
- Inviting people to understand the trade-offs required by competing priorities.
- Seeking to learn something from the public, with a commitment to adjusting plans based on what they share.
- Getting a more diverse mix of ideas and comments than in-person meetings provide.
- Reaching more people, in absolute terms.
- Taking advantage of digital features, like the ability to send automatic updates to people who express interest in a project.
- Gathering a large volume of actionable knowledge about the needs of your community.
- Building a publicly accessible home for the documents, decisions, and conversations that went into a decision.

30 Colombina Schaeffer, interview by author, Chile, November 3, 2021.
31 Jonathan Piron, interview by author, October 15, 2021.
32 "Openwashing."

COMMIT TO INCLUSION FROM THE VERY START

"Half of the population isn't online," says Margo Loor of CitizenOS, "and of those that are, 'online' means Facebook, because everything else is too expensive.[33]" (Facebook is less expensive because in many countries, its parent company, Meta, subsidizes internet and mobile providers to discount the data people use on its products.)

Even for people with internet access, the digital divide isn't solved with the mere availability of a data connection. In many parts of the world, women are still way less likely than men to own a smartphone — about 20% less, according to UNDP data. That means fewer chances to get online, access services, or even just stay informed. Add to that lower digital skills and fewer opportunities in tech education, and it's clear that the digital world isn't equally accessible to everyone.

There are many factors, including civic efficacy (people's sense of whether and how their involvement makes a difference),[34] comfort and confidence using digital tools, past experience interacting with institutions, and even how top-of-mind a participatory process is (or is not).

A recurring challenge in AI-driven civic initiatives is the assumption of a uniform level of digital literacy among participants. This can unintentionally exclude marginalized groups or reinforce power imbalances. Therefore, capacity-building efforts to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills required to engage effectively with AI systems are critical to effective digital participation. Digital inclusion must be paired with investments in AI literacy.

Participants' perception of their options appears to be an important factor. In San Pedro Garza García, Mexico, for example, people who were used to participating in person worried that their feedback wouldn't count as much on a digital platform. [35]

Not everyone feels comfortable telling the government or public authorities what to do (even if they are invited to). There are many reasons for this, including historical and current oppression and various forms of inequality, such as unevenly distributed privilege. Even when traditionally excluded communities are given a genuine opportunity to voice their needs and desires[36], it may challenge the existing social hierarchy and many years of enforced norms.

One of the major barriers to effective digital platforms is the digital divide. This is manifested not just in disparity of internet access, but also speed of connections, cost of data plans, ownership of up-to-date personal devices, and/or degree of familiarity with the necessary technology. Digital platforms that aren't compatible with assistive technology, like screen readers, further hinder participation. In addition, platforms that require people to complete additional registration steps, such as email activation or identity verification with official documents, can quickly lose a significant number of participants.

The rapid roll-out of AI threatens to leave communities even further behind. People Powered members from a wide range of countries express fears that in many places, people are still catching up to the ongoing disruption that digitalization and the internet have brought. As an exponential factor in tech-driven transformation, AI could exacerbate these gaps.

33 Margo Loor, interview by author, Estonia, November 15, 2021. 61% of Estonians do not use the internet. Mari Kalkun and Tarmo Kalvet, Digital Divide in Estonia and How To Bridge It (January 2004), accessed July 21, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23742218_Digital_Divide_in_Estonia_and_How_To_Bridge_It.

34 PACE Academy, "Social Studies."

35 Sofía Corona, interview by author, Mexico, October 27, 2021.

36 Wampler, A Guide to Participatory Budgeting, 26.

+Spotlight
Surprise Citizen Press Conference

To invite citizens to share their thoughts, as well as celebrate those who do, Parti Co-op organized a pop-up press conference in Seoul, South Korea. Whenever someone stepped onto its platform, a group of Parti's journalists began snapping photos, recording their remarks, and generally treating them like a celebrity. The ruckus drew people's attention and led to more participation. The Surprise Citizen Press Conference sent a clear message that citizen feedback was welcomed and celebrated, in a fun and novel way.[37]

37 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 98.

At Democracy Seoul's "Surprise Citizen Press Conference," a platform with a podium was installed in the middle of the street to give citizens providing feedback "celebrity treatment."

+Spotlight
Youth Voices in Timor

In Timor-Leste, over 70% of the population is under 35 yet political power rests with older generations. UNDP launched Youth Conversations to bridge that gap. By combining fun offline methods (like renting electric tuk-tuks and deploying a mobile podcast studio in a van) together with digital tools like the Ekota AI polling platform, they were able to bring youth voices into national policymaking conversations. This hybrid approach helped elevate issues like domestic workers' rights to the legislative agenda, showing how inclusive, youth-led engagement can reshape governance even in low-connectivity contexts.

+Spotlight
Off the computer and into the park

To bridge the digital divide, many participatory programs supplement online outreach with in-person contact. People who run participatory processes frequently cite public parks as prime locations to put up a tent and talk to people. A staff member or volunteer plays the role of "translator," talking to people about the decision-making process and recording each person's opinion on the digital platform.

In Santiago, Chile, Ciudadanía Inteligente quickly found that the pilot version of its Abre digital platform was difficult for local residents to use, as many people in the neighborhood didn't have a personal computer. So, they talked to people in the neighborhood park and transcribed their verbal feedback into the platform. Talking with people led to platform improvements: The team quickly learned that many of the women they spoke to didn't have the personal email account necessary to register as users. Ciudadanía's developers responded by adapting the platform so that lack of an email address was no longer a barrier to registration.

This and other experiences taught the Ciudadanía team that software was only a part of the work.

"The core of the project was not only the platform, but all of the work around it to secure participation,"

says Colombina Schaeffer, deputy director of Fundación Ciudadanía Inteligente. "We used to do a lot of platform development, and then we realized we had a lot of tools but they were not necessarily used or were used only by specific people who usually already had access to decision-making processes. Building communities around platforms is as important, or even more, than developing them."

Combined, all of these factors add up to a reality in which some people feel more comfortable expressing their views than others. Unfortunately, research suggests that digital participation platforms can empower the very people who already enjoy disproportionate power in society[38]. Emilia Saiz, the secretary general of United Cities and Local Government, has found the same:

Ciudadanía Inteligente runs a participatory design workshop in a public park. Photo courtesy

"Underrepresentation of vulnerable groups in decision-making spaces has been critical, and we need to face this."[39]

You will not realize the benefits of participatory decision-making if your process isn't designed for the community you're trying to empower. It is therefore very important that digital-participation hosts consider equity and inclusion at the beginning of the process. Achieving an equitable participatory process will probably take extra effort. This might mean spending more on outreach, or allocating more time to talking to people who use the platform. It will be worth it.

One way to promote equity early in the process is to dedicate more resources to both traditional and online outreach. The UN's E-Participation Index (EPI) formally recommends keeping the analog in-person channels open in addition to any digital platforms. "E-participation should complement rather than replace traditional forms of public participation in efforts aimed at ensuring no one is left behind; face-to-face meetings, paper-based communications, telephone calls, physical bulletin boards, and other hands-on modalities are still important. Strengthening the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups requires the provision of physical public space for the engagement of vulnerable groups, particularly at the local level."[40]

38 Rumbul, "Who Benefits From Civic Technology?"

39 Saiz, "A Panel on the Lessons Learnt on Local Democracy Was Held on 14 December," para. 8.

40 https://desapublications.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/Web%20version%20E-Government%202022.pdf p142

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

An effective and increasingly popular method to drive inclusion is called the citizens' assembly (also referred to as a 'citizens' jury' or 'sortition')[41]. In this process, participants are randomly selected to ensure representative participation, and then supported and empowered to deliberate and consult on a decision.[42,43]

The method tries to address the challenge of ensuring fair and inclusive representation in participatory processes while keeping group sizes manageable. Hosts start with a universe of people, like the national registry of citizens, and randomly select a sample from which to recruit.[44] To achieve a representative group, hosts must still work to ensure consistent sign-up rates amongst the participants. Some ways to do this include providing a stipend to cover participants' time away from work, and free childcare.

41 Flanigan et al., "Fair Algorithms for Selecting Citizens."
42 For more about these participation models, check out Participedia's Citizens' Jury page https://participedia.net/method/155
43 https://www.sparkblue.org/system/files/2025-04/250406_UNDP-Concept-Note-Session1.pdf
44 See the Sortition Foundation for more on this approach.

You can find creative offline outreach methods in the **Outreach and Engagement Methods Idea Bank** appendix to this guide and learn more about deliberative democracy tools for breaking the gridlock in UNDP's practitioner notes.

Education about participatory programs can play an important role in citizens' readiness to participate[45] in even the most inviting decision-making processes. Brazil's e-Democracia parliamentary engagement platform, for example, integrated explanatory videos to help bridge gaps in knowledge.

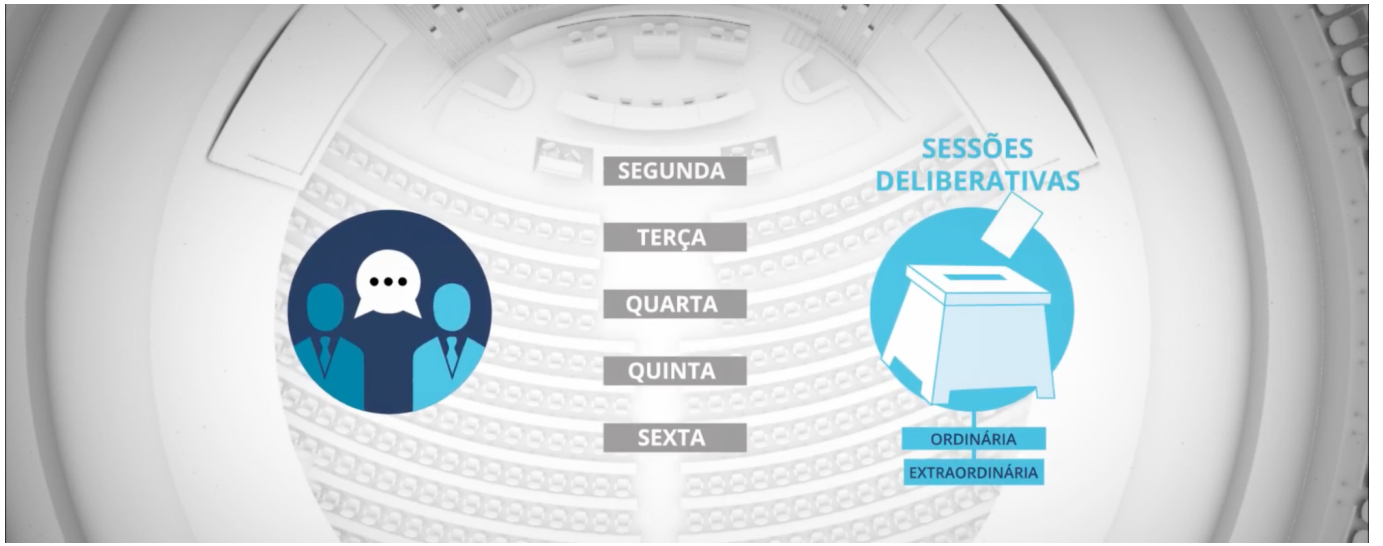
45 Allen, "What Is Education For?"

Consider:

- Who is likely to feel less comfortable using a digital platform to voice their opinions, and what can you do to ease that challenge?
- Who is less likely to know that the engagement process is happening in the first place, and how might you adapt your outreach methods to reach them?

Social justice is advanced through the inclusion of traditionally excluded groups and citizens in vital decision-making processes. After all, the resulting decisions directly impact their communities.[46]

46 Wampler, A Guide to Participatory Budgeting, 27.



The Brazilian Parliament's e-Democracia platform includes a variety of helpful videos like this one that explain how its formal political processes work, and how the digital platforms tie in.

COMMIT TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Seasoned participation veterans know that implementing a tech platform is often easier than convincing politicians to devolve power to participants. But participants will quickly tire of voicing their opinions if there isn't a clear link between their participation and resulting action. Meaningful public participation requires more than asking for public input and setting up an engagement platform. If anything, doing these things without connecting voice to action can further decrease trust between people and their government.[47]

Before launching a participation process, consider:

- Are the relevant decisionmakers (beyond your immediate team) prepared and willing to delegate authority to participants?[48] If not, it may be advisable to delay your program until you can secure their buy-in.
- Will open participation subvert traditional decision-making pathways? Is this politically viable?
- Do the relevant decisionmakers have enough political flexibility to engage participants in a new way?
- Does the host institution have the capacity to facilitate a genuinely open process? Can the process survive the existing bureaucracy and power dynamics?
- If the initiative relies on the support of executives, what will happen to the program when they're no longer in office? Can you plan around term limits and elections, and design for long-term adoption by future leaders?
- If you get participant feedback that doesn't apply to your project or department, how will you make sure it reaches the appropriate recipient? What will prompt them to act on it?
- How long will your process run? Can it be a regular or ongoing program? Is there a clear point person or office who people can contact if they want to keep engaging after the process is complete?

By hosting an open participation process, you're assuming the responsibility to connect participant feedback to relevant decision-making and action.

47 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Public Participation Guide."

48 Wampler, A Guide to Participatory Budgeting, 28–29.

+Spotlight
Find the right respondent inside your institution

Participants should never feel like their time and energy went into a black hole. And yet that's not an uncommon feeling among people who have contacted or otherwise tried to engage with the government (or other public institutions).

You can help prevent this by ensuring that participant proposals and messages reach the right place. Digital platforms like Delib and DemosX, for instance, provide administrators with internal routing tools so that you can flag participants' messages and proposals for the right people. And you can track internal responses (or lack thereof).

The SeeClickFix issue-reporting platform even allows residents to re-open issues that they've reported if they feel the local government closed them without a true resolution.

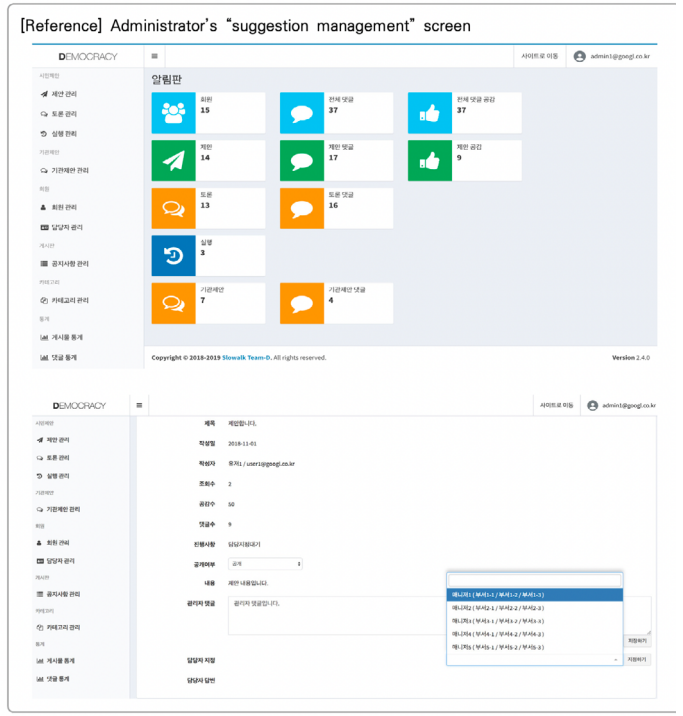
If the sheer volume of participant responses is a challenge for your institution's response capacity, you can commit to a reply deadline for proposals with a pre-specified level of public support. For example, your institution may commit to providing detailed responses to petitions with at least 5,000 signatures within 3 months of the petition's delivery. Some participatory program managers go further and strive to respond to a set percentage of participants' suggestions, such as 90%. The more you can respond to participants, the stronger the transparency you can nurture.

Accountability also means taking participant feedback seriously. In the vTaiwan participatory decision-making process, a government agency invites stakeholders to come together to deliberate a controversial issue and make a recommendation. For example, to determine whether Uber should be legal in the country, vTaiwan brought together taxi drivers, Uber drivers, and riders. The hosting government agency is required to respond to the feedback received: All opinions are incorporated into the related decision-making discussions. The host also must provide a timely reply to questions that arise, specify which recommendations are being adopted, and report back in detail on why the others are not.[49]

Even though you may not be able to implement every idea your constituents suggest, doing your best to respect their input by replying will build trust in the overall process.

49 "VTaiwan.Tw — 數位經濟法規線上諮詢."

[Reference] Administrator's "suggestion management" screen



An example of the administrator's view of a digital participation platform. Hosts can categorize proposals and designate the appropriate department responsible for following up.[50]

50 Hwang et al., Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, 99.

CONSIDER IT A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

Creating a smoothly operating participation process can take years. Likewise, developing a healthy dynamic between citizens and government (or institution and constituency) can take decades.

This is a long-term process. So, treat this project as an engagement "habit."

You can do this by planning for long-term participation from the start. Budgets shift, administrations end, and staff come and go. A digital participation platform preferred by one political party may lose favor and be discontinued when a rival party wins power. If the budget for the platform and its outreach program were not renewed, which design decisions that you can make now that will ensure the process was still a meaningful contribution?

One key way to achieve long-term results is to help participants connect with each other, not just with the host institution running the participatory process. By using the resources you have now to connect residents with each other, you can foster relationships that will fuel long-term civic involvement. Fostering relationships between participants may produce other ongoing benefits long after your participation process has ended.

- Choose a digital platform that allows people passionate about the same issue to connect. Can you make proposals available for all to see, so that even if you don't have the capacity to act on each idea, others can?
- Offering features such as the ability to form working groups, exchange private messages, and schedule offline meetings or events can strengthen social bonds between users.

Another way to ensure your work endures is to embed participatory processes into the institution itself. While executive leadership support is critical to initiating a new process, enshrining it in the day-to-day functioning of the bureaucracy is equally important.[51]

The Parti Co-op team refers to the process as a "journey," and recommends that you treat digital participation as a multi-year project. If you are working within government or a similar institution, you will likely face pressure to run one-off engagement campaigns. Fight the instinct to think in one-year timelines. A successful digital participation process and platform requires several levels of institutional action, including policy and operations, with a longer horizon. The Parti team has found in its work in Seoul and elsewhere that a substantial portion of the platform development process is project planning, with the involvement of internal teams required at many steps along the way.[52] Work to convince relevant stakeholders that this is a long-term project, and therefore deserves long-term planning and operational experience over time to be successful.

51 Denique Souta, interview by author, Jamaica, November 18, 2021.

52 Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and Hyun-Suk Hwang of Parti Co-op, interview by author, South Korea, November 15, 2021.

Challenges and Opportunities for AI in Digital Participation

Chapter 2

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "AI"?

Artificial Intelligence is now an umbrella term that encompasses an array of competing technology methods. These systems perform tasks traditionally associated with human cognition, such as understanding language, recognizing patterns and supporting decision-making. Simply put, we call something AI when it allows a computer to act like a human would.

Over time, tech we take for granted stops being considered "AI." Take, for example, speech processing. Over decades of work in speech processing and human computer interaction, computers have developed to a point where they can decently understand how we talk (at least some of the time, and in common languages).

Our discussion of AI for participation will include the full subset of AI methods, from Natural Language Processing to Machine Learning. Much of what's currently referred to as "AI" relies on Large Language Models, or generative AI. We'll focus on the actual features each type of AI unlocks for participatory democracy rather than the underlying computer science.

AI PRINCIPLES

Depending on whom you talk to, AI can be viewed as a panacea (cure-all) or anathema (scourge). One's opinion might even fluctuate based on the quality of one's most recent AI interaction. It's clear that this is a complicated topic, and only growing more so as AI's developers race ahead to impact the world in ever-deeper ways. A flourishing of actors have launched in recent years to address these topics.

For this reason, People Powered worked with its global community to co-develop an AI policy.[53] The agreement acknowledges that AI is already ubiquitous in the technology platforms we rely on. Developing a policy provides a framework to ensure that use of AI furthers the organization's mission while holding us accountable to its values, members, and community of beneficiaries.

Like other organizational policies on AI, the People Powered AI policy establishes core guiding principles that will remain steadfast even as the technology quickly changes. Your organization may have already conducted a similar process, or can embark on one. By first clarifying the principles that matter to you and the communities you serve, you can prioritize them even when new AI releases seem tempting.

Some of the guiding principles in the People Powered AI policy include:

- **Mission Alignment:** All decisions related to AI use and development will be evaluated on the potential to meaningfully advance our mission compared to their relative costs and risks.
- **Human-Centered:** AI will only be used in ways that respect human dignity. Any AI tools we develop will be designed primarily to increase the equitable access to our resources.
- **Transparency:** AI use should be reasonably documented and disclosed to our community. Any significant organizational decisions made or supported by AI must be disclosed.
- **Accountability:** Humans will remain ultimately responsible for all organizational decisions and actions, and will be accountable for the deployment and use of any AI outputs.

53 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oMD-9nTZ4aaCrBBcBKX0QhzeaNdOa-MsvtYEd5JsT4-4/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.fxii2nqoi5sm

- **Sustainability:** We will strive to use AI tools in ways that are as sustainable as possible, prioritizing more energy and cost efficient solutions and tools wherever we can.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** In the development and use of AI tools we will prioritize inclusive and democratic approaches to training, testing, and algorithmic design.
- **Learning:** We will approach new and existing AI tools with an experimental and innovative mindset, sharing our learnings, successes, and failures with our members.
- **Privacy and Security:** We will endeavor to protect the data privacy of all those in our network to prevent personally identifying or proprietary data from being fed into public AI models.

In addition to organizational policies like People Powered's, several global frameworks offer essential guidance for ethical and inclusive AI governance. The United Nations' Global Digital Compact calls for universal connectivity, human rights-based digital cooperation, and safeguards for emerging technologies like AI. It emphasizes multistakeholder governance and the need to ensure that digital technologies — including AI — serve the public good and uphold democratic values.

Complementing this, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) provides the first global normative framework for AI ethics. It outlines principles such as proportionality, fairness, transparency, and sustainability, and calls for impact assessments, inclusive governance, and protection of data and privacy. These standards are particularly relevant for civic tech platforms and participatory democracy tools that rely on AI to engage diverse communities.

The 2025 UNDP Human Development Report (HDR), titled A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI, offers a people centered analytical framework for AI. It emphasizes that AI's impact will be shaped not by what it can do, but by the choices societies make in its design, deployment, and governance. The report proposes three strategic pillars for AI-augmented human development:

- Building a complementarity economy — where AI augments rather than replaces human capabilities.
- Driving innovation with intent — aligning AI development with socially valuable outcomes.
- Investing in capabilities that count — ensuring people have the skills and agency to thrive in an AI-enabled world.

UNDP's own principles for AI echo and reinforce these global standards. They include commitments to human dignity, equity and inclusion, transparency, accountability, and sustainability. UNDP also emphasizes mission alignment, ensuring that AI tools support development goals and do not exacerbate inequalities or undermine civic trust. These principles are operationalized through internal guidance on risk assessment, ethical design, and responsible data practices.

Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for organizations deploying AI in participatory processes. By aligning with UNDP and UN-wide standards, civic tech actors can ensure that AI strengthens democratic engagement, protects rights, and contributes to inclusive and sustainable development.

THE CHALLENGES AI PRESENTS

In the context of digital participation platforms, the most fundamental challenge AI presents is to what degree we allow it to replace human involvement. People Powered member Brendan Halloran says, "AI is increasingly able to engage people, get their input, integrate it together, and allow us to understand and engage with that content, all with less actual interaction among people. What are the tradeoffs here in contexts of polarization, isolation, low trust, and so on?"[54] Democracy is a process, and people working to make decisions together is a core part of that process. What do we lose by taking shortcuts in that journey?

This isn't the only challenge, of course. If you consider the opposite scenario of each of the value statements in People Powered's AI policy, you will have a good starter list of many of the concerns people have regarding AI:

- **Mission Alignment:** The direction of AI could be or become fundamentally misaligned with your broader organizational goals.
- **Human-Centered:** AI could dehumanize us, or worsen existing inequalities. In the context of participation, we don't yet know what effect automating participatory processes will have on participants' level of engagement. Would you be less likely to write up your thoughts on something if you felt that no person would read it?
- **Transparency:** AI systems are famously opaque, and their ubiquity could eventually erode disclosure of its use.
- **Accountability:** Agentic AI will accelerate taking action on behalf of users.
- **Sustainability:** The industry at large is consuming ever-larger amounts of energy, water, and other resources at a time when the environment can least afford it.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** AI developers aren't particularly representative, and the limited availability and expense of advanced AI models reinforces inequality and exclusion. The training data that informs AI models is often rife with problematic and inaccurate biases. Mainstream models fail to include smaller languages or more broadly, less-digitized cultures.
- **Privacy and Security:** AI data privacy breaches and attack vectors happen regularly, and are difficult to predict.

Additional fears include AI's potential to cause widespread job loss, harm to critical thinking capacity, and its tendency toward hallucination, plagiarism, and sycophancy (unquestionably supporting whatever a user says). Some people are also concerned with the existential threat AI could pose if its incentives no longer align with humanity itself.

While making it easier for more people to contribute to a digital participation platform is absolutely a positive development, the increasing amount of AI slop on the internet is already polluting social media. Digital participation platforms may not be immune to this trend. The sheer volume of machine-generated content could drown out the contributions from actual humans, diminishing their value and possibly even the political legitimacy of the process. Participants may be less eager to engage if they believe that they're interacting with computers instead of other people.

The proliferation of digital disinformation found online is also exacerbated by generative AI. Generative AI images, videos, and audio are already interfering with first responders in crisis situations. This issue is likely to worsen as AI's production

54 Workshop

values improve, and the images become harder and harder to discern from reality.

If not purposefully designed and effectively anchored in human rights and democratic values, AI systems may subtly shift decision-making power away from communities. This would reduce opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. AI can also marginalize vulnerable voices.

There will also be "second-order effects". These are the effects that follow a technology after society has adapted to the availability of that technology. For example, the proliferation of high-quality video cameras in every smartphone eventually led to TikTok influencers. In the case of AI, high volumes of "AI slop" flooding social networks are already changing peoples' experiences on them. And second-order effects are much harder to predict than the initial promises made by advocates for a given technology.

AI's benefits and harms are nuanced, and rapidly changing. As just one example, consider the environmental impacts of AI. It's well known that training new models can be incredibly energy intensive. There's also been significant media coverage about the environmental impact of each individual query we make to an LLM like ChatGPT. But some models can be run locally once trained, without taking up additional server resources per use. It's also hard to measure the net effect of AI: does completing a task in a fraction of the time it used to require using AI end up using more or less energy than the old way of doing things, and how do we know?

Regardless of the per-query environmental impact, there is a clear reason for concern at the macro level: the big tech companies are drastically ramping up their energy usage to train and host AI services. They're discarding their 2030 climate goals and investing heavily in potentially risky energy sources, like nuclear, to meet demand

As the tech companies race ahead to win market share, the ethical concerns surrounding AI are likely to evolve, but unlikely to go away completely. AI development is outpacing the capacity of many governments to set effective rules to regulate it.

Meanwhile, the concentration of AI development in a relative few countries and corporations risks reinforcing digital colonialism, where tools and norms are exported without regard for local contexts, languages, or values. Failure to support underrepresented languages risks excluding entire communities from civic engagement.

Beyond language, several members of the People Powered community have found that mainstream AI models don't reflect their cultures, either. As Charlie Martial Ngounou of AfroLeadership put it, "In African countries, most processes are not really digitized to begin with. You don't really have the data to feed AI models…So we'll end up adopting models trained on another kind of data with no real connection to our own reality, because our data is missing." Then, in participatory programs, low baseline digital literacy combined with AI agents participating on people's behalf could result in a situation where the process has essentially been "hijacked, colonized once more."[55]

In addition, UNDP highlights how women often face additional barriers — from online harassment to exclusion rooted in social norms — making it even harder for them to engage meaningfully in digital spaces.

We will spotlight the more ethical alternatives that people are working on throughout this guide so you can make choices that align with your values. Here are some common concerns about today's AI, and emerging approaches to mitigate them:

55 Charlie Martial NGOUNOU

Concern	Mitigation approach
AI models trained on intellectual property without permission	AI models trained on data with pre-approved consent from the data's owners (such as Adobe Firefly, an image generation model trained entirely on stock imagery with consent of its owners).
User data being appropriated to train future AI models	In many products, you can configure the settings to disallow training on your user data. You can also run some models locally (offline), such as Meta's Llama models or OpenAI's gpt-oss.[56]
The environmental impact of each AI query	Running local AI models doesn't significantly increase impact per use. Holding tech companies accountable for their energy use can incentivize investment in cleaner energy.
When an AI model's inputs are unknown, it risks significant biases appearing in the training data and/or outputs	Open source AI models include open weighting values as well as making training data available.
AI models don't perform well outside of dominant languages like English	Countries and linguistic communities are investing in training "sovereign" models that excel in their language, like Masakhane in Africa and the IndiaAI Mission, plus Mozilla Foundation's long-running Common Voice project.
Distrust of venture-backed AI companies seeking market domination	Public sector and civil society investments in non-commercial AI models that center their values, like La Infrastructura Pública de IA Abierta y Multilingüe (ALIA) and ETH's forthcoming model.
Concerns over who controls AI, and who will prevent it from getting out of control	The AI governance sector is developing regulatory, technological, and social approaches to these challenges, for example AI Safety Asia.

56 For a guide to running an LLM locally on your laptop, see https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/07/17/1120391/how-to-run-an-llm-on-your-laptop/

The mitigation approaches here are not perfect solutions: many of the examples above lag years behind state of the art commercial AI models, for example. They can also be less widely available and more difficult for novices to use.

Not all concerns about AI have a corresponding and sufficient mitigation approach. For example, AI is already replacing and reducing many people's jobs. While the concept of creative destruction[57] predicts this phenomenon, and suggests that new types of jobs will emerge as a result, the years ahead could be a period of great economic suffering and instability for many people while society transitions.

Participatory programs introduce additional constraints and contextual challenges. In addition to all of the above, participation AI might also encounter issues with data scarcity. A community's data may not be sufficiently digitized and represented in training sets. AI might not be able to figure out important contextual meanings, like the acronyms prevalent throughout the public and social sectors.

The sheer speed at which the AI industry is moving presents another challenge. Many local governments are still in the process of "digital transformation", which includes an enormous amount of work to "upskill" the technical literacy of millions of civil servants. The speed and complexity of preparing data and AI systems, evolving responsible data practice, and AI literacy, generally complicates using it in these settings.

To ensure that AI systems serve all communities equitably, and don't reinforce existing disparities, AI accountability must be embedded in broader governance frameworks. This includes clear institutional mandates, regulatory oversight, and mechanisms for redress. UNDP, for example, supports countries in developing such ecosystems through its AI policy guidance and capacity-building programs.

57 https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.190072

AI'S OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION

So why bother? Up until now, we've primarily discussed the downsides to using AI for participation. Fortunately, there are some great upsides, as well. Before you start, consider asking your own community how they feel about using AI in the context of a participation program. The public's view is nuanced about the benefits and drawbacks of AI for public uses.[58] Just like involving your constituents in the overall design of your participatory process, inviting them to share their hopes, concerns, and feelings about AI features can help you secure the buy-in you need from participants.[59]

A key benefit used to promote AI usage is efficiency. Running a participatory process can be an expensive, time-consuming endeavor. If done right, integrating AI in the right spots throughout the process can make for a far faster, cheaper, and more engaging process.

AI can also make participatory platforms far more inclusive. It's being widely used to translate materials and participants' own proposals into a more diverse set of languages. AI's ability to improve transcription of speech is lowering technical and literacy barriers to engaging that is likely to improve representation of different points of view.

AI also makes new modes of engagement possible. For example, the ability of the Pol.is platform to map mathematically valid areas of consensus between rival political factions just wasn't practical to incorporate into a participation program before its release.

AI summarization tech allows hosts to ask more open-ended questions, or scale large numbers of small group discussions, facilitating deeper levels of engagement. Digital participation platforms have begun rolling out features that make participatory processes easier for everyone involved and, sometimes, more powerful. So far, we're primarily seeing existing digital participation platforms roll out AI features. There are some AI-native participation platforms, too, but they haven't gained significant traction yet.

Most commonly observed AI features on participation platforms

In December 2024, our team researched how AI is showing up on 30 participation platforms. We found the following AI applications to be the most common, in order of frequency:

1. Translation
2. Sentiment analysis
3. Topic clustering
4. AI discussion moderation
5. Parsing and summarizing large amounts of text
6. Chatbots
7. Generating images

58 See surveys cited in Slide 4 of Designing and Assuring Equitable AI in Public Services Webinar for the UK Evaluation Society, by Patel, Reema.

59 To guide this process, we recommend Patel, R. (2025) A Framework and Self Assessment Workbook for Including Public Voices in AI. Elgon Social Research and ESRC Digital Good Network.

Feature-level integration

So far, most of the digital participation platforms integrating AI are introducing it at specific points, embedding it within existing tools to power specific features, rather than launching fully-AI products. Your experience as a user or administrator of a digital participation platform is likely to involve encountering tactical AI support in the midst of an otherwise familiar digital user experience.

AI companies have made it easy for developers to integrate their APIs into their own platforms. This means an existing product can be set up to talk to ChatGPT on behalf of a user without having to leave the app. For example, you gain the ability to summarize or "ask questions of" a long PDF document from within a platform you already use.

Can't I just use mainstream AI tools for this?

Yes and no. As you've no doubt seen, tech companies are baking AI features into every conceivable product and user interface. For example, web searches now return AI summaries above the link results. You can now call Google's Gemini AI in a spreadsheet formula and tell it what to do with the contents of another cell.

Still, there's a reason that purpose-built software exists, and democratic participation is a special enough use case to warrant extra attention. Uploading a data export to ChatGPT for analysis, for example, will only get you so far. A digital participation platform that has thoughtfully integrated AI will be providing the model with important context, like how the process works and what the AI should prioritize in its analysis.

Not all participatory AI directly maps to this chronological arrangement, of course. Pol.is's new geo.pol.is product, for example, allows cities and countries to host permanent place-based versions of the platform. That way residents of that place can engage with each other on an ongoing basis, instead of in a limited campaign period. (Previously, the pol.is platform was deployed for a more limited time period instead of being always-available).

USING AI BEFORE A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS STARTS

Streamline administrative work

In addition to the AI features offered by participation platforms, which we'll discuss in detail here, participation hosts are using AI for discrete back-office tasks related to running a process. In these cases, they might not use a dedicated participation tool, but a general purpose AI model. They're using AI to do things like:

- Editing dense legalese and government or corporate jargon to make them more accessible to regular people[60]
- Digitizing analog records from archives and offline communication channels
- Streamline communications, such as scheduling

60 https://www.theverge.com/news/708820/slack-ai-message-context-canvas-writing-assistant

Dipping your toes in

Introducing AI can feel overwhelming. What's the 101 version? Where can you get a good return on minimal investment? After closely studying AI applications, the Civic AI Observatory program by Nesta and Newspeak House wrote up some likely "safe bet" parameters for public good organizations looking to try out AI.[61] What kind of task might be a good candidate for automating with AI? Edward Saperia suggests starting with basic tasks that are:

- Done frequently
- Supervised internally
- Involve limited downsides if they go wrong
- Can be easily compared against an existing process
- Require limited technical investment
- Similar to tasks that have been automated successfully by other organizations
- Not better solved by a tool designed for that task

What about bigger, riskier projects? Saperia says, "It seems like a good idea to start with the basics, and also — given the speed of change — wait for the private sector to make all the mistakes first, and also develop the tooling."

61 https://civicai.uk/p/safe-bets/comments#comment-53157251

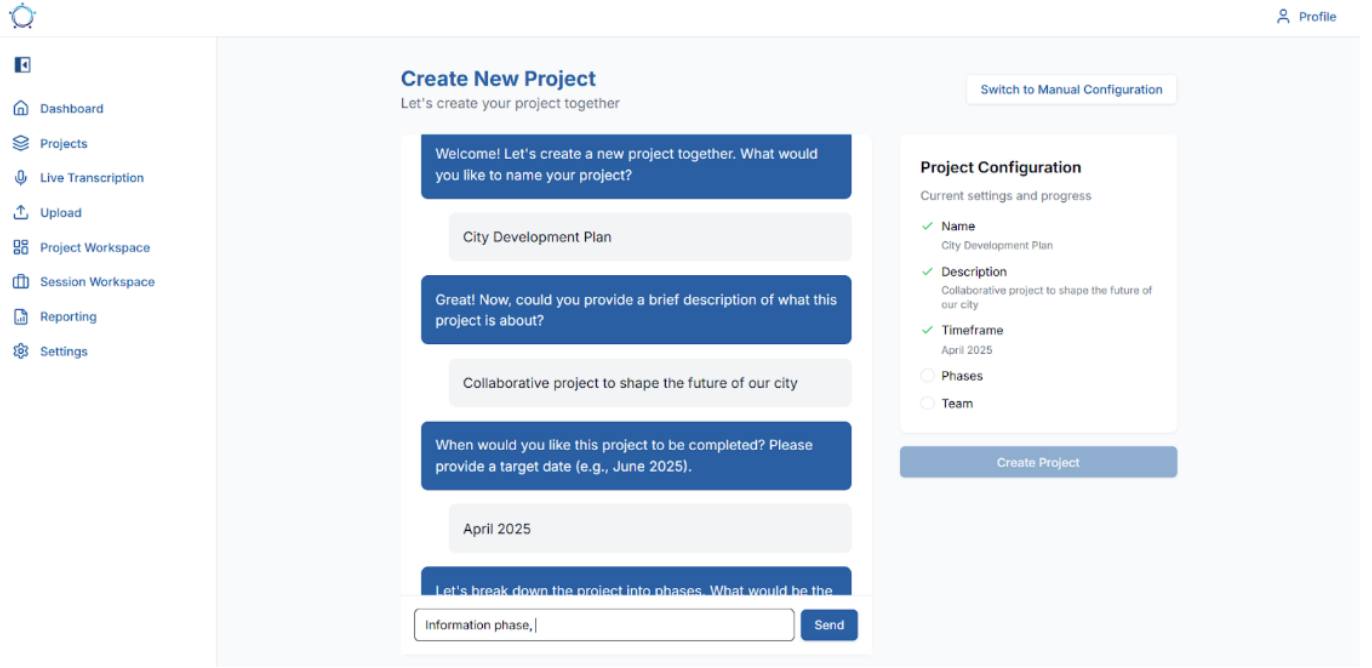
Plan your process

Example platforms with this feature: IdeaScale, deliberAIde.

AI tools can help participatory process hosts create and plan their actual program.

For example, IdeaScale AI provides users guidance and recommendations to design their innovation campaign. Likewise deliberAIde, as seen in this screenshot provided by the company:

Brazil's Empurrando Juntas recommends the use of AI for this purpose, but does not offer a feature to facilitate it on the platform. Participatory process hosts are also using mainstream models like ChatGPT and Anthropic to brainstorm and develop participatory programs, although you should provide the AI with plenty of background context on your program if you go this route.



https://www.deliberaide.com/

Training staff to run participation processes

AI can be used to dynamically generate documentation for a platform that doesn't have sufficient guidance. It can also create videos, slide decks, and other engaging materials to help train staff to moderate the participatory process, for example.

Swappable AI models

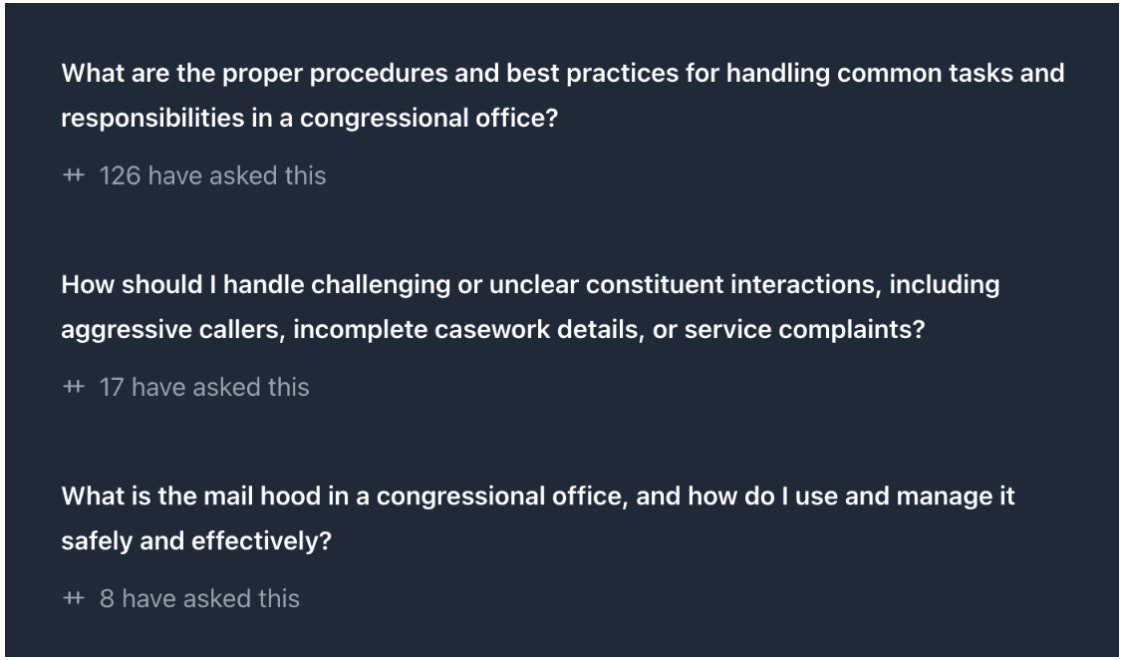
Example platforms with this feature: Your Priorities, Sensemaker, Decidim.

Some participatory platforms allow administrators to choose from a variety of third-party AI models to integrate. This provides admins the ability to choose a model more in line with their values, procurement rules, or preferred languages. It also allows them to swap in public interest AI models in the future once they become available. This offers a compromise between using today's advanced models and migrating to public interest models in the future when they come online.

Dynamic FAQ and Glossary

Example platforms with this feature: StaffLink, Deliberaide (on the roadmap).

Before starting your participatory process, you can prepare dynamically generated Frequently Asked Questions or Glossary sections. Rather than (just) pre-write answers to the questions you expect people to have, you can aggregate common questions to your program's chatbot and publish answers to them. POPVOX Foundation did this with their StaffLink tool. With AI, their system "groups questions by topic, generates a generic version of the question, and shares the number of times a related question was asked."



POPVOX's Frequently Asked Questions section dynamically generates generic versions of the most common questions its users have actually asked its service. https://stafflink.popvox.com/faq

Smart groups: Form diverse participant groups

Example platforms with this feature: Go Vocal, Unanimous AI, Frankly, Your Priorities.

Forming diverse, balanced, and representative participant groups is key to the success and political legitimacy of many participatory democracy processes. Platforms are using AI to dynamically create and balance participant groups. For example, the AI can take local demographic data into account to populate groups with representation from key demographics.

Simulating participation to test your platform

Some platform developers are using AI as a form of pre-launch user testing to simulate people joining and using their websites. This can help you determine where in a sign-up process people might get discouraged and drop out, for example. Many platforms invest time and energy into optimizing the first 'landing page' that visitors reach, for example, to maximize the number of people who ultimately sign up.

USING AI DURING A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

Translation

Example platforms with this feature: Civocracy, Assembl, Your Priorities, Decidim.

Translation is the most commonly used AI feature we observed, appearing in 19 out of 30 digital participation platforms. This frequency illustrates the appeal for participation platforms. AI translation lets platforms reach as many communities as possible.

Human translation is generally acknowledged to be more accurate, especially between certain languages, but its cost can make it prohibitive for participatory programs. When a program can't afford human translation across multiple languages, AI (or "machine") translation can make a participatory process and its related materials (not to mention the large volumes of participants' inputs) far more accessible.

In countries like Indonesia, where over 700 languages are spoken, the time and cost required to fully localize a product and participants' contributions would be prohibitive. Progress is being made to leverage AI to reinforce so-called "endangered" languages globally. The result is that people can participate in whichever language they feel most comfortable interacting in.

Although not the same as translating between two languages, AI is also being used to make government legalese and other dense texts more legible to more people. The Empurrando Juntas team in Brazil, for example, uses AI to "translate" institutional jargon and acronyms to more approachable language.

Parsing, summarizing, and classifying participant contributions

Example platforms with this feature: Polco, deliberAIde, Bang the Table, EngagementHQ, CartoDEBAT, Place Speak, coUrbanize, Fluicity (Efalia Engage), Insights, Konveio, PublicInput, 76engage, Sensemaker, Consult (i.AI UK).

Traditional survey methods often require citizens to choose from a finite set of potential answers, like a multiple choice question. That's because it makes it easier for the group running the survey to aggregate and tally the results. The surveyors get the analog equivalent of structured data back from participants. But asking participants to choose from limited answer sets too often restricts the diversity and depth of respondents' answers. The opportunity to learn more about their lived experience and expertise is lost.[62]

As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace put it: "While multiple-choice polls can capture top-of-mind opinions on predefined options, they rarely surface deeper insights or emergent ideas. In contrast, open-ended surveys, personal reflections, and group deliberation offer

62 See Eliciting People's First-Order Concerns: Text Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Questions, by Beatrice Ferrario and Stefanie Stantcheva.

far richer input—but have often gone underutilized, not because they lack value but because institutions lacked the time, expertise, or tools to apply them. Research, for example, shows that open-ended responses offer windows into public attitudes, but extracting that meaning requires conceptual grounding and interpretive care."[63]

Generative AI's ability to efficiently parse large amounts of speech, text, and other forms of engagement could allow hosts of participatory processes to ask more open-ended qualitative questions that allow people to share how they really feel. And thanks to some of the AI features here, administrators will be able to deftly handle large volumes of text, even if they receive a hundred thousand pages of participants' transcripts.

That figure is not an exaggeration. The UK government runs about 600 public consultations each year, with some individual consultations attracting over 100,000 responses.[64] Staff and contractor time analyzing those responses amounts to hundreds of thousands of hours, and further delays the turnaround time between participation and results.

63 https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/07/how-ai-can-unlock-public-wisdom-and-revitalize-democratic-governance

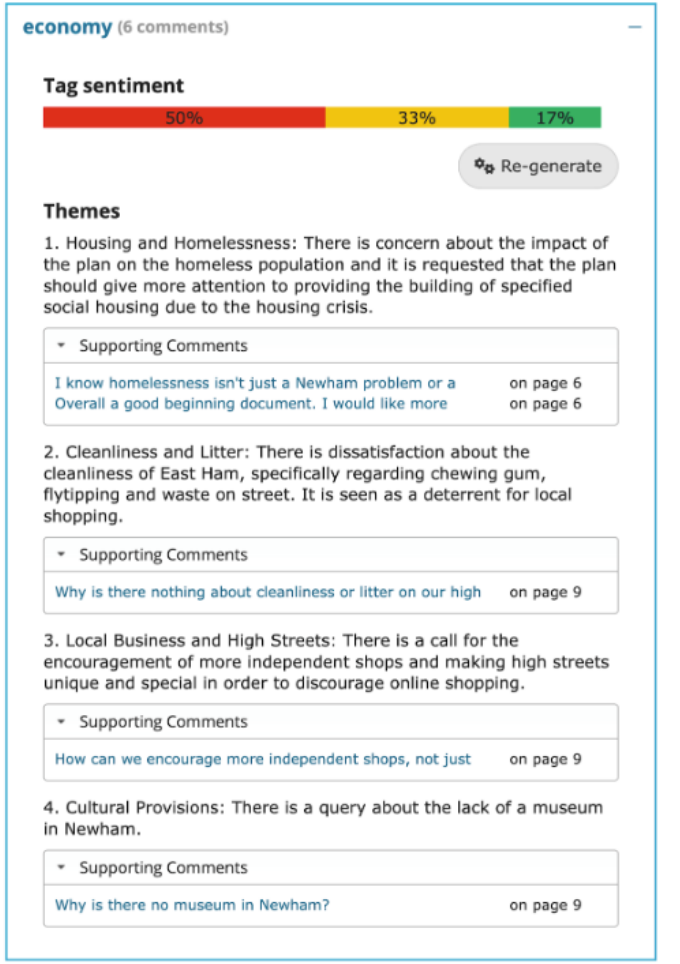
64 https://ai.gov.uk/docs/Scot_Gov_NSCP_Evaluation_Report.pdf

AI has been used for years to address these challenges, even predating the current generative AI boom. More mature participation AI features apply Natural Language Processing and similar methods to mine large volumes of text (participants' contributions) and classify discussion topics or estimate sentiment (how people felt about a topic). They can cluster wide-ranging conversations into a more finite set of topics for participants and process hosts alike to more easily navigate, during and after a discussion.

Topic clustering provides an example of the steady performance improvements AI has made in recent years. While it's been possible for some time, improvements to clustering models have unlocked better and more specific descriptions of the conversational "buckets". The resulting theme descriptions are more interesting; Consider the difference between "people discussed park infrastructure" and "the community is adamant that water fountains are working during summer heatwaves."

How does AI perform with such a task? In the same UK study, Consult's AI theme identification was paired against human reviewers doing the same task. The study found that the model "correctly identified all themes for three-fifths of responses and had generally good overall performance". Its score on the task wasn't perfect, but not far off from subjective disagreements between human reviewers, either.[65]

65 https://ai.gov.uk/docs/Scot_Gov_NSCP_Evaluation_Report.pdf



Konveio's screenshot shows AI-powered topic extraction and sentiment analysis. https://www.konveio.com/features/analytics-reporting. Screenshot taken from Konveio.

Likely because these technical methods have been available for years, we found that digital participation platforms are currently more likely to use them than Large Language Model (or generative AI) features. This finding could easily shift as LLM-based features mature and developers have more time to test and integrate them.

These earlier AI features still require ethical consideration; accurate sentiment analysis is notoriously tricky, for example. But the rapid introduction of LLM-based approaches has introduced other concerns.

As you've probably experienced firsthand, generative AI can also do magical things with large amounts of text. It can summarize, rewrite, translate, expand, and more. Sometimes it'll insert or distort things that weren't really there in the data. This problem is referred to as 'hallucination' and fixing it is a very active area of research.

And how does the public feel about their comments being reviewed by AI? In a different study, Nesta worked with the UK government's AI office to evaluate public opinion about the same Consult tool's use of AI to summarize participants' contributions. [66]

Generally, the UK public understood the rationale for using AI here and valued the efficiency gains that Consult provides, but quite astutely "wanted to know what the cost- and time-savings would be used for". Efficiency is not an end-game in its own right; resources spared from one task could be re-invested in another aspect of engagement. The public was also concerned about the potential for AI model manipulation and its environmental impact.

And they, like many others, seek human oversight for the Consult tool. Their arguments, that "more sensitive and local issues should require a higher degree of human checking to ensure that the Consult tool didn't miss critical information," are sound.

Adjust the AI model to your program in real-time

Example platforms with this feature: Decidim, Participativo Brasil.

Another way to improve an AI model's performance is to give people the ability to train it on the specific data coming out of your digital participation process. Decidim has developed this real-time feature for the purpose of moderating spam on your platform. One can imagine how training a model on your specific process could open other benefits, such as reducing hallucination and adapting it to context-specific speech, terminology, and behavior.

Brazil's national participation platform, built on Decidim, evaluates real-time participation data to flag imbalances in who's participating. Its program managers can then intervene to encourage greater balance. The Stanford Online Deliberation Platform nudges users who aren't participating, and helps organizers keep conversations on-topic and following the meeting agenda.

66 https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/ai-sral-consult/

Transcribe speech

Example platforms with this feature: Fora, Loomio, CartoDEBAT, Cortico, The People Say, Dembrane ECHO. Plus mainstream platforms like YouTube and Zoom, for some languages.

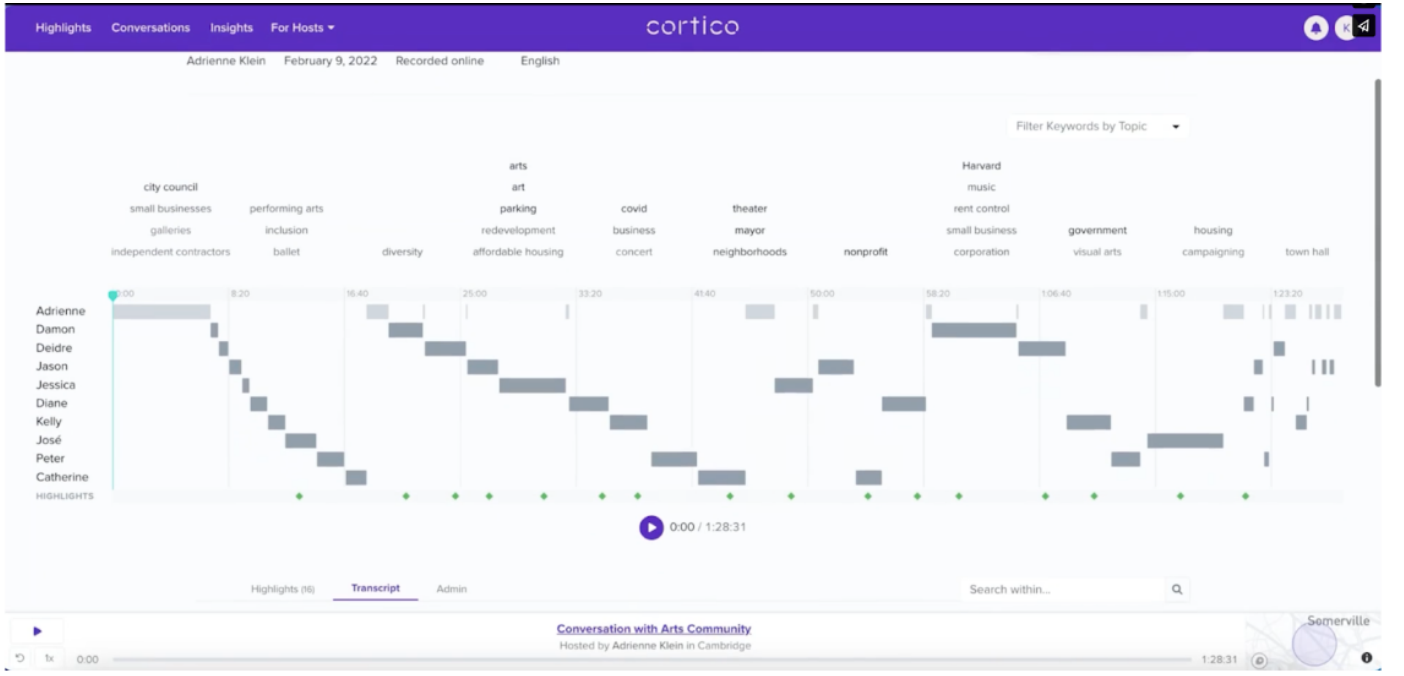
Generative AI isn't limited to working with text. It's also pretty adept at working with audio and video. AI is now able to capture speech as text (and even convert it back to speech again). The more that participation platforms allow people to speak as they naturally would, as if to another human, the more accessible participatory processes can become.

Literacy levels vary widely, for many underlying reasons, and typing out text paragraphs on a screen just isn't a very accessible activity for many people. AI is already being used to capture and transcribe people's spoken voices onto digital participation platforms. By lowering barriers to participation in this way, AI could help broaden participation beyond those comfortable using tech. It can also free up organizers to more meaningfully engage in the program.

For example, in Germany's Siegen-Wittgenstein district, planners piloted DeliberAIde during their participatory social-planning conferences. The AI helped streamline note-taking, improved documentation, and allowed facilitators to focus fully on engaging with participants in dialogue.

Once the speech is transcribed into text, digital platforms can do many things with it. An obvious application is search. But storing interview recordings as text also allows participation platforms to include that participant input in topic clustering, translation, auto-tagging, alerts, and recommendation engines, among other features. Platforms like The People Say can also provide deep links to specific timestamps in a video or audio interview, for example, allowing others to jump right to the relevant part of an hour-long discussion.

Another example worth calling out here is Cortico. The team has developed an entire user interface for transcribing speech and surfacing patterns in the recordings, while retaining the specific audio segments to use later. The project demonstrates that the power of the human voice doesn't need to be lost while collecting large amounts of interview data.

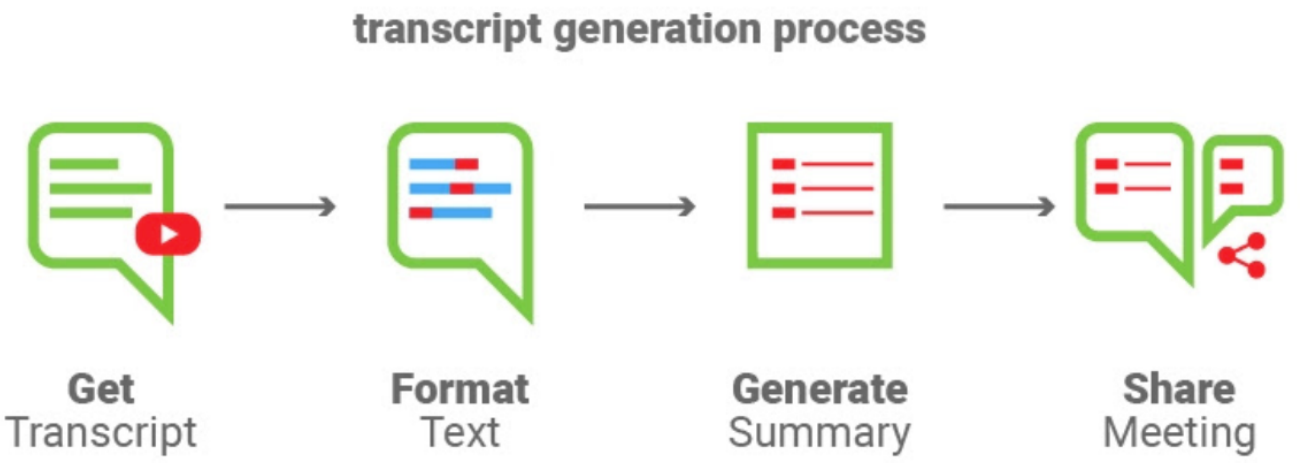


The Cortico platform makes it easy to navigate and parse hours of audio conversations without losing the human voices within. Screenshot from Cortico.

Let people review and approve transcripts of their speech

Example platforms with this feature: CartoDEBAT, Converlens, deliberAIde.

Although rapidly improving, speech transcription is still not yet 100% accurate. Certain languages, accents, and specialized terminology can produce errors in the transcripts. For this reason, it's important that platforms offer participants the opportunity to review and if necessary, correct the transcripts of their speech transcripts.



Block Party's speech to constituent pipeline for public meeting summaries https://blockparty.studio/ **.Graphic from Block Party.**

Public meeting transcription

Example platforms with this feature: OpenCouncil, citymeetings.nyc, Block Party.

An exciting use case for AI speech transcription is public meetings. For years, civic innovators have wanted to enable alerts for meetings. Imagine getting a proactive notification when your child's school is being discussed in a community meeting. Rather than attend meetings for hours each week, you can engage when something relevant to you has been discussed.

A variety of civic platforms are developing AI speech transcription tools to make public meetings more accessible in this way. They're navigating the need to train the AI on special, locally-relevant vocabulary and acronyms, and exploring ways to engage residents in the outputs of the meetings. deliberAIde, for example, is using AI to detect and delete Personal Identifiable Information (PII) in transcripts.

Scanning handwriting and other analog documents

Example platforms with this feature: OpenCouncil, citymeetings.nyc, Block Party.

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AI chat

Example platforms with this feature: Polco, Konveio, Your Priorities.

ChatGPT popularized the general human-to-AI chat interface for AI interactions. Between the familiarity of the interface and the ease of replicating it technically with APIs, many products adopted a similar chat approach when adding AI. This includes some digital participation platforms, which have already integrated chat modes in some of their products.

An example might be taking a long government document, like a law, and adding a chat interface where people can "chat with" the document in natural language terms. This allows people to ask for just the answer to the question they care about, for example, rather than read 50 pages of dense legalese. On participation platforms, this interface can be extended to "chatting with" the results of a participatory process, so they can make sense of what took place and how the group came to the final decision.

Tech companies are already exploring other interfaces for interacting with LLMs, so we'll see more ways of interacting with LLMs in the future.

A downside can be that a chat interface expects people to come up with questions to ask the LLM or dataset, for example, rather than proactively guiding them. Which leads us to…

Assist participants through the process with bots

Example platforms with this feature: deliberAIde, Polco, Empurrando Juntas, All Our Ideas, Konveio, Your Priorities, Loomio.

Another form of chatbot is explicitly framed as a user-support agent. Due to the cost of employing humans to provide customer or constituent services, this has been an active area of software development for many years. The chatbot automates or semi-automates helping users get answers to their questions, sometimes routing the request to a human support agent if the chatbot fails to handle the initial query.

Digital participation platform developers have also customized AI support bots to assist people through a participatory process. The user support bots are provided with contextual background on the process, and tasked with supporting people as they navigate it in order to help them participate. They usually appear in the composition box of a participation platform, where participants are tasked with contributing ideas or drafting a proposal. For example, All Our Ideas generates brief, helpful Pros and Cons to explain the options participants are voting on.

A marketing image from Polco's AI user support bot https://info.polco.us/platform/ai. Image from Polco

Some bots are designed to accompany people throughout the entire participation process. The bots can proactively encourage and work together with people to brainstorm ideas, expand on their draft proposals, and reflect on what they want to say to the group. The result can be that users' proposals contain more supporting material, enhancing its legibility to other participants.

A risk here is that different participants might have varying experiences with the same support bot, leading to unequal treatment. For example, a bot might provide two different people a different set of pros and cons about the same proposal. And due to the (valid) competing priority of keeping these conversations private, the process hosts might never know how users' experiences with a support bot might differ.

There is also a risk that the user will submit whatever the bot suggests, since it's significantly easier than composing an original proposal, distorting the human inputs into the participatory process. AI is already shaping our language, and people are short on time. There's increasing potential that participants might submit something that the AI contributed without sufficient review (see our discussion of 'AI slop'). As one People Powered member put it, "If you shape people's input with AI, you miss the point of engaging people."[67]

Allow participants to generate text

Example platforms with this feature: Assembl, All Our Ideas, IdeaScale.

One of the key ways user-support bots help people participate is by helping them improve their participatory proposals with AI draft assistance. This can mean expanding upon their initial thoughts, clarifying initial ideas, and generally helping people make their contributions easier for others to understand.

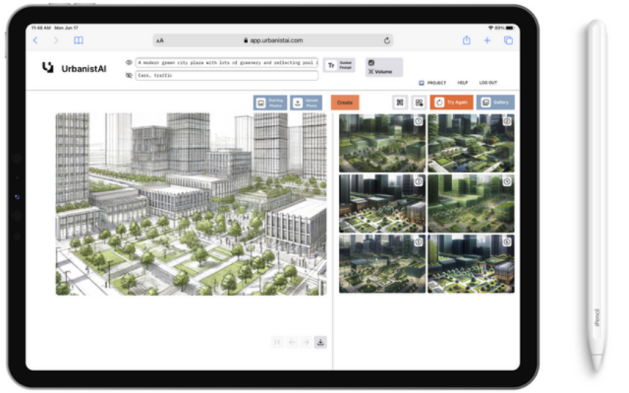
All of the existing concerns about text generation apply here. So far, the user is always the one who decides to submit their communications. So even if AI helped out, the participant hypothetically signs off on it by submitting. But it's not hard to see how an AI model's inputs into a participant's proposal could also shape it.

Allow participants to generate images

Example platforms with this feature: All Our Ideas, Assembl, IdeaScale, UrbanistAI, deliberAIde, Your Priorities.

LLMs are able to generate compelling images and even videos from just a short text prompt. The results have been hit-or-miss though, and getting the model to produce the desired result can still be complicated. Perhaps for this reason, image generation features are still fairly rare on digital participation platforms.

A good example of how they work can be seen on UrbanistAI. The tool uses image generation to assist participants in the ideation stage. It takes advantage of generative AI's imaginative approach to help participants visualize their dreams and desires for their place-based communities. Users can draw and annotate the images, including on an iPad app.



The UrbanistAI app https://site.urbanistai.com/
Image from Urbanist

67 Workshop 2

+Spotlight

Allow citizens to iterate and co-create the places together in real time

The UNDP Panama Accelerator Lab tested how tech could open up new ways for people to participate. They collaborated with a local university and community groups to run design sessions with participants spanning many generations. They included students (ages 18-22) and seniors (ages 70+) who took photos of their neighborhoods to flag problems and opportunities. Their photos were turned into prompts for UrbanistAI, which used AI to help participants enhance the photos to imagine what they might build in those places. From tree-shaded benches to open-air gyms, art walls to bike paths, the reimagined simulations sparked dialogue, reflection, consensus, and laughter—and revealed a shared vision for public spaces that transcended generational divides and digital gaps.

Allow participants to generate videos

Example platforms with this feature: None observed yet! Mainstream tools like Sora and Veo are leading the way.

This feature could become more common in participatory platforms in the near future, as the technology behind it improves and becomes more easily accessible (especially its cost). Already mainstream AI providers give their users the ability to generate video clips (Sora and Veo), extend existing clips (Adobe), and turn still photos into videos (Google Photos). Whether generative video will be useful during a participatory process (where a user can create and share videos sharing their views, for example) or after the fact (as another form of sensemaking) is to be determined.

Recommend related participatory content

Example platforms with this feature: Your Priorities, Decidim.

Recommendation engines help users discover related new and related content on platforms. They're also known to extend users' 'engagement' and time spent interacting with a platform. Recommendation engines usually select the content that they show to users based on algorithms and AI.

On a digital participation platform, this 'content' might consist of other users' ideas or proposals up for vote. Promoted proposals may receive more discussion and votes. Digital participation platforms must ensure that everyone's proposals are treated equally, but recommendation engines aren't always transparent in why they select some proposals over others. Any algorithmic feature, recommendation engine or otherwise, that prioritizes one participant's content over others' should be transparent. Recommendation engines are a great place to employ open source software and AI that can be inspected by stakeholders to ensure their fairness. The platform offering recommendation engines should also be able to explain why one participant proposal gets promoted while another does not.

Moderating participant discussions

Example platforms with this feature: All Our Ideas, Fora, Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, adhocracy+, Social Pinpoint, Bang the Table EngagementHQ, Unanimous AI, Go Vocal, Your Priorities, SocietySpeaks.io, TrollWall.ai, Dembrane, Deliberation.io.

Manually moderating active discussions can be burdensome on understaffed administrative teams. AI developers like Google Jigsaw have long offered free resources like the open source Perspective API that leverage AI to help moderate discussions and reduce toxicity.

Even if you use AI to help moderate discussions, we recommend keeping a close eye on what it's finding and whose contributions are being flagged. AI models are far from perfect, and unexpected language can appear in plenty of innocent contexts. You'll likely want to fine-tune the AI moderator as you see how it performs with your participants. Platforms like Decidim offer the ability to train the moderator in real-time on the content appearing on your platform,[68] rather than a pre-trained model that might not include your community in its training data.

We also recommend human facilitators to help guide discussions in productive directions, even if you rely on AI to weed out toxic content.

Moderating spam

Example platforms with this feature: Decidim, Social Pinpoint.

Although not always a problem, some platforms get deluged with spam comments. AI can help here, too, to filter out obvious spam from genuine participation. Decidim, for instance, can train its anti-spam filters on the specific spam that you've already marked for it. Unfortunately, generative AI is also making it easier for bad actors to compose authentic sounding spam for the same reasons it can help people draft better proposals. Depending on the sign-up process, though, spam may not be an issue for your program.

68 https://docs.decidim.org/en/develop/develop/ai_tools/spam_detection_trainer

Envision participants' proposals with simulations

Example platforms with this feature: UrbanistAI, Urban Platform, CityGML.

AI can help people simulate potential outcomes for the options they're considering. A common form of simulation used in urban planning and place-based decisionmaking is called Digital Twins. An AI model is created to emulate a real-world system, such as a city or neighborhood, as closely as possible. Once the model has been created, planners and other stakeholders can simulate the likely outcomes of a given intervention.

For example, UrbanistAI simulates policy decisions. It can analyze a dataset on a city's traffic and air quality to visualize the effect different mobility interventions might have on residents' health.

SYNTHETIC PARTICIPATION

Proceed with caution

AI's ability to synthetically represent complex systems has inspired research to use it to create synthetic agents as proxies for engaging actual people. Google Deepmind's AI lab teamed up with Stanford and other researchers to create AI agents that, the authors claim, can reliably predict what the people themselves reported after 2 hours of upfront training.[69] The accuracy of the synthetic person-agents suffered in other situations, such as in economics games.

Future research will likely improve upon these results, but the entire direction of this work represents an existential decision point for participatory democracy. Do we want to cede our involvement to AI proxies that may (or may not) represent what we would say or do in a given situation?

Even if they proved accurate, what do we lose from people not personally engaging with one another, within communities and between the elected and the governed? If decisionmakers can only consult AI avatars, will it be possible to heed the thoughts and lived experiences expressed by AI with the same care that comes when speaking with human constituents?

Should we celebrate a near future where "politicians can talk to these avatars and get to know members of the public in a really granular way"?[70] What do we lose when public officials can skip some of the few remaining opportunities for engaging their constituents, and vice versa? Is it another dangerous step towards disenfranchised citizenry?

Much of the value in democratic systems lies in the interactions we have with one another. Participation and engagement with political systems drive benefits well beyond the specifics of a given policy outcome. AI increasingly tempts us to automate ourselves out of our involvement with an ever-expanding range of activities, with all of the associated promises and risks discussed in this report. But is automating away the active role of the people in democracy a step too far?

69 https://arxiv.org/pdf/2411.10109

70 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qk_UAJ9MnW8

Complete tasks for participants with agents

Example platforms with this feature: Thinkscape, commercial AI platforms.

The next phase of AI development is "Agentic AI", where the AI's role evolves from one of consultant to actually taking actions on a user's behalf. While today's AI might help you compose your to-do list, for example, an agentic AI tool would go and complete tasks on the list!

Commercial AI platforms are already rolling out agentic AI to users. Their speed and ability to accomplish tasks are not great yet, though. You can follow along with benchmark tests of AI agents on resources like OSWorld. To our knowledge, no major participation platform has introduced actual AI agents for participants yet, although some social networks have.

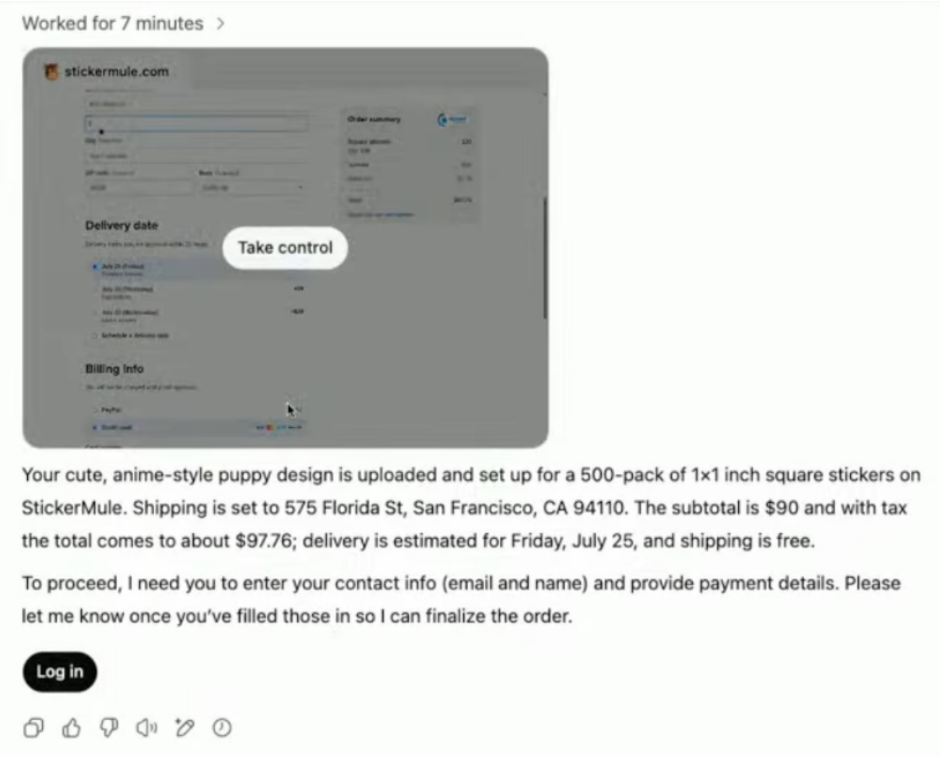
Although not identical to today's commercial AI agents, Thinkscape has been an early leader in the use of AI agents for participation. Rather than attempt to do your shopping for you, the agents help facilitate small group discussions. They also float between the groups to pollinate ideas. And they can bubble up what's being discussed in many small groups to the admin level. By employing AI agents in these ways, Thinkscape is able to strike a balance between giving participants ample opportunity to speak and be heard in small groups, and giving process hosts the ability to scale conversations to include many more people.

Agentic AI generally introduces new risks beyond those of today's generative AI. It's one thing for an AI model to get something completely wrong while providing information to a user. It's another thing if it acts on that wrong information, sending a message to a person, buying something, or deleting data based on that erroneous understanding.

Another concern with agentic AI is that in contexts with low digital literacy, AI agents could begin supplanting human participation by acting on their behalf without sufficient involvement from participants.

Malicious actors are also likely to adapt to and attempt to scam people using AI agents. Proceed with great caution.[71]

71 OpenAI repeatedly underscored this point in its AI agent product launch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jn_RpbPbEc



A demo of OpenAI's Agent mode which seeks to perform tasks for users. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jn_RpbPbEc

USING AI AFTER A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS FINISHES

Help make sense of it all

Example platforms with this feature: Sensemaker, Assembl.

Sensemaking helps participants and admins alike understand the results of a participatory process. The goal is to communicate how the process went and share the results in a way that helps participants feel seen, heard, and like their time was well used.

So far, we've observed that many AI features on participation platforms have been introduced in this stage, potentially because it's seen as less risky than using AI during the core participatory activities. Unfortunately, many of the AI-powered sensemaking features on the market are only visible to the admins hosting the participatory process, not the participants themselves. This is a missed opportunity to show people what they helped make happen. Fortunately, there are exceptions.

For example, Assembl distills wide-ranging digital debates down and represents them in visually creative formats like mindmaps, videos, and even a comic strip summary. The platform helps tell the story of what happened in the group's deliberation process in highly legible ways that everyone can understand.

Google's Jigsaw team also launched its own free product, Sensemaker, to provide this service. The open source tool is under active development, and can be used with a variety of other participation platforms.

A graphic novel produced by Assembl. Graphic taken from Assembl

Compose written summaries of the process

Example platforms with this feature: Assembl, CartoDEBAT, Insights, Fora, Go Vocal, Bang the Table EngagementHQ, Polco, Panoramic, Konveio, parlament.fyi.

In addition to summarizing aggregate contributions, AI can and is being used to help summarize entire participation processes. That way participants and hosts alike can get a digestible version of a voluminous discussion engaging tens of thousands of participants. As one example, a 2024 study published in Science by Google DeepMind and Stanford found that AI generated more agreeable summaries of discussions than humans, while still representing the minority views that had been expressed.[72]

Generative AI is known to miss things, though. As in the Nesta report, we agree with the UK public that sensitive or local engagements should receive a greater degree of human review to ensure the model doesn't miss entire sections of engagement. This approach, paired with emerging enhancements to limit hallucinations (like RAG) will hopefully reduce this risk in the near future.[73]

72 https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adq2852
73 https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/ai-sral-consult/

Collect and display analytics

Example platforms with this feature: Your Priorities, Fora, 76engage, Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, CartoDEBAT, Loomio, Empurrando Juntas, Bpart, Ethelo, adhocracy+, ConsultVox, Converlens, Civocracy, Delib Suite, Go Vocal, coUrbanize, IdeaScale, Cocoriko, Efalia Engage (formerly Fluicity), Bang the Table EngagementHQ, Place Speak, DemocraciaOS, Polco, Crowdsmart, Unanimous AI, Efalia Engage (Fluicity), Talk to the City, Delib Citizen Space, PublicInput, Konveio, deliberAIde.

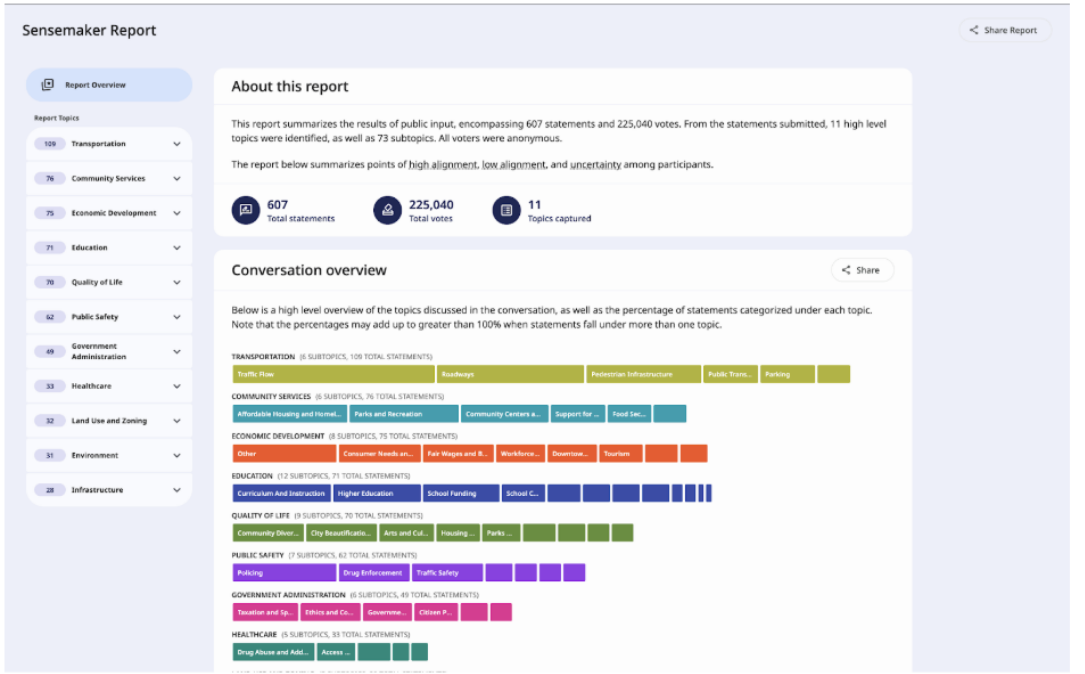
Process hosts are using AI to process and analyze the data coming out of the participation program. This may include consulting formal analytics programs, such as those offered by digital participation platforms, as well as ad hoc analysis conducted with general purpose AI models. For the latter, a process host can upload a set of data export files to a model to provide context, and then ask specific questions of the model.

Some participation platforms are also integrating AI into their analytics products. For example, a process host can easily "ask" their analytics package where participants are dropping off during the engagement flow rather than build and tag a traditional conversion funnel. DeliberAIde and other platforms promise to "measure deliberation quality".

Analytics is another area where relying solely on LLMs could be a mistake, given their tendency to hallucinate and fail basic math tasks. Newer products are chaining together several AI tools (known as 'tool chaining') rather than rely solely on LLMs. For example, they might use the LLM to help the user brainstorm the question they want to ask and translate it into the steps it will need to take, and then call in another tool, such as a calculator, to execute the query and return a trustworthy answer.

Data visualization features help make sense of the analytics. Beyond just analyzing the data, visualizing it is a powerful way participation hosts can share back what took place with participants. Data visualization has been around for years, but AI has made it far simpler, faster, and cheaper to create a variety of compelling visuals that tell the story of the engagement.

For example, Google's Sensemaker platform can dynamically build a report webpage visually presenting the data on the discussions that took place:



https://github.com/Jigsaw-Code/sensemaking-tools/
Image taken from Jigsaw

AND MORE!

As you can see, there's endless room for experimentation here. Some other ideas we've seen come up, but haven't seen enough examples of yet, include:

- **Contribution tracking:** Using AI to see how participants' own contributions showed up in the end results. This is nearly impossible to do at scale without AI, and could be a powerful reinforcement of the benefits of participating.
- **Playback:** Automate an animated playback of the entire participatory process that people can view. Or use AI to show participants the highlights and key moments.
- **Smart notifications:** What if the AI could learn what we care about, and only notify us then?
- **Driving post-process ongoing engagement with participants**. Staying in touch with participants after a process is vital, yet a common failure of today's programs. AI could help admins do a better job of this, while also tailoring the communications to the topics and ideas people demonstrated interest in.

TABLE: AI FEATURE SUMMARY

To summarize, here's a table of which features might be used throughout a participatory process, and whether they're primarily designed for participants.

	Before (planning)	**During** (implementation)	**After** (sensemaking, feedback, and ongoing engagement)
Participants	» Dynamic FAQ and Glossary	» Translation » Parsing, summarizing, and classifying participant contributions » Limit AI hallucination » Transcribe speech » Let people review and approve transcripts of their speech » Public meeting transcription » Scanning handwriting and other analog documents » AI chat » Assist participants through the process with bots » Allow participants to generate text » Allow participants to generate images » Allow participants to generate videos » Recommend related participatory content » Envision participants' proposals with simulations » Complete tasks for participants with agents	» Help make sense of it all » Compose written summaries of the process » Collect and display analytics

TABLE: AI FEATURE SUMMARY

To summarize, here's a table of which features might be used throughout a participatory process, and whether they're primarily designed for hosts.

	Before (planning)	**During** (implementation)	**After** (sensemaking, feedback, and ongoing engagement)
Hosts	» Streamline administrative work » Plan your process » Training staff to run participation processes » Swappable AI models » Smart groups: Form diverse participant groups » Simulating participation to test your platform	» Parsing, summarizing, and classifying participant contributions » Adjust the AI model to your program in real-time » Moderating participant discussions » Moderating spam	» Help make sense of it all » Compose written summaries of the process » Collect and display analytics

Selecting a digital participation platform

Chapter 3

Now that you know what they can do, it's time to think about which platform(s) you'll use. People Powered has put together a matrix of over 80 digital participation platforms available. It offers a quick overview of each platform's pricing (if available), features, and point of contact, as well as whether it is open source. ("Open source" means the software's underlying code can be viewed and, usually, adapted by anyone. The license chosen by the platform developer dictates the rules governing how its code can be used.) To offer further guidance, People Powered's independent Digital Participation Committee went a step further and chose 30 comprehensive platforms and rated them according to specific features.

This is a lot of information. How do you sort through it all and select the best platform for your needs?

Above all else, any digital platform should support and enhance your broader participatory program. You're opening decision-making up to your constituents, and the tools should enhance that process, not get in the way of it.

IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS

Before you select a platform, first determine your goals. Consider who you're trying to reach, when in the policy-making process you will engage them, and how you're going to involve them in decision-making.

The Parti Co-op team identified the following critical factors to consider as you set your participation goals:[74]

- The degree of participation you seek from participants.
- The institutional authority of the team that's convening the participatory process.
- The capacity of the broader institution operating the platform.
- The overall vision and goals of the process.

74 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 147.

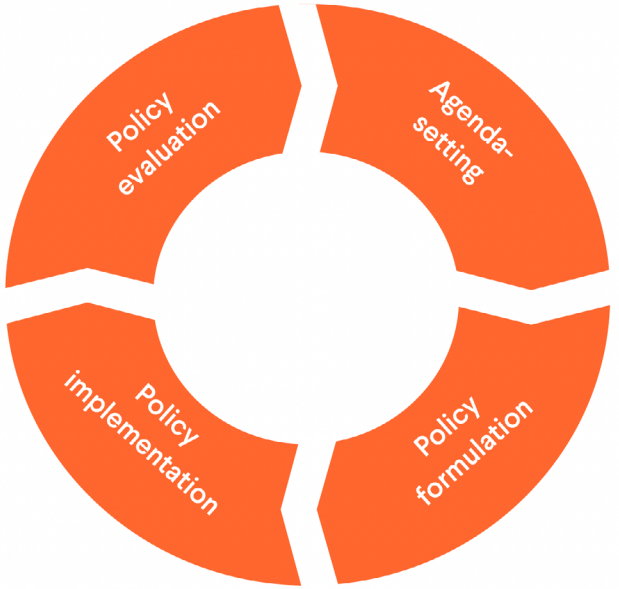
It's important to consider your institution's role in the local landscape. For example, the Fundacja Pole Dialogu team in Warsaw found that operating a digital participation platform at the district level wasn't ideal, since it competed for attention with the city's broader programs but didn't receive the same resources.[75] See if you can convince the staff assigned to existing programs to support your initiative before beginning a competing effort, particularly if your team or unit doesn't have the influence or resources to execute well on its own. In China's emerging participatory budgeting landscape, for example, neighboring villages sometimes work together and combine their allotments so they can take on larger projects.[76]

Your goals can be quantifiable, like generating a certain number of suggestions, discussions, or implemented policies. You can also set qualitative goals, such as perceptions of the platform/exercise by participants and other interested parties.[77] Also consider long-term goals, like development of an ongoing practice of participatory decision-making inside your institution.

75 Mateusz Wojcieszak, interview by author, Poland, October 27, 2021.
76 Ming Zhuang, interview by author, China, October 29, 2021.
77 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 87.

Your goals also should be specific. How much online support must a participant's proposal receive before it warrants attention? Participation platforms like We the People in the United States, g0v Join in Taiwan, and Decide Madrid in Spain each set specific thresholds of community support before key offices or decision-makers are obligated to respond.

Go Vocal (previously CitizenLab) created this illustration of the decision-making cycle:[78]



Go Vocal's decision-making cycle has four continuous stages: agenda-setting, policy formation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation.

Generally speaking, the earlier you involve people in the decision- or policy-making process, the more substantive input they can provide. Early involvement also allows your institution to benefit from community insights before getting locked into a specific course of action. If you're just getting started, it might be easier to involve people later in the decision-making process. But be warned: They also may feel less motivated and positive about the experience if it feels like their engagement is welcomed only after major decisions are made. For example, there is a big difference between deciding whether to fund a public park and then helping to design it, and voting on the name for a park that's already been approved.

78 Go Vocal, *The FAQs of Digital Consultation: Tips & Tricks from Rea-Life Case Studies and Civil Servants*, 4.

TRY IT OUT FIRST

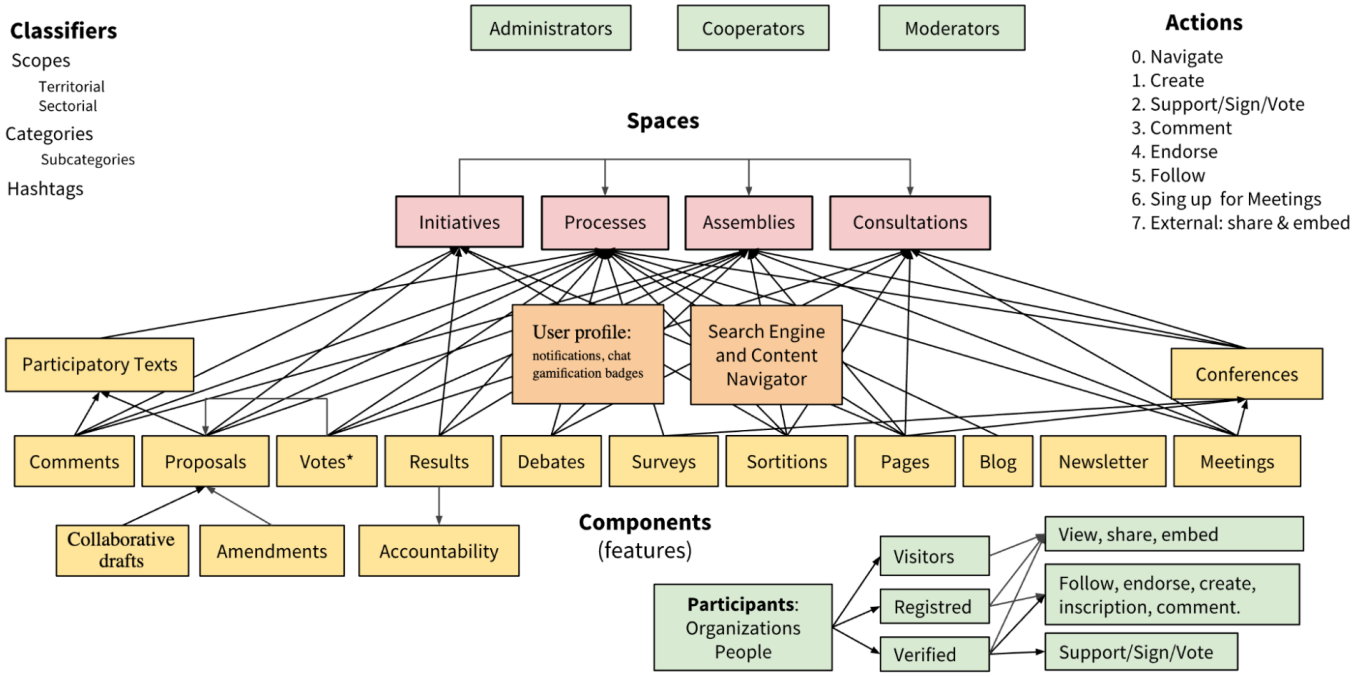
Don't assume a platform has the features you need, based only on the developer's description. If possible, try the features out first. Many participation platforms offer a ready-to-go demo site, or "sandbox." This is a great, no-commitment way to play around and see how its features actually work. We've included links to platform demos whenever possible in the comparison matrix in the appendix.

Every platform has advantages and limitations. By using a platform, you'll begin to get a feeling for the logic behind how the software was built. However, it can take time.

We learned through our user interviews that the instructions for even popular and widely used platforms are often unclear or outdated, particularly when it comes to disclosing limitations. For example, a digital platform might require you to run a process a specific way, or in a certain chronological order. Try simulating your process on the platform before opening it to outside engagement so you can be sure it will work for your needs.

If a platform you're interested in doesn't provide a link to a demo version, contact the provider to ask about trying it out. If the platform is hosted by a for-profit company, this will likely trigger a sales call in which staff will try to sign you up as a customer. While not necessarily welcome, such sales calls can be a good way to get answers to any questions you may have. However, if you prefer, simply ask to try out a demo, or "sandbox" account, without a sales pitch.

If you work for a government agency or other large, formal institution, you may not be allowed to contact providers during the bidding process. If this is the case, refer to the later section in the guide on contracting considerations.



The Decidim platform's architecture illustrates how complicated a site's interconnecting features can seem to a new user.[79]
Graphic taken from Decidim.

79 "General Description and Introduction to How Decidim Works."

DETERMINE THE TOTAL COST

There are three primary expenses to take into account when choosing a digital participation platform: the platform itself, staff time, and the specific participation program.

Platform

The most obvious cost is the software itself. Digital participation platforms have a wide range of prices. Some are free, whereas others cost thousands of U.S. dollars per month. The addition of AI introduces a new cost, which is sometimes included in the platform price. Other times it's an optional add-on, or platforms sell AI credits to cover different tiers of usage (because they're often paying a third party AI company to power these features).

Unfortunately, developers aren't always transparent about the costs of using their platform. They would rather start a conversation to determine your budget instead of posting prices on their websites. You'll see this when you go to a platform's pricing page and the only option is to sign up for a sales call. Sometimes you can find other customers mentioning the prices they were charged by searching online (search "platform name" in quotation marks plus "price"), but usually this is only the case for more common platforms.

Staff time

Some governments and institutions have staff with strong tech skills, but no discretionary budget to pay for a platform. In such cases, much of the platform can be configured internally. On the other hand, the salaries and benefits for these team members could end up costing significantly more than even the most expensive software subscriptions.

Team roles

Your team is a vital factor in the success of any digital participation program. Where possible, we recommend building a team that includes the following functions:

- **Coordinator**, to oversee the project and handle communication among stakeholders.
- **Project manager**, to oversee platform planning, design, and implementation, as well as to track project goals and strategies.
- **Participant point person**, to field inquiries from participants and ensure they are appropriately received and addressed.
- **Institutional point person**, to connect participant suggestions to the appropriate teams and departments, then summarize results and report back.
- **Software developer(s) or website manager(s)**, to build or implement the digital participation platform, as well as to complete technical updates as needed.
- **Communications manager**, to conduct outreach and marketing to drive engagement and reach new groups of people.

You will also benefit from at least occasional access to:

- A **data governance advisor**, who is familiar with how both you and the tool(s) you use are collecting, using, and storing people's data.
- A **lawyer** who knows contracting rules of relevant institutions, has related tech and privacy policy experience, and understands all of the necessary fine print.
- A **social worker, sociologist, or similar individual** who knows the communities you're trying to reach. He or she should come from the targeted community and be trusted by the residents.
- An **administrative liaison** who understands project costs and institutional budget processes.
- A **data scientist or statistician** who can help parse engagement data for insights. Some platforms will aggregate data for visual reports, but whether that will be sufficient will depend on your needs.
- A **participatory design specialist** who can ensure that the use of digital tools advances the overall goals of your participatory process.

The number of people in each role will vary depending on the size of your institution. A small organization might have one person running digital programs as well as coordinating communications, for example, while a large institution will likely be able to assign one person (or more) for each function.

Common scenarios

To help you decide on a platform, let's take a look at some common scenarios based on the resources you have for the project.

One-person team, with minimal budget for a platform

If this is your situation, you'll most likely want to choose one of the hosted Software as a Service (SaaS) platforms. Hosting a digital platform yourself can be risky. You have to perform your own server configurations and backups. And one person we spoke with reported that her organization had relied on a volunteer to host the platform on its behalf, then lost access to it when he became too busy and stopped responding.

In contrast, SaaS platforms take care of web hosting. Outsourcing platform hosting and management to a specialized team will allow you to get up and running quickly. You can choose one of the more affordable SaaS options from our comparison matrix. However, be sure to first make sure this is allowed by your institution. Many governments, etc. still rely on their own servers, and may have rules governing if it is permissible to go outside.

If you have limited staff capacity, it makes sense to start with a single participation process, like an open call for ideas. Then, if the process goes well, you can expand to more avenues of participation.

Small team (five or fewer full-time staff members) with a small budget for a platform (up to $1,000 per month)

If your team is mostly non-technical, it's wise to choose an SaaS platform for which software development has mostly been done for you. This will allow your team to focus on running the participation programs. Many platforms offer scalable pricing tiers with corresponding sets of features. However, be certain you will actually use added features before spending more on premium service tiers.

Mid-size to large team (at least 10 staff members) with a moderate budget for a platform (up to $3,000 per month)

With a decent-sized team and budget, you have more options. You can choose an SaaS platform and focus your staff's time on the program side (like outreach, moderation, and internal communications). That can help ensure your energy is focused on driving participant participation, rather than on writing and testing code.

For example, platforms like Decidim are modular. This means your team can choose to use only the features in which you're most interested (like participatory budgeting, for example). This way, you and your constituents aren't distracted by too many potential actions to take.

If your team includes people with strong web development skills, you might want to instead explore open source options. These platforms let you customize the technology to your local context and needs.

Strong budget and small team ($5,000 per month or more)

If you have a platform budget available but insufficient staff, the SaaS approach can fill the gap. For a small monthly fee, you can subscribe to an SaaS platform with accompanying web hosting, security, regular updates, and customer support. Platforms like Go Vocal and Loomio are great examples of this arrangement. They offer a strong set of features and do most of the technical work for you.

Some companies offering engagement platforms will even perform non-technical work for an additional fee. For example, PlaceSpeak offers help setting up public surveys, writing reports, running social media promotion, and moderating community participation.[80].

Strong tech team and no dedicated budget for a platform

In this case, we recommend choosing one of the most popular open source platforms, like CONSUL or Decidim, and setting it up yourselves. Open source platforms can be very difficult to set up and configure to your needs without a technical team that can dive into the code.

If you do have a strong tech team, you can modify one of the open source platforms to satisfy your needs and desires. On the other hand, no matter how expert your team (or how big your budget), you won't be able to adapt proprietary participation platforms. If your plans don't align, you're out of luck.

80 "PlaceSpeak."

ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY

Another important consideration as you choose a digital participation platform is to assure that there are no barriers to use.

E-participation should complement rather than replace traditional forms of public participation in efforts aimed at ensuring no one is left behind; face-to-face meetings, paper-based communications, telephone calls, physical bulletin boards, and other hands-on modalities are still important. Strengthening the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups requires the provision of physical public space for the engagement of vulnerable groups, particularly at the local level.

Public spaces are integral to successful community development. Public institutions can also combine digital and face-to-face approaches to facilitate complex discussions involving large numbers of people and incorporating a diverse range of views and interests. A number of Member States have successfully created digital spaces that have brought together offline and online participants to identify and explore key sectoral issues.

Access for those with disabilities

Over 1 billion people — about 16% of the global population — live with disabilities, according to the World Health Organization.[81] That number is even higher when you consider the aging of many populations around the world, as well as how many of us experience temporary disabilities at certain points in our lives.

Any inclusive participatory process should strive to serve everyone in the community. Designing for inclusivity often ends up benefiting all of us in ways we don't expect. For example, the transition from door knobs to accessible handles didn't only help people with disabilities. Anyone carrying something using both hands benefits by being able to use their elbow to open a door. In addition, consultants at Accenture found that accessibility-minded companies also perform better financially.[82]

In the participation space, we have clear evidence that investing in accessibility pays off: Investing in an accessible experience can pay dividends for your program. The team behind Brasil Participativo worked to improve the open source Decidim platform's mobile experience, and it paid off: over 1.6 million Brazilians have participated on the platform, making it the most popular Decidim instance in the world.[83] Argentina's municipality of Rosario is so committed to "digital transformation" that it has integrated it into every aspect of its operations, from education to participatory budgeting. One aspect of the application of digital technology to participatory budgeting is a commitment to make the process totally accessible to individuals with visual disabilities.

We've noted platforms' descriptions of their accessibility in our comparison matrix. You should also check if your government or institution has its own accessibility-compliance requirements. Some of the common accessibility guidelines include those adopted by the:

81 World Health Organization, World Report on Disability.
82 Accenture, "Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage."

83 https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/ accessed July 20 2025

- The World Wide Web Consortium (W3)'s (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 2.2 was officially published as a web standard in 2023.
- U.S. government (Section 508, last updated at the end of 2017).
- European Union (Directive 2016/2102, last released in 2016).

Technology advances faster than regulatory bodies. The WCAG 2.2 standard is the most up-to-date guideline. The standards body is already at work on the next generation guidelines, WCAG 3.0, although they won't be finalized for some time. Compliance with WCAG levels A and AA counts toward U.S. Section 508 compliance, so this may be a good place to start.

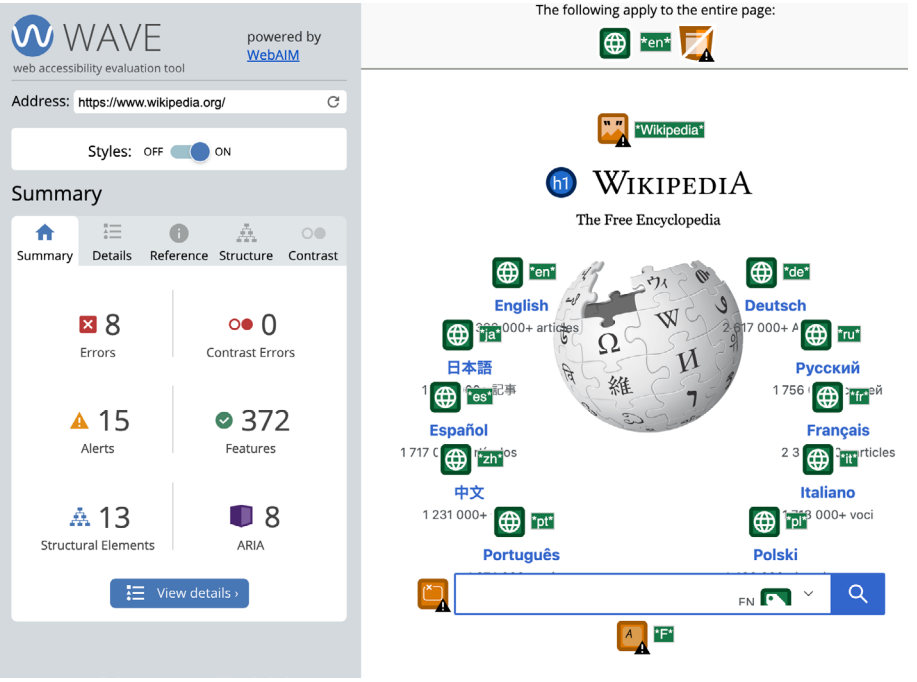
Even if you aren't required to fulfill specific accessibility requirements, we still recommend you choose a platform that prioritizes it. While guidelines like WCAG can be intimidating in their length, one study[84] found that the vast majority of accessibility errors fell into just six categories:[85]

1. Low-contrast text (picture a white font against a light gray background).
2. Lack of alternative text for images (descriptions for screen-reading software).
3. Missing form-input labels (telling assistive software which information a form field is asking for).
4. Empty links (the document links to other resources without text, so it can't be read).
5. Missing document language (a simple tag that denotes which language a page is presented in).
6. Image-based action buttons that aren't legible by assistive software.

One way to evaluate platform accessibility is to perform some quick tests. Accessibility expert Karl Grove[86] suggests that you load the demo site of a platform you're considering and try to interact with it in high-contrast mode (on Windows or MacOS), using only your keyboard and no mouse (navigating with the tab key). At the same time, disable images in your browser.

You can also use an all-in-one accessibility testing site like WebAIM's WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool. Just enter the digital participation

86 Gloves, "The 6 Simplest Web Accessibility Tests Anyone Can Do."



An example of the WAVE tool's automated evaluation of accessibility on Wikipedia.org. Image taken from WAVE.

84 WebAIM, "The WebAIM Million - An Annual Accessibility Analysis of the Top 1,000,000 Home Pages."
85 Fletcher, "In WebAIM's 2021 Survey of the Top 1M Websites, 96.7% of Detected WCAG Errors Fell in 6 Categories."

platform URL into the tool and it will let you know the accessibility issues it finds.

Another way to improve the accessibility of your digital participation program is to use other tools to enhance it. The Civic Tech Field Guide collects assistive and accessibility tech tools and programs.

AI and machine vision in particular are quickly upgrading the experience for the many people who rely on assistive technology. Consumer tech such as Meta's Smart Glasses are being used by low vision communities, for example, who have found them to outperform far more expensive assistive glasses.[87] Of course, all of the existing caveats about AI and tech monopolies apply here, as well. Auto-generated closed captions have become far more common than in the past, as more people watch social media videos in settings where they don't want to play the audio. And large swaths of younger generations regularly use subtitles when they watch TV; according to one 2024 survey, 70% of Gen Z viewers and 53% of millennials versus 38% of Gen Xers and 35% of baby boomers.[88]

87 https://www.theverge.com/the-vergecast/707759/ai-smart-glasses-meta-ray-ban-vergecast

88 https://eu.app.com/story/entertainment/television/2024/09/27/television-subtitles-popular-with-americans-study-shows/75392702007/

Slow, intermittent, or expensive connections

Many digital participation platforms and AI chatbots assume that users have uninterrupted internet connectivity. Others were built for the desktop computer era rather than mobile devices. These assumptions affect key user-experience choices, like placing a button too far down on a page. For example, in one case, one platform offers a poll feature, meant to be used at in-person meetings, that requires an internet connection to function. But field teams attending community meetings won't always have connectivity.

Some of your key participants may have internet connection, but it's slow. For example, people in rural Kenya often must rely on 3G cellular data networks.[89] To test how a platform operates for users with slower connection speeds, try loading the URL for the demo site into Google's PageSpeed Insights tool. It will automatically analyze the page and give it a score. The closer that score is to 100, the better the experience will be for your users with slow connections. The tool also provides recommendations for improving page speed.

89 Rapudo Hawi, interview by author, Kenya, October 13, 2021.

Cost of internet connection and electricity are additional barriers to participation on digital platforms. Faster-loading sites tend to require less data transfer. This saves money for participants who pay for metered data plans. Research has consistently shown that faster page load times lead to better user engagement and fewer drop-offs, which is vital for ensuring a representative engagement process. A 2017 study by Google found that when page load time increases from 1 second to 3 seconds, users are 32% more likely to leave (bounce).[90] Fortunately, the cost of internet and data connections has greatly decreased, although it's still out of reach for many people. The limitations of connectivity in many parts of the world underscore the value of centering hybrid participation pathways. Since our last report, even more governments have restricted residents from accessing the open internet. They do this in a variety of different ways, from increasing liabilities for platform providers all the way to banning certain platforms or completely shutting down the internet for periods of time. While circumvention technology can help people get around these digital roadblocks, it will be difficult to gain sufficient digital participation if all the participants need to figure out technical workarounds.

90 https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/app-and-mobile/page-load-time-statistics/

CONSIDER OPEN SOURCE PLATFORMS

Many software experts prefer open source platforms, for a variety of reasons. Open source code also means that you, your team, or your partners can adapt it to your own needs. In the Brasil Participativo example above, the Brazilian government team was able to invest their resources in improving the mobile experience for its citizens because the core underlying platform was already built.

Open source code can also be openly examined, so you or your team can determine how the platform works. For example, you can determine how the platform sorts participant proposals to ensure a fair process, or where the tool calls the AI model and which data it sends to it.

In addition, with open source software, you can keep running your project even if the original developer stops supporting it. With closed code, or proprietary platforms, you are dependent on the unpredictable factors that affect all businesses. For example, it's not uncommon for participation platforms to be acquired by larger government technology vendors. This can affect the platforms' licensing, pricing, data export features, and whether you can continue using it at all.

OPEN SOURCE ECOSYSTEM

In addition to the public sector and civil society contributors, there's an ecosystem of small tech companies offering additional services for open source participation platforms like Decidim and CONSUL. Companies like Voca, Open Source Politics, and DigiDem Lab provide additional services like platform configuration and cloud hosting. This makes it easier for less-technical teams to use open source tools. They even develop additional software features atop the open source platforms.

For example, Voca has built a WhatsApp integration for Decidim so participants who already use the messaging app can engage with your participation process from it. This way participants don't need an email address to take part, a consistent data connection (another common digital barrier). These third-party development companies are also implementing deliberative AI features ahead of the underlying platforms, which are often focused on maintaining core infrastructure.

PREVENTING LOCK-IN

If you choose a platform that isn't open source, you should make sure you can at least export your data from the platform. Several proprietary participation platforms offer data downloads to help alleviate fears of lock-in (where you can't export or re-use all the work you've done, and contributions people have made, anywhere else). The platforms offering this functionality are tagged as having the "export data" feature in the ***platform comparison matrix***.

Don't just take the marketing page's word for it, though. Before you run an entire program, try exporting your data from the platform to see how long it takes to get your data out, and how useful the data they send you is to re-use elsewhere. Even when you can export your data, setting up your participation process again on another platform will likely be time consuming, which is why we recommend testing platforms before deciding on one. Open source platforms are more likely to facilitate your access to the data you generated on them.

OPEN ETHOS

There are also values-based reasons to choose an open source platform. Advocates like those with the Public Money's Public Code campaign[91] argue that software funded by government budgets should be broadly available. Not all institutions support procurement of open source platforms, however. The low price tag of open source code, which is often zero, can paradoxically prove to be problematic, for instance due to outdated procurement rules that flag no-cost transactions as illegal "gifts." Solutions to this include procurement reform in the long term, and hiring vendors to implement the open source software in the short term.

At least one platform developer has found a compromise between open source and proprietary profitability. Go Vocal offers two versions of its platform. The free version is open source and contains the platform's core functionality.[92] This means users can host basic participation processes without even speaking with the company behind it. You'll need to know your way around a web server, though. For its more advanced premium features, Go Vocal sells a commercial version. On this version clients can view the underlying code if they want to see how things work, but can't adapt it for their own purposes.[93]

WHAT ABOUT "OPEN SOURCE AI"?

For years, various actors have advocated for various interpretations of what "open source AI" should mean. The definition is likely to keep evolving with the underlying technologies (and the legal system's response to it), but at least for now, Open Source Initiative, the non-profit organization that stewards the definition of open source software, has published an initial definition of open source AI.[94] They developed it through years of research and co-design with stakeholders. In short, open source AI provides the freedom to:

- "Use the system for any purpose and without having to ask for permission."
- "Study how the system works and inspect its components."
- "Modify the system for any purpose, including to change its output."
- "Share the system for others to use with or without modifications, for any purpose."[95]

91 Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE), "Public Money, Public Code."

92 This approach is known as the open-core model.

93 "Open Source Community Engagement Platform."

94 https://opensource.org/ai/open-source-ai-definition

95 https://opensource.org/ai/open-source-ai-definition

+Spotlight

Allow citizens to iterate and co-create the places together in real time

The Decidim and CONSUL platforms were started in Spain (Barcelona and Madrid, respectively). Both platforms have gained international acclaim and usage, with many governments and institutional users around the world. The most recent contributions to Decidim's Github codebase come from developers in Spain and Romania, and the city of Helsinki has assigned software developers to help build out the platform to power its participatory budgeting project. Decidim has been adopted by close to 90 cities, regions, and institutions,[96] reaching over 1 million users.[97] CONSUL has been used by 35 countries and 135 institutions.[98]

By collaborating on code, operators of open source platforms are able to compete with those owned by privately funded software companies. The two Spanish platforms' global networks of users and code contributors show what is possible when local governments work together across national boundaries and continental divides.

96 "Decidim in Use."
97 "Decidim Census."
98 "CONSUL."

TAKE CONTRACTING ISSUES INTO ACCOUNT

Technology procurement can present a major hurdle for people working for government and other bureaucratic institutions. Although these rules were often developed with good intentions (like curbing corruption), they can be out of date and make acquiring technology more difficult.

For example, procurement rules may forbid direct contact with platform developers during the bidding stage. This rule can make it difficult to assess options by conducting "test runs." If this is your situation, seek out current users of the platform and speak to them about their experience.

Institutional rules also sometimes require choosing the cheapest bidder or a domestically operated platform. If you face these restrictions, we recommend clearly defining the specific features or other requirements you need from a digital platform so you can justify its selection instead of other offerings.

PROTECT DATA PRIVACY

Data privacy is particularly critical on participation platforms, as they often handle participants' personal and sensitive information. Therefore it's critical that you select platforms that comply with the highest standards of data protection. They should offer clear mechanisms for getting users' consent, facilitating anonymity if your program calls for it, and securely storing data. Responsible data governance must be a foundational principle in the use of digital tools for civic engagement.

We've outlined some questions you can ask platform providers in the How to evaluate a platform section. Most of all, find out where your participants' information goes and who, if anyone, it's shared with. A holistic way to answer this question is to take a look at the platform provider's governance and business models. Do they align with the responsible treatment of your participants' data?

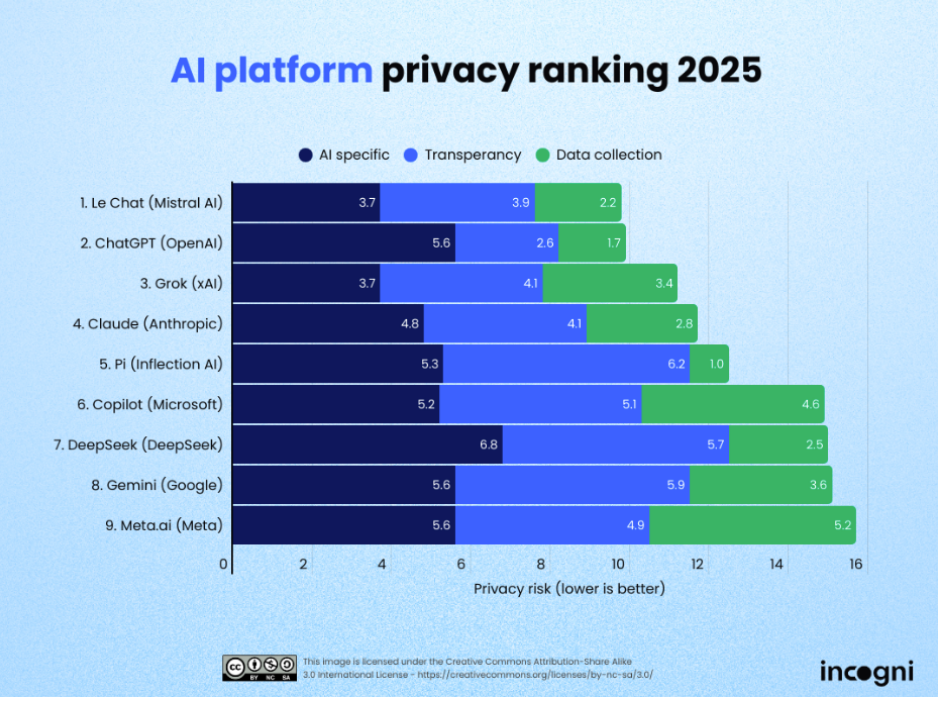
A legal advisor should review any applicable laws governing personal data and privacy in your jurisdiction. Those laws may be at the city, state, national, and/or international levels.

A legal advisor should review any applicable laws governing personal data and privacy in your jurisdiction. Those laws may be at the city, state, national, and/or international levels.

When considering procuring or using a digital participation platform, first review its privacy policy. Many institutions require a lawyer to approve the policy before procuring a digital platform. If that is the case, build extra time into the process.

Globally, 79% of countries have passed or drafted data protection and privacy legislation.[99] The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development maintains a helpful database of these laws, organized by country. The European Union's landmark General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) includes principles governing data use.[100] These are worth reviewing even if you are located outside of the EU, as they represent an emerging legal consensus.

99 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Data Protection and Privacy Legislation Worldwide."
100 "Art. 5 GDPR - Principles Relating to Processing of Personal Data."



Graphic taken from Incogni.

Other major data protection frameworks include:

- Brazil's General Data Protection Law
- California's Consumer Privacy Act
- China's Personal Information Protection Law
- South Africa's Protection of Personal Information Act
- India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act
- Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act
- the EU's AI Act, which reinforces data protection principles

The best (and worst) AI models for user privacy

Incogni ranked nine of the major chatbots in a June 2025 study focused on their privacy policies.[101] They looked at specific performance on privacy priorities like whether they train on users' prompts, their transparency on which data they collect, users' ability to opt out, and sharing information with third parties.

The results? As of July 2025, the best privacy actors, according to Incogni, are:

1. Mistral AI's Le Chat, which collects minimal data and is transparent about data usage.
2. OpenAI's ChatGPT, which provides a clear opt-out option and is transparent.
3. xAI's Grok, which has solid opt-out options and clear disclosure, but has other issues.
4. Anthropic's Claude, which doesn't train on user input, so you don't need to adjust it, and provides good to high transparency on data usage.

The bottom 5 models for privacy were:

1. Pi 's Infection AI
2. Microsoft's Copilot
3. DeepSeek
4. Google's Gemini
5. Meta's Meta.ai

Meta.ai scored last in part because it shares users' prompts with third parties without allowing them to opt-out. ARIJ's AI index includes links to many of the AI models' data and privacy policies in one place if you'd like to explore in more detail.[102]

Another report from 2025, by the Future of Life Institute, gives Anthropic, OpenAI, and Google grades from C+ to C-, respectively. Meta scored a 'D' and DeepSeek an 'F' (the lowest score).[103]

It's also important to consider the regulatory environment any given AI company operates in, as they're often legally required to comply with national security laws. Growing awareness of digital rights has created a market for more privacy friendly products. In generative AI, that includes alternatives like Lumo, a privacy-centric chatbot from Proton.

101 https://blog.incogni.com/ai-llm-privacy-ranking-2025/

102 https://arij.net/ai/playbook/tools/index.html

103 https://futureoflife.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FLI-AI-Safety-Index-Report-Summer-2025.pdf

LOOK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Like everything else, digital participation platforms come and go over the years. Nonprofit platforms might not be able to maintain their funding, for-profit platforms might be acquired and pivot into other uses, and government-backed platforms might be affected by a change in political leadership that undermines support. Choose a platform that is likely to be sustained and updated for as long as you'll use it. While there's no way to guarantee longevity, here are some signs to look for:

- **Has the platform been around for a while?**

Check out the year the platform was created in the comparison matrix we've provided. You also can search on the internet for reviews by users and third party websites.

- **Is the platform still active?**

Most of all, you want to determine if other institutions are actively using the platform. You can also look at how long it's been since the platform's operating team posted updates to social media, their blog, the platform's "changelog," or code repository (if it's an open source project). Updates to the platform's underlying software code are especially important, since these are needed to patch the inevitable security risks and keep the platform functional on new generations of devices.

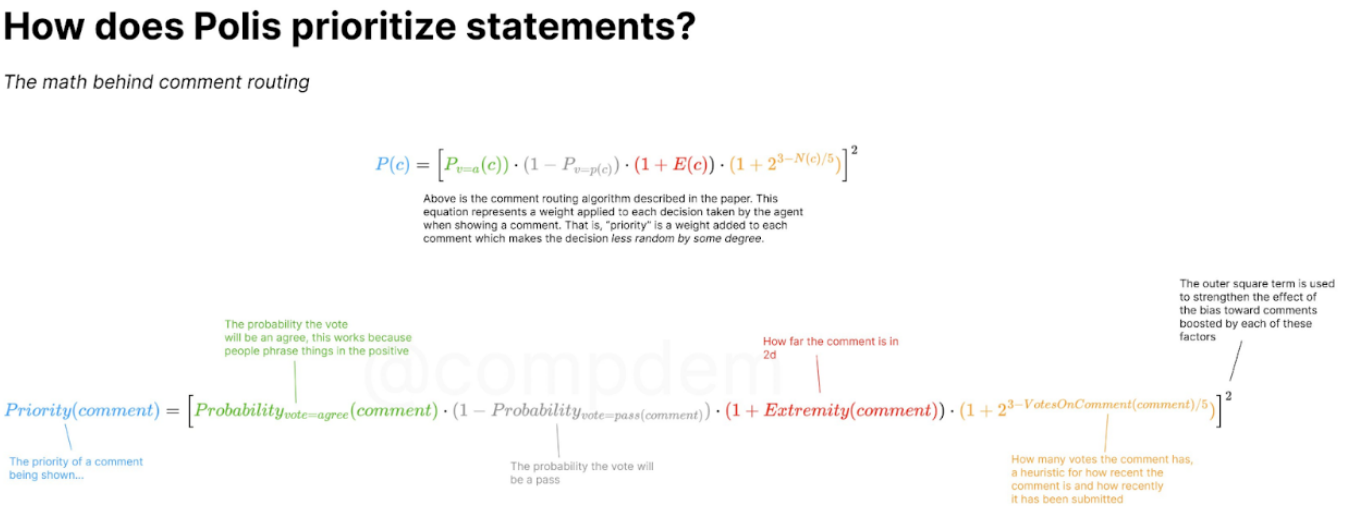
- **Does the group running the project have ongoing financial or institutional support?**

This information isn't always public, but you can look for signs such as major grants from foundations, a healthy community of software developers, or a significant number of paying customers.

One benefit of selecting an open source platform, if you have the technical ability to maintain it, is that you can continue operating and even improving the code even if the original developers stop contributing to the project.

Sustaining your participation program is an additional challenge to consider, given the long-term nature of cultural change. Many of the teams we interviewed reported difficulty sustaining their projects, especially (but not only) when they also had the responsibility of software development. In China, the Social Equity and Participation Center developed and maintained a participatory budgeting platform over years of hard work.[104] In contrast, Ciudadanía

104 Ming Zhuang, interview by author, China, October29, 2021.



Polis's open statement prioritization formula explains which statements will be prioritized on the platform https://x.com/compdem/status/1614178107422015494/photo/1. **Image taken from the Computational Democracy Project**

Inteligente (South America) found that despite interest in its platform from local councils, the team couldn't achieve sustainability.[105] Many of our interviewees mentioned the difficulties of qualifying for government tech budgets due to procurement regulations.

If you're thinking about building your own digital participation platform, re-consider how long you'll realistically be able to sustain it. Many civic tech groups that handed off their platforms to the government report dissatisfaction with the experience. Read the section titled, "Why not build our own platform?", in the appendix for information.

105 Colombina Schaeffer, interview by author, Chile, November 3, 2021.

TRANSPARENCY AND EXPLAINABILITY

For a good example of what explainability looks like on a digital participation platform, consider Polis's open source statement prioritization formula. [106] Its founder, Colin Megill, says, "We have a lot of responsibility here. We will know exactly what gets recommended because we own the attention mechanism all the way to the last line of code, and have no profit motive in the loop." Compared to a black box recommendation engine, Polis knows which content gets recommended to other users, and why.

106 https://acte-europe.org/posts/3HMjqPxPxFFLjSM-6SU1bwy/how-do-civic-tech-platforms-work-together

» **Questions to ask about AI functionality**

TOWARD INTEROPERABILITY

There's no open data standard for participation platforms yet, but more and more platforms are experimenting with interoperability. Rather than rely on a single platform for your entire participation process, you could 'chain' together multiple tools to use each in a phase of a single program. That way you can leverage their unique strengths without being locked into a single solution.

For example, CrownShy's Comhairle platform walks participation program admins through choosing a suitable workflow and selecting from the right participation tools to suit it. Participation platform members of Alliance Civic Tech Europe are teaming up bilaterally to make their products interoperable.[107] Metagov is running an interoperability program, which CrownShy is implementing together with the Scottish government.

107 https://acte-europe.org/posts/3HMjqPxPxFFLjSM6SU1bwy/how-do-civic-tech-platforms-work-together

Setting up a digital participation platform

Chapter 4

User testing

Integrating in-person engagement with hybrid platforms

How to get help

USER TESTING

The simplest way to begin user testing is to identify who your participants are, then talk to them. The more often you do this, the better sense you will have of their motivations, the difficulties they face when engaging with your platform, and other vital dynamics.

To make it easier for digital platform hosts to talk to users, the civic tech community has developed citizen-user testing groups. These groups reimburse residents in exchange for their feedback about a civic-engagement tool. By formalizing this relationship, you can reach a more representative sample of the community than by relying on your immediate social network. It's a good idea to establish a practice of regularly communicating with your target users[108].

108 You can learn more about establishing a Citizen User Testing group in O'Neil, The CUTGroup book.

Particitiz cleverly combined user education with promotional outreach for several of its engagement projects. It understood that both lack of awareness of its program and the digital divide prevented many people from participating. So it dedicated resources to helping potential participants learn how to sign up for and use the platform. For over a week, a team called each individual selected to find out if he or she was already acquainted with the tool. If not, they set up an appointment to provide a tutorial. This type of outreach requires additional staffing, but it is a very effective way to get feedback from potential users.

By talking to people who you'd like to use your digital participation platform, you can learn where they get stuck. For example, it's not always clear which fields can be edited later, vs. which submissions are final.

You can review an example of a user-experience test by checking out Fundacja Pole Dialogu's audit of a digital participation platform in the resources section of this guide.

INTEGRATING IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT WITH HYBRID PLATFORMS

Although it offers several advantages, online platforms are hardly the only way to reach people. Some digital participation platforms recognize this fact by integrating their offerings with offline engagement at both the program and platform level.

For example, cities have appointed in-person translators to capture participant feedback and log it onto the digital platform. This way, participants who are more comfortable sharing feedback verbally can do so.

At the platform level, Decidim offers features that support face-to-face meetings, conferences, and workshops. The features integrate real-world gatherings into the digital participation platform. CONSUL also supports polling at in-person meetings.

meetings

to meet and not miss anything

The meeting component offers organizations and participants the opportunity to convene meetings, determine their location and time, register and limit attendees, define the structure and content of the meeting as well as publishing the minutes, and the resulting proposals.

assemblies

the power of collective self-organization

Is a space that offers the possibility of setting decision-making bodies or groups (councils, working groups, committees, etc.) that meet up periodically, detailing their composition, listing and geolocating their meetings, and allowing to take part in them (for instance: attending if the seating capacity and nature of the assembly so permits, adding items to the agenda, or commenting on the proposals and decisions taken by that body).

Images taken from Decidim.

From the Decidim website: The meeting component offers organizations and participants the opportunity to convene meetings, determine their location and time, register and limit attendees, and define the structure and content of the meeting, as well as publish the minutes and the resulting proposals.

The assemblies feature is a space that offers the possibility of creating decision-making bodies or groups (councils, working groups, committees, etc.) that meet periodically, detailing their composition, listing and geolocating their meetings, and allowing users to take part in them (for instance, attending if the seating capacity and nature of the assembly so permits, adding items to the agenda, or commenting on the proposals and decisions taken by that body."[109]

Internal outreach

Depending on the size of your institution, you may also need to plan how to conduct internal communication. Publicizing your program and platform within your institution will prepare your colleagues before suggestions begin rolling in.[110]

If you're fortunate enough to have colleagues or volunteers who are assigned to help operate the digital participation platform, they'll likely need training. The administration side of these platforms is usually designed to be user-friendly, but new tools always present a learning challenge.

Build internal administrative training into your preparation timeline. Learning the platform together can also be a team-bonding opportunity.

Testing the AI

AI development is moving quickly, so rather than focus on where they stand at this point in time, we'll introduce a few methods you and your team can use to test the efficacy of AI models to your specific use case.

Co-design

Co-design is an important design methodology where you bring your community in early in the process of building or deploying a tech tool. By inviting others in early, you can greatly reduce the risk of building or buying something that just won't work for your community. For example, you might learn that an AI tool you were planning to use doesn't work with the language your community speaks.

109 "Features."
110 Hwang et al., Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, 141.

Co-design Resources:

- The Situate AI Guidebook: Co-Designing a Toolkit to Support Multi-Stakeholder Early-stage Deliberations Around Public Sector AI Proposals[111]
- Intersectional Spaces of Participation: Inclusive, Resilient, Embedded (INSPIRE): "INSPIRE will test co-design of participatory spaces in seven pilots involving different groups historically marginalised in policymaking and public life."[112]
- OECD case studies of open co-design processes led by government agencies, including NASA.[113]

User testing

Like co-design, user testing tools and methodologies help you see how your intended users interact with a given platform. The Citizen User Testing Group methodology pays people from your intended community to participate in the user testing program to ensure representative results.

User testing resources:

- The free CUT Group book lays out how to start and run a Citizen User Testing Group.
- A collection of topic- and place-based user testing groups, primarily across North America.
- A developer's guide to user testing
- User Testing Cheat Sheet

Benchmarks

Benchmarks are a fairly empirical way to test technical systems by a standardized rubric. This way evaluators can test a variety of AI models, for example, using the same scoring system. Rather than become an expert in how AI works, you can refer to trustworthy and up-to-date benchmarks.

AI benchmarking resources:

- Humanity's Last Exam benchmarks large language models with 2,500 questions covering a wide range of subjects.
- MLCommons's AI Risk & Reliability working group to "support community development of AI risk and reliability tests and organize definition of research- and industry-standard AI safety benchmarks based on those tests."
- MLCommons Agentic Reliability Evaluation Standard.
- MLCommons AILuminate benchmark "to measure AI reliability across new models, languages, and tools."
- In LM Arena, humans vote on chatbots' performance against one another in categories like text generation and coding.

Red-teaming

Red-teaming is a cybersecurity practice where your team or external collaborators (like "ethical hackers") try attacking your technical system to identify problems, before someone less aligned with your interests can do the same. It can be deeply technical or as simple as a social attack vector, where you look for security weaknesses in human parts of the process, as well.

Red-teaming resources:

- Red Teaming Artificial Intelligence for Social Good: UNESCO's playbook
- AI Vulnerability Database: An open-source, extensible knowledge base of AI failures
- Red teaming large language models (LLMs) for resilience to scientific disinformation
- Humane Intelligence runs "Bias Bounty" events and red-teaming competitions to evaluate AI models against standards

111 https://arxiv.org/abs/2402.18774
112 https://www.inspiredemocracy.eu/
113 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/global-trends-in-government-innovation-2024_c1bc19c3-en.html

AI Audits

Rather than rely on AI principles or take AI developers' word for their trustworthiness, AI auditors look at the outputs of an AI model to determine whether it meets standards of values like fairness. By comparing the AI's outputs with other sources, such as demographic data, data scientists can begin to determine whether an AI model is treating everyone fairly, for example.

AI auditing resources:

- An Introduction to Community-Led AI Audits
- The Adversarial Algorithmic Auditing Guide by Eticas
- Over 20 AI auditors in the Civic Tech Field Guide
- The International Association of Algorithmic Auditors

Like AI itself, AI auditing is very much an emerging practice. There aren't clear standards for AI audits, and auditors themselves "can operate without quality assurance or accreditation".[114]

HOW TO GET HELP

Depending which platform you choose, there are a variety of resources to help you set i up. These include free and paid options.

Customer support

Many SaaS platforms offer "customer success" teams who will help you set up and configure their product. A nice byproduct of the SaaS business model is that platform developers are incentivized to keep you happy: The more success you have using the product, the more likely you are to stay a paying subscriber.

With some plans, though, technical and other support costs extra. Some of the hosts we spoke to from the Global South felt that the price for this support, at over 100 US dollars per hour, was unrealistic for their context, especially when they were just piloting a platform to find a good fit.

Participation consultants

Companies like Particitiz in Brussels provide fee-based professional support to help institutions and organizations host participatory platforms. Other companies and consultants offering this service can be found in the table on the next page.

When hiring one of these companies, it is always worth asking for references from clients with whom have worked previously—especially if they used the same platform you're considering.

It is also worth checking if the platform developers recommend anyone to provide support. Sometimes this information is listed on their websites. For example, the Consul Project offers referrals to two certified collaborating companies as well as a list of self-nominated supporting companies. If the information isn't on the platform's website, try reaching out to the developers to ask if they can refer you.

114 Designing and Assuring Equitable AI in Public Services: Webinar for the UK Evaluation Society, by Patel, Reema.

Consultant	Based in
BiPart	Italy
Civic Trust	United States of America
Codeando	Mexico
DigiDem Lab	Sweden
DoBigGood	United States of America
Dreamocracy Belgium	Belgium
engage2	Australia
Fundacja ePaństwo	Poland
Institut für Partizipatives Gestalten	Germany
Feeling Javier Arteaga	Colombia
Octree (Voca)	Switzerland
Oficina	Portugal

Consultant	Based in
Open Cities Lab	South Africa
Open Source Politics	France
OpenUp	South Africa
Participation Factory	Czech Republic
Particitiz	Belgium
PokeCode	Spain
Politik Digital	Germany
Public Good Group	United States of America
Smarticipate	The Netherlands
The Centre for Civic Innovation	Australia
WeVis	Thailand

Open source contributors

If you're setting up an open source project, the platform's Github contributors may be available on a freelance basis. Look for usernames on Github and click on them to determine if they provide contact information. See, for example, the top contributors to the CitizenOS platform. You can view a similar contribution page for other open source repositories.

User forums

Open source software projects often are associated with a community of contributors who gather on web forums or real-time chat platforms hosted by providers like Discord or Slack. These communities are often the best place to seek help in setting up and using the software. Product-user forums also are valuable because you can find others who have encountered and solved the same issue you face.

However, some interviewees found the level of discourse to be comprehensible only to software developers. Take a look at the forums and see if you or your staff can understand the problems and solutions presented. Otherwise, you'll need to rely on a back-up technical team, which can be a limiting factor for many groups.

The Civic Tech Field Guide tracks listservs, forums, and Slacks for digital participation tech. You also can find these communities by researching a specific question or error message you've encountered using a search engine. Make sure to include the platform name or error message in quotation marks (for example, "Assembl") so that you get the most relevant search results. This type of search may give you a list of forums in which users discuss the platform, as well as paid search ads for companies that are experienced with it.

Peer networks

Reformers inside of government or other big institutions can feel lonely as they work to push public participation. Especially at the local level, you may be the only person you know advocating for more participatory decision-making. Fortunately, there are online forums specifically dedicated to government employees, like Apolitical and International Design in Government. These groups host networks of professionals just like you and you can post a question to them. Projects like Abre Alcadías elevate the stories of participatory champions inside local government. Professional associations like Débatlab connect people interested in public engagement to each other.

Running a process on a digital participation platform

Chapter 5

Iterative development

Outreach and participation

Participant support

Moderating a civil discussion

Evaluation and accountability

Best practices for platform managers using AI

Recommendations for AI and platforms implementing AI

ITERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

One of the major trends in software development is a shift to iterative development. This means sharing software with your target audience much earlier than in the past. Developers then can use the feedback received to make adjustments. This type of development process helps ensure that platforms truly serve users' needs. For an example of how this works in action, check out our mini case study titled "**Off the computer and into the park**".

You also can run your own participation process iteratively. Share what you're working on with constituents as you go. Soft-launch your platform to a small group of people for early feedback. As you learn what works well for users, and what does not, you can adjust your plans to help ensure success later on.

OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION

After a commitment to opening up decision-making, outreach and community-building are probably the most important factors in a successful participation process. Collaboration and voting features are meaningless if people don't use them to engage their communities. As Colombina Schaeffer put it, "The core of the project was not the platform, but all of the work around it to secure participation."[115] For this reason, we've compiled an Outreach and Engagement Methods Idea Bank in the appendix, and welcome your suggestions and contributions to expand this resource.

Your outreach needs to reflect people's existing social habits. "People don't easily form networks purely for the sake of participation," comments Margo Loor of CitizenOS[116]. When digital participation works, it's because it has built upon pre-existing networks and connections.

115 Colombina Schaeffer, interview by author, Chile, November 3, 2021.
116 Margo Loor, interview by author, Estonia, November 15, 2021.

Make it meaningful, but keep it simple

People are busy, and they can quickly sense a waste of their time. By connecting your digital participation project to real-world results, like public budgets or binding policy changes, you can demonstrate that it deserves their attention.

It will be easier to communicate a simple call to action than a complicated process. Make your call to action easy to understand and concise enough that it will fit on a postcard or flyer. Translate internal jargon or acronyms into conversational language so everyone can understand and participate.

Determine who you need to reach

As discussed in the "Commit to inclusion from the start" section, equitable representation is vital to the success of your program. For a variety of reasons, you will likely have a more difficult time reaching some communities.

As you prepare your outreach strategy, it's worth paying special attention to how you'll reach and engage under-represented and marginalized groups who have traditionally been excluded.

You may want to double up on outreach to these communities to improve representation on the platform.

Learn where people are...

Consider taking a design-thinking[117] approach when assessing participants' information-seeking habits. Talk to them to understand where and how they learn about new things. This will help you determine how to reach people, whether it be by local radio, word of mouth, or WhatsApp groups. If a survey distributed via an existing chat group effectively reaches the people you want to target, you may not need a dedicated digital participation platform. The Participation Center in China developed its tool, the Community Support Fund E-Platform, as an applet for WeChat, a popular communications channel with over 1 billion users[118]. Praekelt.org builds tools to help semi-automate the process of conducting resident outreach via WhatsApp.

...and meet them there

Research shows that simply talking to people is a great way to engage them.[119]

This is the theory behind canvassing, in which volunteers or staff go door-to-door for real-time conversations. That's the philosophy behind New York City's Public Engagement Unit[120]. This team, part of the city government, handles public outreach for a variety of municipal programs. Tactics include canvassing, phone banking, and SMS (text-messaging) outreach. The team helps boost public awareness and engagement for public policy goals like health care enrollment, voter registration, and COVID testing.

Social-currency models that use ambassadors and mentors to drive community engagement have achieved some success. Kenya's forthcoming Kijiji Yeetu platform incorporates an ambassador approach to outreach. The development team has found that to reach more marginalized groups, like women in rural areas, they need to meet them where they are. Thus, they recruited hundreds of local ambassadors through workshops, participants in previous projects, and nominations from the community. These ambassadors understand their communities and speak residents' language, and thus can help educate others on the platform. They influence how people view the participatory process, improving the chance for transformational change[121]."

117 "Design Thinking."
118 Ming Zhuang, interview by author, China, October29, 2021.
119 "Deep Canvassing."
120 "NYC Mayor's Public Engagement Unit."
121 Rapudo Hawi, interview by author, Kenya, October 13, 2021.

In Warsaw, the Fundacja Pole Dialogu team took a similar approach to help participants develop ideas into proposals. Through an open recruitment process, and suggestions from district government offices, they recruited volunteer mentors who assist people as they think out their suggestions. This not only increased the organizing team's capacity and proposal pipeline, it also built relationships between participants[122].

Offline participatory budgeting processes are driven at least in part by the participation of stakeholders such as associations, businesses, religious communities, and non-governmental organizations. Don't forget these civil society groups in the migration to digital participation. For example, Fundacja Pole Dialogu found it very effective to partner with civically involved businesses to reach more people. The businesses, such as cafés, agreed to host participatory project discussions or other events. The organizing team created a map of the venues, aiding people in connecting with each other[123].

Once you understand how your desired participants get information and learn about things, you can establish an outreach strategy to drive traffic to your platform.

122 Mateusz Wojcieszak, interview by author, Poland, October 27, 2021.
123 Mateusz Wojcieszak.

People are unlikely to participate just because you have a platform, so leverage existing social groups.[124]

If you reach out to the leaders of relevant local groups, they might help promote your decision-making process.

124 Margo Loor, interview by author, Estonia, November 15, 2021.

Your outreach goals should be specific: "We'll attract x daily visitors, who will make y annual suggestions, by collaborating with local civil society organizations."

Outreach and marketing should be adapted as people begin to use the platform. For example, participant feedback submitted via Parti's Demos X platform helped the organization create a guide to help its personnel deliver clear, consistent messaging to the public.[125]

125 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 134.

The Democracy Seoul Design Guide is used internally and with partners to communicate clear, consistent messaging to the public[126].

Graphic from Democracy Seoul Design.

126 Hwang et al., 135.

+Spotlight

Don't be afraid to advertise

The Go Vocal platform (and Neighborland before it shut down) regularly achieve strong, representative participation rates for local governments. Their secret? The operators spend money on ads to reach people who might not otherwise learn about the engagement process. While not every government can afford or is allowed to run paid ad campaigns, you might want to consider it. Online ads can help you reach large numbers of people affordably, and can be tailored to reach different audiences.Online ads can help you reach large numbers of people affordably, and can be tailored to reach different audiences.

Bring the most interesting conversations off-platform to spark interest

To reach more people online, choose a specific target audience and then experiment with transitioning their conversation from the platform to other social media channels[127]. This can create what is called a "bandwagon effect" and help generate participation by others.

You can research which social networks certain age groups or other demographics use, helping you reach new people. Digital marketing websites can help you optimize your content for those platforms.

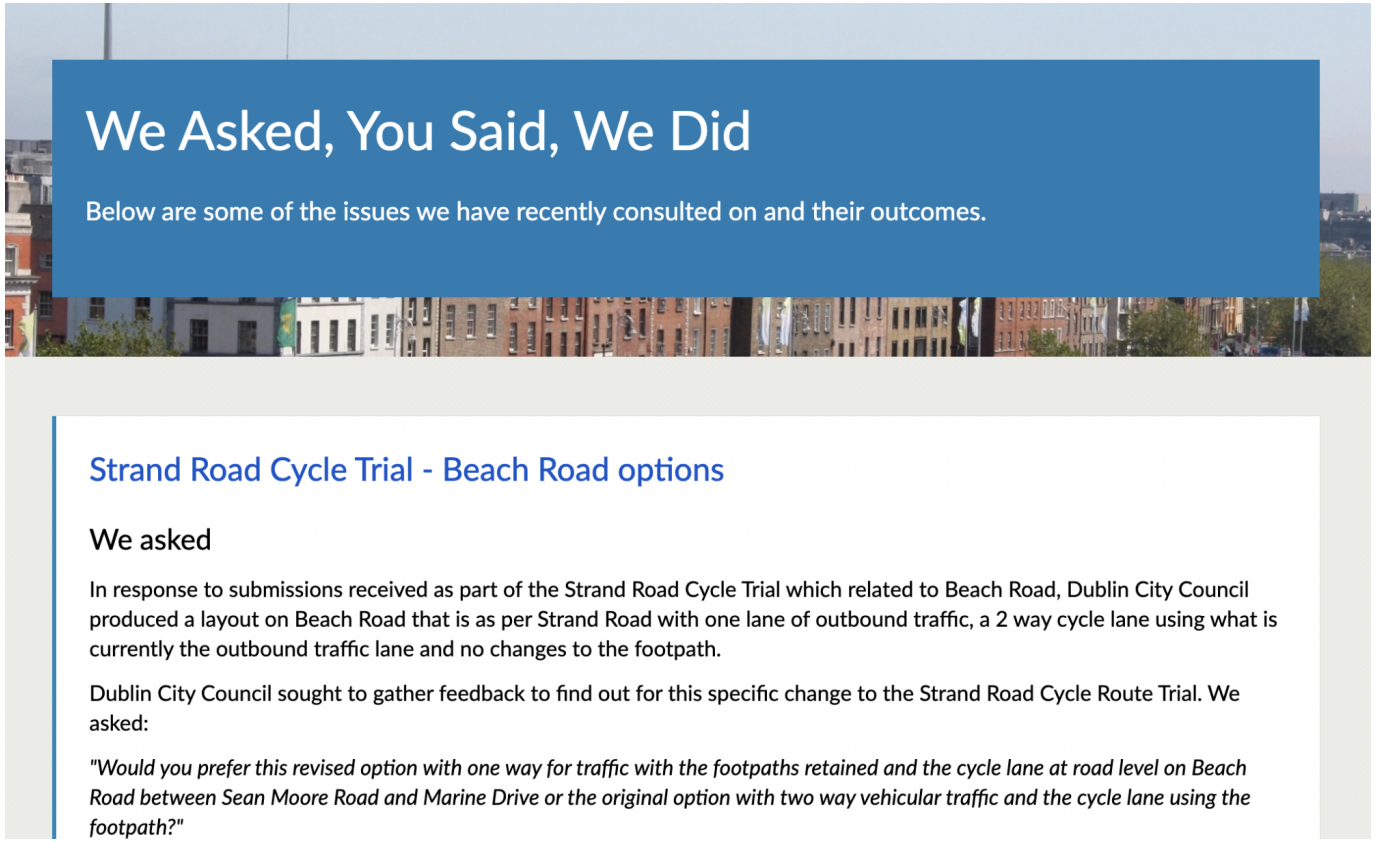
127 Hwang et al., 138.

Share your people-powered wins, early and often

People are often skeptical of public institutions, sometimes for understandable reasons. And within your institution, you will encounter people who are skeptical or wary of engaging the public (or other external participants) in decision-making. People in positions of power within institutions have a tendency to treat online participation as a one-way channel for broadcasting policies or collecting votes. Your goal is to expand their imagination so you can implement a platform that facilitates true collaboration between a variety of stakeholders. Changing that mindset while managing the expectations of participants is a very gradual process.[128]. For these reasons, it's vital to show the link between participation and results.

128 Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and Hyun-Suk Hwang of Parti Co-op, interview by author, South Korea, November 15, 2021.

In your communications, you can highlight and promote the real, positive changes possible with broad participation. The SeeClickFix app, for example, prominently displays the number of resident-submitted issues a city has resolved. The Delib platform has a "We Asked, You Said, We Did" page that concisely summarizes the results of public consultations[129]. The "We Did" section links to specific, concrete changes made because of people's involvement.



Screenshot from Delib

129 "Webinar. Closing the Feedback Loop."

Showing results is especially important early on in your participatory process, when people are deciding whether to invest their time and energy. By quickly implementing a working feedback loop between public input and your institution's responsiveness, you show the community that the process is real and works. Even if you must explain why an idea can't be implemented, you demonstrate responsiveness. See if you can implement any quick-win solutions, since that will demonstrate the link between participants' engagement and change.

The implementation and communication phases are very important factors that determine people's future participation. If they feel listened to, they will be more likely to participate in the future.[130]

130 Margo Loor, interview by author, Estonia, November 15, 2021.

+Spotlight
Not just for governments[131]

Digital participation platforms also are useful for organizations outside the government. The **Let's Do It** movement started as a day of volunteer action in which over 50,000 people came together to clean up their country. The movement grew and now millions of people participate in annual events around the world[132].

After years of consistent volunteer work to clean up their neighborhoods, participants started wondering why the communities were dirty to begin with. They began to focus on systemic change. Why wasn't garbage collection being managed appropriately? Which interest groups stood in the way of improvements? This

131 Margo Loor, interview by author, Estonia, November 15, 2021.
132 "Let's Do It World."

A highlight from World Cleanup Day 2020.

new focus led to the development of a digital participation platform, CitizenOS. In contrast to a top-down approach, in which a government body engages the public, CitizenOS was built to organize and accelerate the work of social movements, locally and across countries.

Activists' use of CitizenOS to organize their work is just one example of civil society organizations leveraging digital participation platforms. Another example is the Jogye Order, a major Buddhist organization in South Korea, which used the DemosX platform to collaborate with people and build trust. Many different groups, institutions, and governments can benefit from inviting participation through digital platforms.

+Spotlight
Have fun trying out participants' suggestions

Residents won't always understand what's possible when they submit ideas, so it's natural that some of their proposals will not be feasible. Still, you can have some fun and demonstrate that your institution is responsive via "micro executions." The Parti Coop team established a Citizen Suggestion Trial Center, a public forum that examines and discusses resident suggestions through experimentation. A particular suggestion is implemented in a trial run, then the results are shared for discussion on the digital platform[133].

When a participant on the DemosX platform in Seoul proposed turning the city's metro system into an educational site, complete with teachers in the subway cars, the Parti Coop team ran with it and set up a small experiment. It then produced and shared a promotional video documenting this novel urban intervention[134].

133 Hwang et al., Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, 110.

134 Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and Hyun-Suk Hwang of Parti Co-op, interview by author, South Korea, November 15, 2021.

Democracy Seoul's Trial Center tested out a citizen proposal to offer formal education in the city's subway system and created a video showing how it would work.

PARTICIPANT SUPPORT

Helping participants use a platform can require a significant time commitment. Consider hosting public trainings as part of your outreach plan. The Codeando México team found that a chat group on a platform like WhatsApp was a helpful way to support people struggling to use the digital platform.[135]

Multilingual engagement

People speak thousands of languages, and it isn't uncommon to hear hundreds of different dialects spoken within a single city. Expecting people to meaningfully contribute to an open participation process in a language they don't speak is unreasonable, and will empower speakers of the dominant language at the expense of other linguistic communities.

Developers of digital participation platforms responded to this need by integrating translation features into their products. Sometimes this means they hire translators; other times, volunteers are recruited. Still another option is translation produced by artificial intelligence, via services like Google Translate or DeepL. However, while machine translation is rapidly improving, it isn't perfect.

Some AI models are explicitly trained to support smaller languages, including:

- CDIAL, "Digitizing Local Languages, Localizing Digital access for 1 Billion Africans" (based in Nigeria).
- Meta's Massively Multilingual Speech AI research model, which as of 2023 "can identify more than 4,000 spoken languages" and "expand text-to-speech and speech-to-text technology from around 100 languages to more than 1,100" (based in the United States).
- La Infrastructura Pública de IA Abierta y Multilingüe (ALIA) (based in Spain), designed to be "Europe's first public, open and multilingual AI infrastructure" and to work "with texts in more than 35 European languages."
- ARIJ's AI playbook, which includes an updated directory of which AI models support Arabic (based in Jordan).
- Yodi, which does AI translation between Ewè to English (based in Togo).

135 Sofía Corona, interview by author, Mexico, October 27, 2021.

MODERATING A CIVIL DISCUSSION

Conversations can take many forms on digital participation platforms. Common examples include comment fields, opportunities to submit proposals, the ability to send private messages, and the option of gathering signatures for a petition. You should develop a plan for how you and your team will moderate these various types of conversations.

To ensure civil discourse and protect your users from hate speech, harassment, and other harm, keep in mind:

- Some groups of people, especially women of color, experience higher rates of online harassment[136][137].
- Online harassment doesn't always fit the definitions found in terms-of-service agreements[138].

So, what should you do?

136 "Troll Patrol Findings."
137 Duggan, "1 in 4 Black Americans Have Faced Online Harassment Because of Their Race, Ethnicity."
138 Sinders, "When Online Harassment Doesn't Follow the Rules."

Civil-discussion features

Some platforms remind users to be civil as they type. For example, the Expressão digital participation platform gently nudges its users toward more civil language as they compose their drafts.

These types of features have been adopted by mainstream social media platforms in recent years to help improve conversations. Google offers a free API, Perspective, to identify "toxic" language in comments and other digital conversations. While users can alter their language to "game" the algorithm, it's a start.

User authentication

Some digital participation platforms also promise to verify that each user actually lives in the eligible town or region. (We've noted in the comparison matrix which platforms have an identity-verification feature).

Validating people's identification cards is one way to ensure eligibility. However, this process doesn't guarantee participants will always be civil. Requiring official identification also can depress participation. Thus, verifying users may be counter to your goal of broad engagement. The more hurdles you put in front of participation, the fewer people will engage. For example, it's very common for digital participation platforms to require users to verify their email address before gaining access. Yet in many contexts, including those described by our interviewees in Chile and Jamaica, a large proportion of would-be participants either didn't have email addresses or didn't have access to them.

In some places, like Estonia, the government operates a digital-identity program. Residents thus are already familiar with the process, making verification less of a hurdle than in other contexts.

Despite the barriers they present (or perhaps, due to them), user-authentication features are often preferred by governments or other hosts when significant budgets or binding votes are involved. One compromise is to require a mobile phone number but not an identity card. Be wary of services that promise to "geo-verify" users by their location. These services base their determinations on users' IP addresses, and can be fooled with VPN connections.

Another way to protect results without erecting hurdles to participation is to focus on active fraud monitoring. You can use a web analytics service to monitor user activity and look for irregular patterns, like a proposal that receives an abnormal spike in votes over a very short time period[139].

Blocking and reporting

At the very least, users should be able to block someone who harasses them[140]. And they should be able to report harassment to the platform provider. Test this process internally before you launch to make sure messages or flagged content go to a responsive person who can help resolve the issue.

Human moderation

Regardless of the various technical functionalities that promise to address harassment, you will want to allocate human resources to this challenge. If your participatory process involves meaningful decision-making power (and hopefully, it does), conversations can easily turn contentious and political. Some people will stop participating if they feel a process has become uncivil.

139 Hwang et al., Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, 100.

140 For more on why it's important to provide this feature, even on 'civic' or workplace platforms, see Sinders, "No One Is Talking about the Biggest Problem with Slack."

Moderators can help keep conversations productive and limit the negative impacts of bad-faith participants.

To assure that people of all ages feel safe when they participate, it is critical to allocate adequate resources to moderation. Before launching your process, identify moderators who speak the language(s) of the people you wish to engage. Participants might use languages or vernacular with which your team isn't familiar. So, assign someone on your team the responsibility of regularly checking in to make sure the platform is a healthy, accessible place for everyone.

In addition, establish some basic guidelines for the discussion on your platform. For example, specify that comments or suggestions that violate laws or personally attack someone will be deleted[141].

Some platform operators offer to moderate conversations on your behalf for an additional fee. For example, PlaceSpeak offers this service as an add-on to its platform for 1,000 USD per month[142].

141 Hwang et al., *Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide*, 100.
142 "PlaceSpeak."

AI moderation

(See the Moderating participant discussions section).

Cybersecurity

Another concern is cyberattacks. Local governments have been on the receiving end of cyberattacks, especially ransomware, at alarming rates in the past few years. In a ransomware attack, hackers gain access to sensitive data and/or control of your software. Then, they demand a ransom in return for access.

In other cases, governments have increasingly tight control over the internet and social media, allowing intense surveillance of citizens' activities. The sensitive data they collect on political opponents or the entire population could be used for yet-unknown future applications.

What you can do about it

Even if there doesn't appear to be a threat on the horizon where you live, we recommend making a plan on what to do if the situation changes, as that can happen literally overnight.

One way to protect your participatory platform from a ransomware attack is to avoid being a rich target in the first place. By minimizing the amount of private or sensitive data you collect from users,[143] you limit the value (and potential damage) of a ransomware attack. If your data is just publicly available participation content, you won't be a good target for ransom.

Instead of storing passwords, many operators of digital products now are asking users to authenticate themselves through "magic links" sent via email or mobile phone notifications (which themselves rely on biometric authentication like a finger print or facial recognition). Two-factor authentication is also now common practice, and strong implementations of it rely on digital 'passkeys' rather than text message codes that can be intercepted. Passkeys are supported by tech giants like Google, Apple, and Microsoft, and are easy to use for end users.[144]

If you do collect and store sensitive data, such as users' passwords, it should be sufficiently encrypted and protected[145] so that even if hackers gain access to the database, they cannot use the information.

143 "Principle (c)."
144 https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/blog-post/passkeys-promise-simpler-alternative-passwords
145 Arias, "How to Hash Passwords."

If you're paying for a SaaS platform, the provider will respond to any cyberattacks that occur. Many of the paid platforms explicitly promote cybersecurity as a reason to use their product. While this isn't an iron-clad guarantee, their tech team might have more resources to protect your platform than you, depending on your team.

If you are hosting your own platform, automating frequent backups and setting up a content delivery network (CDN) like Cloudflare can help prevent or mitigate cyberattacks. With servers around the world, CDNs can quickly shift web traffic to help mitigate the impact of an attack (although you and your team will still need to address the attack itself, which may require changing the code).

Digital participation platforms that collect important votes or determine budgetary allocations must also be secure from internal manipulation of outcomes.

Some platforms are experimenting with the blockchain, which is essentially an open, decentralized ledger of transactions, to publicly record votes so that manipulation is more easily detectable.[146]

Cybersecurity is a holistic concern. You should consider implementing best practices for cybersecurity across your institution, and keeping them up to date. If you rely on a large technology vendor like Microsoft, Google, or IBM, each provides specific cybersecurity resources and programs you can enroll in.[147]

If you do find yourself on the receiving end of a serious cyberattack, several civil society groups and cybersecurity companies offer pro bono resources. These include digital 'hotlines', clinics, funding,[148] and other forms of guided support.[149]

Regardless of who's maintaining the platform you're using, make sure it is actively maintained. Researchers discover new security risks in commonly used software every day. The platform you're using must be regularly patched, or updated, to address these discoveries. You can determine if this is occurring by looking to see when it was last updated (in the app store, or the platform's open code repository, or website, where it's often referred to as a "changelog").

146 European Commission, "The DECODE Architecture, Documentation and Sustainability."
147 "IBM Security Learning Academy"; "Google Cybersecurity Action Team"; "Cybersecurity Framework & Policies."
148 https://www.opentech.fund/
149 Find over 100 cybersecurity resources designed for civil society group at https://directory.civictech.guide/listing-category/cybersecurity

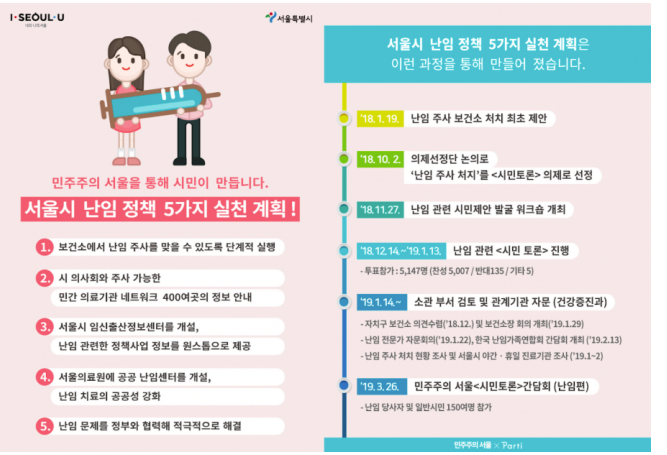
EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Review and learn internally

Remember that your first experience with digital participation will inevitably be opportunities for learning.

You may discover that the platform you selected doesn't do a sufficient job supporting your needs. Or you may find the platform to be too complicated to use, and end up relying on far simpler digital solutions to accomplish your goals.

The goal of pilot programs is to learn before committing to a course of action. In many institutions, there will be strong incentives to demonstrate that everything went well, even when it didn't. Resist this pressure and work to understand where you or your team can make improvements. If your institution doesn't have a formal internal evaluation process, consider implementing pre-mortems and post-mortems on your participation process.



This screenshot from the DemosX platform shows the results from a citizen discussion on whether fertility shots should be provided at community health centers.[150]

Be accountable to your publics

It's also vital to share with your community the mid-term results of their engagement. Communicating these results will benefit future programs that invite engagement with your institution.

In Seoul, successful participant proposals on the DemosX digital platform are developed into policy implementation plans. Each plan is monitored quarterly, with the results posted on an implementation page that participants can monitor.[151] The page includes a detailed report on progress and outcome data showing the changes brought about by the policy.

150 Hwang et al., Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, 115.
151 Hwang et al., 115.

Tap into these evaluation resources

Two evaluation resources you should consider reviewing are:

- Evaluating Digital Citizen Engagement: A Practical Guide.
- SIMLab's framework for monitoring and evaluating inclusive technologies in social change projects.

More broadly, you may benefit from the impact-assessment work led by:

- The World Bank's Digital Engagement Evaluation Team (DEET).
- The U.S. Office of Evaluation Sciences.
- The Public Impact Observatory.
- The Impacts of Civic Technology Conference.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PLATFORM MANAGERS USING AI

Do's and don'ts for AI adoption

If you are just beginning to explore AI in digital participation, we recommend exploring the most common use cases where participation platform developers have the most experience leveraging the technology, and where the AI itself is often a bit more mature. Based on our recent research, the most frequently observed AI features on participation platforms are:

1. Translation
2. Sentiment analysis
3. Topic clustering
4. AI discussion moderation
5. Parsing and summarizing large amounts of text

While still capable of producing errors, participation platforms have already supported these features for years, in many cases.

People Powered's own community-developed AI principles cautiously encourage the use of AI for tasks like text editing (such as fixing spelling, grammar or improving content, organization and brand voice consistency).[152] This recommendation is offered within the context of existing digital platforms, and might not apply if your application requires training an AI model on significant amounts of custom, original data. While translation is already proving useful for many people, you need to experiment with multiple offerings to test their accuracy across your target language(s), and be transparent about where you use AI in external communications.

Participation platforms have already demonstrated AI's utility for content summarization, as current Large Language Models (LLMs) often perform this task with accuracy. This application alone can greatly increase efficiency and help extract and name key themes that might otherwise be missed in the volumes of public feedback. LLMs still make mistakes, though, and you should validate the accuracy and reproducibility of any summarizations it performs. You can do this through human spot-checks and by inviting public scrutiny of its work (as long as the community feedback is intended to be public).

We generally encourage exploratory use of AI for automating workflows, but complex tasks can still increase the chance of errors. Here and in many other AI applications, regular monitoring and evaluation by humans is crucial. You or your team members should verify the AI's outputs in context of your own subject matter expertise and familiarity with the community. Given how much time AI can free up, you should have capacity freed up to regularly check in on its performance.

The People Powered AI policy does flag certain applications as high-risk. For example, AI notetaking bots have proliferated in online meetings to transcribe the event. We have prohibited them in our own non-public meetings in order to respect participants' privacy and data security rights. We also prohibit using AI to monitor employee activity or "productivity", as it poses a significant risk to trust (and often fails to measure the holistic value of someone's work, anyway).

This may be obvious, but we recommend AI not be used to create synthetic content, including images, videos, or human voices, unless they're clearly labeled as artificial content. Generating an image that's meant to be a simulation of a near-future version of your street in order to advocate for a more vibrant community is great. Attempting to pass off artificially generated content, such as deep fakes, as genuine community engagement

152 People Powered AI Policy 2025

stands against everything participatory democracy programs seek to accomplish.

Across the board, AI tools confidently assert their ability to accurately accomplish certain tasks, whether or not they are actually capable of doing the job well. Do not base important decisions on AI's authoritative tone or "predictive" abilities.

AI Moderation

Given the costs of human moderators, many platform developers have applied AI to take on the task of moderation. Even if you use AI to help moderate discussions, we recommend keeping a close eye on what it's finding and whose contributions are being flagged. While AI models can help identify "toxic" language and automate responding to it, it's historically pretty bad at assessing participants' true sentiment or interpreting posts that rely on nuanced communication styles like sarcasm or irony.

You'll likely want to fine-tune the AI moderator as you see how it performs with your participants. Platforms like Decidim offer the ability to train the moderator in real-time on the content appearing on your platform,[153] rather than a pre-trained model that might not include your community in its training data. We also recommend human facilitators to help guide discussions in productive directions, even if you rely on AI to weed out toxic content.

An important concern we have with AI-powered moderation features is that whoever sets the rules of the model can abuse their power to dictate what's permissible to say and what isn't. Whether it's the AI developer, the platform developer, or the host of the participatory process, AI will automatically enforce their standards whether or not they are just. For example, some governments have pressured AI companies to manipulate their data, and some major companies have complied. In addition to enshrining a false version of history, AI moderation models may respond by "rate limiting" or otherwise suppressing the speech of participants found to be violating the moderation rules, whether or not those rules are just to begin with.

We wholeheartedly support general moderation rules that discourage individuals from attacking others based on legally protected characteristics like race, gender, or disability, or otherwise harassing people or violating their human rights. The interpretation of these principles into content moderation programs is an entire field often referred to as user "Trust and Safety," and it's now a hotly contested arena due to the power these rules represent. When in doubt, we side with creating healthy community spaces where diversity is welcome and individuals' rights are protected, with the allocation of adequate human resources relative to the volume of your community participation.

Human-in-the-loop

A "human-in-the-loop" process requires human oversight and intervention at various stages of AI-powered operations to help ensure accuracy, quality, and ethical considerations that the model might mess up. It's a very common feature of institutional AI principles because they've decided that humans remain ultimately responsible and accountable for final actions and decisions, including the use of AI outputs.

Take for example the AI moderation feature. Even with the technical ability to address harassment (like dialogs that nudge users towards more civil language as they're writing), maintaining human involvement at the administrator level **is critical**. Hybrid models combine AI, crowdsourced filtering (where other participants can flag problematic language for review), and "expert" human review can be effective in your large-scale engagements.

153 https://docs.decidim.org/en/develop/develop/ai_tools/spam_detection_trainer

In this setup, the AI system might automatically flag potentially problematic comments in discussions. Human moderators would then review these flags to interpret the nuances of the conversations (especially complex posts that AI might misinterpret), and make the final decision about content removal and/or intervention with the potentially offending user. The human review helps ensure that conversations remain productive and civil, limiting the negative impacts from bad-faith participants, while reducing the chance that the automated system mis-steps in its interpretation and response.

This type of model is especially important for participatory processes that involve meaningful decision-making power, as discussions among different groups can become contentious, and the process results can be consequential. AI outputs should always be verified by humans, and ideally followed as the process is running, rather than just at the end.

Communicating clearly with participants

Transparency regarding AI use is another common principle. Your AI use, including that of your digital platform, should be reasonably documented and disclosed to your community. Any significant decisions that were made or supported by AI should also be disclosed. We recommend noting when you use AI translation so that participants speaking other languages can be wary of errors. Your commitment to transparency is vital for building and maintaining trust with participants.

Managing ethical concerns and public perception

Despite its benefits, AI adoption presents significant challenges, including bias and ethical use. AI-enabled tools risk reinforcing inequalities, eroding trust, or further excluding marginalized voices. With and without AI, it's crucial to be in conversation with your community throughout the participatory process, be ready to adjust, and be open to taking your community's pulse on whether and how they would like to see AI implemented.

Key ethical and societal concerns surrounding AI include:

- **Bias**: AI models can and do reproduce social biases originating in their training data.
- **Lack of transparency and explainability:** Many widely available AI models have proprietary and opaque training data and algorithms, making effective oversight difficult. The technology itself can make it difficult for even the models' creators to understand why it's producing certain outputs.
- **Manipulation risks:** AI can generate large volumes of text (bots) or realistic-seeming deepfake audio and video that could be used to pollute participatory processes. For example, an interest group could create a large number of credible fictional personas, diminishing the contributions of and outvoting human participants.
- **User perception:** AI introduces variation in user experience. People are understandably wary of AI, and may lose trust in a process that uses it, especially if it's used without clear disclosure.
- **Inclusion and equity:** If not carefully managed and checked, AI could unintentionally reinforce existing power imbalances like over-representing majority cultures and language groups.
- **Data privacy:** Protecting data privacy is crucial, as AI services might train on participants' data or accidentally "leak" users' data to other users or third party connections.

To manage these concerns, you should:

- Prioritize applying AI in contexts that respect human dignity and promote equitable access to resources.
- Prioritize inclusive and democratic approaches to training, testing, and deploying AI tools.
- Be an active participant in shaping norms around your community's AI use and developing responsible practices for it.
- Strive to use AI tools in the most ethical, sustainable, and transparent ways possible, while maintaining vigilance against their still emerging harmful effects.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AI AND PLATFORMS IMPLEMENTING AI

Designing for public interest and democratic values

Whether you're developing your own AI or deploying an existing model, participatory platform developers play a critical role in shaping how this technology ultimately impacts participatory democracy. We're counting on you to design AI tools and platforms that meaningfully facilitate engagement and shape better societal outcomes. This includes ensuring that your AI model or features support existing goals such as helping institutions engage constituents more often, in more depth, and involving people in real decision-making.

We would also like to see civil society and democracy activists get exposure and access to trustworthy AI systems earlier in the technology adoption cycle, so they can prepare participatory processes and institutions for impending technology-driven disruption. They need your support developing capacity to test AI and avoiding the deployment of inhumane systems.

Working with governments and civic actors

As you probably already know, governments, institutions, and civil society organizations have specific needs that vary widely and differ from other markets. As you design, develop, and integrate AI tools to serve these markets, it would help to directly collaborate in order to understand how their unique contexts will affect your product (and vice versa).

Taking a collaborative approach ensures that your AI solutions are practical and relevant for real-world participatory programs. It can also introduce your cutting-edge solutions in a safe environment, like a regulatory sandbox,[154] allowing you to work together to address and mitigate the very concerns that could otherwise prevent adoption of your platform.

Ethics-by-design: inclusion, bias, transparency

Your product design process should include ethical considerations, like inclusion, bias, and transparency, from the start. You'll need to consider:

- **Transparency and explainability:** How can the workings of AI algorithms be made clear and understandable to participants and platform managers? If you're integrating AI into an existing platform, you should document and disclose where it's showing up and what it's intended to help with. (The sparkle symbol seems to have emerged as a universal indicator of an AI feature). Modern language models can now show their "chain of thought" to users. This means they visually display the

154 Sandboxes and testbeds are "[p]rograms that lower the barriers to innovation in a dedicated area of a larger place (like a city)...allow[ing] private sector companies, researchers, and others to pilot new tech like self-driving cars and drones in a real urban environment, often before they're ready for broader roll-out." https://directory.civictech.guide/listing-category/testbeds-and-sandboxes

process by which they got to their answer.

- **Bias mitigation:** How can biases in the underlying training data be accounted for, and how can your algorithms be designed to prevent the unintentional reinforcement of inequalities or exclusion of marginalized voices? One way to identify solutions here is to be transparent about how your system works. While you might be the expert of your product, other people with different lived experiences are likely going to be able to help you spot a potential problem with how your system interacts with their community. Engaging them openly can help you address it before it does any harm.
- **Inclusion:** Design for human dignity and equitable access to resources. By prioritizing inclusive and democratic approaches to training, testing, and deployment of your AI, you can directly support the broader objectives of participatory democracy.
- **Responsible data use:** Can you avoid training AI on customers' data in general, or at least without their express permission? What alternatives can you offer? User privacy is an important priority, and increasingly a legally-required one. You can save yourself a lot of trouble by not collecting personally identifiable or other sensitive data in the first place.

Limit AI hallucination

One technique to address the hallucination issue is Retrieval-Augmented Generation. This approach basically focuses the AI model on a set of pre-approved verified documents. Doing so can limit the likelihood that the model hallucinates some totally original (mis)information. This technical approach is proving popular in legal contexts, where AI outputs must be based on established law, policy, or precedent.

Participatory platforms like Policy Synth, Parla, UrbanistAI, Konveio, Redbox, Local Minutes, and Congressional RAG use this method, among others.

Another method to reduce hallucinations is to set your AI model to "low-creativity" setting. OpenAI's API allows for this adjustment, for example. It was used by POPVOX Foundation in addition to RAG to design a tool for legislative staffers in the US Congress that "avoids AI hallucinations by grounding responses strictly in vetted documents."[155]

Real-world testing and feedback loops

By incorporating real-world testing and feedback loops into your development process, you can navigate difficult scenarios and identify edge cases before they become a problem. This includes practices like co-design, red-teaming, and performing audits of your or your providers' AI models.

Approaching AI tools with an experimental mindset and sharing learnings, successes, and failures with customers, participants, and the broader community engenders empathy for your efforts and promotes continuous improvement. Like in other areas of software development, iterative development of participation AI features helps ensure your platform is truly serving users' needs, and that any AI is well integrated into complex sociopolitical contexts.

155 https://modparl.substack.com/p/blueprints-for-parliaments

Looking forward

Looking forward, we've identified several trends to watch. Some groups working to connect people to power (especially those located in the Global Majority) report that their time is better spent cultivating communities than developing software. They've found that building a community of practice and helping people use existing digital tools, like WhatsApp and other mainstream chat apps, are more effective than building or learning to use digital participation platforms. Since the first edition of this guide, civic tech developers have built many more bridges from chat apps, which can reach almost everyone in a given community, to participation platforms, which have historically required an email address and consistent data connection to register.[156]

This trend is driven in part by a growing recognition from funders that supporting the development of new technology isn't the best use of their resources, given the strength of existing open source platforms. Meanwhile, interviewees commonly reported that even existing open source platforms require significantly more support, documentation, and (affordable) consulting services than is currently available. Philanthropic groups should consider dedicating resources to strengthening the ecosystem surrounding existing digital platforms so that more communities can benefit from them.

In the private sector, the digital participation platform industry is becoming increasingly professional and consolidated. The existence of an industry trade group in Europe, Association Civic Tech Europe, and the acquisition of several major platforms by larger firms, like Neighborland, SeeClickFix, and Open Town Hall, signal that this trend will continue.

156 For examples, see https://directory.civictech.guide/listing-tag/WhatsApp

Conclusion

The field of participation tech has only grown since the first edition of this report in 2022. Millions of people around the world are engaging on these platforms and making important decisions for their communities, with their communities. And technologists are already using AI to quickly develop custom applications for more bespoke communities and use cases.

We've covered a very wide range of considerations in this guide. Hopefully, we've provided a sense of what to look out for without being overwhelming. The best way to learn is by doing, so start small, talk to people outside of your institution, and simply try it.

In many cases, the specific digital participation platform you choose will matter less than the program you build around it. If you're trying to engage your constituents in decision-making, the most important piece of advice is to begin. In doing so, you will find other people, inside and outside of your institution, who are interested in connecting people to power. The strength of that link is more vital to your outcomes than any individual piece of technology.

While it's become clear that AI can enhance digital participation programs in powerful ways, many questions remain open. People Powered members have repeatedly shared that if AI automates the people out of participatory democracy, we've completely missed the point. We don't yet know what effects ever-increasing AI usage will have on participants' desire to engage, or the legitimacy of results. For People Powered, as well as for UNDP, the guiding principle behind this work is meaningful engagement with people. So while we'll continue to follow the roll-out of new features that support group deliberation and decision-making, especially in the context of democratic backsliding, we should remain focused above all on connecting people to one another and to collective decision-making power as the main dynamic fueling our work.

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Additional resources

Where to find single-purpose tools

Matrix of platforms

How to evaluate a platform

Questions to ask about AI functionality

Should you build your own platform?

Outreach and Engagement Methods Idea Bank

Resources developed by others

WHERE TO FIND SINGLE-PURPOSE TOOLS

While this guide provides a deep dive into participation platforms offering suites of tools, there's also an extended world of special purpose products built for more specific use cases. Many participation platforms include these features, as well, but sometimes you might want a simple tool. The Civic Tech Field Guide inventories all manner of participatory engagement tools, which you can find pointers to in the table below.

Tool	Description	Example
Civic forums	Online discussion platforms built to foster civic conversation and debate.	Consider.it
Communicating with the government	Digital communication channels between constituents and representatives, trying to improve the feedback loop.	Bogotá ta escucha
Communicating with the people	Tools and platforms that share official communications and democratic processes.	Common Measurements Tool
Debate	Tools that help map, enhance, and facilitate democratic debates.	Rhetoric
Deliberation	Platforms that assist participants in deliberating together over decisions.	DECID
Digital peacebuilding	Digital peacebuilding leverages technology to prevent conflict, promote social cohesion, and support peace processes through online platforms, data analysis, and digital communication tools.	Phoenix
Hotlines	Public service hotlines are dedicated phone lines provided by government agencies or nonprofit organizations that citizens can call to access various services, report problems, get information, or receive immediate assistance on a variety of issues, enhancing accessibility and responsiveness of public services.	Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement

Ideation	Platforms that invite citizens and residents to contribute their ideas, creativity, and perspectives to the governance process	Cap Collectif
Interactive Voice Response (IVR)	Interactive voice response (IVR) is a technology that bridges analog and digital experiences by allowing humans to interact with a computer through their voices and dialpad entries. It's used in many ICT4D projects where smartphone and desktop devices are not yet prevalent.	SEMA
Issue reporting	A subset of crowdsourced data collection, issue reporting platforms enable residents to notify their government(s) of items in need of attention, often municipal.	SeeClickFix
Kiosks	Interactive digital terminals placed in public spaces, which allow citizens to access various public services, provide feedback, obtain information, and engage with government initiatives, thereby enhancing public participation and service delivery while contributing to narrowing the digital divide.	Digital Neighborhood Bulletin Boards
Mapping tools	Tooling and utilities for making civic maps	SketchMap Tool
Meeting tech	Tech to facilitate and improve outcomes from interpersonal meetings, whether face to face or remote.	meet.coop
Neighborhood forums	Digital venues that promote conversation within geographically-defined communities.	smalltown
Online forums	Digital conversation hubs for conversations of civic import. They are often designed to facilitate constructive dialogues, but sometimes fail by attempting to creating new destinations rather than embrace existing community hubs.	Ethelo
Participatory budgeting	Collaboratively raising and allocating public funds	Danes Je Nov Dan

Participatory budgeting tools	Tools and platforms one can use to run participatory budgeting programs, where citizens and residents can decide how to allocate public funds, and co-develop projects.	CONSUL Democracy
Platform interoperability	There's no open data standard for participation platforms yet, but more and more platforms are experimenting with interoperability. Rather than rely on a single platform for your entire participation process, you could 'chain' together multiple tools to use each in a phase of a single program. That way you can leverage their unique strengths without being locked into a single solution.	Comhairle
Polarization	Projects that seek to reduce perceived political polarization through a variety of methods, like guided exposure to alternate viewpoints.	The Bridging Dictionary
Surveys & polling	Surveys are used to gather input, measure public opinion, and establish baseline understanding of demographics and other information about residents.	Civic Echo
Urban planning	Tools that seek to improve urban planning processes by digitizing them and making them more accessible to residents.	GAMA Platform

MATRIX OF PLATFORMS

To help you choose a digital participation platform, we compiled a comparison of over 75 offerings. You can filter and sort by any of the characteristics we assessed to help narrow down your choices.

The bulk of the data were provided by the Civic Tech Field Guide, with additional contributions from many others, especially those thanked in the guide's acknowledgements.

We welcome suggested additions and corrections to this matrix, which can be submitted on the field guide's website.

HOW TO EVALUATE A PLATFORM

Here are some questions you might want to ask as you consider which digital participation platform to choose. The procurement process (before you pay for anything) is an excellent opportunity to get answers to your questions.

If the answers aren't available on the platform's website, try sending the developers an email. If you don't receive a good answer, that may be a bad sign!

Is the platform available in the language(s) of the people you wish to engage?

How much does the platform cost?
Ask about upfront, one-time initiation/license costs as well as recurring charges. If there are recurring costs, how long will you need to pay them?

Is the platform hosted in the cloud (Software as a Service), or will you have to install it yourself?
If the platform is hosted for you, how long do you expect to need to pay a monthly fee? Can you easily export the data in a useful format when you need to?

If you have to install and implement ongoing updates to the platform, do you feel confident in your ability to launch, configure, and host the software?
If you need to host the participation platform yourself, do you have adequate technical staff and server capacity?

If the price includes a variety of different modules, are you likely to use all of them?
Is the platform modular, meaning you can activate just the features you want to use?

Does using the platform require integration with other products and services?
Some govtech vendors will try to force you to use their other offerings.

Who will you need on your team to set up, launch, and run the platform? The various responsibilities are listed below:

- Program manager.
- Moderator(s) and community manager(s).
- Communications staff.
- Software developer(s).
- Designer(s).
- Platform administrator(s).

- Data analyst(s).
- Internal user(s).
- Intermediaries to bridge the gap between digital participation and offline activities.

A single person may play multiple roles on small teams...

For how long has the platform been in operation?
If a platform has only existed for a few months, it might be worth choosing a more mature solution. Look for the version number if there is any.

- Less than a year.
- 1-2 years.
- 3-5 years.
- Over 5 years.

How active does the project appear to be?
Check the platform's website, blog, user forums, and social media accounts. Have they posted this year? Is it easy for new users to sign up? Some platforms are still online to serve existing users, but are no longer accepting new users due to a business pivot or other reason.

Check out their Git repositories for recent code updates. For example, see GitHub's appropriately named "Pulse" feature on Decidim's code repository. It shows a feed of recent activity focused on improving the platform's underlying code.

With software, you generally want to use an actively maintained project. This is one basic way to determine if the platform's developers are providing updates for security and new features.

How long does it take for the platform's operator to reply to an email?

- One day or less.
- Less than a week.
- Less than a month.
- Longer than a month.

What kind of support is offered?

- User forum for support from technicians and other users.
- Customer service email address.
- Live chat.
- Phone support.
- Documentation for the product. Read it before purchasing/signing up, because it's not always kept up to date. Poor documentation will often mean you'll need more tech support than you would otherwise.

Also determine: Is support included in the price? If the platform is open source, are there people or companies you can hire for help? Are the support forums comprehensible to average users, or are they written for software developers?

Who developed the platform?
What is the business model? Is it a/an:

- Independent project without a clear organizational host.
- Nonprofit, charity, or civil society organization.
- For-profit business, corporation, or govtech vendor.
- Research group or institution.
- Government or public sector.

Is the platform's code open source, or is it proprietary and impossible to view?
Some platforms offer view-only access to the code so that you can investigate what you're using. If you have a strong technical team, you may appreciate the ability to modify the platform code to your unique context.

Does the platform's website list current or past clients?
Better yet, does it link to its current and past clients' participation websites? Consider reaching out directly to these peers to better understand their experiences with the platform.

Can you easily download participation data from the platform?
Or will you need to keep paying the subscription fee to access it? Try exporting some sample data and see if it arrives in a useful file format.

Does the platform offer features that cover your needs?
(See our comparison matrix showing platform features.)

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT AI FUNCTIONALITY

Which AI model does the platform rely on?

Whose model is it?

Can other models be swapped in?

Does our data or our participants' data get shared with or used by the AI provider?

By the participation platform?

By any other third party tools or services, like marketing platforms?

At which stage(s) of the process is the AI used?

What does the platform use AI to accomplish?

How will we know it's operating correctly and fairly?

How does the AI perform with the languages spoken by our community? (List)

Can the AI be turned off if we don't want to use it?

Has your AI been audited? If so, are the results published?

How often does the platform test its AI's outputs?

SHOULD YOU BUILD YOUR OWN PLATFORM?

We've compiled this list based on considerations and advice shared by experts from around the world.

- Building and maintaining a software platform for thousands of users requires a significant and ongoing investment. Especially in contexts in which software development is a relatively expensive resource, hiring and retaining several developers for the time it takes to build a platform will be a challenge and inevitably present opportunity costs.
- As you can see in the platform matrix, there is a lot of competition in this space. Funders will point to the readily available open source platforms, asking whether you need to build a new one rather than adapt an existing option.
- Your resources may be better spent on outreach and community-building than on developing original technology.
- If you want to seek public sector funding of your project, you may not be ready or willing to go through the hurdles of becoming an eligible government contractor.
- Many developers who have later tried to transfer digital participation platform ownership to local governments have been disappointed by their ability to accept and operate it.

For additional perspectives on the drawbacks of building your own platform, as well as how to build it well if you decide to develop one anyway, see "Don't Build It: A Guide For Practitioners In Civic Tech / Tech For Development."[157]

157 Jordan, "Don't Build It: A Guide For Practitioners In Civic Tech / Tech For Development."

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT METHODS IDEA BANK

Offline outreach

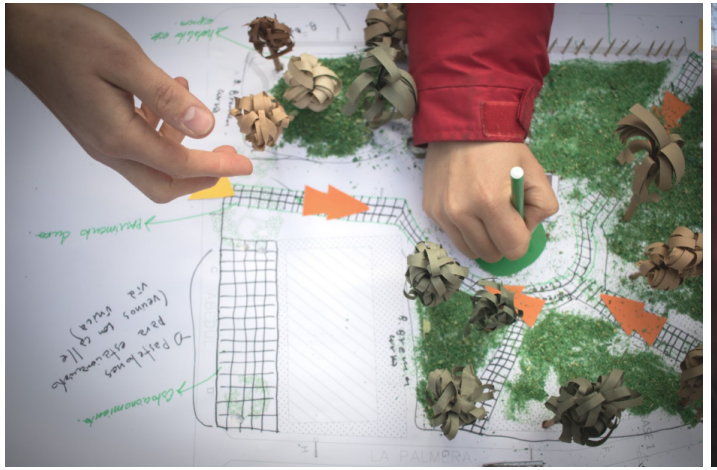
- Take a design-thinking approach before deciding on a strategy. Talk to potential participants about good ways to reach them.[158]
- Reach out to community media, like local radio stations and print journalists.
- Contact editors of community newsletters.
- Set up a table at local events and fresh markets.
- Request support from your peers/colleagues in other departments or institutions. Make it easy for them to promote your platform by developing shareable materials and sample language.
- Reach out to community and civil society groups to activate their members:
  - School boards.
  - Houses of worship.
  - Workplaces.
  - Unions.
  - Sports clubs.
  - Youth groups.
  - Cultural and arts groups.
- Reach out to communities related to the subject for which you're seeking participation (you can look for interest groups at universities and on social media, for example).
- Recruit local businesses, like cafés, to act as physical entry points to the process. They can provide the caffeinated beverages that fuel community discussions and project meetings.
- Canvass door to door in under-represented neighborhoods.
- Contact targeted people via their phones with peer-to-peer SMS (text messaging). When recipients reply, you can have a real, two-way text conversation.
- Try phone banking. Recruit volunteers to call everyone on your list or in their networks to ensure they know about the project, and help them navigate any technical hurdles.
- Copy the model of food trucks. In 2013, the city of Boston noticed the growing popularity of food trucks and set up a "City Hall To Go" truck that parked in historically under-served neighborhoods and provided government services. [159] The program inspired at least two other cities to set up mobile stops.

158 Diana Dajer, interview by author, Colombia, October 25, 2021.

159 "City Hall To Go - Boston, MA."

Photo by Daniella Rascón for Jamaica Plain Gazette

- Erect tents in parks, on plazas, and by other landmarks. Many cities have set up tents in a park to connect people to participation programs. Toronto's city council found this method especially helpful when the COVID pandemic prevented indoor workshops. It set up a tent in a park in the summer to remind people that the participatory budgeting process was underway, and allowed people to vote for projects using the dotmocracy[160] method as an easy way to engage.[161]
- Organize in-person workshops. Although the pandemic has made in-person gatherings difficult, engaging people face to face is still the best when it's safe. For this reason, you might want to design your workshops explicitly to reach the people least likely to participate via the digital platform.
- Run simulations where people can practice participating in a low-stakes setting. For example, mock elections or debates about entertaining topics can teach people how to engage around less intimidating topics.
- Enlist teachers/professors to engage their students and, for younger students, caregivers.[162]



In Chile, Ciudadanía Inteligente ran participatory workshops in parks, with tents in case of inclement weather. They also provided materials to help residents express themselves and co-design their neighborhood. Photos from Ciudadanía Inteligente.

160 See https://dotmocracy.org/ for more on this method

161 Mustapha Khamissa, interview by author, Toronto, September 21, 20201.

162 Eunmi Hwang, Ohyeon Kwon, Jisun Song, and Hyun-Suk Hwang of Parti Co-op, interview by author, South Korea, November 15, 2021.

- Allow residents to call in or text their input, without accessing the web. Examples include SEMA and telephony tech solutions like Twilio and Africa's Talking.
- Place paid ads, including:
  - Outdoor advertising, such as on public transit and billboards.
  - Direct mail pieces, which can be customized with local information.

Outdoor advertising for Democracy Seoul on the subway, bus stops, and electronic billboards.[163]

163 DemosX guide book pp. 140

Digital outreach

- Create digital graphics, sample posts, etc. that you can ask others to share, like a promotional video explaining your program and how to join the digital participation platform.

Imagine Mesa, hosted on Neighborland, created a short video to promote its idea-collecting campaign.[164]

- Reach out to local social media influencers, like owners of Instagram accounts focused on photography in your city.
- Identify local chat groups and neighborhood listservs.
- Take advantage of workplace and profession-related conversation platforms (like Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Discord).
- Find out if you can promote your program on:
  - Your institution's website and social media accounts.
  - The city hall website and social media accounts.
  - Supporting foundations' websites and social media accounts.
  - The website/social media accounts of any other supporters (such as the mayor).

164 "Imagine Mesa."

Digital-participation readiness checklist

When COVID eliminated the possibility of in-person gatherings, many of the institutional clients of Particitiz asked it to expand its services to include online deliberation.[165]

To transition to digital deliberation without losing its rich diversity of participants, the company created a team focused on inclusion and on-boarding. This team is tasked with reaching out to every participant ahead of digital convenings to boost awareness and assist with any technical needs. Its outreach checklist is shared below in case it is helpful to others.

One week ahead of convening

1. Do you have the appropriate computer or tablets to join us on DATE? (web camera, microphone, etc.)

- If yes: Great.
- If no: We can provide a tablet for the length of the deliberative process.

165 Dimitri Lemaire, interview by author, October 13, 2021.

2. Do you know and have you ever used the DIGITAL TOOL(s) we will be using next week?
- If yes: Great.
- If no: Do you have time now to review the tool(s) with us, or shall we organize a 20-minute meeting to help onboard you onto the platform?

3. Do you have any other needs that can help you join us?

Day of the convening

The inclusion and onboarding team is present to help participants as needed. This has the added bonus of enabling the program's moderators and facilitators to stay focused on their roles.

RESOURCES DEVELOPED BY OTHERS

The e-Participation canvas, by Go Vocal, is a useful resource that's easily adaptable by others:

"Citizen participation projects can be complex to organise. They imply multiple deadlines, require collaboration between different stakeholders, and need to have clearly defined goals. Our participation experts have designed this e-participation canvas as a framework for internal use, aimed at cities and governments launching citizen participation platforms. Fill out this one-pager to clearly set your goals, agree on deadlines and attribute tasks to each stakeholder."

How to run a citizen workshop: Citizen Participation Platform Demos X Operation Guide, pg. 96 offers highly detailed instructions on best practices for engaging people in person.

Fundacja Pole Dialogu: User experience audit of a digital participation platform

R.H. Fuller: Digital Democracy Report (Solonian Democracy Institute, 2021). It's a very useful annual report on the field, although it doesn't cover several of the most popular platforms. The Solonian Democracy Institute's emphasis on individual platform profiles and focus on cybersecurity are particularly noteworthy.

Matt Stempeck, 2020: A two-part investigation into digital participation platforms, with an emphasis on their ability to demand accountability from governments and institutions, published on Civicist.

UN's Local E-Government Toolkit, especially module 2.4 (E-Government version | Local version) from National E-Government Toolkit and Local E-Government Toolkit respectively

UN's E-Participation Index: A comparative analysis of the level of digital participation mechanisms deployed by each of the UN's 193 nation states.

Participation AI's Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement in Public Procurement for Artificial Intelligence: A Mission-Oriented Playbook

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