COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES ON E-PARTICIPATION

Work Package 5 – Deliverable D5.1

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No.726840
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Deliverable number | D5.1
Deliverable title | Comparative case studies on e-participation
Responsible author | Tiina Randma-Liiv, Kadi Maria Vooglaid & Riin Savi

Grant agreement no | 726840
Project acronym | TROPICO
Project full name | Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments
Starting date (dur.) | 01.06.2017
Ending date | 31.05.2021
Project website | http://tropico-project.eu/
Coordinator | Lise H. Rykkja, University of Bergen
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Date of delivery | M30 = November 2019
Nature | R (Report)
Dissemination level | PU (Public)
Lead beneficiary | TUT
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work Package 5 of the TROPICO project examines the conditions and practices of external collaboration in policy design, focusing specifically on e-participation platforms. The aim is to carry out empirical analysis of recent e-participation initiatives which are targeted at fostering collaboration between governments and citizens. The study employs an exploratory approach to investigate the functioning of e-participation platforms and to identify drivers and barriers which contribute to the success of these initiatives. In doing so, the contextual factors that surround e-participation platforms – the national context, organizational and individual-level factors – have been explored. The project involves the analysis of selected e-participation initiatives in seven European countries – Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Spain. The main research questions are the following: 1) How are e-participation initiatives launched and institutionalized? 2) How are e-participation initiatives organized and administered? and 3) What lessons can be learned in the implementation of e-participation platforms?

In addressing these research questions, a qualitative case study method has been used. In-depth single-platform case studies were conducted to provide thick empirical descriptions on how a selected e-participation initiative is designed and implemented in a particular country. The compilation of empirical case studies consisted of two steps. First, relevant e-participation platforms were selected in each country following a common Case Selection Strategy. Second, each partner prepared an in-depth single-platform case study based on a common analytical model provided in a detailed Case Study Protocol. Case studies relied on information collected through desk research and interviews.

Deliverable D5.1, presented in this report, presents the rich empirical material collected through the case studies, which enables to develop further our existing knowledge on the institutional, administrative and organizational aspects of e-participation. All case studies follow the same structure consisting of seven parts. The collected case studies form a basis for a systematic analysis on how e-participation initiatives are organized and administered within the government and how collaborative partnerships both within the government and with non-governmental actors affect the performance of e-participation platforms. This, in turn, feeds into the development of a model of supply-based success factors of e-participation platforms, which will be discussed in the forthcoming research report presented in the deliverable D5.2, by that further contributing to both the existing academic knowledge as well as providing valuable information to policy-makers who are involved in the establishment and development of e-participation platforms.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic participation or e-participation as a part of the participatory democracy discourse (Lindner, Aichholzer & Hennen, 2016) has been mostly associated with the idea of democratic innovation (Kö, Leitner & Leitold, 2013) and thus features often in discussions about the normative values, as well as future prospects of democratic governance. Public administrations play a key role in the development of e-participation (Medaglia, 2012: 351), because they are usually responsible for organizing and managing top-down online opportunities and other communication channels with which citizens can engage in the political arena (Gil-García, 2012; Welch & Feeney, 2014). However, insufficient attention to the empirical relationship between the normative theory of e-participation and the actual politico-administrative and socio-organizational context in which these practices unfold, has hindered the possibility of drawing broader conclusions on the adoption and performance of e-participation platforms. While participation has been on the public administration research agenda for several decades (e.g. Cunningham, 1972), and the different levels of collaboration also feature in theoretical papers on e-participation (Kubicek & Aichholtzer, 2016), there is little empirical research which systematically addresses how (e-)participatory policy-making is actually organized and administered to facilitate collaboration between decision-makers and citizens.

The scholarly debate on external collaboration for policy design – involving governmental actors, key stakeholders and citizens – discusses increasingly the emergence and impact of ICT on the transformation of governments (Kim & Lee, 2012; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). E-participation initiatives take different forms such as online discussion forums and consultation platforms to legislation wikis, e-petitioning, online complaint systems and one-stop participation portals. In the Work Package 5 of the TROPICO project, we will focus on platforms, which have been set up to foster long-term collaboration between citizens, civil society organizations and the government. A definition of e-participation provided by the United Nations is followed, according to which e-participation is “the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends” (United Nations, 2014: 61).
The study employs an exploratory approach to investigate the organization and administration of e-participation initiatives in seven European countries – Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland and Spain. In doing so, the contextual factors that surround e-participation platforms – the national context, organizational and individual-level factors – have been explored. The main research questions are the following: 1) How are e-participation initiatives launched and institutionalized? 2) How are e-participation initiatives organized and administered? and 3) What lessons can be learned in the implementation of e-participation platforms?

In addressing these research questions, a qualitative case study method has been used. In the first stage of the research project, in-depth single-platform case studies were conducted to provide thick empirical descriptions on how e-participation initiatives are administered and what are the organizational features and challenges associated with e-participation in a particular country. The case studies are provided in this deliverable D5.1, chapter 2. In chapter 3 of the report, we draw some (very) preliminary conclusions from a comparative perspective. In the next stage, the main findings of single-country case studies will be fully synthesized to enable a comparison. The results of the comparative study will be published in a forthcoming research report: Deliverable D5.2. Based on the D5.1 and the D5.2, practical recommendations targeted to policy-makers will be provided in a policy brief, deliverable D5.3.

The empirical case studies were carried out in two steps. First, all partners presented information on the general e-participation landscape of their respective countries together with more specific information on 2-4 e-participation platforms following a common Case Selection Strategy. Together with the coordinators of the WP5, one appropriate case was chosen for each country. The case pool includes both national and local level e-participation portals. As the e-participation landscape is highly fragmented, it is virtually impossible to compile a set of cases similar enough to warrant a strict comparison. In some countries, one will find a number of local level e-participation initiatives, but no national level initiatives, which could be deemed successful. In other countries, it is the other way around. This is why in this study the local/national dichotomy was ignored, and the focus was set on those e-participation portals, which could be explicitly linked to the policy-making process on a procedural and organizational level, regardless of whether it was tied to local, regional, or
national policy-making. Also, in some cases the e-participation portals function informally (meaning these are not formally integrated into the policy-making process) and are operated and maintained by civil society organizations, whereas in other cases the e-participation portals can be highly institutionalized in both their organizational design and processes.

The criteria for case selection were the following: 1) portals which connect stakeholders with the public sector via an online platform which is open and transparent; 2) cases that were designed for long-term or permanent collaboration and which had been in operation for at least one year; 3) portals that were (co-)administered by some branch of the government; 4) portals that included a deliberative element, which fed into the policy-making process. Despite the increasing relevance of social media in policy-making process, this project excluded social media platforms in order to keep more specific focus to enable comparison. Participatory budgeting is another field which is growing both in theory and in practice, but in the context of this project, preference was made on more generic practices of policy collaboration.

Second, all partners in the selected countries prepared an in-depth single-platform case study based on a common analytical model provided in a detailed Case Study Protocol (which is described more specifically in the Research Report D5.2). The case studies relied on information collected through desk research and interviews. Desk research involved the exploration of the following sources: the website of the e-participation initiative and their publications; respective laws and secondary legislation; governmental policy documents, strategies, action plans and reports regarding participatory policy-making in general, and e-participation in particular; relevant reports and analyses prepared by third parties such as NGOs, think-tanks, international organizations; statistics available on e-participation in general, and the selected e-participation platform, in particular; media coverage of the chosen initiative. In addition, partners were encouraged to become a „tester” of the platform, i.e. by registering as a user and trying out all the functionalities that the platform offers.

In each country, 8-13 interviews were conducted. The interviewees represented the following groups: the initiators of the platform, people who were formally involved with the maintenance and/or moderation of the platform; a senior manager of the public sector organization where the e-participation initiative was administered; representatives of
important governmental and non-governmental partners who were actively involved in running the platform; representatives of policy-makers, either politicians, policy advisers or senior civil servants who had used the e-participation platform as an input in the policy-making process; and stakeholders who had been actively involved in some of the cases that had been discussed through the selected e-participation platform. It is acknowledged that some of the respondents can be identified through their unique positions and in the French case, the names of the key individuals (the founders of the platform) were mentioned. Consequently, the interviews were anonymized when the interviewees requested that, or when they did not consent to being identified. The semi-structured interviews followed the common analytical model and lasted for 1-1.5 hours. Interviews were also used for specifying and triangulating information collected through desk research. When conducting interviews, TROPICO Data Management Plan was carefully followed by asking for a written consent from all respondents. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

This report presents the rich empirical material collected through the case studies, which allows for developing further the existing knowledge on the institutional, administrative and organizational aspects of e-participation. All case studies follow the same format consisting of seven sections:

1) Introduction  
2) Overview of the national context  
3) Description of the e-participation initiative  
4) Organizational characteristics of the initiative  
5) Individual-level aspects of the initiative  
6) Evaluation of the e-participation initiative  
7) Conclusion and lessons learned

The collected case studies form a basis for a systematic analysis on how e-participation initiatives are organized and administered within the government and how collaborative partnerships both within the government and with non-governmental actors affect the performance of e-participation platforms. This, in turn, feeds into the development of a model of supply-based success factors of e-participation platforms (which will be discussed in the forthcoming deliverable D5.2 Research Report) by that further contributing to both the
existing academic knowledge, as well as providing valuable information to policy-makers who are involved in the establishment and development of e-participation platforms.

References


2. CASE STUDIES

2.1. Estonia: The Estonian Citizens’ Participation Portal

_Kadi Maria Vooglaid_

2.1.1 Introduction

The following case study explores the drivers and barriers of e-participation based on the example of the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Platform (ECIP). The ECIP is a participatory e-democracy instrument allowing individuals to submit collective addresses to the parliament (Riigikogu) via an online platform. This encompasses proposing new ideas for law or policy, or suggesting changes to existing laws or policy. The e-participation portal is formally institutionalized, with a cluster of laws and regulations framing the processes pertaining to the platform. It is co-administered by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly, which is a semi-governmental institution, and the Chancellery of Riigikogu. The high level of formalization makes it an interesting case for e-participatory research, as there are very few examples, where national-level e-participation platforms are formally institutionalized, i.e. procedurally binding for the parliament.

The research was designed as a qualitative case study carried out in two stages. Firstly, desk research was conducted, looking mainly into the political, institutional and legal aspects surrounding the e-participation initiative. Data was collected from legal and policy documents, as well as reports. Contextual factors regarding the national level determinants were explored through a literature review on Estonian administrative practices and e-government, as well as a review of existing studies made on e-participation in Estonia. The second stage was based on seven semi-structured interviews with politicians, senior administrators and stakeholders. All interviewees had either daily influence over the administering of the portal (the administrators) or were actively involved with some of the key initiatives which came through the portal, either as the primary negotiators (the politicians), or as active campaigners (the users/citizens).

1 www.rahvaaligatus.ee
2.1.2 Overview of the national context

Estonia is a small country with a population of 1.3 million (2017) and an area of 45,227km$^2$. It restored its independence as a democratic republic in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to the Constitution adopted in 1992, Estonia is a parliamentary democracy with unicameral parliament Riigikogu that performs the legislative function and oversees the executive branch. Riigikogu comprises 101 members and is elected every four years in free elections based on proportional representation. Elections are general, uniform and direct. Voting is secret and involves a possibility of casting a vote electronically. The formal head of the state, the President, has mainly a representative and ceremonial role. Since regaining independence, both majority and minority governments have been in power. However, the common government configuration has been a minimal winning coalition with three political parties sharing the executive power. The Cabinet of Ministers, headed by the Prime Minister, represents the political leadership of the country making decisions on behalf of the executive branch.

The public sector in post-Soviet Estonia was rapidly digitalized, and the country as a whole has often been dubbed an e-government success story (Kalvet, 2012). With the mandatory digital ID and its streamlined e-services Estonia ranks 9th in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI Country Report, 2018) out of 28 EU member states, which places Estonia in the cluster of high-performing countries. The reasons for this relative success are manifold, encompassing historical, social and political aspects. The role of the local IT community, with a strong lineage of experts dating back to the 1960s and the establishment of the Institute of Cybernetics, has often been cited as one of the main reasons behind Estonia’s speedy digitalization (Kitsing, 2010). The success of Estonian e-government has still been described as a “success without strategy” that cannot be explained by the “deliberate rational actions of strategically focused policymakers” (ibid 2010).

When it comes to understanding how and why e-participation projects work (or do not work), the e-governance context of Estonia is by no means arbitrary, however. It could be argued that the rapid digitalization of the Estonian public sector created a culture of e-government (Björklund, 2016), where citizens find it increasingly self-evident that all interactions with the state must be conducted online. The presence and role of a “digital culture” is exemplified by
the fact that public trust towards digital solutions has remained high despite setbacks involving several security issues related to e-voting systems (Madise & Vinkel, 2014). The core service of the so-called e-Estonia infrastructure is the digital identification system, which was codified into law as early as 2000 (The Digital Signature Act of 2000), when digital signatures were made equal to handwritten signatures, i.e. given legal force. Consequently, Estonia became the first country in the world to use legally binding e-voting in national elections in 2005 (Madise & Martens, 2006). The share of votes cast electronically has grown with every subsequent election, and a new record was just reached in the most recent parliamentary elections in March 2019, with 247,232 e-votes (approx. 30% of all eligible votes) cast compared to 186,034 e-votes cast in the local elections of 2017 (Olup, 2019).

Another relevant aspect of the national context concerns the development of civil society in Estonia, which can be considered as relatively weak. There are two primary reasons behind the relatively weak position of civil society in Estonia. First, the Soviet legacy, where any civic initiative was put under pressure and the entire civil society was limited to inherently non-political activities such as cultural clubs or voluntary fire-fighters (Randma-Liiv, Liiv & Lepp, 2008; Ruutsoo, 2012). Second, the dominance of a strong neoliberal ideology, which was instituted during the first freely elected government of post-Soviet Estonia, refocused many values in Estonian society, leading to the atomization of the consumerist individual, and consequently to the demise of collectivist strategies in the political sphere (Ruutsoo, 2012).

There have been several attempts to revitalize civil society in Estonia. Despite a lack of interest in civil society issues in the parliament (Ruutsoo, 2012), the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept was negotiated between civil society leaders and the parliament in 1999–2002, and was eventually adopted in the parliament in 2002 (for an in-depth overview, see Randma-Liiv, Liiv & Lepp, 2008). Estonia joined the Open Government Partnership (https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/) in 2011, and since joining, the Government Office has bi-annually pledged to continue with the implementation of the Open Government Action Plans. The ECIP itself was part of the Estonian Open Government Action Plans for the periods 2014-2016 and 2016-2018. Policy makers often view “inclusion” as an activity separate from the policy-making process (Kübar & Hinsberg, 2014), which means that public participation is often performed as a mere formality. This has also been the main criticism
towards all e-participation platforms that have been set up by the government since 2001 in Estonia (see Table 1).

When it comes to the current state of play of e-participation, there are three other national level platforms, in addition to the ECIP. There is osale.ee\(^2\), which is essentially a revamped version of an older portal “Today I Decide” (TID) that offers citizens the opportunity to propose ideas for the government, as well as comment on draft resolutions. Then there is the governmental draft law portal “Eelnõude Infosüsteem” (EIS)\(^3\), where different branches of government upload all formal documents for commenting and coordinating between ministries, stakeholders, and also citizens. Lastly, there is an informal e-petitioning site of Estonia\(^4\), which is run by the Estonian Homeowners’ Association. None of those are strictly binding to any institution in terms of the level of regulations pertaining to participatory processes. The ECIP was chosen as a case for that same reason – it is the only participatory portal that is backed by procedural dictates, making it possible to probe the potential effects of institutionalization on the participatory process. Table 1 presents current national level e-participation portals in Estonia.

**Table 1: National level e-participation portals in Estonia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E-participation portal</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Proprietor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themis</td>
<td>Discontinued</td>
<td>Estonian Legal Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TID</td>
<td>Discontinued</td>
<td>Government of Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>osale.ee</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Government of Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIS</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Government of Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petitsioon.ee</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Estonian Homeowners’ Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECIP</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Estonian Cooperation Assembly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^2\) [www.osale.ee](http://www.osale.ee)  
\(^3\) [eelnoud.valitsus.ee](http://eelnoud.valitsus.ee)  
\(^4\) [www.petitsioon.ee](http://www.petitsioon.ee)
2.1.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

The ECIP is a digital solution for exercising the legal right of Estonian citizens to petition the government. The ECIP is regulated by the “Response to Memoranda and Requests for Explanations and Submission of Collective Addresses Act” (hereafter the “Collective Addresses Act”) – a participatory democracy instrument, voted into law in 2014 by the Estonian parliament.

The idea for collective addresses (“collective address” is used interchangeably with “citizens’ initiative”) was proposed to the parliament by an ad hoc People’s Assembly (Rahvakogu), comprising of a stratified random sample of ordinary citizens, who gathered in the Estonian capital Tallinn in 2013 to brainstorm proposals for amendments to electoral laws as well as ideas to curb unethical lobbying practices and ideas for more public involvement in politics. The People’s Assembly was convened as a response to a financing scandal involving the ruling party at the time. The deliberation day, endorsed by the Estonian president Toomas-Hendrik Ilves, and facilitated by a number of academics, and organizations working on a pro bono basis, resulted in 15 proposals being sent to the parliament for deliberation. The “Collective Addresses Act” was amended to include the citizens’ initiative instrument as a result. The aim of the citizens’ initiative was to increase opportunities for public participation in law-making.

The “Collective Addresses Act” along with adjunct laws stipulates that when a proposal put forth by any individual gathers 1000 or more signatures (Estonian citizens of at least 16 years of age are allowed to sign the collective addresses), it will be further handled by the Riigikogu. It is possible to present the signatures in both analogue and digital formats (the Estonian digital ID shares legal status with the handwritten equivalent), and while some still use the option of collecting signatures manually, there is a clear trend towards digital initiatives becoming the preferred method for the citizens’ initiatives. Between April 2016 and April 2019, 23 initiatives were sent to the parliament digitally, as opposed to just 6 on paper (“Riigikogule esitatud kollektiivsed pöördumised”, 2019). The parliament must respond within 30 days and let the author of the initiative know whether the parliament has accepted the proposal. According to an interviewee from the Chancellery of Riigikogu, the parliament usually accepts all proposals which fulfil the legal criteria, i.e. the sufficient number of signatures, regardless of the quality of the text or other arbitrary shortcomings. When the
proposal is accepted by the parliament, the Speaker of Riigikogu will decide which parliamentary committee will be the “owner” of the proposal and forward the proposal to the relevant committee for deliberation. It is mandatory to include the author of the initiative in at least one of the sessions held on the topic. The process itself must be concluded in three months and any result or decision made must be forwarded as a formal response to the author of the initiative no later than six months after the start of the proceedings.

While the input side of the ECIP’s process is determined by law, the output side of the whole process is much more complicated and is based on the discretion of the MPs. After the Chancellery of Riigikogu has verified the legality of the initiative and forwarded the initiative to the relevant standing committee, a number of things can happen – there are essentially six types of further processing of any given initiative, all of them listed in the Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act:

1) The first option for the committee is to initiate a bill or draft resolution on the issue, when they reach an agreement on the changes necessary, which will then be voted upon in the parliament. The committee can also convene a general assembly, when the initiative is thought to address issues of “significant national importance”. So far only two initiatives have been granted that opportunity – an initiative on long-term care insurance, and an initiative regarding Estonia’s exit strategy from coal energy.

2) The second option is for the committee to hold a public sitting, where anyone is welcome to join. More often than not, this option is used for environmental initiatives, due to high public interest.

3) The third option is for the committee to forward the initiative to the competent institution (ministry, agency or local government) for taking a position and resolving the issue.

4) The fourth option is for the committee to transmit the initiative to the Government of the Republic, which is instructed to develop a position regarding the proposal and is obliged to notify the committee of their resolution.

5) The fifth option is to reject the proposal. The committee rejects any proposal, which is clearly incompatible with the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, or any international obligations imposed on the country by international agreements. The committee also rejects proposals, which are substantially similar to any proposal in
respect to which proceedings were conducted less than two years earlier. Initiatives can also be rejected on other (political and/or administrative) grounds, but in these cases, the committee is obliged to explain their decision in detail, referring to relevant documents or laws when applicable.

6) The sixth option is to resolve the initiative “through other means”.

The multitude of processing pathways reflect the diversity of the initiatives, which have been forwarded to the parliament since the law came into effect in 2014. There have been a number of initiatives concerning the environment, ranging from local issues such as air quality in the industrial town of Kohtla-Järve, to initiatives calling for the protection of certain species or banning certain pesticides, to highly complex issues such as the Estonian exit strategy from coal energy dependency. Some initiatives read more like manifestos rather than specific proposals, yet other initiatives focus on solving very particular problems, such as the regulation of e-cigarettes, road safety, fireworks taxes or the processing of missing persons reports.

What is remarkable about the example of the ECIP is the fact that while technically the speaker of Riigikogu is not obliged to address any initiatives which fall out of the scope of the work of the parliament, no initiative has so far been turned down on the grounds of regulatory misalignment. All initiatives that fulfil the 1000 signature requirement have been either processed by the parliament or have found other ‘homes’ in either local governments or relevant units of the government. This goes to show that there is considerable respect for the instrument.

The core technical innovation of the platform is a back-end solution for the digital mass-signing of documents. Earlier, it was possible for a limited number of people to digitally sign the same document, but with larger numbers the systems would crash. This innovation made it possible for large numbers of users to digitally sign the same document, using the Estonian digital identification system. As the Collective Addresses Act requires initiatives to gather at least 1000 signatures, this technical innovation was of critical importance, because it enabled the Chancellery of Riigikogu to receive all collected signatures in one document, thus making it relatively easy to check the validity of the signatures. It could be argued that in addition to
checking the signatures, it also makes it easier to collect signatures, as the campaigning can be done entirely online.

While the technical back-end of the portal is rather complex, the actual process of submitting a proposal is quite simple. In theory, anyone regardless of nationality or citizenship can submit a proposal or participate in the deliberation on the platform, because the platform allows one to create an account using a “soft ID”, such as a Facebook or Google account. The only requirement is that the initiative must be presented to the parliament in Estonian, which means the author of the initiative must at least speak the language. However, if the author of the initiative is not a citizen, they cannot sign the document themselves – the signatures can only be given by Estonian citizens at least 16 years of age using their digital ID. In a nutshell, anyone can create an initiative, as long as it is in Estonian language, but only citizens can sign (vote on) the initiative.

There are a few steps between creating an initiative, and sending it to the parliament, however. To encourage co-creation of the final text of the proposal, the author of the initiative can only begin collecting signatures after three days, before which the initiative is in “forced co-editing mode”. The text editing part of the platform is built on etherpad – an open source component which enables co-editing text in the same way Google Docs does, for example. According to the project manager of the ECIP, not many take advantage of this opportunity though. After the initial three-day “incubation period”, the author can make the proposal public and start collecting comments and votes. The author of the initiative can decide on the deadline for signature collection, and extend the period for signature collection, if it has not collected enough signatures by the initial deadline.

Anyone can share the initiative on social media platforms via a direct link and receive notifications about the status of the initiative on their e-mail. The follow-up feed also appears under the original text of the initiative, where it is possible to read the official responses of the parliamentary committees. The website of the Chancellery of Riigikogu also shares all relevant documents related to the initiatives, which include official records of all sessions held on the topic either in committees or the general assembly, and explanatory memoranda about any referrals of the initiative to other branches of the government.
2.1.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

The Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal provides an example of ‘ambivalent ownership’. The portal fosters novel, yet not entirely unproblematic forms of cooperation between different governmental, quasi-governmental and non-governmental actors. The formal proprietor of the portal is the Estonian Cooperation Assembly foundation – a quasi-governmental competence center founded in 2007 by the President of Estonia. The Assembly operates according to a three-year strategy (called charter), which is drafted by the members of the cooperation network of the Assembly. The day-to-day operations of the Assembly are overseen by a CEO, who reports to the Advisory Board, which consists of up to eight members from the academia, public and private sectors. Four of these are assigned by the President of the Republic of Estonia, the other four members are chosen by members of the collaboration network. The Assembly is financed from the budget of the Office of the President.

The Estonian Cooperation Assembly was a key partner in facilitating the People’s Assembly of 2013 which resulted in the codification of the Citizens’ Initiative into law (The Collective Addresses Act). The Cooperation Assembly thus has an unquestionable ownership of the ECIP. The Cooperation Assembly also represents Estonia in the Open Government Partnership network, and they managed to insert the development of the ECIP as one of the formal goals in the Estonian OGP Action Plan for 2014-2016, as well as for the period 2016-2018. After the initial terms of reference study made by the strategic design firm Pulse, a decision was made to use available freeware CitizenOS\(^5\) as the technical basis for the ECIP. The decision to use locally sourced freeware resulted in considerable savings in terms of setting-up costs, but also complicated matters later on, as questions of legal status of the platform, data protection regulations and other technical minutiae gained importance in the day-to-day operations of the platform. While in principle, the formal proprietor of the ECIP platform is the Estonian Cooperation Assembly, the owner of the actual database and the back-end solutions of the portal is CitizenOS, which itself is a branch of the Estonian non-profit organization Let’s Do It World.

\(^5\) [app.citzenos.com](http://app.citzenos.com)
The second organizational aspect, which contributes to the ‘ambivalent ownership’ thesis is the organizational relationship between the Cooperation Assembly and the Chancellery of Riigikogu. While the Cooperation Assembly is responsible for securing funding for the portal, as well as educating the public about everything that has to do with the procedure of submitting a Collective Address (beginning with the guidelines of civilized deliberation and commenting, and ending with obtaining and using a digital ID to sign documents), as well as dealing with the day-to-day moderating and technical troubleshooting, the actual beneficiary of the portal is the parliament, which has shown very limited interest in formally acknowledging that even a portion of the upkeep of the portal ought to be their responsibility. The workload of the Chancellery of Riigikogu as regards the ECIP is limited to checking the validity of the digital signatures.

On the Assembly’s side, there is only one employee – the project manager – who deals with everything related to the ECIP. The project manager also has other duties in the organization, which means that the workload is quite high. This has not become a problem yet, although it is probable that it will become problematic soon, as there seems to be a steady upward trend in the usage of the ECIP. Even though the ECIP is relatively manageable as of 2019, the project manager still sees an acute need for a full-time employee, who would exclusively deal with communication and information dissemination. The main tasks would involve educating the public (ordinary citizens as well as NGOs), but also the MPs about the right to petition. According to the assessment given by the project manager of the ECIP, the members of the parliament have a vague understanding at best, of not just the portal, but the underlying legal procedure itself. While some MPs display a very positive attitude towards the portal – mostly those, who process the most initiatives such as MPs from social and environmental committees – there are a number of MPs, who have not even heard of the ECIP, or the citizens’ initiative as such.

The funding of the ECIP is a patchwork of different revenue streams. The running costs of the portal, such as fees regarding the processing of digital signatures and front-end design solutions, have been covered by micro-donations from the users of the ECIP. The back-end solutions are free, because of an informal agreement between the project manager of the ECIP and the CEO of CitizenOS, which provides the code-base for the platform. The personnel costs are partially covered by the budget allocations received from the Office of the President,
but that does not cover all activities undertaken by the Cooperation Assembly. Additional revenue comes from successful project proposals submitted to various foundations.

2.1.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

The performance of the ECIP is much dependent upon the enthusiasm of individual employees of the Cooperation Assembly. In some cases, these committed individuals have performed roles beyond their job descriptions. For example, in order to speed up the learning curve for the civil society, the Cooperation Assembly has taken a very active role in promoting participatory democracy in Estonia. This further illustrates the ‘ambivalent ownership’ dilemma, as the Cooperation Assembly, which during its establishment was expected to be a neutral competence center, has turned out to play a much more active role in pushing the ECIP to the forefront of the Estonian e-democracy agenda. This level of activism borders on falling out of the scope of the Cooperation Assembly as regards the formal competencies listed in their Charter.

2.1.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

Democratic legitimacy and transparency

According to the project manager for the ECIP, the participatory process has been set in motion relatively successfully, as an increasing number of people and organizations are using the platform for resolving issues and proposing ideas for the government. However, the input side of democratic legitimacy is difficult to assess in the case of ECIP. Because of strict data protection policies, information on the demographic and socio-economic profile of the users of the platform cannot be accessed. According to the project manager of the ECIP, it has also been a matter of principle – because of the sensitive nature of some of the information processed on the ECIP, she has made a conscious decision not to publish any statistics about the demographic profile of the users.

At the same time, the ECIP scores quite high when it comes to democratic legitimacy as far as throughput is concerned, as it is quite rare that an e-participation instrument is backed by solid legal framework. The fact that the process is regulated by law was brought up on numerous times during the interviews. This was especially apparent when talking to the
politicians, who handle the initiatives. MPs do not seem to question the style or even content of the initiative since the regulatory framework provides for “an automated process” of addressing the initiative. If the initiative received through the ECIP lands on the agenda of the committee, a response must be formulated, because that is the law. Another interviewee admitted that they sometimes also receive initiatives, which have already been discussed in the committee at some previous time, but they then handle it again, and respond as prescribed in the law. The project manager for the ECIP also emphasized that the legal backing combined with the adequate levels of citizens’ interest also provides for (financial) sustainability for the ECIP.

While the level of democratic institutionalization is high, there is still room for development when it comes to transparency. While transparency is explicitly mentioned as a guiding principle on the webpage of the ECIP, there are still links missing between different parts of the whole process, the most problematic being the follow-up phase. Because there are a number of options how the parliament decides to process the initiative, it is very difficult to design a comprehensive and user-friendly view of these processes, and to steer the entire follow-up phase. On the one hand, committee proceedings do reflect information related to any given initiative and keep a public and digital record of all related documents, so that the whole process could be dubbed legitimate and transparent enough. On the other hand, citizen initiatives submitted through ECIP often end up in the complex system of a variety of government organizations, where broader issues related to policy coordination and impact assessment come in play.

**Stakeholder expectations and experience**

There are three groups of active stakeholders associated with the ECIP – the citizens/users, the politicians, and the administrators. All three groups have somewhat differing expectations when it comes to the outcomes of the processes taking place through the portal. Perhaps surprisingly, the stakeholder group with the highest expectations are not the users themselves, but the administrators of the portal. Furthermore, high expectations are not limited to politicians, as one would think, but high expectations apply to the users as well. It is expected that the users are able to deliberate and formulate their proposals, as well as take
care of the campaigning and signature collecting at a much higher level than has usually been the case in Estonian civil society.

Probing the experiences and expectations of every single user of the platform has not been an explicit goal of this particular case study. However, based on the interview with a representative of the Estonian Green Movement’s initiative on the Estonian exit strategy from coal energy (so-called PÕXIT), some conclusions could be drawn about how users with well thought-out agendas and organizational backing perceive the effectiveness of the portal. The PÕXIT campaign represents one of two initiatives that made it through to the general assembly to be debated as an ‘issue of nationwide consequence’. According to the author of the initiative, he did not expect that to happen at all. He was pleasantly surprised by the intensity and formality of the proceedings and the feedback that he received from the MPs. Evidently, there was little hope of achieving the goals laid out in the initiative but achieving policy change was not even the main objective of the campaign itself. Instead, the author wanted to use the portal as a communication strategy to encourage national debate on the issue of coal dependency and educate the generally environmentally illiterate citizens on the importance of the topic. From that perspective the initiative succeeded well above all expectations. The same pattern of user expectations was corroborated by interview with another user who proposed an initiative to regulate party financing.

The third stakeholder group are the politicians, who deliberate on the proposals in committees and on some occasions at the general assembly. Politicians often tend to be skeptical of participatory mechanisms and in the context of e-participation they have sometimes been accused of perpetuating the ‘middleman paradox’ (Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005). However, in the case of the ECIP the interviewed politicians were rather enthusiastic about the whole process. While it is true that some MPs might not even know about the portal or the Collective Addresses Act, those interviewed for the case study were acutely aware of the portal as well as the legal process, and thought it was an excellent way for the citizens to engage with the parliament. This positive attitude towards the ECIP was also affirmed by the support staff of the parliament, who all agreed that the track-record of the portal has been very promising so far.
Influence on policy design

All outcomes concerning changes in laws or policies in the context of the ECIP are up to the discretion of the MPs, who deliberate on the initiatives in Riigikogu. While those who fail to achieve their goals by using the ECIP as a strategic tool, might feel frustrated and perhaps even betrayed by their government, the sovereignty of the parliament in all its decisions is an inalienable feature of representative democracy. A number of examples of the ECIP can demonstrate the impact of the citizens’ initiative on policy change.

One of the most recent initiatives to be processed by the Parliament was a plea made by the residents of the industrial city of Kohtla-Järve, who complained about poor air quality. What was seemingly a local issue was taken up by the environmental committee, which organized a session including the representatives of all major industrial polluters of the area, as well as local authorities, the Ministry of Environment, the Environmental Board, and the Environmental Inspection, in addition to the authors of the initiative themselves. While the official number for pollution levels were norm-compliant, the committee took further steps to ensure that additional measures are taken by the polluters to further reduce levels of pollution. The chair of the environmental committee acknowledged that this problem would never have been solved or even addressed by the government, if the issue had not been taken up in the form of a citizens’ initiative.

One of the interviewees singled out the initiative regarding the protection of waterfowls. The authors of the initiative pointed out that the current laws allow tourist hunters to hunt unlimited numbers of waterfowls, which is unethical and detrimental to the population of the birds. The initiative was backed by the Estonian Ornithologists’ Association. The proposal was debated three times in the committee, which is more than usual, with the committee inviting the authors of the initiative, as well as the Estonian Hunters’ Association and the Ministry of Environment to participate in the proceedings. While the proceedings revealed that the activity of the hunters did not significantly endanger the species, the behavior of hunters was still deemed unethical. No quota was imposed on hunting the birds, but an amendment was made in the relevant law, which stipulates that foreigners cannot obtain a license for hunting unless they complete a compulsory training session on the rules of hunting in Estonia.
There are, of course, more examples of initiatives that did not result in any tangible changes in laws or policy. Due to the institutional constraints imposed on such processes by the constitution, the parliament always has the final say. That is the reason why actual influence on law or policy cannot be the yardstick for measuring the performance of the ECIP. However, it is possible to gauge whether the ECIP has influenced the agendas of the parliamentary committees, and whether the subjects which come through the ECIP receive special attention when compared to issues which end up on the committees’ agendas through other means. Regarding the influence of the ECIP over the committees’ agendas, it is quite clear that this influence is substantial. Due to the precise procedural rules, it is not possible for the committees to ignore the initiative, draw out the process indefinitely, or bury the proposal until the next election. Interestingly enough, this legal guarantee has provided the parliamentary opposition a complementary opportunity to influence the parliamentary agenda. Indeed, the ECIP has been used several times by either single opposition MPs or opposition parties to forward their agenda to the relevant committee. All in all, the procedural rules contribute to clarity of procedure, thus creating a certain level of trust between the citizens and the parliament.

2.1.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

Many countries around the world have experimented with e-participation in some form or another. Because there are numerous ways how one can use the internet to engage people in policy-making, each case is unique. E-participation as a practice is still relatively new and there is no orthodoxy regarding the “correct” way to implement it, or an agreed-upon framework for evaluating such initiatives. This makes it difficult to extrapolate recommendations for a generic e-participation initiative, because each politico-administrative, cultural and technological context is different.

However, there are some aspects of the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Platform, which might prove to be meaningful in a more general sense. The first lesson relates to the level of institutionalization of the initiative. The attention that can be allocated by the government for dealing with participatory processes must be understood as a scarce resource. This means that if there is no formal obligation to process citizens’ initiatives, all other legally regulated government obligations overrun the petitions and initiatives in favor of more “important”
matters. This can be seen from the fact that the legal status of the citizens’ initiatives guarantees a spot on the relevant committee’s agenda, which has also been often used by opposition MPs, who wish to get their proposal on the desk of the relevant committee. The competition for the decision-makers’ attention is also relevant in the presence of multiple channels for participation. In the absence of a clear governmental strategy regarding the principles and channels of participation, the proliferation of such portals can deepen mistrust between citizens and the government, because the comparative outcomes of using each portal are ambiguous at best.

The second general lesson has to do with increasing the input legitimacy of such instruments. Even with such a low threshold for signatures as 1000 as in the case of ECIP, it has still proven difficult to collect enough signatures in many cases. The reasons for this are twofold – the citizens are not well informed about the possibilities of participation, which means that even when the ease of digitally signing initiatives might become a driver of e-participation, it cannot become such a driver before citizens learn to use their digital signature for signing initiatives. The other reason has to do with the low capacity of the civil society in Estonia on the whole. Many NGOs might potentially benefit from the opportunity presented by online participation, but have little experience in petitioning the government, insufficient skills for carrying out a proper campaign, and few resources to allocate to coordinated dissemination activities. In order to address this issue, only a little more resources for civic education would go a long way.

References


2.2. France: Online Platform “Parlement & Citoyens”

Samuel Defacqz & Claire Dupuy

2.2.1 Introduction

Parlement & Citoyens (P&C) is an online platform enabling citizens and legislators to work together to find solutions to [France's] problems. This case study analyses this (private) e-participation initiative in the French context marked by a high e-participation index and a high level of citizens’ mistrust toward political elites. These conditions are expected to contribute to development of participatory democracy and the success of initiatives such as P&C. However, since 2013, French lawmakers only used the platform 24 times to consult citizens. The analysis of the ‘immature’ case of P&C allows highlighting factors of success and failure at the institutional, organizational and individual level of e-participation initiatives in an apparent favorable national context.

For this purpose, we conducted an in-depth case study covering the period from 2013, when the platform was put online, up until 2019, to appraise the impacts of the initiative in a given context. The objective of this analysis is not to conclude that the participatory initiative is effective or ineffective, but to analyze the reasons that might explain such an outcome. The case study also enlightens the understanding of cases behind the single instance of P&C.

As regard to data collection, we conducted both semi-structured interviews and desk research. Three types of actors were targeted for the interviews: lawmakers who have participated in at least one online consultation on P&C, citizens using P&C and the founder (and president) of Parlement & Citoyens. Desk research was helpful to contextualize information collected through interviews and prepare the discussions with our different interviewees. We collected legal texts, public documents on MPs’ and Senators’ websites, data from the platform, as well as press articles about P&C or Cap Collectif (see hereafter).

P&C is established as a non-profit organization. The initiative has three objectives: increasing public policies efficiency, strengthening the legitimacy of law making and improving trust.

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6 https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/
between citizens and elected politicians by building an open and transparent collaboration. To date, 17 Senators and MPs have conducted 24 consultations on P&C. Lawmakers are invited to upload on the platform (ideas about, or elements of) draft laws that are open to comments, arguments and votes of citizens and organizations. After six years of operation, the initiative resulted once in the vote of a law. The draft law of Senator Joël Labbé (2013-2015) has been the only draft law written by a lawmaker and subject to a consultation on P&C that was then introduced and voted in the Parliament.

2.2.2 Overview of the national context

There is a relative consensus that public authorities in France have become more open and inclusive with greater use of new technologies (Boulesnane & Bouzidi, 2018). Open online consultations and co-construction platforms were introduced to include citizens in the law-making process. They developed after France joined the Open Government Partnership in April 2014. A turning point was the Law for a digital Republic adopted in 2015. For the first time, citizens were given the opportunity to voice their opinion and to participate in the process of drafting a law before it was introduced to the Parliament (Secrétariat d'Etat au numérique, 2015), and finally voted by both legislative houses. Yet, co-construction and consultation platforms have also given rise to criticisms and concerns about the inclusiveness of the initiatives (biased population of participants) and the actual (absence of) influence of ideas and opinions collected on the outputs of the consultation processes.

In this context, P&C holds a particular place as it is a non-public initiative dedicated to connecting citizens with lawmakers, and not a public or government-led e-participation initiative, like most public consultations conducted in France so far. Indeed, besides the consultation for the Law for a digital Republic mentioned above, many e-participation initiatives are conducted by the national government, regional governments, local governments and other public institutions (as the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, or by universities).
Overall, France scores “very high” (0.9663; 13th state out of 193) with regard to the United Nations E-Participation Index7 (United Nations, 2018). France also has a high score for the Telecommunication Infrastructure Index: 0.7979 (United Nations, 2018). This index includes for instance the percentage of individuals using the Internet (85.62% the French in 2018). As regards to the state structure, France is a unitary and decentralized state since 2003, with a strong national integration through a territorially based and vertically integrated administrative system, from both the ministerial and political points of view (Bezes & Le Lidec, 2010). France has been recognized for a long time as the archetype of the statist model (Kohler-Koch, 1999) even if this model has been eroded by corporatism practices and decentralization (Dupuy, 2019). Based on the notion of nation-state, the centralized state is responsible for preserving the identity of the nation in France, and interest organizations are considered as an impediment to the accomplishment of the general interest. The French interest intermediation system is characterized by a state domination, a strong emphasis on the general interest, a long-lasting skepticism towards private interest associations and conflictual modes of interest representation (Klüver, 2010, p. 182).

This case study was conducted in the midst of the movement of the Yellow Vests (“mouvement des Gilets Jaunes”). It started in November 2018 with popular demonstrations against a fuel tax increase. Later on, the claims of protesters extended to broader demands about the increase of purchasing power. This protest illustrates the growing mistrust of citizens towards the (political) elites in France (Algan & Cahuc, 2007; Rodriguez & Wachsberger, 2009). One of the Yellow Vests’ claims is the introduction of a referendum of popular initiative (known as RIC, for referendum d’initiative populaire). On the one hand, this context influenced the content of the interviews we conducted. On the other hand, it also shows the topical nature of our study, being about an online platform that aims to connect citizens and policy-makers. In this respect, several interviewees pointed out that the movement of Yellow Vests indicates a gap between citizens and political elites that participatory initiatives may contribute to close. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Cap Collectif, the civic-tech startup managed by the founder of P&C, was selected by the French government to conduct the great national

7 This E-Participation Index is based on e-information (availability of online public information), e-consultation (online public consultations), and e-decision-making (directly involving citizens in decision processes).
debate\textsuperscript{8}, which was set up in a short time as a reaction to the Yellow Vests movement. A consortium of Yellow Vests associations also worked with Cap Collectif to put online an alternative consultation platform called the real debate\textsuperscript{9} (le vrai débat).

2.2.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

Goals

The P&C website introduces the platform as an online solution that “enables citizens and parliamentarians to work together to find solutions to [France’s] problems”. P&C seeks to tackle what they call the threefold crisis of the French representative democracy: a crisis of effectiveness of public policies, a crisis of laws’ legitimacy, and a crisis of mistrust of citizens towards political actors. For this purpose, P&C is structured around three goals. The first objective of P&C is to increase public policies efficiency by diversifying MPs and senators’ sources of information. The idea of the platform is to allow all citizens, as well as any stakeholders (civil society organizations, business association, companies...), to engage in a dialogue with lawmakers through an open, transparent and organized process. The goal is to foster an objective and non-ideological debate on political, economic, social and environmental issues. Second, P&C is aiming at strengthening the legitimacy of law making by opening legislative work to as many citizens as possible in order to restrict the influence of lobbies and partisan interests and ensure a better knowledge and representation of the “general interest”. P&C considers this general interest as the foundation of the legitimacy of the laws. The third goal of P&C is to improve trust between citizens and elected politicians by building an open and transparent collaboration. P&C seeks to involve citizens and political representatives in a process of sincere and non-dogmatic research of the optimal solutions to public problems. The objective of P&C is to move forward from electoral patronage to a

\textsuperscript{8} Le grand débat national (the great national debate) is an initiative of the French president in order to collect the ideas and opinions of citizens on four topics (ecological transition, taxation and public spending, democracy and citizenship, and State and public services organization). As part of this initiative, an online platform managed by Cap Collectif was put online: https://granddebat.fr/.

\textsuperscript{9} In response to the grand débat national, several Yellow Vests associations gathered together to launch an alternative platform to the government one in order to collect, in a broader way (without restrictions regarding the topics), the grievances and demands of citizens: https://le-vrai-debat.fr/. Cap Collectif also manages this platform.
cooperation relationship in order to make citizens and their representatives aware that they belong to the same political community.

Scope of the initiative

Theoretically, all issues from any policy field can be the topic of a consultation (or petition) on P&C. Practically, consultations are about national issues that are of interest for either MPs or Senators as they initiate them. The issues at stake display a significant variation, from artificial intelligence, to the protection of biodiversity or the status of elected politicians. As noted above, the specificity of P&C compared to the majority of e-participation initiatives conducted in France is that the platform is a non-public initiative that connects citizens and organizations with lawmakers, and not executive actors.

If this e-participation initiative aims primarily at connecting legislators with citizens, the website is also open to the contributions of other stakeholders such as companies, subnational governments, public institutions or interest groups, from civil society organizations to business associations. This usage of the platform by actors which are not individual citizens, is encouraged and even sought after by the founder of the platform, MPs and Senators. The idea of the P&C founder, a former parliamentary assistant Cyril Lage, was to make P&C a substitute for informal relations and meetings behinds close doors between lawmakers and interest groups. By introducing their propositions on the platform, the intention was that the contribution of interest groups to policy design should become more transparent.

P&C is used during the upstream stages of the policy cycle. Consultations may fulfill several functions, from agenda setting (consultations or petitions raising awareness about a particular issue), policy preparation (consultations part of an information mission) to policy formulation and law making (consultations on the precise content of a draft law).

Chronology: From a citizen lobby to an e-participation platform lacking institutional support

The website of P&C was put online in February 2013. This website and the consultation platform are outcomes of a personal reflection of the founder, Cyril Lage. The original idea was to found a citizen lobby in order to thwart the action of private interests lobbies. However,
following different discussions, reflections and meetings with other citizens interested in
democratic issues, he decided to launch a platform to organize exchange between citizens and
lawmakers. Together with Armel Le Coz, a designer in innovation and territorial management,
Bastien Jaillot and Xavier Lacot, who are expert consultants in PHP (Hypertext Preprocessor),
Cyril Lage, himself a former consultant in public affairs, imagined and designed the
consultation platform that will be the core of P&C.

In 2009 and 2010, Cyril Lage worked (part time and voluntarily) as a parliamentary assistant.
This job inside the French parliament allowed him to consult with different MPs and Senators
and convince a few of them to conduct the first consultations. In order to ensure the political
neutrality of his initiative, Cyril Lage sought to convince politicians from each political hue. Six
MPs and Senators agreed to introduce a consultation on P&C: Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (MP,
*Front national*, radical right), Bruno Le Maire (MP, *Union pour un mouvement populaire*,
mainstream right), Dominique Raimbourg (MP, *Parti socialiste*, mainstream left), Joël Labbé
(Senator, *Europe Écologie Les Verts*, green party), Bertrand Pancher (MP, *Union des
démocrates et indépendants*, center right) and André Chassaigne (MP, *Parti communiste
français*, communist party). Apart from M. Chassaigne, they all conducted a consultation in
2013 or 2014.

In July 2014, Cyril Lage, Bastien Jaillot, Xavier Lacot and Maxime Arrouard founded a civic-tech
startup called Cap Collectif. The startup resulted from their difficulties to fund P&C in the
absence of support from any of the legislative institutions, neither the Senate nor the National
Assembly. Both assemblies’ bureau refused to financially support the initiative or endorse it
as an official platform available for their members. Interviewees pointed out different
explanations. First, the advent of participatory democracy is not a priority for the majority of
lawmakers. Many of them do not see the potential benefits of such practices and do not get
the point to invest resources in their development. In addition, the president of the National
Assembly did not want to support the project because the platform was open to any

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10 The aim of Cap Collectif is to use, spread and develop the technologies designed originally for P&C and sell them to other
customers seeking participatory platforms to support their decisions: Either municipalities, governments, assemblies,
councils, associations or private companies. Among its customer portfolio, there are French and other French-speaking public
institutions, such as the Public Hearing Office on the Environment of the Province of Quebec or the Parliament of Wallonia.
Several companies, professional associations, political parties, universities or unions also bought the access to Cap Collectif’s
platforms.
lawmakers from all political parties, including radical ones. Moreover, as different civic tech startups exist in parallel, the official support to one of them might be seen as problematic. Last, the status of the software used by P&C (proprietary software) is debated (and highly criticized by an MP of the majority, Paula Forteza, who is however committed to the development of e-participation initiatives).

In July 2015, for the first time, a draft law submitted on P&C, by the green Senator Joël Labbé, became a law (Loi n° 2015-992 du 17 août 2015, known as the energy transition law, “loi de transition énergétique”, or “loi Labbé”). Later on, another draft law from the government, but submitted on P&C by a Joël Labbé, became a law. In December 2018, following the movement of Yellow Vests, P&C launched a public consultation supported by 13 MPs and Senators about the referendum of popular initiative.

Legal framework

No particular legal text is framing the consultations conducted on P&C. P&C is a private initiative managed originally by a small group of citizens. In the beginning, P&C was merely a website. Four years after the launching of the website, the founders decided to provide a legal status to the initiative. Consequently, P&C became a non-profit organization (under the loi 1901) in April 2017 (Parlement & Citoyens, 2017). The 1901 law is the French legislation organizing the status of non-profit organizations, known in France as “associations loi 1901”.

Technical features

P&C offers two participatory instruments to connect citizens and lawmakers. First, individual or a group of MPs or senators can submit a draft law for citizens and organizations to comment, discuss and amend it. This is the core service provided by P&C. Second, citizens and organizations can launch petitions on the website.

Regarding consultations, MPs or senators can use the platform not only to discuss the components of a draft law directly, but also to consult citizens and stakeholders about a given issue (usually in the context of an information mission of one of the assemblies). The principle is to collect diverse ideas on the topic, highlight the divergent positions, and collectively engage in finding causes and solutions to the issue at stake. Any user of the website, citizens,
organizations and lawmakers have to adhere to a charter when registering on the platform. This charter mentions the adhesion to the republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity and the principles of the Declaration of human rights. It also highlights the necessity of transparency. Citizens commit not to use voluntarily false information or racist or abusive language; while lawmakers commit to respect all stages of the consultation method proposed by P&C (including the writing of a report and the organization of a debate), and conduct consultations for any law they introduce in the parliament or for which they are designated as rapporteur. Practically, lawmakers do not respect the majority of these engagements.

The platform provides some flexibility to MPs and Senators regarding the consultation process, which usually consist of five main phases: (1) the presentation, (2) the consultation, (3) the synthesis and the lawmaker’s answers, (4) a debate, (5) the report publication or the law itself. No standard templates are used for these consultation phases. For instance, there is no predetermined template for consultation presentation. The structure of the consultation is also at the discretion of lawmakers initiating the consultation.

(1) For each consultation, the issue at stake is presented by the MP or Senator that submits it either through video and or by a brief written presentation. The lawmaker structures the consultation in two or more questions or sections (e.g. sections of a draft law, or sections about incentives and obstacles related to the issue at stake). For instance, the last consultation to date, the one conducted by the MP Bruno Studer about the use of ICT at school, is divided into three parts: expected benefits of digital tools, identified obstacles to the development of digital tools, and possible solutions to their development.

(2) Participants, who can be anonymous, are invited to contribute with their propositions and comments on one or more of the sections with arguments in favor or against the propositions. Each participant can vote on each of the propositions (and arguments posted below them) made either by the MP or Senator or other participants. Each vote on

11 The charter (in French) can be found following this link: https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/pages/charte
12 For instance, lawmakers also can use the platform to launch a questionnaire, as the MP Sylvain Waserman did in April 2018. Cédric Villani made the choice not to launch one ‘centralized’ consultation about artificial intelligence but conducted simultaneously seven consultations on the subject.
13 Any content on the platform can be “signaled” to P&C by the participants. Content that is insulting, racist, and contravening the law is deleted by P&C (only on the initiative of other participants). However, all deleted content is kept online in a “trash section” at the end of each page of the consultation. Practically, not much intervention are needed and the “trash section” is usually empty (FR_itw2).
propositions can be in favor, against or mixed. The votes under arguments can only be supportive (support of the positive or negative argument). The platform technically does not allow addressing directly other participants. However, some participants use “@” in the argument part to respond to each other. For each proposition, any participants can upload “sources” on the platform (reports, press or academic articles...).

(3) At the end of the consultation period, the MP or Senator is supposed to provide a synthetic report of the different arguments and propositions that were made during the consultation process. The lawmaker should also answer to the most supported propositions. For instance, the MP Bruno Studer committed to answer to each of the “10 most supported contributions and the 10 most debated contributions” (as displayed on the consultation page). He has not done it so far, mainly because of time issues. Another case is the consultation conducted by the MP Dominique Raimbourg in 2013 where he uploaded a clear and synthetic report summarizing agreements and disagreements about the issue at stake, prison policy.

(4) Based on that, a contradictory debate is to be organized (physically or online) between some of the participants and the MP or Senator (the most important contributor and participants randomly selected). This phase also is often ignored as exemplified by the two last consultations conducted on the platform in in April and June 2018 which were not concluded by a debate. But, for instance, the video of the debate following the consultation on the use of pesticides organized on Hangouts in 2013 is still available on P&C.

(5) The last step is supposed to be the submission of a final report (mission report) or the introduction of a draft law in parliament. The final version of the draft law introduced by Joël Labbé was put online on P&C.

Besides the consultations, which are the core of the P&C initiative, petitions can also be introduced through the website for citizens to submit ideas to MPs/senators. If their petition gets more than 5000 votes, the MPs/senators members of the association commit to “provide an answer” (the website is not more specific than that). One of the 232 petitions has yet reached this threshold (petition against a reform increasing the number of compulsory vaccinations in France). Answers received from four MPs were against the proposition of the petitioners.
2.2.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

Ownership

The P&C initiative had no legal status or ownership from the creation of the website in 2013 until April 2017. On the 11th of April 2017, the non-profit organization (association loi 1901) was created and thus became officially the owner of the website and the e-participation initiative (Parlement & Citoyens, 2017). Officially, the organization has a board of directors and an executive committee. The board of directors is composed of several groups: MPs and senators, subnational governments, public administrations and consultative bodies, foundations and associations, trade unions and firms, ordinary citizens, founders, and experts. 11 senators (out of 348) and 28 MPs (out of 577) are members of P&C.

Administration

P&C officially employs no staff. In practice, the association is mainly managed by Cyril Lage and depends on the work of Cap Collectif’ staff (the civic-tech startup founded by Cyril Lage, and his colleagues) and parliamentary assistants of MPs, and Senators conducting consultations. Staff members of Cap Collectif are allowed (and invited) to work a couple of hours a month for the platform. They mostly do preparatory work for consultations with the MPs or Senators and their staffs (regarding communication, the structure of the consultation...); ‘light’ interventions during consultations (handle users’ signals about inappropriate contents); and deal with organizational issues (organizing the debate that follows the consultation). Initially, P&C was also in charge of writing the consultations’ report. Now, this task can also be carried out by parliamentary assistants, following a canvas provided by Cap Collectif. Some interviewees also consider the parliamentary information report as the report of the consultation conducted on P&C.

Partners

Besides the MPs and Senators that are members of P&C, the e-participation initiative benefits from support of subnational governments (Centre–Val de Loire Region, the Corrèze department and the city of Mulhouse), public administrations and consultative bodies (CNCD, the National Coordination of Development Councils and the CNDP, the National Commission
of Public Debate), foundations and associations (APF France handicap, Colibris, La Fondation pour la Nature & l’Homme), and trade unions and firms (CFDT, Eurogroup consulting, SNCF Réseau). This support is mainly symbolic in the sense that their involvement shows that the initiative is backed by a great diversity of actors from different policy domains and active on different issues. They also contribute financially through their subscriptions. These partnerships result from personal relationships and the network built by the founders. To date, P&C never benefited from official support of any national legislative institutions. Both the National Assembly and the Senate (through their Bureau) refused to provide official support to P&C.

Internal collaboration

This e-participation initiative did not affect directly collaboration within the government (due to the particular status of P&C: a non-public initiative dedicated to connecting citizens with members of parliament).

Funding & human resources: no dedicated HR and funding

P&C employs no staff. The organization never benefited from dedicated funds, neither for the design of the platform, nor for its operation. It is however possible to become a member of P&C by paying a (minimum) fee depending on the status: non-profit organizations (200€), individuals (5€), for profit organizations (1000€) and lawmakers (200€). This subscription is not necessary to participate in consultations or petitions since the registration on the website is free. This source of revenue has not been sufficient to cover staff related costs. In the beginning, P&C relied on voluntary work of the founders. It is now dependent on Cap Collectif’s and MPs’ or Senators’ staff. In 2019, Cap Collectif plans to hire an employee dedicated notably to the search of sustainable financing for P&C. Altogether, Cap Collectif employs 26 staff members.

Organizational processes

P&C is originally a private initiative voluntarily managed by a small group of committed citizens, gathered together around the first initiator of the idea, Cyril Lage. Because of this initial informal structure, P&C has been managed in a very flexible way. Moreover, the fact
that initiative only relies on staff members – Cap Collectif’s staff and parliamentary assistants – who are not officially dedicated to this particular task also influences organizational processes. On one hand, the time dedicated to P&C by Cap Collectif’s staff depends directly on the workload that the startup is dealing with. For instance, since late 2018, Cap Collectif has been involved in setting up the great national debate conducted by the French President and government. Consequently, staff members have no time whatsoever to dedicate to P&C. On the other hand, parliamentary assistants have also many other tasks to perform other than to work and follow the consultation conducted on P&C. Some lawmakers hired trainees to deal with this issue. In general, the time-consuming nature of a consultations is a concern for parliamentary assistants.

Organizational culture

Cap Collectif is part of a community called Open Democracy (Démocratie ouverte)\(^\text{14}\). Open Democracy is a non-profit organization that gathers democratic innovators (e.g. non-profit organizations, networks, media, startups), researchers, elected representatives, local governments and citizens that share the objective of making the democracy more transparent, collaborative and participative. Cap Collectif is also part of a network called La French Tech. This government-backed organization gathers startup founders and investors “who believe in both growth and progress”.\(^\text{15}\) In brief, Cap Collectif cultivates the image of a creative, innovative and young business working towards a more transparent and democratic society.

2.2.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

Leaders

As indicated in the previous sections of this case study, the leaders of the e-participation initiative are Cyril Lage, and to a lesser extent, his committed fellows involved in the design

\(^\text{14}\) Cyril Lage and Armel Le Coz are actually also the founders of Démocratie ouverte, in 2011. “Originally created to support the Open Government Partnership in Paris in 2014, Open Democracy has developed into a network of democratic innovators and engaged citizens in French-speaking countries. Since then, Open Democracy’s purpose consists in gathering, promoting, and supporting those who want to improve our democracy. After several years of working on how to realize a more open democracy, we have built a solid network of more than 300 members”. More details on https://democratieouverte.org/.

\(^\text{15}\) La French Tech supports startups through diverse startup programs, events, funding opportunities, policymaking and a network of French Tech communities across world. More details on https://www.lafrenchtech.com/.
and the development of P&C (Armel Le Coz and Bastien Jaillot). Cyril Lage developed the original idea. During the establishment phase of the e-participation initiative, Cyril Lage, Armel Le Coz (in charge of the platform’s structure), Bastien Jaillot and Xavier Lacot (in charge of technical issues), designed the website of P&C. Regarding the everyday operation of the initiative, Cyril Lage is again the leader of the project as he is the CEO of Cap Collectif. Cyril Lage and his colleagues are also managing partnerships surrounding the initiative. The network they developed served as a basis for the establishment of the board of directors of P&C. Today, Cyril Lage seems to have less time to dedicate to P&C, mainly because of his work as CEO of Cap Collectif.

**Formal actors**

According to the leader of P&C, the most important explanation of the success of any e-participation initiative is the active involvement of the initiator during the whole process. MPs or Senators, and their staff, have therefore a key role during a consultation process on P&C. They are in charge of choosing a clear and topical issue to consult on and communicating about the consultation (e.g. through media, social networks and identified stakeholders). Parliamentary assistants are in charge of the communication coordination, following the contributions and writing the final report. MPs and Senators are involved in the press conferences, promotion videos, communication events (public meetings, activities in constituency), also meeting with the main contributors and the legislative follow-up of the text (if applicable).

**Informal actors**

Besides the role of MPs, Senators and their staff, media can play an important role for the dissemination of the initiative. Nevertheless, few consultations conducted on P&C have attracted national media attention to date. NGOs can also have an incidental influence on the participation rate. We selected two examples, one positive and one negative, to illustrate the action of NGOs during consultations. The first illustration is the role of BLOOM association during the consultation on the bill for biodiversity, nature and landscapes conservation conducted by Senator Labbé in 2015. BLOOM is a non-profit organization founded in 2005 by Claire Nouvian (Choquet, 2019) that works to “preserve the marine environment and species from unnecessary destruction and to increase social benefits in the fishing sector”, as
mentioned on their website.\textsuperscript{16} The association has called its members to participate in the consultation through its mailing list counting thousands of addresses. Following this, the participation rate took off. Another consultation, the 2018 consultation of MP Bruno Studer about the use of digital tools at school, was the target of a negative campaigning by the NGO \textit{SOS Éducation}. The organization put online detailed instructions to downturn the proposition of the MP and called its members to “vote against the proposals of Bruno Studer to prevent them to count a majority of "agree"”.\textsuperscript{17} Again, the participation rate took off following this NGO action. In addition, “committed contributors”, either practitioners, experts or ordinary citizens, are also significant actors of P&C consultations. They provide a lot of content (and sources) during consultations.

Finally, an informal network of parliamentary assistants sharing an interest in participative democracy seems to be at the origin of the usage of the platform by some MPs or Senators (FR_itw1, FR_itw2, FR_itw3). For instance, the usage of the platform by Senator Guillaume Gontard is the consequence of an advice from one of his assistants (FR_itw1). The latter, M. Fabien Duquesne knows personally the assistant of Joël Labbé, Aurélien Vernet, who was the coordinator of the consultations conducted by his Senator (FR_itw3). M. Vernet also is a member and connected to several associations campaigning for more participatory democracy: The organization Article 3, and the organization called La C.L.I.C (Citoyens Lobbyistes pour l’Intérêt Commun – Citizen Lobbyists for the common interest). These associations are also connected to Cyril Lage. In parallel, Cyril Lage and Armel Le Coz founded in 2011 an organization called Démocratie ouverte (Open Democracy) in order to develop a network of “democratic innovators and engaged citizens” that works to “improve democracy” in French- speaking countries.

\textbf{Administrators}

Consultations conducted on P&C are administered by staff who do not have this task as their main function. P&C is mainly managed by Cyril Lage for the general management of the initiative (and its promotion towards media and potential MPs and Senators) and depends on

\textsuperscript{16} Website of BLOOM association (in English): \url{https://www.bloomassociation.org/en/}
\textsuperscript{17} More information is available (in French) on the website of the organization: \url{http://soseducation.org/ecolenumerique-comment-participer-a-consultation#axzz5fJSSumj7}
Cap Collectif’s staff and parliamentary assistants for the everyday operation of the initiative. Parliamentary assistants have a background in communication or political science and are usually not specialists in e-participation and online tools. Staff members of Cap Collectif who are invited to work for P&C have different backgrounds, from web development to communication.

The fact that both parliamentary assistants and Cap Collectif’s staff have other priorities than working on P&C’s consultations has several consequences: e.g. late or absence of final reports, absence of (physical) debates, and uncertain follow-ups. For instance, Guillaume Gontard’s parliamentary assistant hired a trainee, who was in charge of managing the consultation as his main mission (FR_itw1). However, at the end of the six-month traineeship in July 2018, the report was not written down because the Senator decided to extend the consultation period until September 2018. The parliamentary assistant had then not the time to do it himself because of his day-to-day activities, other on-going projects and legislative work. In February 2019, five months after the end of the consultation which started in April 2018, the written report is still missing. The parliamentary assistant plans to hire a new trainee to write the report. This case illustrates the difficulty for parliamentary staff to manage consultations and insure proper follow-ups.

2.2.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

Performance indicators

Even if the president of P&C mentioned potential “success criteria” (a draft law is finally introduced in the parliament, a draft law includes inputs from the consultations), he also indicated that it is not the purpose of P&C to “evaluate its customers”, that is, MPs and Senators. According to Cyril Lage, building on P&C main objectives, this task should be carried out by citizens and anyone following the consultations. This refers directly to the three goals of the initiative that are: increasing public policies efficiency, strengthening the legitimacy of law making and strengthening trust between citizens and elected politicians. Yet, no indicators have been discussed to follow up on these goals.

Moreover, the founders of P&C explain that their objective when developing their e-participation initiative was not to design a tool that should attract the highest number of
people as possible, nor a representative sample of the population. The aim of the initiative is to ensure that consultations enable policy makers to map out debates on a given topic. This usage is also pointed out by lawmakers themselves. Nevertheless, P&C (and Cap Collectif) developed a “very precise list of conditions and key success factors” to insure participation during consultations. Without revealing the precise content of this list (because it is part of the service sold by Cap Collectif to their customers), two crucial elements are put forward by the president of P&C (and CEO of Cap Collectif). First, the issue of the consultation must be topical and of high interest. Second, the consultation must constitute a clear stage in the decision-making process that will finally result in the vote of a law (or amendments to a law) or the implementation of a policy. The presentation must clearly specify the role of the consultation in the broader policy cycle.

If we assess the performance of P&C with respect to the commitments of lawmakers, the conclusions are mainly negative. Many consultations miss final reports, contradictory debates are often never organized and very few consultations ended with the introduction of a draft law in the parliament. The founder of P&C acknowledges this situation. However, he also claims that P&C is part of a larger movement towards a more open democracy and any step in this direction should be appreciated.

**Democratic legitimacy**

As noted above, P&C wants to enable policy makers to collect expertise and citizens’ stances on policy issues. The main rationale is to allow any citizen, as well as any stakeholders (e.g. civil society organizations, business associations, companies), to engage in a dialogue with legislators through a consultation process, without any representativeness threshold.\(^{18}\) Moreover, the charter that citizens, organizations and lawmakers have to sign explicitly mentions the importance of “public interest”. It indicates that all users recognize that the public interest must prevail, at all times and in any circumstances, on individual, corporatist or categorical interests. In addition, an extract of the article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is displayed at the bottom of each page of the website: “the law is

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\(^{18}\) Consequently, no particular effort has been made by P&C or legislators to involve diverse segments of society. Nevertheless, the platform claims to work towards the general interest that P&C considers as the foundation of the legitimacy of laws (see point 2.1.).
the expression of the general will. Citizens have the right to contribute to lawmaking personally or through their representatives. It must be the same for all, either that it protects, or that it punishes”. The platform therefore insists on a general public interest rather than on a certain degree of representativeness. This position also appears to be shared by the lawmakers using the platform.

Nevertheless, some MPs and Senators targeted municipalities, local representatives from their constituencies, actors met during physical consultative meetings such as companies or civil servants, to make them participate to the online consultations. For instance, Guillaume Gontard asked the municipality of Grenoble, located in his constituency and where a local currency is in use, to participate to his consultation. Yet it turned out that they did not despite their interest in the topic.

**Transparency of the process**

This section is structured based on the chronology of a typical consultation process via P&C. First, the choice of the topic is at the discretion of the legislator who is initiating the consultation. The only criteria is that no draft law on the issue should be already in discussion. Second, regarding moderation, any content on the platform can be flagged to P&C by the participants. Cap Collectif’s staff may delete any contribution that is insulting, racist and contravening the law when flagged by a participant. In order to ensure transparency, all deleted contents are kept online in a “trash bin” at the end of each page of the consultation. Third, any user can disseminate background information about each proposition (in a section called “sources” where links to reports, press or academic articles can be uploaded). Experts and organizations are not systematically engaged in the deliberation process but can contribute to the consultation in their own name and with the same tools and status as all the other participants (they can provide information about their background and area of expertise on their profile page, if they wish to do so).

Fourth, interactions between the legislator and the contributors (or contributors between themselves) are possible through votes, new propositions, inclusion of sources and writing arguments (in favor or against). The status of the MP or Senators are not different from participants’, except for the fact that he or she has the opportunity to structure the consultation and upload all his or her propositions first). The intention of the platform
designers was to prevent direct exchanges between participants. However, participants usually use “@” in the argument part to respond to each other.

Fifth, the organization of an off-line meeting is expected. Such a meeting should include the initiator of the consultation, the most important contributors identified by P&C and participants randomly selected by P&C. This phase is practically often ignored. Finally, a final report should be prepared. Initially, the staff of Cap Collectif was in charge of making sure that no dimension of the debate was ignored. However, due to lack of resources, parliamentary assistants are actually in charge. Beside the report, no particular section is dedicated for participants to follow up the consultation results.

Concerning the transparency of civic tech, the issue of the software behind them is debated in France. P&C (and Cap Collectif) uses a proprietary software developed by the founders. This point is highly criticized by some actors from the French civic tech and an MP of the majority, Paula Forteza. Paula Forteza is a MP committed to e-participation as well as open source. Consequently, she refuses to use P&C as long as its source code is retained closed.19

**Influence on policy design**

In order to assess the influence of the e-participation initiative on policy design, two types of consultations must be distinguished. On the one hand, several consultations were conducted via P&C in the context of information missions (FR_itw6, FR_itw9). As information mission is a mission conducted by an MP or a Senator (initiated by the government or by one of the assemblies) which aims at investigating the issues surrounding a particular topic. The objective of such missions is usually to provide propositions that should finally contribute to drafting of new legislative texts, the modernization of one or more laws or policy change. The final product of these missions is a report written under the supervision of an MP or Senator and communicated to the government or the parliament. In this context, the influence of consultations is difficult to assess because the influence of information missions on policy design is in itself difficult to assess. The consultations conducted via P&C for the purpose of

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19 Among other transparency initiative, Paula Forteza and her parliamentary staff developed an open source platform of e-participation aiming at consulting citizens for writing questions that MP can ask to government. The platform can be consulted here: [https://questions.parlement-ouvert.fr/group/4](https://questions.parlement-ouvert.fr/group/4)
information missions usually ask citizens and stakeholders to identify the potential benefits and obstacles to a given issue and propose solutions to adopt or adapt new or existing laws. According to our interviewees, the influence or added-value of such consultations is that they confirm information collected through other consultation arenas (meetings with public servants, companies, public hearings...) and provide examples and illustrations from citizens’ experience (that can feed the report). It also enables involving citizens in parliamentary work.

Other consultations aim at drafting laws or amendments. Only once, a draft law submitted via P&C by the green Senator Joël Labbé, became a law. The influence of such consultations is difficult to assess, as amendments cannot be officially related to information received by legislators from interest groups or citizens. Some senators, as Guillaume Gontard and Joël Labbé, who are critical of this legal requirement, bypass it by publicizing the consultations or meetings with NGOs they had during their speech in Parliament or on their website.

Moreover, opposition MPs or Senators may also conduct consultations about a draft law that they know has little chance to be introduced on the parliamentary agenda due to limited opportunity windows for opposition groups. In France, the government mainly controls the parliamentary agenda. Most legislative sessions are therefore dedicated to governmental legislative projects. Opposition parliamentary groups have few opportunities per year to introduce laws in the parliament and these opportunities depend on group’s size).

Finally, as regard to petitions, their influence on policy design is very limited, if existent at all. As mentioned above, only one out of the 232 petitions introduced has yet reached the threshold necessary to receive answers from lawmakers. This petition dealt with a governmental reform increasing the number of compulsory vaccinations for kids and opposed it. Four MPs responded on P&C and turned down the petitioners’ demand.

**Influence on external collaboration**

Given the limited use of the platform among MPs and Senators, P&C has not changed deeply and sustainably collaboration practices of legislators with stakeholders and citizens. However, this e-participation initiative is part of a broader movement of citizen inclusiveness in policy-making in France, in which the founders of P&C, through Cap Collectif, are central actors. Indeed, the technology (consultation platform) designed initially for P&C has been used for
different consultation initiatives at the local and national level. The platform has notably been used for the law for a digital Republic (governmental initiative) adopted in 2015 (Secrétariat d'Etat au numérique, 2015) or the pension reform in 2018. The last large-scale use of the platform is the great national debate conducted by the French government following the movement of Yellow Vests.

Regarding precisely MPs’ and Senators’ external collaboration practices, the existence of P&C opened a path towards more inclusiveness of citizens in the parliamentary work, even if the usage of the platform has not yet become a standard practice. MPs and Senators continue to use their usual channels of consultation such as public hearings, meeting with interest groups, citizen consultations in constituency... The advantages of P&C compared to traditional (offline) consultation practices identified by MPs and Senators are the transparency of the process and the possibility to reach more citizens and more diverse groups of citizens. In practice, the consultations conducted via P&C still coexist with other consultation arenas. It is interesting to note that for the purpose of transparency, some MPs and Senators asked stakeholders and citizens they met to record their opinion and propositions on the platform after traditional meetings (FR_itw1, FR_itw3, FR_itw6). The main disadvantage identified by legislators about the usage of this kind of e-participation initiative is the important workload it induces (for the parliamentary assistants to follow propositions and write the report).

2.2.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

P&C is a case of a (private) e-participation initiative, in a context characterized by a high e-participation index and a high-level of citizens’ mistrust toward political elites. Based on this case-study, several success factors, in terms of participation and impact on policy design, can be pointed at. First, the issue at stake must be topical and of interest to a wide range of citizens. Second, a strong leadership from the initiator of the consultation is key. The initiative has to be personified by a committed leader. Third, the involvement of third actors, such as interest groups or experts, fosters participation and improve the perceived quality of

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20 Some interviewees point out that P&C is the showcase of Cap Collectif. The success of Cap Collectif and the conduction of other great scale consultation (conducted by the government) is, at least partially, due to the existence of P&C (FR_itw2, FR_itw3).
contributions collected by lawmakers. Fourth, the presentation of the consultation must explicitly mention its (potential) influence on policy design.

Another lesson retrieved from this case analysis concerns the role played by a participatory democracy network in the development of e-participation initiatives. Interviewees indicated that many actors who are active at different stages of the e-participation initiative know each other. This network is likely to have resulted in increasing lawmakers’ usage of the platform. In addition, desk research and an interview with a MP who refuses to use P&C, despite her commitment towards participatory democracy, illuminates some of the issues of e-participation initiatives. P&C relies on a proprietary software which is managed by Cap Collectif, a private company. This raises concerns about the transparency of the consultation process. As long as the source code of the website is kept secret, transparency issues are left to the discretion of Cap Collectif. Users have thus to trust the company. In this context, the processing and the storage of contributions (and other related data) may also be questioned.

Last, the emergence and the institutionalization of online participatory democracy practices proves to be the result of a long process. In France, the creation of P&C and the vote of the Labbé law (2013-2015) undeniably contributed to the development of e-participation and the recognition of the potential results of online participatory platforms. Another crucial event was the Law for a digital Republic adopted in 2015 and the online consultation conducted upstream by the government (Secrétariat d’Etat au numérique, 2015). If French legislative institutions are today not eager to support the institutionalization of e-participation platforms, individual lawmakers in contrast are very much in favour of it. According to the MPs, Senators, but also the citizens we interviewed, these initiatives would contribute to reawaken democracy, notably by reducing the gap between citizens and political elites. Yet, as of now, we noted a limited use of P&C. The current protestation movement of the Yellow Vests and the subsequent great national debate might constitute a new stepping-stone towards the development and institutionalization of e-participation in France.

References


**Other sources**


2.3. Germany: E-Participation Platform “meinBerlin”

Andree Pruin

2.3.1 Introduction

In Germany, governments at all levels aim to expand online participation offerings (Große 2018, 35-40). In its E-Government Act 2015, the state government of Berlin has laid down the promotion of eParticipation as an objective of government action. The online participation platform ‘meinBerlin’ is the main instrument for implementing this goal. ‘meinBerlin’ is intended to be the central point of contact for online citizen participation of all administrative units in Berlin. This chapter aims to contribute to examining the impact of organisational factors on the success or failure of eParticipation processes. Studies on the influence of socio-organisational indicators on the success or failure of eParticipation processes in Germany have so far been scarce.

For this case study, a document analysis of the respective media coverage, official documents, press releases and the website content itself was conducted. In addition, eight semi-structured expert interviews with employees responsible for eParticipation in the State Chancellery of Berlin, of an external service provider involved in creating and maintaining the platform, and of other administrations at municipal and state level were carried out.

2.3.2 Overview of the national context

Modernisation of local government since the 1990s

The political and administrative system of Germany is shaped by the federal distribution of competences and a strong role of local self-government. The country consists of 16 federal states with hundreds of local governments (Kuhlmann & Wollmann 2014, 73). Traditionally, the German administration is regarded as a prototype of a weberian bureaucracy, characterised by professional training, fixed competences, division of responsibilities and hierarchical subordination (Holtkamp 2009, 65). This paradigm might be eroding, however, especially after the budget crises of many German municipalities in the mid-1990s. Public

21 https://mein.berlin.de/
Management inspired reforms (“Neues Steuerungsmodell” (NSM)) were introduced in many German municipalities (Bogumil & Holtkamp 2006, 80-101). These reforms were implemented with the aim of fulfilling public tasks more (cost-) efficiently. However, the implementation of these measures in the municipalities lead to great variance in outcomes, due to the strong position of local self-government in Germany (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017, 298). Decision makers in public administration quickly realised that the NSM was not a great success (Jann & Wegrich 2004, 211), as it intensified negative conditions to some extent (Holtkamp 2009). The one-sided focus on increasing efficiency was therefore partially replaced by the idea of greater effectiveness and democratic legitimacy through more political participation of citizens. This paradigm shift is exemplified by the change from the Neues Steuerungsmodell to the concept of the Bürgerkommune (citizen municipality), which focuses on collaborative forms of decision-making with citizens (Holtkamp 2009, 66). But although the opportunities for citizens to influence politics at the local level have increased in recent years, the actual scope for political intervention is rather limited, for example due to privatisation of public services and the budget crises of many municipalities (Bogumil & Holtkamp 2006, 114-125).

**Political culture and participation**

In general, Germany’s political culture has gradually changed since the ‘participatory revolution’ of the mid-1960s. Initially characterized by the ‘Obrigkeitsstaatlichkeit’ (the authoritarian state), the participation culture in the post-war era under Chancellor Adenauer was regarded as rather passive and reduced to the electoral act. Since then, the proportion of citizens who actively participate in the political process, for example in political parties, has stabilised at a standard level for comparable parliamentary democracies. However, the increase in non-conventional forms of participation since the 1970s has been substantial (Ismayr 2003, 471-472). This was, for example, exemplified by the big peace- or anti-nuclear-movements, but also by thousands of citizen initiatives on fields like public infrastructure, transport, housing or education, especially on local level (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017, 297). In recent times, the protests against the “Stuttgart 21” railway station project have been exemplary for the increased participation demands of the population (Kersting 2018, 14).
Administrative Structure of the State of Berlin

Berlin differs from the rest of Germany's administrative system (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010). Along with Bremen and Hamburg, Berlin is one of three city states in Germany. It is therefore both a federal state and a municipality. The state government (the Senate) thus fulfils both state tasks and municipal responsibilities. However, some municipal tasks are taken over by the city districts. The districts are part of a two-tiered hierarchical administration, which has to fulfil self-administration tasks at the same time. The districts have very limited legislative sovereignty and also no real budgetary and financial sovereignty. Since recent reforms, however, the districts have been allocated a global sum from the state budget for their own budget to perform their tasks. Thus, the districts now have the opportunity to set their own priorities, which makes a significant contribution to the strengthening of district self-responsibility (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010).

Since the early 2000s, various structural reforms of the city districts have been implemented (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010). Following the NSM paradigm (Schedler & Proeller 2011, 5), these changes were mainly aimed at increasing the efficiency of administrative services (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010). However, the district administrative reform of 2005 also extended the possibilities of citizens to participate in local politics. This includes, for example, residents’ meetings and residents’ question times (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010). Also, the district of Lichtenberg is regarded as one of the forerunners in Germany regarding the establishment of a participatory budget (Franzke & Kleger 2010). Additionally, elements of direct democracy were considerably strengthened in 2005 and 2006. For example, the quorums for petitions for a referendum and people’s initiatives were reduced significantly. As a result, there was a strong increase in the number of successful referendums on both local and state level (Hoffmann & Schwenkner 2010).

Digital governance in Germany and Berlin

Germany only performs average in the eGovernment benchmark of the European Union. The index examines the implementation of digital administrative services. Particularly with regard to the penetration of e-services, Germany is 'underperforming' (see also European Union 2018). The most frequently used administrative services are still mainly carried out in person, not digitally. In a representative study conducted by the German interest and research
network "D21" (D21 2018), 40 percent of respondents stated that they had made use of an eGovernment service at least once in 2018. The trend is slightly downward. Forty-two percent of the citizens questioned cannot name any eGovernment services. About one third of Germans have concerns about the security and protection of their own data with regard to government interactions. 58% of the respondents are satisfied with the online services offered by their respective municipalities (D21 2018). Regarding eParticipation, there is a rather clear discrepancy between the general willingness to participate online, and the actual participation rates. Thus 56% of Germans aged 18 and older who use the Internet privately can imagine participating online (Krcmar et al. 2016). However, numerous examples show that the actual demand for such formats is often very low. Also, there are examples where participation decreases after repeated participation (Zepic et al. 2017).

According to the German Index of Digitalisation 2019 (Deutschland-Index der Digitalisierung 2019), Berlin ranks among the top federal states. Berlin is one of the three federal states in which citizens have the most frequent digital contacts with public authorities. The topic of eParticipation is also covered by a sub-index "Openness". This index is composed of the possibility of direct online citizen participation, the availability of a digital request management system, the provision of open administrative data (Open Data), a presence in social media as well as information on public WiFi hotspots. Berlin, together with the other two city states Hamburg and Bremen, takes first place here. In the overall index, which includes not only digital citizen services but also indicators such as 'digital infrastructure', 'digitisation of everyday life' or 'digitisation of the economy', Berlin ranks first among all German states (Opiela et al. 2019).

2.3.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

‘meinBerlin’ is the main eParticipation platform of the state of Berlin. Citizen participation processes of all administrative units can be realised via this platform, which makes meinBerlin the central ‘point of contact’ for all online participation processes in Berlin. Various types of eParticipation initiatives can be conducted on the platform, including development plan processes, participatory budgeting, public surveys, open debates and collective brainstorming, the latter primarily on urban development processes (Klie et al. 2015). Often, these eParticipation processes are carried out in addition to existing ‘classical’ citizen
participation, such as planning cells and citizen juries. It is therefore not a question of replacing traditional citizen participation with eParticipation, but of supplementing them. The platform gives citizens the opportunity to exert influence on policy formulation in the different districts and at the state level. However, the topics are determined by the administration, and the users cannot initiate their own topics (Klie et al. 2015).

Currently, 44 different authorities and subordinate organisations can conduct consultations on ‘meinBerlin’. These include the Berlin State Chancellery (Senatskanzlei), the various State Departments (ministries), the district administrations, subordinate authorities of the districts and state-owned companies. The centralisation of all online citizen participation processes on one platform is intended to prevent high costs arising from numerous parallel e-participation structures in different administrative bodies on local and state level. It is also intended to motivate administrative units that have not yet conducted any or only a few citizen participation processes to integrate online citizen participation into their planning processes.

The administrations also are expected to benefit from the elimination of media format differences and a uniform system for data storage. By establishing the platform as a central point of contact for citizen participation, users are expected to be motivated to return to the platform. The intention is to ensure that all or at least most citizen participation cases reach a critical number of participants. However, a target number is not defined. Through centralisation, citizens are expected to also benefit from a uniform presentation of all processes, which should make it easier even for inexperienced users to participate online. Another objective is to attract new user groups who have so far participated less frequently in citizen participation processes. This applies not only to people who are unable to attend face-to-face events due to lack of time or reduced mobility and citizens who have low affinity to online processes, but also to socially disadvantaged population groups who inherently participate less frequently (e.g. Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995; Milbrath 1965). This is in accordance with the Berlin Senate’s principle that marginalized social groups should play a greater role in political decision-making. In addition, it is the declared aim of the city state’s government to strengthen and further develop citizen participation processes in general.

The development of the platform began in 2013, when the Senate Department for Urban Development and the Senate Department for Environment (Senatsverwaltung für
Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt) planned the digitalisation of legally required citizen participation processes in urban land-use planning (§ 2a Bundesbaugesetz). The law stipulates that land-use plans must be available for public inspection. At the same time, the district of Treptow-Köpenick was planning an online platform for informal citizen participation processes. Under the supervision of the State Chancellery, which is primarily responsible for citizen participation in the state of Berlin, these two projects were merged in 2015. Thus, both legally binding processes and informal processes are carried out on the platform (Klie et al. 2015). Since then, the project is financed by the budget of the State Chancellery. The budget title in the 2018/2019 biannual budget amounts to 244,800 euros per year (Land Berlin 2018).

The planning was carried out by a steering group recruited from interested employees of various administrative units at state and district level volunteering to participate. The group was relatively autonomous in its scope of action. There was little administrative or political influence. Rather, the project received support from the governing parliamentary groups in the Berlin House of Representatives.

The steering group quickly decided to outsource the technical implementation of the project to a service provider. The decision was made for the Berlin-based association "Liquid Democracy e.V.", which developed ‘meinBerlin’ on the basis of their in-house open source software "Adhocracy". The service provider advised the steering group not only on technical issues, but also on issues of citizen participation itself in order to create an integrative solution. However, after the launch of the website, Liquid Democracy regards itself primarily as a technical service provider for the state of Berlin.

During the development phase, some aspects of similar web portals existing in other German larger cities such as Frankfurt a. M., Munich or the Austrian capital of Vienna were taken as a basis. Part of the group also participated in a congress on eParticipation, where participants shared their experiences in initiating and operating similar platforms. In addition to the development of the platform, a study on citizen participation in Berlin was commissioned. The study was carried out by the ‘Centre for Developments in Civil Society’, which is located at the ‘Protestant University of Applied Sciences Freiburg’. The institute deals with issues of civic engagement, good governance and corporate responsibility. Among other aspects, this study
identified basic requirements for the establishment of a central eParticipation platform, which were considered in the planning process (Klie et al. 2015).

Due to the composition of the steering group, which initially excluded any full-time employees with formal responsibilities, the initiation process lasted until 2017, when the platform was finally launched. Since then, the website was in the beta phase (testing phase). Already at that time, meinBerlin was available to all administrative units. With a relaunch of the website in April 2019, key findings of the test operation were taken up and revised. Although the platform was established at the same time as recent eGovernment legislation, no references were made. The eGovernment Act only contains a declaration of intent to promote eParticipation, but no binding measures. Instead, online participation continues to be a voluntary task of the state administrative authorities (Land Berlin 2015). Nevertheless, for the employees responsible for ‘meinBerlin’, the law serves as a non-binding basis for legitimation vis-à-vis the decision-makers in other administrative units today.

Since the relaunch, ‘meinBerlin’ also offers a geographical visualisation of all projects (since February 2019) to allow easier identification of participation processes relevant to the users. The website is not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities (sign language, "easy language" etc.).

The participation processes themselves are set up by the responsible administrations at state or municipal level. The respective employees can choose different types of consultations from an instrument box and create the procedure themselves. They can test the functionality of the processes on a separate serve. The processes are also moderated by various departments and thus no additional personnel resources are spent. The registration requires authentication of an e-mail address and no real names or authentication occur.

2.3.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

The responsible authority for ‘meinBerlin’ is the Governing Mayor of Berlin and thus the State Chancellery. Within the State Chancellery, the responsible employee for eParticipation is located at the Press and Information Office of the State Chancellery, which in turn is subordinated to the State Secretary for Media (Land Berlin 2019a). This formal affiliation is related to the Press and Information Office's responsibility for the Internet presence of the
state of Berlin. On "www.berlin.de" all information about the state of Berlin shall be bundled, this applies to all e-government activities of the state of Berlin and its districts, including ‘meinBerlin’. Moreover, the State Chancellery also has a section for civic engagement and promotion of democracy. Also, a department for e-government exists (Land Berlin 2019a). As a consequence, regular collaboration is required between the employee responsible for eParticipation and his counterpart for civic engagement and promotion of democracy, also regarding the functional development of the portal.

However, the closest partner for the employee responsible for eParticipation in the State Chancellery is the project manager at the IT service provider "Liquid Democracy". These two persons work closely together on the further development of the platform. In addition to a monthly meeting, daily e-mail and telephone contacts shape the day-to-day work of the respective employees. Liquid Democracy is responsible for most of the technical support to both the administrative staff and the users. The state and district administrations may also contact the responsible employee in the State Chancellery for advice on general questions of citizen participation and on the portal. Together they explore which types of citizen participation are best suited for the project; the chancellery employee also actively promotes the use of ‘meinBerlin’ for upcoming planning processes. Collaboration practices within the executive are therefore manifold, but mostly informal. Liquid Democracy and the State Chancellery also jointly offer a course at the Berlin Academy of Administration open to all administrative employees of the state of Berlin, who are concerned with planning processes, to inform on basic concepts of citizen participation and the technical use of the portal.

The remaining tasks, such as setting up processes, moderating processes, etc., are decentralized to the responsible administrations. They may seek support in how to operate the portal. Within the districts and Senate Departments, employees are in most cases responsible for carrying out the participation processes. They are also responsible for the respective subject in general. In most cases there is no separate staff responsible for carrying out participation processes on ‘meinBerlin’. One exception is the “Mitte” district, which since 2017 has bundled all citizen participation processes in one office. A specific employee promotes citizen participation and the use of meinBerlin in the administrative units of the district. She also provides technical support and prepares the descriptions of the planning processes. A quite similar situation applies to the district of Lichtenberg, which has an
employee for civic participation in development projects. However, these two examples are exceptions. In principle, there is no uniform structure as to how eParticipation or citizen participation in general shall be organised in the districts. Most administrative units in Berlin do not have an employee responsible for citizen participation processes.

2.3.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

Despite the decentralized character of the platform, two people are entrusted with ‘meinBerlin’ on a full-time basis. These are, as already mentioned, the employee for eParticipation in the Senate Chancellery, as well as the project manager at Liquid Democracy. These two persons are also mainly responsible for the further development of the platform. In addition, they advise the administrators in the individual administrations on questions of citizen participation on ‘meinBerlin’. The employee in the Senate Chancellery also observes planning processes in the state of Berlin at state and district level in order to proactively propose ‘meinBerlin’ as a suitable instrument for citizens’ participation in the planning process. He also maintains contact with the relevant decision-makers in the parliamentary arena. He regularly reports to the responsible committee in the Berlin House of Representatives on the state of development of ‘meinBerlin’. This is complemented by mainly informal contacts with decision-makers in politics and administration. However, these employees are mainly advocates and advertisers for the project. The concrete decision to carry out online participation procedures on ‘meinBerlin’ is always made by the respective administration and its leadership.

However, for many state and district administrations, the platform is not prioritised. On the one hand, this is because many employees are generally sceptical towards participation processes. One interviewee reported that many employees in the districts and Senate Departments fear for the autonomy of their decisions if they would apply participation processes. Besides, they consider the technical expertise of the citizens to be low. Also, some employees have little or no time to carry out citizen participation in addition to their regular tasks, due to the low number of staff in the state of Berlin. The opportunity costs are therefore too high.

As already mentioned, ‘meinBerlin’ is regularly financed from the budget of the Senate Chancellery. Since the platform is administered decentrally, the personnel costs that arise
indirectly from the operation of the platform are irregular and cannot be derived directly. However, it can be assumed that at least opportunity costs will be incurred due to increased workload of the employees. In addition, a personnel position is financed directly from the budget of the Senate Chancellery.

2.3.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

‘meinBerlin’ has currently slightly more than 9.000 registered users. In 2018 alone, more than 5.000 new users registered. This is more than twice as many as the new registrations in 2017. In relation to Berlin's population, however, the number is very low (approx. 0,24 %). The users contributed with 13.118 proposals, ideas and comments (Land Berlin 2019b). Thus, also the interaction rate of the users is relatively low (mean = 1.5 interactions per user).

Many of the interviewed experts stated that in most online consultations only very few citizens participate. Some deliberations have only one or two comments. Nevertheless, there are also some "outliers" to the top, i.e. processes in which many more citizens participate. These are mostly procedures with a strong local and a rather “hands on” character. No other performance indicators are systematically measured.

To increase user numbers, ‘meinBerlin’ is promoted in "offline events" like town hall meetings. In addition, the State Chancellery seeks to ensure that the website can be found through search engine optimisation. Apart from that, there are no advertising measures for ‘meinBerlin’. This was criticised by some respondents. From their point of view, it would be necessary to increase the awareness of the platform among the population by large-scale advertising campaigns. Although there is no data on the awareness of ‘meinBerlin’ among the population, all our interviewees claimed that the website is not well known at all. According to their observations, almost nobody outside the administration knows the platform.

Regarding the composition of the users, a non-representative, non-public user survey on the platform suggests that the users are by no means a representative sample of the Berlin population. Users of ‘meinBerlin’ are relatively old on average, live disproportionately often in inner city districts, and are well educated. Other indicators relevant to empirical participation research, such as gender or income, were not asked.
Even though most of the interviewed experts state that the primary aim of the platform is to collect "good ideas" and to identify potential conflicts, they find it necessary to address the interests of all social milieus in the planning processes. Therefore, one interviewee mentioned that the administration is trying to make the platform better known in places where citizens from socially disadvantaged milieus meet. The other respondents, however, stated that there was no strategy to change the current situation regarding the limited representativeness of ‘meinBerlin’. The administration's goal of making citizen participation processes more inclusive and representative using e-participation seems to fail. In addition, far too few people participate in most procedures - also from the interviewees' point of view. The input legitimacy of the portal can therefore be regarded as rather low for most processes.

Regarding the throughput and output dimension of legitimacy, experiences with the handling of the results of e-participation processes by state and district administrations are still rare, as this is a quite young instrument and not many processes have yet been completed. In principle, the quality of the input is regarded as (surprisingly) high. In addition, specific and concrete proposals would have a realistic chance of being implemented. It is also important how questions were formulated in advance by the respective administrations. The more concrete and application-oriented the citizen participation processes were initiated, the easier it would be to implement the results. Without exception, all interviewees expressed the opinion that e-participation was only suitable as a complementary measure to “traditional” offline participation.

A definite advantage of ‘meinBerlin’ over "normal" processes is that the results of the participation can be processed without media discontinuity. Likewise, the results can be simply exported without additional effort for further processing inside the administration. Basically, e-participation is only weakly institutionalised in the Berlin administration. Online participation continues to be a voluntary task of the administrations. While a few entrepreneurs use the platform on a regular basis, the vast majority of administrations in Berlin use it rarely or not at all.

With regard to the transparency of decisions, most of the background information is simple descriptive texts. All reactions through comments are visible to all users of ‘meinBerlin’. This applies to all participation procedures except for legally prescribed land-use planning
procedures. Here the comments are sent directly to the responsible authority. Consequently, users can usually refer to each other and discuss the topics. However, it should be mentioned that interviewees often remarked that the deliberative quality of the platform was only limited, as users would hardly refer to each other. As a rule, the way in which the results of public participation have been taken into consideration should also be published after the consultation. According to the observations of some interviewees, however, this is not always the case. Therefore, the transparency of decision-making remains quite limited. However, some participation procedures would promise a certain "guarantee of participation". In these procedures, the "best" or most popular proposals are examined in a binding manner by the respective authorities.

An example of a particularly successful procedure on ‘meinBerlin’ is a participation procedure for locations for bicycle boxes and car sharing stations in the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district. An open collection of ideas, in which more than 30 suggestions for potential locations were submitted, was combined with a survey. The survey could also be commented on. According to the respondents, this procedure was particularly successful because the question was asked very precisely and concretely. The local limitation to one neighbourhood within the district was also crucial for success. Pursuant to the interviewees, such procedures are generally more successful if there is a strong local connection, since people would then feel more affected by administrative actions. In contrast to this, many participation procedures are not accepted by the citizens, especially if the question is too diffuse and open. Consequently, procedures without concrete local reference are usually less successful, since the incentive to participate without the feeling of being affected is not strong enough.

2.3.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

A closer look at the performance of the platform ‘meinBerlin’ reveals that, despite a positive trend, it is still not meeting the general expectations. Given that only administrations initiate, moderate and evaluate e-participation processes on the platform, these organisational features are crucial.

Individual attitudes towards e-participation or citizen participation in general constitute an important obstacle to the use of e-participation. Decision-makers in administrations often see no need to integrate e-participation or citizen participation in their planning processes. This
becomes particularly clear in the Berlin example. There are 44 different administrations that could potentially use the platform, but only a few really do. These are mainly single actors, some of them isolated, who actively promote the usefulness of the platform. Technical barriers are not regarded as strong but conserved values and norms prevail and prevent the implementation of e-participation to a large extent. The recent efforts of several Berlin administrations to issue binding guidelines for the implementation of citizen participation in their planning processes may overcome these.

Another relevant factor is the internal affiliation of responsible employees as well as the availability of skilled and sufficient personnel. Administrations that have a central point of contact for citizen participation use ‘meinBerlin’ more frequently and presumably more effectively. Especially the number of staff in the Berlin administrations often leads to the fact that a further participation of citizens is desired, but the opportunity costs for the concrete implementation are after all too high. Moreover, administrators of eParticipation vary in their knowledge about participation in general and the virtues and variation of its use. Yet this knowledge base is also important because administrations’ legitimacy also depends on the outcomes of their participation.

Lastly, the platform suffers from a lack of visibility inside and outside the administration. Participation processes that deal with concrete, local issues are particularly successful – on the one hand because the results of these processes are easy to implement, on the other hand because citizens have a special interest in playing a decisive role in shaping their own local area.

References


2.4. Netherlands: Digital Democracy Initiative “de Stem van West”

Vidar Stevens

2.4.1. Introduction

The current case study examines a Dutch digital tool – ‘De Stem van West’\(^{22}\) (translated ‘the Voice of West’, hereafter referred to as SvW). It can be considered a “successful” case where, within a two-month period, Amsterdam’s politicians and government officials were able, with the help of the open source digital tool ‘My Voice’, to attract more than 19.880 inhabitants of the Amsterdam-West neighborhood (out of 142.700 – 14 per cent of the inhabitants) to attend digital political discussions in their neighborhood (De Zeeuw & Pieters, 2017: 21). This digital tool facilitates the policy-making process of the neighborhood council of Amsterdam-West. Citizens of the neighborhood can vote on plans, voice their concerns, and upload ideas and proposals themselves. Since the launch of the digital tool in January 2017, 71 proposals have been launched and discussed on the democratic online platform (March, 2018). Thirteen of these proposals are currently being executed by the neighborhood administration. In addition, the tool was recognised by Eurocities as Europe’s most innovative digital democracy experiment. The SvW can thus be regarded as an exemplary case of how to organize a digital democratic process and incorporate a ‘new’ online decision-making structure in ordinary administrative, political structures, and accountability structures that are in place in local (Dutch) municipalities.

This case study provides a thick description of Amsterdam-West’s digital democracy project. For the data collection, we drew on a detailed process mapping based on an analysis of documents and a series of interviews (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004: 136-137). The document analysis included policy documents, meeting minutes, position papers, annual reports, evaluations and implementation plans of the stakeholders involved. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview data was triangulated by comparing the interview responses to each other and to the document analysis findings. Furthermore, two one-hour video observations in the neighborhood council were carried out, to get a better gist of the

\(^{22}\) https://stemvanwest.amsterdam.nl/
functioning of the neighborhood council of Amsterdam-West and to understand how the
council members operated with the new channel of decision-making next to the ordinary
political process. Lastly, all digital platform discussions, proposals and arguments were coded
and quantified to evaluate the type of issues or proposals that had most societal and political
impact.

2.4.2 Overview of the national context

To understand the success of the digital democracy initiative of the SvW at the local level in
Amsterdam, one should acknowledge the open, but hesitant, democratic experimentation
context of the Netherlands. Digital democracy is a relatively new phenomenon in Dutch
governance, compared to countries like Finland or Estonia. At the national level, the most
renowned digital democracy initiative has been the Dutch e-petition initiative.23 The main goal
of the e-petition initiative – established in 2005 – is to make it easier for citizens to influence
the national decision-making process. Nowadays, the website attracts about 2 million monthly
visitors. The collective result of the petition is never binding, however. It is rather a sign of
discontent or a new idea which can be picked up, or ignored, by the Dutch Parliament.
Nevertheless, such initiatives at the national level are relatively rare.

The Dutch Minister of Interior Affairs has, so far, been very ambiguous when it comes to
addressing the concern for digital democratic innovation. On the one hand, the Minister has
argued that there is a growing democratic deficit in the Netherlands (respondent 4). On the
other hand, the Minister has not launched any democratic renewal program to overcome this
democratic deficit (respondent 5). Instead, she established a State Committee in 2016, which,
under the supervision of former Minister Johan Remkes, was to conduct research and advise
the government to see whether the democratic and parliamentary system of the Netherlands
is ‘future-proof’. Remarkably, in the 2018 final report, with the title ‘Low threshold, high
dykes’, little is mentioned about the value of digital participation initiatives for enriching the
policy-making processes in the Netherlands (respondent 4 & 5).

Most digital democratic innovation in the Netherlands takes place at the local level. This
tendency is fostered by the program ‘Proeftuin Lokale Digitale Democratie’ (translated ‘Living

23 https://petities.nl/
Lab Local Digital Democracy’) of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which was launched in the summer of 2018 (respondent 3). In an initial round of this program, five municipalities have been stimulated to pioneer and experiment with new online democratic practices. Another 25 municipalities have shown interest in participating in the program (respondent 9). The city of Amsterdam has been a test case for the Living Lab Local Online Democracy program. This test case was not organized by the Ministry but emerged from Amsterdam’s own initiative to experiment with digital democracy tools. To this end, Amsterdam – and especially the ‘Voice of West’ case which is central in this article – has up until now sparked municipalities’ interest all over the country; and will presumably continue to do so in the coming years as civil servants of the Ministry of Interior Affairs observe a ‘ripple-effect’ of the Amsterdam case in conversations with other, interested, municipalities who want to do something with digital democratic renewal (respondent 2, 3, 12 & 13).

Within the Living Lab Local Digital Democracy program, the municipalities are, just like the SvW case, experimenting with tools that were developed in the European D-CENT project. D-CENT is an abbreviation of Decentralised Citizens Engagement Technologies. The D-CENT project was co-funded by the European Commission and run by a consortium of ten partners all across Europe, including NESTA and the Open Knowledge Foundation (respondent 10). In the D-CENT project three particular tools were developed and pilot tested in Spain, Iceland and Finland through Lean UX experimentation, to mention: YourPriorities, Consul and MyVoice (respondent 11).

After seeing the success of Lean UX experimentations in particularly Barcelona, Madrid, Reykjavik and Helsinki, the municipality of Amsterdam decided to effectively start their own democratic test case in the neighborhood of Amsterdam-West. Since 2014, when the local elections were held, the governing parties of the neighborhood council – the Socialists, Greens and Social Democrats, in collaboration with the Pirates Party – were looking for new (online) ways to reconnect with civil society organizations in the neighborhood and attract new citizens (i.e. other than the usual suspects that show up at neighborhood council meetings) to the decision-making processes (respondent 1). This was especially because the level of institutionalization of civil society participation in Amsterdam-West was quite low, or as respondent 6 argues, “we had little overview of the civil society initiatives in the neighborhood, and the few civil society initiatives we knew were mostly ad-hoc, non-durable,
activities and initiatives.” In addition, within the neighborhood administration, a digitalization team was set up to look for new ways to incorporate ICT tools and practices in the bureaucratic machinery (respondent 7). Hence, in the neighborhood of Amsterdam-West, which has a population of 144,210 inhabitants and is as such the ‘sixth biggest city of the Netherlands’ according to respondent 6, there was a lot of momentum to experiment with digital tools. In sum, the SvW can be regarded as one of the first initiatives in the Netherlands that uses open-source digital tools to attract citizens to the (political) decision-making processes.

2.4.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

The formal goals of the SvW initiative were threefold (respondent 1). The first goal was to bring people together to debate and prioritize innovative ideas to improve their local communities. The second goal was more citizen-oriented, as the neighborhood council aimed at helping citizens get their voices heard and to encourage citizen participation in governance. To highlight the importance of this second goal, the chairman stressed during the neighborhood council meeting of 18 December 2015: “during Election Day, we count every voice, on any other day we must listen to citizen’s voices.” The third goal of the digital democracy initiative was to develop, with the help of open-source tools, a new infrastructure that would allow the neighborhood administration to expand and renew their participatory governance toolbox. This was further highlighted by a neighborhood council member who argued during the same neighborhood council meeting that “no self-respecting government should hesitate to renew its administrative and participation processes when possible.” No specific targets (in terms of amount of online discussions, number of participants or proposals which eventually would be executed) were set to monitor the progress of the digital democracy initiative (respondent 6). This made it difficult for neighborhood council members to assess the success of the SvW initiative (respondent 1). Nevertheless, with regard to the potential of the digital tool, expectations were high; the implementation plan of the initiative stated that “new technological developments allow Amsterdam-West to turn itself into a more dynamic and interactive, 21st century, democracy” (Gemeente Amsterdam-West, 2015).

To achieve the set goals, the digital tool was incorporated in the policy design process. Specifically, in the SvW tool, citizens can add ideas onto the platform. Promotors of the ideas must provide points in support of their idea. Other participants can comment on these ideas
and arguments. This informs and sparks initial debate. The ideas and arguments that have been introduced are, subsequently, up-voted and down-voted to show what the most popular ideas and best arguments for and against the proposals are. The platform, and more specifically the interface of the platform, is structured in such a way that arguments in favor and against are placed in two separate columns. According to respondent 8, “this structure makes it harder for arguments to go off-topic, instead encouraging positive points, curbing negativity and avoiding personal attacks.” In addition, respondent 8 continues, “the trend of the loudest voices becoming dominant is mitigated with minority and majority opinions getting equal weight in the platform’s algorithm, thus thereby facilitating consensus.”

If an idea on the platform’s interface surpasses the threshold of 100 positive votes within three months, the proposal will be put on the monthly agenda of the neighborhood council. In the neighborhood council meeting, the promotor of the idea will have 30 minutes to reflect on the online discussions, the arguments in favor of and against the idea, and the possible costs of the project. After half an hour, the neighborhood council will deliberate on the idea without the involvement of the promotor of the idea. When, after deliberation, a majority of the neighborhood council members agree with the promotor’s idea, the project will be sent through to the neighborhood administration to see whether it can be incorporated in existing policy plans, or whether the proposal collides with other bureaucratic activities. If the latter is not the case, the citizen’s proposal will be executed by civil servants, and, under the supervision of the neighborhood alderman, in close cooperation with the promotor of the idea. As such, ideally, the SvW tool enables better decision-making by crowdsourcing policy design.

The idea of crowdsourcing policy design was first mentioned in the 2014 Coalition Agreement (respondent 6). Yet, it took another three years before a well-functioning digital interface was launched on which citizens could engage in online deliberation (respondent 1). Within these three years, the digital tool has gone through four key stages of development, to mention: user-centered design research, minimum viable product development, proto-testing, and instrument evaluation (respondent 7). The user-centered design research phase was an interactive design processes in which the developers of the SvW tool focused on the potential users of the tool, their online and offline behaviors, their needs to interact with the
neighborhood council, and the ways in which they would normally enter webpages (e.g. direct through the separate webpage or ‘through the backdoor’, like: a Facebook link).

The phase started with mapping the different users of the tool, these were: (1) people who wanted to upload an idea, (2) people who only wanted to comment on ideas, (3) people who only wanted to vote on ideas, (4) people who just wanted to know what was going on in their neighborhood, and (5) civil servants and neighborhood council members who would eventually have to execute the new policy ideas. These different user groups demanded different user requirements (respondent 8). Some people only wanted to have a quick peek on the tool’s platform, whereas other participants wanted more elaborate user functions, like uploading photos. Hence, through investigative (e.g. surveys and interviews) and generative (i.e. brainstorming sessions) methods, the developers aimed to reveal what the specific user needs were for citizens in Amsterdam-West (respondent 8). Ultimately, this phase enables the development of tailor-made products for digital participation use.

Following the outcomes of the user-centered design research phase, a minimum viable product was developed as the most simplistic version of the digital tool. On the interface of the minimum viable product, citizens could upload and comment on ideas for repainting a bicycle tunnel. There was an enormous response, as the neighborhood council received 49 different art impressions (respondent 6). Yet, more importantly, the developers of the SvW tool retrieved new user’s information, updates on bugs in the tool, and suggestions for changes in the voting procedures on the platform (respondent 8). This information was eventually used in the fourth phase of development (i.e. instrument evaluation) as a means to update the minimum viable product and change it to the current version of the tool which can be accessed open-source on GitHub.24

During the development of the SvW tool, there were little political pushbacks or attempts to delegitimize the initiative. According to respondent 1, this is mainly due to the fact that within the neighborhood council and administration, there was a strong coalition of influential people (i.e. the neighborhood’s alderman, the majority of the neighborhood council, and several high-level civil servants) who wanted to bring the development of the open source

24 https://github.com/Amsterdam/openstad-monolith
tool to a good end. Consequently, the developers had sufficient time (round about 3 years) to fine-tune a tool which could one-on-one be incorporated in the neighborhood administration’s apparatus (respondent 8).

In the development of the SvW tool, specific developers’ attention was further devoted to the legal framework of laws and formal documents to which the digital tool had to adhere. One of the documents which was a part of this legal framework is the Open Source Definition Framework (OSDF). The OSDF is originally derived from the Debian Free Software Guidelines (DFSG). The OSDF not only demands that a tool’s source code is freely accessible, but also ensures that the distribution terms of the open source software must comply with a number of criteria. Specifically, developers – using the OSDF as point of reference – must ensure that the software is technology neutral, does not discriminate against persons, groups or specific fields of endeavors, and the license of the software must not be specific to a product or place restrictions on the use of the source code by other programs (respondent 7). On the whole, the OSDF guarantees that spin-offs of the SvW tool can emerge and new digital initiatives can be developed.

The developers also had to consider the privacy standards which follow, inter alia, from the Dutch Personal Data Protection Act. The Dutch Personal Data Protection Act was updated on 1 January 2016. The law text ensures that personal data of participants of the SvW tool is only stored for a limited amount of time for specific purposes (e.g. registering the amount of ‘real voters’ for a proposal on the tool’s interface). At all times, participants can command the proprietor of the tool to withdraw their personal data (respondent 7). This, however, also means that their voting and argumentation history will be deleted from the servers. Overall, during the development of the SvW tool the developer’s team thus focused on various key aspects to develop the most applicable tool for the Amsterdam-West political and administrative context, to mention: the different user groups and their preferences of the tool, the political and neighborhood dynamics in which the tool would be implemented, open-source development, modular programming and aspects of privacy and personal data. In the next section, more detailed information will be presented about the organizational side of the digital democracy initiative after developing the SvW platform.
2.4.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

When a tool is developed, it does not immediately mean a digital democracy initiative function well. Respondent 1 says, “a tool is just an instrument – the value of the instrument is determined by how people use it.” In the SvW initiative, different actors in different ‘spheres of governance’ can be identified which are either involved in or responsible for the maintenance or execution of the digital participation initiative. The formal ownership of the digital platform can best be placed in the civil society sphere, as according to respondent 6 “the citizens of Amsterdam-West determine on the digital platform what is being discussed, in what manner, and for what reasons.” The rights to start a discussion, comment on proposals, and vote on proposals are strictly limited to citizens of Amsterdam-West. Neighborhood council members (i.e. politicians) or civil servants who work for the neighborhood administration are not allowed to contribute in any substantive way to the online discussions. Only the Digital Unit of the neighborhood administration, which consists of four freelance expert people, is allowed to execute maintenance works on the digital platform. In addition, seven neighborhood council members act as moderators on the platform to ensure that positive discussions emerge (respondent 6). Within the neighborhood council there is a strict protocol for intervening on the digital platform. The main rule of intervention is when a comment discredits a person, calls for violence, or harms the participation of other citizens on the platform. According to respondent 6, “neighborhood council members seldom delete messages.”

Activities in the civil society sphere, however, do not only happen on the digital platform. This becomes particularly clear from our observations in the neighborhood council meeting of 4 July 2017, when the peculiarities of the citizen’s initiative of WDM2030 were being discussed. The WDW2030 project aimed to make the Witte de Withstraat car-free and greener. The idea received over 400 votes on the SvW platform. During the neighborhood council meeting, a neighborhood council member asked the promotor of the initiative: what actions have you undertaken to gather support for your idea? In response, the promotor replied, “we made a special flyer and handed it out to people living around the square, we organized a meeting in the local community center, and we circulated a phone number to which people who were in favor or against the idea could call.” The initiative of WDW2030 has proven that offline
marketing increases the likelihood that you get more votes and substantive online discussions, according to respondent 6.

In the political sphere, two actors can be identified: the neighborhood council and the neighborhood executive committee which consists of aldermen who are responsible for the execution of policies. Since the formal status of the digital participation initiative is to function as an extra channel of decision-making next to the ordinary political process, members of the neighborhood council are confronted with an extra impetus for the policy agenda (respondent 1). Nevertheless, the roles and responsibilities of the neighborhood council members have not changed with the SvW experiment (respondent 6). As persons, having the power to legislate and who represent their voters, the neighborhood council members carry out their responsibility for oversight to ensure that activities of the neighborhood administration are conducted impartially and neutrally. In addition, they join the members of the neighborhood executive committee in responsibly formulating and deciding upon policies for the district Amsterdam-West. The aldermen of the neighborhood executive committee are – in the end – also politically responsible for coordinating, supervising and executing policies, and providing guidance to the civil servants (i.e. the actors in the administrative sphere) of the neighborhood administration. The civil servants respect the principle of political neutrality and primarily implement policies and undertake the execution of individual public administration duties – and also duties that follow from the digital democracy initiative – in keeping with their areas of expertise.

As such, on paper there are clear role demarcations between involved political actors, civil servants and citizens. In practice, however, there were various, ‘role conflicts’, to quote respondent 1. She explains, “between actors there seemed to be different expectations both of one’s own role, responsibilities and tasks, and the reciprocal roles, responsibilities and tasks of others.” Consequently, “there were oftentimes no matching role expectations, causing for delays in projects and frustrations among people who had to work together.” From our data, three incongruent role expectations can be distilled: citizen-political role incongruence, political-administrative role incongruence, and administrative-citizen role incongruence.

Citizen-political role incongruence mostly deals with the difference in expectation regarding where citizens’ involvement ends and political responsibility starts. Respondent 6 points out,
“in several cases citizens proposed ideas and expected that after the discussions in the neighborhood council their tasks and involvement were finished; while, politicians tried to hold on to the citizens as much as possible to legitimize their policies and activities.” As a consequence, some ‘citizen participants’ felt as if they were ‘doing the job of the neighborhood administration and aldermen’ in their spare time without getting paid for the extra activities (respondent 1). According to respondent 1, this is one of the explanations why after a very promising start of the SvW platform in 2017 less proposals were collected in the months June, July and August of that same year (see figure 1). Promotors of the proposals simply did not want to carry the amount of work necessary to implement their ideas.

Political-administrative role incongruence has to do with the impact of the ad hoc decision-making, which follows from the digital democracy process, on the long-term goals of the administrative organization. To elucidate, respondent 1 argues that due to the rise in digital participation, and thereby the increased need to respond quickly to citizens’ demands, two ‘speeds’ have come to co-exist in the administrative organization. One ‘political’ speed that urges civil servants to ensure as soon as possible that ‘accepted’ citizen-proposals are executed; and a ‘slower’ bureaucratic speed that considers the long-term goals of the neighborhood administration. An example of the latter ‘speed’ are plans to restructure a road intersection. To execute these plans, civil servants have to budget (and contract) in advance the possible costs for adapting the sewer system or drawing the new set-up of the intersection. These administrative tasks can collide with a citizen’s demand, after a successful digital democracy initiative, to adapt an unsafe pedestrian crossing as quickly as possible. As a result, civil servants sometimes experience that political executives are too involved in micro-managing in the hope to speed up the implementation of a citizen’s proposal instead of just keeping overview of the broader administrative processes.

The last, administrative-citizen, role incongruence can be understood as the result of citizens’ frustration about ‘civil servant’s actions who do not know what is happening on the streets’ and the need of civil servants to put more expertise in the proposals that are discussed on SvW’s digital platform (respondent 6). We interpret this role incongruence as a lack of knowledge sharing in different stages of the policy-making process between citizens and civil servants. After a citizen’s proposal gains a majority of votes on the platform and in the neighborhood council, a civil servant has to execute the plan in close collaboration with the
promotors of the plan (if the promotors are willing to be involved in the execution phase). However, when drafting a proposal, the citizens lack the knowledge about, for example, underground cables or existing land-use plans; making it sometimes impossible for civil servants to fully execute the proposals of the citizens. When civil servants have to give ‘the bad news’ to the plan promotors they occasionally get the response from citizens that they ‘do not know what the citizens of Amsterdam-West want’ or ‘that the neighborhood administration must work for the people and not vice versa’. After conflict resolution sessions, however, most of the time the collaboration between civil servants and citizens went very smoothly and resulted in a more feasible policy outcome (respondent 6).

In the first year of the experiment, these role incongruences were taken for granted. The neighborhood aldermen viewed these role incongruences as a part of the learning curve of the experiment (respondent 6). Moreover, the funding of the digital democracy initiative was only temporary – as three years of funding was devoted to the development of the tool and 50.000 euro in 2017 was budgeted for ‘a small experiment’. However, when the project, after a positive evaluation of the SvW tool, received more structural (i.e. permanent) funding, stakeholders decided to make some repairments to overcome the role incongruences. In this way, the digital participation initiative had to become less of an ‘island’ compared to the rest of the administrative organization (respondent 1). Specifically, three repairments were made:

1. Before a proposal would be put on the agenda of a neighborhood council meeting, a responsible civil servant would write an advisory report with regard to the feasibility of the proposal;
2. After a proposal would obtain sufficient support on the platform and in the neighborhood council, a broad commission of politicians, citizens and civil servants would be established to monitor the progress of the implementation of the proposal. When within the administration the implementation would be delayed, this commission had the right to intervene or to straighten things out;
3. Civil servants would receive more training and education to become more acquainted with digital forms of citizen participation and ways to show a more open-attitude towards citizens’ involvement.
It is still too early to assess the impact of these changes (respondent 1). Nonetheless, we can argue that after a year of experimenting with the digital tool the organizational side of the initiative has adapted itself in such a way that hopefully the different ‘spheres of activity’ become more aligned to ensure closer links between citizens’ input and organizational throughput. In the next section, we examine the ‘output’ of the digital initiative and assess what after a year of experimenting has been the substantive impact of the digital democracy process on the policy-making and citizen participation activities in Amsterdam-West.

2.4.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

The success of the Stem van West Initiative for most part depends on the managerial efforts of the coordinator and the political support from the alderman. They can be considered the ‘champions’ of the process (respondent 3). During the entire process they have personally undertaken various interpersonal management approaches with involved stakeholders to ensure that noses pointed in the same direction. With interpersonal management approaches one has to consider the focus on the relationships between actors involved and the difficulty people can experience in designing and implementing the digital democracy process. Managerial activities regarding interpersonal management approaches relate to aspects of mediation, motivating, catalysing, learning, storytelling, information-sharing, resource-sharing, trust building, and the management of discomforts (respondents 3 and 9). Motivating and catalysing turned out to be crucial to spur creativity in the digital democracy process. In particular, these activities were focused on ensuring that interactions between stakeholders got an added value, in the sense that creative and out-of-the-box policies were designed and discussed. Lastly, the champions were particularly good at communicating to ‘stakeholders’ outside the collaborative arrangement. They invested a lot of time in keeping in touch with civil society organizations, private companies, but also political representatives, to ensure that the digital democracy process would be properly embedded in the neighbourhood dynamics.

2.4.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

So far, we have looked at the development of the SvW tool and how the digital tool and the digital participation process functions. However, to make a good assessment of the success of the SvW platform we also need to consider the substantive impact of the digital democracy process on the policy-making activities in Amsterdam-West. With substantive impact we
mean whether citizen participation has increased and whether a broad range of topics have found their way to the neighbourhood council’s political agenda. In March 2018 there were new neighbourhood elections. In the months after the elections the digital tool was barely used due to activities for moulding a new coalition of political parties governing the neighbourhood administration. Hence, to make a genuine assessment of the substantive impact of the digital democracy initiative we kept March 2018 as end date for our analysis.

From the Digital Unit, we got the information that in one year’s time, 28963 unique visitors participated on the digital platform. Of this group of visitors 6987 people actively launched a proposal, commented on a proposal, or voted for a proposal. According to respondent 6, these figures prove that the digital tool is able to reach a broader audience than organizing participation through so-called ‘neighbourhood meetings’. Most of the time, these evenings attract twenty to forty ‘usual suspects’, i.e. citizens who already have regular contact with politicians and civil servants. Hence, based on these statistics the neighbourhood council concluded that it was worthwhile to make the digital participation process more permanent (respondent 1).

Respondents 9 and 10 are, however, more critical of this reading. According to them, “the active participants who take the initiative to launch proposals on the digital platform – which can be considered as the most time-consuming task – still are the usual suspects.” In their view, there is a certain Matthew effect; implying that digital participation has become another vehicle for the usual suspects to communicate their policies and plans. Groups that are not reached by ordinary participation processes are barely reached by digital participation either. Instead the usual suspects manage to link more bystanders (from their own neighbourhood networks) to their ideas by asking them through Facebook or offline promotion to support their initiatives. To this end, the neighbourhood council cannot paint the picture that, “new audiences are targeted and reached with the digital participation tool”, according to respondents 9 and 10.

Substantively, the digital tool has offered a broad variety of arguments and proposals. Table 2 provides information about the online deliberations on the SvW platform. In total, 71 proposals were launched in one-year’ time. 25 of the 71 proposals obtained enough societal support in terms of getting more than 100 likes on the digital platform. This equals 35.2% of
the total amount of proposals. On average, each proposal received 7.5 comments. Most of these comments were in favour of the proposal. Nevertheless, each proposal also received negative feedback, which – according to respondent 1 – also helped the politicians to get a better gist of what citizens’ attitudes were towards an idea. 13 of the 71 proposals (equals 18.3%) received enough political support in the neighbourhood council to be executed. This also means that nearly half of the citizens’ proposal did not gain enough political support. Respondent 6 points out, “in one situation it occurred that citizens wanted to turn a green area into a local vegetable garden, but they were unaware of the fact that the green space was not a public space but belonged to a flat on the opposite side of the street.” In other situations, respondent 6 continues, “the proposals did not consider other interests in the neighbourhood, for example, citizens who were against specific walking areas for dog-owners, or the neighbourhood council could not execute the proposals because they did not possess the political mandate to do so”. On the whole, more than 7600 votes were given on the digital platform and more than 500 arguments in favor or against.

Table 2: Statistical information about deliberations in the SvW project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information about deliberations in Stem van West (reference data: March 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of discussions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of votes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes in favor:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes against:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total amount of arguments:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments in favor:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguments against:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of discussions with enough political support:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of discussions with enough societal support:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 shows the amount of online initiatives on the digital SvW platform per month. In terms of participation intensity, two proposal peaks can be identified. These peaks were at the start of the digital initiative, and in November 2017. Respondent 1 explains, “in the beginning, we (i.e. ‘the neighborhood council’) campaigned through the local broadcasting agency AT5 and we did target marketing on Facebook to ask specific groups of people to submit proposals.” In consequence, the neighborhood council received 26 citizens’ proposals in the first 3 months. This also entailed, however, quite a lot of extra work for the neighborhood council members and the civil servants. Therefore, the neighborhood administration stopped campaigning for the digital democracy initiative after April 2017. However, at a certain point the number of online proposals decreased. This decrease in the amount of proposals can partly be explained by the fact that politicians and citizens are on holiday in the summer period (respondent 1). In addition, some promotors of proposals realized that their task was not only limited to submitting an idea, but also to help with the implementation of the idea. This extra responsibility made some people hesitant to submit a new, or help with another, proposal (respondent 6).

Around October, political parties started campaigning for the upcoming neighborhood elections. This brought back some new energy and political discussions in the neighborhood (respondent 6). Political parties took more opportunities to proliferate their viewpoints by organizing many meet-ups in the neighborhood. For citizens, this created, at the same time, the opportunity to (strategically) gain more support for their wishes and demands, because, according to respondent 1, “politicians wanted to show that they understood the citizen’s needs.” In consequence, we observe a rise in the amount of proposals that were submitted on the digital SvW tool in November 2017. Now, on average, 3-4 new ideas are submitted monthly. These figures tell us that the intensity of the digital participation process depends on whether or not the administration decides to actively promote the opportunity to join the digital participation initiative and whether or not a lot of political activity (e.g. upcoming elections) takes place in the neighborhood.
Figure 1: The amount of online initiatives on the digital SvW platform per month

Table 3 categorizes all 71 proposals into type of issue and uses the metrics of votes and responses to see what sort of issues had a higher propensity to gain societal support (i.e. votes in favor) and political support (i.e. be executed after approval from the neighborhood council). Three interesting findings come up in the table. First of all, citizens submit quite a lot of proposals which belong to the policy areas of greening, mobility, spatial planning and waste management. According to respondent 8, “this is mainly because these are issues which are tangible to people; they see a road, cars or green areas every day when they cycle or drive to work.” She continues, “only a small group of people, mostly experts, care, for example, about the data storage of the neighborhood administration, the local art gallery, or smart bicycle lanes.”
Secondly, most political throughput can be found in the fields of greening and leisure. Respondent 6 explains, “greening the area is in the current political climate also a priority of many higher-level governments.” These higher-level governments provide a lot of funding opportunities for such greening projects. The neighborhood council can thus support these ‘green area projects’ without spending ‘own money’ to the citizen initiatives simply by asking higher-level governments for funding. According to respondent 1, “support for these citizens’ initiatives are thus easy and quick wins for political parties in the neighborhood council.”

Thirdly, most topics received a very few ‘negative’ responses. This indicates that genuine debate – with good argumentation structures in favor and against the proposal – did not really emerge on the digital platform. As a result, developers of the SvW tool are currently rethinking how more interaction on the SvW tool can be generated through certain incentives and redesign of the platform’s interface (respondent 7 & 8). In fact, in November 2018 an updated digital tool was launched in Amsterdam-West (respondent 6).

### Table 3: Categorization of proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount of proposals</th>
<th>Total votes</th>
<th>Votes in favor</th>
<th>Votes against</th>
<th>Total reactions</th>
<th>Positive reactions</th>
<th>Negative reactions</th>
<th>Political impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture and Art</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greening</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1301</td>
<td>1241</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cohesion</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial planning</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1108</td>
<td>1054</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste management</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

The current case analysis demonstrated that despite the positive connotations of the word ‘digital democracy’ and the high expectations policymakers have with regard to the potential of digital democracy tools, in reality, it takes a lot of effort, time, and (incremental) adaptability of the governance- and democratic structure to incorporate digital democracy processes in the bureaucratic machinery of a neighbourhood administration. On the basis of the current case analysis three types of uncertainties: 1) product, 2) substantive and 3) strategic uncertainty can be distilled. These uncertainties need to be managed and nurtured in order to bring a digital democratic experiment, such as the Stem van West, to a good end. The three types of uncertainties were not equally present in the case and they were quite interrelated. Nevertheless, for each type of uncertainty a lesson can be drawn regarding how a manager can contribute to the maturation of a digital democracy project in a local context.

Firstly, product uncertainty refers to the complexity for developing a digital participation tool, as a new decision-making channel, next to existing democratic arrangements and governmental practices. The first lesson relates to the way the digital democracy tool ‘Stem van West’ was developed. Specifically, it took around three years’ time to work towards a full-fledged digital tool which could one-on-one be incorporated in the neighbourhood administration’s apparatus. To achieve this, the developers followed a very incremental process in which not only was tested what the different user preferences were of participants of the digital participation process, but also – through proto-testing – how the digital democracy process, as an extra channel of decision-making, would impact the governance processes for the neighbourhood council members and civil servants. Especially, with the development of a Minimum Viable Product, developers consciously added new features to the digital participation tool based on the experiences that followed from feedback from participants and other involved actors. In this sense, the development process was open, transparent and inviting for actors to join and contribute to the product development process.

Hence, on the basis of these case dynamics, we advise neighborhood administrations, or other levels of government, which are also interested in adding a digital democracy tool to their participation toolbox, to take sufficient time to come up with a product that is ready to tailor usage to the needs and interests of those participating in the digital democracy process. This
first lesson has some resonance in the digital government literature. West (2005: 16), for example, argues that the democratic performance of digital participation tools increases if developers critically assess, and thereby take the time to see, whether new features of a digital tool (ranging from simple things such as placing audio or visual materials online to more interactive mechanisms of communication that allow citizens to vote, make comments on proposed ideas, etc.) actually improve the ability of citizens to leave their mark on a decision-making process.

Secondly, substantive uncertainty springs from the different perceptions individuals (can) have about the nature of problems, their causes, and possible solutions. An important lesson stands out in the case study: if managers of a digital democracy process do not reach out to influential people in the neighbourhood and promote the possibility to suggest new policies on the open-source tool, deliberation on the digital platform and a bigger offline reach than non-digital participation tools will not occur. In the Amsterdam-West case, the digital participation tool has mostly become another vehicle for the usual suspects, who often already have strong ties with the neighbourhood administration, to communicate their plans and policies (remember the Matthew effect). With the online digital tool, they have been able to link more bystanders from their own social networks in the neighbourhood to their ideas. Although, creating this accumulation effect for the usual suspects was initially not the goal of the neighborhood administration, they started facilitating the offline promotion of the ideas of the usual suspects as the number of visitors and participants on the digital tool rapidly increased. In addition, they introduced target marketing to stimulate (other) people to also add ideas to the digital platform’s interface. The effects of these interventions were most noticeable just after the intervention took place, as the amount of online initiatives peaked in the two months after the promotional activities of the neighborhood administration up to the level that civil servants requested to stop the Facebook advertisements and target marketing as they drowned in new workload. Therefore, the neighborhood administration did not really intervene substantively in the online discussions, they mainly tried to optimize the conditions for debate. Their efforts, thus, show that understanding the offline neighborhood dynamics, and base your promotional activities on these social dynamics, help to stimulate greater online engagement to citizen proposals.
Lastly, strategic uncertainty relates to the choices that actors involved can make with regard to implementing output following from discussions on a digital tool. An important lesson is that stakeholders of a multi-actor digital democracy project must in the implementation phase discuss and overcome incongruent role expectations to avoid that demanded tasks and activities are not executed due to strict task delineations and entrenched role positions. This lesson stresses the importance of a manager as an ‘expectation- and task manager’ in digital democracy processes. In our case, we specifically saw, in terms of strategic uncertainty, that stakeholders were foremost busy with what they perceived what their own tasks were in the digital democracy process. In addition, they were reluctant to take on the ‘extra’ tasks other stakeholders expected from them. Just like Huxham and Vangen (2005), however, we believe that a real collaborative advantage (in our case: efficient implementation of citizen’s proposals) can only be created if stakeholders do not hold on too much to their own task instructions and priorities, but instead also take some risk by seeking for more convergence with their partners’ skill, tasks and expectations. Especially, when organizational flexibility is requested with a new ‘digital democracy’ decision-making channel that is being established next to existing democracy- and governance processes within the neighborhood administration’s apparatus.

The described practices in the thick description that are suggested to be beneficial to the use of digital participation tools, can have a smaller positive impact on citizen participation and democracy than proclaimed. Therefore, in prospective studies, more attention should be devoted to digital participation dynamics where the involved actors were not satisfied with the results of the experiment. In this way, the research niche of digital participation and democracy can further mature, and thereby enrich the scholarly debates about how under varying circumstances digital tools can spur citizen’s involvement in the decision-making processes in the public sector.

References


2.5. Norway: E-participation Platform “Minsak.no”

Andree Pruin

2.5.1 Introduction

‘minsak.no’ is an ICT tool implemented in 2013 by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (from 2014, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation), which enables petitions to be submitted online and centrally across all Norwegian municipalities and regions. E-petition is often described as the digitisation of previously analogue petition data, such as names and signatures (Lindner & Riehm 2009). However, ‘minsak.no’ is more advanced as it offers supplementary, publicly accessible information and additional participation and discussion opportunities that potentially make petitions more collaborative. Generally, a distinction is made between different forms of e-petitions. First, informal petitions initiated and implemented by non-governmental actors (e.g. change.org). Such e-petitions do not necessarily follow a formal framework and are not an instrument of direct democracy. Rather, they are a part of political campaigns or public protests. Secondly, e-petitions initiated by state actors and oriented at least to a certain degree to an institutional framework and legally binding documents. ‘minsak.no’ represents the second type (Lindner & Riehm 2009).

The following case study focuses on answering the following questions: What influence does the political-administrative context in Oslo have on the performance of ‘minsak.no’? And vice versa: What influence does the tool have on the political-administrative system? The empirical analysis is based on a document analysis of the respective media coverage, official documents, press releases and the website content itself. In addition, four semi-structured expert interviews with officials from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation responsible for the realisation and running of ‘minsak.no’ and employees in the biggest Norwegian city administration of Oslo were conducted, to investigate how this tool affects municipal governance.

25 https://minsak.no/
2.5.2 Overview of the national context

Historically, Norway is a comparatively homogeneous society with collectivistic and strong egalitarian norms and values. Although the Norwegian society has shown some tendencies towards pluralization since the millennium (Christensen 2003, 176), these characteristics are still reflected in the political-administrative system. Norway has a unitary system of government (Lægreid et al. 2013, 8) with a highly democratic and consensus-oriented tradition. As a result of the universal welfare state, Norway has a rather large public sector (Kuhlmann & Wollmann 2014, 100).

Norway is characterised by a consensual and collaborative mode of decision-making. As a state that is strongly influenced by corporatist decision-making arrangements, the focus is on consultation and compromise. Moreover, Norway is characterized by a comparably high level of mutual trust between public sector organizations and central actors in politics and economics (Christensen & Lægreid 2002). Also, most citizens have a fairly high trust in central political and administrative institutions and individual actors (Rothstein & Stolle 2003; Olsen 1983). In contrast to many other Western European countries, the often proclaimed ‘institutional crisis’ in western democracies seems to be less significant in Norway. Nevertheless, the social democratic welfare state has been challenged by various developments. An indicator of this is for example the increasing number of new social movements and citizen initiatives (Groß & Rotholz 2009). These groups benefit from a traditionally high level of participation of the population (Olsen & Sætren 1980).

Moreover, the rather strong role of local self-government in Norway is crucial for the understanding of the institutional context of ‘minsak.no’. The nineteen administrative regions, i.e. ‘county municipalities’ (fylkeskommuner), and the 429 municipalities (kommune) implement policies that are decided at central governmental level, but also enjoy considerable political and administrative autonomy (Lægreid et al. 2013, 8). The most important welfare services are delivered at local level (Christensen et al. 2014). Principal tasks of the municipalities today include education, social welfare, road construction as well as water supply and sewage disposal. Municipalities and regions can also issue their own regulations (Groß & Rotholz 2009). Nevertheless, there is an expectation that policies at the local or
regional level should not show too much divergence from the national level (Lægreid et al. 2013, 8).

The city of Oslo, which is examined in this study, differs from other municipalities in Norway in so far as it is both a city (the capital of Norway), a municipality, and a regional municipality. Oslo’s system of governance is based on a parliamentary system since 1986. The previously existing system of proportional representation was replaced by the parliamentary majority principle. The city parliament (Bystyret), consisting of 59 city representatives, elects the mayor of the city, who also heads the city government (Byrådet). The city parliament is at the same time the regional parliament (Fylkesting). It is divided into five Standing Committees: Finance, Health and Welfare, Urban Development, Education and Cultural Affairs, and Transport and Environmental Affairs. The city parliament is backed in its work by a secretary, which is not a political entity, but part of the city administration (Oslo kommune 2019).

Until 2003, political participation besides elections was primarily based on direct, informal contact with elected representatives (Riehm et al. 2009). The municipal right to petition was introduced in 2003 as a reaction to a decline in voter turnout in local elections. The introduction of a municipal right of petitioning was aimed at counteracting this (Riehm et al. 2009). Today, §39a of the Municipal Act gives Norwegian citizens the right to put forward a petition. Local and regional legislative bodies are obliged to deal with the petitioners’ proposal if at least two percent of the population signed a petition. 300 signatures are sufficient, if the municipality has 15,000 residents or more, whereas in regions, 500 signatures are needed to submit the petition (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2014a).

As a result of this legislation, the first electronic petition system was developed in 2005. It was introduced in 14 smaller municipalities. The objectives associated with the introduction of the electronic petition system were to make the right to petition more widely known, to increase its use, to facilitate access to the petition system, to increase the transparency of the procedure, to enhance the supply of information and to mobilise younger age groups (Riehm et al. 2009). However, the number of petitions was very small. In addition to the current state-initiated petition platform ‘minsak.no’, there are also privately-run initiatives. Some of them have significantly higher user numbers (e.g. "underskrift.no"). Also, on these platforms legally
binding petitions can be conducted, since §39a of the Norwegian Municipal Act does not exclude them.

There are relatively few projects that promote the use of e-participation in Norway (Joseph & Avdic 2016). Gidlund (2015) argues that different, sometimes conflicting logics shape this medium development of e-services. Economic intentions like cost reduction and efficiency, for example, would be difficult to combine with democratisation. According to the eGovernment Benchmark 2018 (European Union 2018), Norway is one of the European leaders in the digitisation of public services. Especially in the categories 'Business start-up', 'Family life', 'Losing and finding a Job', 'Regular business operations' and 'Owing and driving a car', Norway performs well above average compared to the other EU28+ countries.

2.5.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

‘minsak.no’, founded in January 2013, is an online petition tool that can be used to submit petitions at the regional and municipal level within the framework of §39a of the Norwegian Municipal Act. The use of ICT in this process shall simplify the use of the rights granted by §39a of the Norwegian Municipal Act.

‘minsak.no’ is intended to be a low-threshold way for citizens to voice their interests to the local government via computer, smartphone or tablet. ‘minsak.no’ shall contribute to a more active local democracy in which citizens can put issues on the local political agenda and discuss them in the municipal and regional councils. Moreover, the need to deal with the concerns of citizens is intended to increase the responsiveness of local democratic bodies (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2014b).

‘minsak.no’ can be used in any municipality and any region in Norway. All citizens of a municipality or region, incl. residents under the voting age of 18 years can submit their proposals and sign others. Therefore, there are no restrictions regarding the age of the initiators of a petition, nor regarding the signatories. If a proposal reaches a certain number of signatures, the local government has to deal with the suggestion. The municipal or regional council shall decide on the matter within six months after it has received the successful petition. Issues that do not reach enough signatures within 12 months will be closed. The petitions may only be signed by residents of the respective municipality or county.
municipality. For this purpose, all signatories must provide their name, address and zip code. Further authentication is not necessary in order to keep the effort for the signatories as low as possible. Petitioners must register, however. After the petitioner has collected enough signatures, the petition can be sent to the respective municipality or region. The signature list will not be closed once enough signatures have been collected. In principle, an unlimited number of people can sign. The number of signatures is then listed on the website, but it has no direct effect on the subsequent process. If a petition receives enough signatures, this does not mean, however, that the content of the petition must also be implemented. Successful petitions only serve the purpose of agenda-setting. Petitions submitted must be within the scope of responsibilities and tasks of municipalities or regions in Norway. If the petition is outside the jurisdiction of the municipality or region, the council may reject it. This is also the case if the council has already dealt with the same matter in the respective legislative period (Dagsavisen 2016). Petitions which concern a current planning procedure are excluded from this (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019).

On the start page of ‘minsak.no’, one will first find links to submitted cases that are in process of signatures collection. Here the responsible municipality or region is mentioned, as well as the number of signatures already made. It is also possible to search for specific municipalities or regions to get an overview of all relevant projects in that geographical area. In addition, one can search all petitions by name and location and sort by indicators such as ‘date’, ‘status’ or ‘number of signatures’. On the subpage ‘Føreslå ei sak’ (‘Suggest a case’) a new petition can be created. In order to do so, the petitioners have to register first. This is necessary to be able to send the petition to the municipalities or the region if there are enough signatures. The petitioner can write a short text to describe his or her concern on the subpages of the respective proposal. Once posted, texts cannot be changed afterwards. This is to prevent the content of a petition from being abusively altered later. It is also possible to upload a picture related to the petition, so that the intention and circumstances of the issue are more illustrative. Other users then have the opportunity to sign, view previous signatories or comment on the project. The comments are sorted by date. In order to actively promote the petition, it is possible for petitioners and supporters to share ‘minsak.no’ petitions on social media platforms and via e-mail. Another subpage (‘Retningslinjer’, in English: ‘Guidelines’) explains the legal framework. This FAQ explains the most important formal rules within which
‘minsak.no’ operates (number of signatures, authorized persons, process, etc.). A last subpage answers frequently asked questions about the portal (‘Spørsmål og svar’, in English: ‘Questions and Answers’). The website is available in all official Norwegian languages: Bokmål, Nynorsk and Sami. The first two languages are the standard varieties of the Norwegian language (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019). ‘minsak.no’ is also adapted to the needs of people with visual impairments (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019).

**Figure 2: Number of petitions submitted in Oslo on ‘minsak.no’ by year**

![Graph showing number of petitions submitted in Oslo on ‘minsak.no’ by year](image)

*Source: Graph and calculation based on: Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019, * January until June 2019*

Neither the ministry responsible for ‘minsak.no’, nor the municipality of Oslo, collects data on the frequency of use. However, all active and past petitions are available on the website. According to this data, the arithmetic mean is 30.8 petitions (median: 28) per year (excluding 2019). The number of petitions submitted reached a significant peak in 2014 (52 petitions submitted), one year after the launch of the portal. The year 2016 also marked a peak with 39 petitions submitted. In the year with the highest number of petitions submitted (2014, 52 petitions), only 20 petitions reached the required number of signatures though. The arithmetic average of this figure of 16.2 (median: 17) is not significantly lower (Figure 1). The
most successful petitions, in terms of the number of signatures, both deal with the issue of city tolls in Oslo. They were signed by 36,871 and 5,684 people respectively. This was followed by a petition to preserve a recreational area (4,708 signatures).

‘minsak.no’ was originally developed on the initiative of the former Minister Liv Signe Navarsete (from the Centre Party) and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (from 2014: The Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation). The tool was introduced under her successor Jan Tore Sanner (from the Conservative Party).

2.5.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

‘minsak.no’ is operated and managed by the Department of Local Government (Kommunalavdelingen) inside the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. Within the department, the section for Elections and Local Democracy (Seksjon for valg og lokaldemokrati), which is responsible for questions of local citizen participation, is in charge of the project. One employee of the section is primarily responsible for the operation, moderation and further development of the platform. However, the employee is not exclusively responsible for ‘minsak.no’. In fact, the administration of ‘minsak.no’ is only a small part of her work. The technical realisation of the website is carried out by two external service providers. They are responsible for the technical operation and hosting of the website.

Since the ministry itself only provides the website and moderates the processes, the remaining responsibility for processing the (successful) petitions lies with the administrations and political decision-makers of the municipalities and regions themselves. They are the ones who receive the successful petitions and then deal with them further. After a petition has reached a sufficient number of signatures, it can be forwarded by the petitioner to the municipality concerned. Here, the person or unit responsible for the administration of the city council receives an e-mail. In the case of Oslo, this is the Bystyret (city council) administration.

The e-mail contains the text describing the petition, the name of the petitioner and a list of all the persons who signed the petition. The first step within the administration is to check whether the subject of the petition falls within the jurisdiction of Oslo. If it does not, the petition will be rejected by the administration. Also, if a petition on the same subject has already been debated and decided during the current legislative period, the administration
can reject the petition. This does not mean though, that petitions on the same subject should not be dealt with again. However, the petitioner has no right to have the issue debated in the city council. Now, a random check within the administration is made to see whether the people who signed the petition are residents of the city of Oslo. According to the interviewees, however, this is not checked in the population register. It is only checked whether the addresses given exist in Oslo. If the petition meets the formal criteria, it is forwarded in written form to the parliamentary groups of the city council (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019). The petitions are then discussed in the parliamentary groups and debated in the city council.

Moreover, it is above all the municipalities and regions that make proposals for the revision of the website. For instance, representatives of the municipalities and regions proposed the implementation of the Sami language on the website. If the ministry agrees, it then implements changes to the website in cooperation with the technical service providers. However, this does not lead to constant contact between the municipalities and regions and the ministry. The contacts are rather loose, situational and informal.

The costs of the website are regularly financed from the ministry's budget. Since only one person is directly responsible for the website, the personnel costs for operating the website within the ministry are relatively low, so the platform has no major impact on the organisational budget. As already mentioned, however, the petitions are processed elsewhere – in the municipalities and regions. Since the ICT tool mainly digitises existing routines, the process is not a major novelty compared to already established organisational routines. However, further processing is much simpler, as municipal administrators do not have to digitise handwritten signature lists, as is the case with ‘traditional’ petitions. In principle, though, the potential increase in the number of petitions means that municipalities and regions may (in the future) incur additional effort – administrative and political – regarding the e-petitions. However, this is only an assumption of the interviewees. In Oslo, the figures since the introduction of the platform are relatively constant and decrease rather than increase (see Figure 2).
2.5.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

The decision to initiate ‘minsak.no’ is mainly linked to the former minister Liv Signe Navarsete. A scientific study (not commissioned by the government) on the variance in the participation behaviour of citizens across different municipalities showed that in municipalities that offered the possibility of carrying out petitions on the internet, more petitions were submitted. This finding motivated the Minister to commission a nationwide portal through which citizens of all Norwegian municipalities and regions could submit a petition online with the aim of increasing the quantity of petitions and getting more people interested in (local) democracy. The decision to initiate such a portal was therefore primarily a normative and political one.

As already mentioned, only one person in the ministry is regularly entrusted with ‘minsak.no’. A typical working week of this employee does not require more than two hours of work to manage the website. The responsible staff member then only checks the petitions. This means that she reviews all the petitions and comments posted on the site. In particular, she examines whether the petitions and comments correspond to the “netiquette” of the website. If they do not, they are usually deleted without further action. The same employee - along with other employees - is also entrusted with the conception of other e-participation formats, which, however, has not yet been made public. Since the petitions are submitted to the municipalities and regions, however, the effort of further processing increases in the local administrations.

Also here the employees in the secretariat of the city parliament regard the effort as manageable, since the processing of the signatories' data has been reduced by the absence of media breaks. For the politicians in the city council on the other hand, it basically makes no difference whether the petition is submitted online or in writing. The parliamentary groups only receive the version already revised by the administration. In this respect, a petition on ‘minsak.no’ does not differ from "analogue" petitions. The responsible persons in Oslo mention that they can imagine that more petitions would have to be processed in the future due to the digitalisation of the process. However, this assumption cannot be confirmed since the introduction of the platform (see Figure 1).

2.5.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

The Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation does not systematically evaluate the website based on performance indicators, such as success or number of submissions.
Similarly, no monitoring has been conducted on the number, frequency, or substantial scope of transmitted petitions to the municipalities lead to local policy changes. Consequently, no figures are available on how many petitions were submitted to the municipalities before the launch of the platform and after. However, such evaluations were also not intended, this is also related to the local self-autonomy, i.e. municipalities and regions should address petitions autonomously. Also, the city administration in Oslo collects no statistics on the number of petitions, but municipal officials reported a clear increase after the introduction of ‘minsak.no’.

Since the introduction of the tool in 2013, however, there has been no sustained increase in the number of petitions submitted to ‘minsak.no’ in Oslo based on the website’s data. Rather, the number of petitions is stagnating (see Section 2.5.3; Fig. 2; Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2019). The years 2014 and 2016 were exceptions with 52 and 39 petitions submitted respectively. However, only 20 and 23 petitions found sufficient support. A cautious assumption for this circumstance could be a brief peak of public attention, for example through media coverage in the initial phase of the portal. Previous studies show that initial high level of participation rates in eParticipation procedures frequently declines and has a tendency to stagnate (Zepic et al. 2017). Another reason for the rather low total number of petitions submitted could be the existence of private e-petition portals such as "underskrift.no". This portal accepts petitions at all political levels and therefore has a higher number of total users. If sufficient number of signatures according to §39a Municipal Act is collected on this website, they can also be submitted to the municipality.

Yet, in recent years, the share of successful petitions increased from 59 per cent in 2016 to 74 per cent in 2017 and 2018, which could indicate that the platform is now mainly used by citizens with strong mobilization potential. Another reason could be that there has been a learning effect in dealing with the platform. It remains unclear though how many of the successful petitions were dealt with in the city parliament (i.e. were not rejected beforehand), as the administration does not distinguish between ‘handwritten’ petitions and online petitions.

Since no demographic factors are requested from the users of the website, it is also not possible to conclude whether the signatories are representative for the population. However,
petitioners are often involved in local politics. Supporters of the petitions would presumably also come primarily from the social environment of these citizens, e.g. family, friends and other citizens involved in local politics.

The comment function of the website allows the ministry to moderate the discussion, which is not used for active intervention but only for sanctioning the violations of the “netiquette” of ‘minsak.no’. Moreover, users rarely use this comment function and also rarely refer to each other and thus no real discussions emerge. One interviewed local politician stated that the comments had not yet played a role in the decision-making within her parliamentary group. Interaction with citizens is therefore limited to petitions that are debated in the city council. In this case, the local politicians have to comment on the facts. In addition, the petitioner has the right to speak at the Council meeting and may present his or her case.

Moreover, ‘minsak.no’ lacks a tool to monitor the success or failure of a petition. In Oslo’s case, interested users can consult a different website, the electronic documentation system of the Oslo administration, to inform themselves about the processing of the petition. From a democratic theory perspective this may be regarded as problematic since the democratic decisions following a petition are neither transparent nor justified. Therefore, signatories of petitions in many cases do not know whether their signature had an effect, and if so, to what extent. However, political action in a democracy is dependent on consent and therefore also requires justification.

Regarding the throughput perspective, the interviewees considered the greatest benefit of ‘minsak.no’ to be a reduction in the workload, both within the administration and for the petitioners. On the administration side, all data is digitised immediately after the petition is submitted, which is not the case with conventional procedures. Previously, it was occasionally very difficult to identify all the names and addresses of the signatories. Also, it was a very time-consuming procedure. Now it is possible to simply copy the names of the signatures into an Excel table. The petitioners, on the other hand, would no longer have to laboriously collect signatures on the street. Firstly, interested citizens received proposals for petitions relevant to them on the website itself. Much more decisive, however, is the possibility of sharing the petition with potentially affected or interested citizens via social networks or e-mail. Social networks are the central instrument for petitioners to make their concerns known. Well-
networked citizens, therefore, would be able to gather many signatures in a very short time. No respondents mentioned any noteworthy disadvantages. However, respondents in Oslo cited the increasing number of successful petitions as a potential challenge. So far, the number of successful petitions is still manageable. However, since there was the potential for a very rapid mobilisation of signatories for a petition, this could change in the future and exceed the capacities of the administration of the city parliament and of politicians. Since the introduction of ‘minsak.no’ in 2013, however, the number of petitions submitted has not risen; on the contrary, it has rather declined since 2014 (see Figure 2).

If one measures the success of petitions submitted by their effects on the concrete policy design, it is clear which kind of petitions are potentially more successful than others. As a good example, a project for the further use of an abandoned building in a residential area in Oslo was mentioned. One petitioner suggested that the building should be used as a kindergarten. This proposal was successful because it was relatively easy to implement and addressed a very specific issue. Other petitions, such as those calling for the reduction of nitrogen oxides in Oslo, are usually too vague and oftentimes connected to many other political decisions. Such concerns would therefore have very little chance of being directly implemented. The same applies to petitions that require very high investments. However, these petitions could be successful in a different way: Although they had no direct chance of being implemented, there was a chance that the issue gets visible in the public debate. Politicians would be sensitised to an issue and would have to take a position. Local media would possibly also report on the topic.

A prominent example was a petition on the city toll in Oslo. A political activist who had been protesting against the toll for some time demanded that members of all parliamentary groups in Oslo’s city parliament who voted for the introduction of such a toll should in future only be allowed to travel through the city by public transport. Although this petition was neither legally nor politically feasible it generated considerable media interest. In principle, therefore, it seems that issues that are concrete and politically less controversial have a greater chance of being implemented. Also, more far-reaching issues, which are more conflict-prone, can be successful in the sense that they can create public and political awareness.
In principle, all interviewees consider ‘minsak.no’ to be an effective instrument for implementing the right to petition. Petitions are thus easier to carry out and also easier to manage. The former is also recognisable from the probable increasing number of petitions submitted. Basically, the platform is mature and does not require any revision from the point of view of most respondents. However, one interviewee mentioned that she would remove the comment function of the website. This is particularly interesting given that it is the only interactive and potentially deliberative feature on the platform. However, the users would hardly relate to each other and exchange arguments, which is why the function was regarded as ineffective for the discussion.

2.5.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

The online platform ‘minsak.no’ promotes participation at the local and regional level in Norway. It can be regarded both as rather simple and straightforward, as well as effective and well-functioning. Next to the functional needs of such a platform that may be regarded as comparatively limited, the political-administrative and organisational settings also affect this overall assessment. On the one hand, ‘minsak.no’ is based on and was integrated into a legal framework that already existed before the portal was established. Hence, no radical changes in the legal framework were necessary, neither prior the launch of the tool nor since its inception. On the other hand, the platform is very compatible with existing working processes and routines in the administrations and in the politics of the municipalities and regions to which the petitions are addressed yet it does simplify these administrative (and political) processes. As a consequence, hardly any personnel or organisational costs occur in implementing and exercising e-petitions via this novel platform. However, it also did not motivate or inspire new or innovative forms of collaboration, either vertically between the central and the local level, neither among local administrations. More importantly, the pre-existing state-society relations remained the same, the rather rudimentary deliberative approach to allow for a commentary function on the platform is hardly used. State actors largely ignore the function. Basically, ‘minsak.no’ is for the most part just a matter of shifting an already established process to another medium. However, it does trigger implications for democratic quality.
‘minsak.no’ takes advantage of the high degree of participation in social media platforms by Norwegian citizens. Hence, sharing e-petitions in social media distributes petitions to a larger number of people within a shorter period of time. Although a petition is not necessarily directly implemented, it yields a legally binding effect. The city parliament is obliged to discuss the topic. There is little concern on the part of the administration or politicians that this system could be abused. One possible reason could be the high degree of mutual trust between representatives of the political-administrative system and the citizens. As a consequence, an increase in successful petitions is suspected by the administration and politicians – at least in Oslo. So far, this has not been empirically observable. One explanation for this could be the manifold contacts between citizens and politicians in Norway.

In turn, the expected higher demand for direct participation via ICT tools such as ‘minsak.no’ could shape the responsiveness of local and regional politics. It is highly unlikely that the platform will lead to greater representativeness in participation. This refers to two different yet interconnected aspects: First, the nature of the issue matters and proposals that are precise and easy to accomplish have a better chance to get implemented. Second, the petitioners to a large extent resemble those citizens who already participate frequently and thus do not necessarily represent the average Norwegian voter. A further problem is the lack of traceability of what happens to petitions in the political-administrative process after submission. The platform ‘minsak.no’ does not provide any tools or means to assess the consequences of submitted petitions on actual policy design in the respective municipality or region. Yet for citizens, the decisions and justifications are hardly transparent. Political decisions in a democracy, however, need to be justified.

References


2.6. Scotland: E-participation Practice "We asked, you said, we did"

Benedetta Bellò and James Downe

2.6.1 Introduction

This case study examines an example of an e-participation practice that promotes e-consultations and citizens/stakeholders’ involvement in policy design in the UK. We chose to analyse the Scottish government use of *We asked, you said, we did*, which is part of the platform called *Citizen Space* provided by a private company, *Delib*. The platform allows the Scottish government to engage with citizens/stakeholders on-line. *We asked, you said, we did* aims to involve the public in the decision-making process (*We asked, you said*), but it also makes explicit the actions policy-makers made as a result (*We did*).

A documentary analysis of Scottish public sector reform documents (e.g. *Scotland Community Empowerment Act, 2015*) and other relevant reports (e.g. Scotland’s Action Plan on Open Government) provides information on the national context that surrounded the introduction of the platform by the Scottish government. The case study then describes the e-participation initiative in detail, before examining its drivers, barriers and critical success factors at the national, organisational and individual level. The case study also examines the performance of *We asked, you said, we did*. In addition to the document analysis, thirteen expert interviews were conducted with different actors – a representative of *Delib*; senior managers of the Scottish government working in different policy areas (e.g. law, family, and property); and stakeholders that had used the e-participation practice and non-governmental partners involved in developing the initiative.

Interviewees were asked questions about three main areas – the socio-technical view, the project view and the democratic process view (Porwol et al., 2013) which aimed to overcome the overly techno-centric focus of e-participation research and to understand the socio-organizational realities behind the adoption of e-participation initiatives.
2.6.2 Overview of the national context

A stream of the literature emphasises the significance of national governments in adopting e-participation initiatives and implementing ICT policy strategies (Medaglia, 2012; Welch and Feeney, 2014; Wright, 2006). In order to establish ICT innovations that allow stakeholders and citizens to participate in policy design, and for them to be diffused widely, there needs to be clear and strong input from national governments (Sæbø et al. 2011). The Scottish government is committed to engaging stakeholders, communities, and citizens in the policymaking process and the way in which services are delivered. The national context, therefore, has strongly influenced the adoption and use of the Citizen Space platform and We asked, you said, we did. Scotland has a tradition of engaging citizens/stakeholders in the policy-making process, as one interviewee explained:

“Scottish government, when it was re-established by the Scotland Act in 1999 told parliament that we would consult the public on anything that came before parliament so there was a requirement from our side to do consultation as a particular thing”.

Moreover, as a different interviewee revealed:

“There’s a wider political will in the Scottish government to be as open and transparent as possible, to engage people more in the policymaking process ... making it easier for people to respond to consultations, to see the outcomes of those consultations, to see what other people have responded to in those consultations”.

There has been a range of legislation and policy over the last decade which has aimed to improve the way in which the Scottish government engages with the public. For example, the values of openness, accessibility, and public engagement are included in the National Performance Framework, to which all public services in Scotland must be aligned. The framework was originally developed in 2007, with the aim of encouraging more effective partnership working, reducing inequalities and giving equal importance to economic, environmental and social progress. It contains a set of national outcomes (e.g. living in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe, open, connected and making a positive contribution internationally) and measures Scotland’s progress against those outcomes through a set of national indicators (economic, social and environmental) that give
a measure of national wellbeing. The Scottish government expresses, through the Framework, “The desire to work with people rather than do stuff to them”. In fact, it works with a wide range of public sector partners (e.g. the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) to achieve the national outcomes.

The Scottish government has also contracted with the Scottish Community Development Centre26 (SCDC) to establish what good quality community engagement looks like. As one of the stakeholder interviewees said:

“Many people in Scotland were unhappy with the quality of community engagement that was happening, they felt that statutory agencies had already made decisions before they engaged the community. They felt that they were not fully part of the decision-making process”.

In 2005, the SCDC (funded by the Scottish government) proposed a framework made of ten National Standards for Community Engagement to shape the participation processes of public bodies. The framework was updated in 2007-2008 and now has seven standards (Inclusion, Support, Planning, Working Together, Methods, Communication, and Impact). There is also an online planning and evaluation tool (called VOiCE - Vision and Outcomes in Community Engagement) which assists individuals, organisations and partnerships to design and deliver effective community engagement. VOiCE is funded and published by the Scottish Government.

In 2010, the government established the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (called the ‘Christie Commission’). The aim of the Commission was to develop recommendations for the future delivery of public services. It concluded that services must be designed with, and for, people and communities - not delivered ‘top-down’ for administrative convenience.

26 A charity that aims at growing community development in Scotland and increasing the influence of community in policy development and in decisions that impact on their lives.
Scotland became a member of the Open Government Partnership\textsuperscript{27} (OGP) in 2016, which emphasises a partnership approach between government and civil society at all levels. In December 2018, the Scottish government published their Second Action Plan on Open Government as part of its programme to make government more inclusive, responsive and accountable. The plan contains five commitments including the following: “Providing a framework to support systemic change in Scottish Government to improve the way people are able to participate in open policy making and service delivery”. A multi-stakeholder steering group, composed of civil society members and government officials, has worked together to support participation and design solutions (including use of the \textit{Citizen Space} platform) to deliver outcomes. An interviewee explained that:

“We organised half a dozen events around Scotland to co-create ideas and to think about what Open Government could do and how useful it can be. We took the themes from that and developed them into specific commitments”.

This short summary of the national context shows how the Scottish government is committed to working with citizens and organisations, but most of the initiatives precede the introduction of e-participation as a method of engagement. We shall now turn to describing the e-participation initiative in more detail.

\textbf{2.6.3 Description of the e-participation initiative}

\textit{We asked, you said, we did} is a feature of \textit{Citizen Space}, a cloud-based software for managing, publicising and archiving all consultation activity in one place. It was designed in 2005 by \textit{Delib} with the latest version built in 2010. The company have been developing it iteratively since its’ launch in response to feedback from customers and changes in technology (e.g. the increasing use of mobiles). It was initially co-funded by the Central Office Information\textsuperscript{28} (50\% by government, 50\% by \textit{Delib}) to solve a requirement for a common way to consult across the

\textsuperscript{27} An international initiative with more than 65 participating countries that, since 2011, provides a platform for reformers inside and outside governments around the world to develop reforms that promote transparency, participation and accountability, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.

\textsuperscript{28} The UK government department responsible for providing marketing and advertising services to other organisations in the public sector, from 1946 to 2012, when it was closed.
central government and the problem of publishing consultations centrally. It is integrated within the Scottish government website.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Delib} is the owner of the platform and although it is a small company (approximately 20 employees in the UK and five in Australia and New Zealand) it provides \textit{Citizen Space} to more than 110 diverse organisations around the world (mainly in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand\textsuperscript{30}) including national and state governments, local authorities, healthcare, utilities, police, regulators and trusts. In Scotland, it is used by many Scottish local authorities (e.g. City of Edinburgh Council), governmental agencies (e.g. SEPA – Scottish Environment Protection Agency), the Scottish Police Authority, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Services.

\textit{We asked, you said, we did} is generally used for consultations on policies that have been designed, but it has been used for all the different stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting, policy analysis and preparation, policy formulation, policy implementation, policy monitoring, and policy evaluation). One interviewee explained that:

\begin{quote}
There are times where we do engagement, which is more sort of like crowdsourcing ideas. That would be the idea finding, idea generation stage. It can range a lot.
\end{quote}

The majority of interviewees said it was used for implementation. For example, the representative of \textit{Delib} said:

\begin{quote}
We do see a bit of policy implementation stuff ... We did a really interesting one last year or the year before around salmon fishing, which was all policy implementation and it was incredibly detailed”, and a manager said:

I think options appraisal is generally for formal consultation. You get a lot of, ‘The government’s position is this, but we’re looking to understand what the impact would be or how we should implement some things’”.
\end{quote}

\textit{Citizen Space} was first used by the Scottish government in 2014, but from 2015-2016 it has been used for every Scottish government consultation. This means that it has been applied in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \url{https://consult.gov.scot/}
\item The links shows the list of users: \url{https://aggregator.delib.net/citizenspace}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
practice more than one hundred times to date. The government’s Digital Engagement team chose it because it met some essential criteria such as value for money compared to other similar platforms and for technical reasons. For example, it includes “Response publishing, because it’s not something that most platforms incorporate” and it allowed the Scottish government to solve a common problem when:

“People didn’t ever see where their work went, and they weren’t clear what happened to their views...we needed a platform that would help us do that”.

The platform is a quick way to provide a snapshot of the consultation process from start to finish. It shows all open and closed consultations and through the “Find consultations” window, it allows to filter for ‘title or description’, ‘status’, ‘audience’ (e.g. Animal trainers), ‘interest’ (e.g. Art, Culture and Sport) and ‘department’. It also allows the public to read the consultation papers and, for the closed consultations, also the responses received. The number of responses range from very small (less than ten) to significant numbers (nearly 7,000) as in the case of the consultation on a Draft Referendum Bill (2016-2017).

*We asked, you said, we did* provides a format for feeding back outcomes as a result of a consultation. It provides a concise overview on how citizens/stakeholders response (*You said*) to the consultation (*We asked*) have been considered in the policy-making process (*We did*). It is essentially a ‘one-stop shop’ with all consultation documents in one place.

The Scottish government’s use of *We asked, you said, we did* is intended to make it as easy as possible for people/organisations to express their opinions on a proposed area of work which will inform policy-making. The responsibility for running a specific consultation is delegated to each policy team that wants to use it. They write the paper, manage the process and decide whether the analysis is done in-house or through the help of external analysts such as academics.

Each consultation is unique. It depends on its specificities whether to use only an e-consultation or complement it with face to face off-line consultations. One interviewee explained that:
“There isn’t a rulebook around how this is done. It’s quite open. Again, it’s a lot because we’re more interested in doing things bespoke for the audience that we’re trying to capture and designing things around that they need rather than saying ‘This is the way to do it’”.

Scottish government officials will tailor their advertising of the consultation according to its content and audience. For example, they may ask stakeholders to: “Retweet and to put a message out to their members so we...make sure they’re aware that way” or use social media, selecting proper hashtags, tagging groups, sending e-mails, and using Chatbox. As one interviewee explained:

“Often there’s a press release that goes out and things are shared on our main Scottish government comms channels, like social media platforms. Often, it’s just policy reaching out to the direct stakeholders. Again, it depends on the audience”.

A specific interest group or a stakeholder organisation (e.g. COSLA or the NHS Scotland) may also ask the Scottish government to run a consultation about a topic of interest using We asked, you said, we did.

The platform’s feedback mechanism helps people understand consultation outcomes without having to navigate complex documents. It allows the use of simple styling features as bold, italics, underline, bullet points, numbering and hyperlinks and it assures accessibility standards in order to be inclusive to all parts of society. For example, the consultations work with assistive technologies like screen readers or can be completed by tabbing through content without needing to use a mouse.

If there are any concerns about a consultation (either technical or content-related problems) or complaints, the respondent can obtain an expert response by contacting the specific numbers and e-mails reported in each consultation, that link directly to the policy team in charge of this consultation.

The interactions in the platform are one-to-one with no space for discussion or moderation. However, before publishing the results, a redaction dashboard allows the user to edit the
responses in order to remove offensive words before putting a response into the public domain.

Once the consultation is closed, each policy team collects the responses and report the conclusions back to Ministers. An official explained that they:

“Let ministers know what the responses said and that would be a part of the thinking that they would take into account in reaching a decision about what to do. We also publish the analysis of responses where we have one”.

There will always be a range of barriers to engaging in e-participation initiatives. Interviewees provided numerous explanations of this. For example, the representative from Delib said:

“10% of the country can’t get online, that’s probably the biggest single barrier... Traditionally there’s enormous barriers to entry... On a technological level, anything that requires registration or login, basically that’s 80%, 90% of certainly a public audience is just not going to engage with it. So, something as simple as registration is a real big, technical barrier”.

Alongside these technological barriers, there may also be barriers of culture and age. For example,

“People are still massively reliant on documents and they’ve got this real print mindset. That’s a huge barrier to entry. If you can only access the internet on your phone, expecting you to download PDFs and all that, that’s just not a thing for the majority of people”.

Delib charges an annual fee to each government organisation that includes all updates, hosting, backups, disaster recovery etc. They also provide technical support and account management to all customers. For example, they help users struggling to embed a video, manage a response analysis or conduct qualitative coding. Delib uses an escalating structure to manage fees, by charging more for organisations who are larger and have a greater level of activity. Any changes made to the platform as a result of requests from organisations is rolled out across all Delib customers. For example, one interviewee reported that the “Response
publishing was a customisation of their platform that was driven by us (the Scottish government) and we asked for it”, and it is now a commonly used feature for all.

On an annual basis, users of Citizen Space meet in a face to face workshop to exchange ideas on the platform. This is in addition to an online blog that covers similar topics. The workshop is perceived as being really useful as it improves the way in which the Scottish government interacts with other public authorities and stakeholder organisations. One interviewee explained that it’s:

“A really useful way to learn how other people are doing consultation, what’s working for them, where they’re struggling, how we can improve and learn from each other. In addition to that, with Citizen Space, we also speak with other governments about their wider digital engagement approaches. You might see something that’s interesting and have a conversation about how that worked for them, what approach they had to it etc..... We’re cognisant that there is pressure to be better... around Open Government”.

Therefore, the use of the platform has broader benefits in learning from other organisations and working more collaboratively (and e-collaboratively) with citizens/stakeholders.

2.6.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

Interviewees from the Scottish government suggested that they have a distinctive approach to policy-making - the so-called Scottish Approach (Cairney et al., 2016; Coutts and Brotchie, 2017; Keating, 2010; Scottish Government, 2007; 2014; Scottish Government and ESRC, 2013). An official explained:

“We also had commitment from the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon... saying that we have the most open and transparent government Scotland’s ever seen. We have various other commitments tied into some of the Scottish Government visions, open government etc. That have all been the catalyst to look to be better”.

This approach has resulted in the choice of the platform Citizen Space that fits closely with the existing organisational culture.
The Scottish Government is structured into directorates, and ministers, civil servants and policy-makers work in a wide range of different departments to manage the policy-making process. While there is corporate support and a common motivation to engage with citizens/stakeholders’ and there is widespread (mandatory) use of the Citizen Space platform to run all government e-consultations, the overall quality of the process depends on each single policy team. Some officials focus on very specific policies while others are much more widely cast. One interviewee explained that there are a range of experiences in involving people:

“At the moment it is a bit erratic, some teams are incredibly good at it and others are less so. What we’re trying to do is give colleagues in public service a way of understanding the tools and techniques you can use to ensure you have effective engagement at each stage”.

At the moment, each department chooses how to gather information, what additional tool(s) to use in order to guarantee citizens/stakeholders’ participation (whether to complement the e-participation with off-line, face to face forms of participation), and how to run the analysis (internal or external approaches). Moreover, it is up to Ministers’ discretion, what to do with the responses, either through informing legislation, revising policy or doing nothing.

The Scottish government’s Digital Engagement team and the Engage team (that leads the Scottish government’s involvement in delivering the mission of being an open and accessible government) jointly proposed the adoption of Citizen Space. They prepared a report for the senior management team to recommend the adoption of the platform and met Delib to customize it for the Scottish government needs.

The Digital Engagement team is currently responsible for running the platform and for the technical and non-content related issues about the e-consultations. Moreover, they provide the connection hub between the Scottish government departments and Delib for IT issues (e.g. missing responses and acknowledgement). They also regularly report on how the Scottish Government is using the e-participation tool to support policy professionals in being more transparent, collaborative and creative, and to encourage greater citizen engagement through the web and social media (Lockhar, 2015). The government’s Online Communication team is
involved in advertising and promoting the consultation to external citizens/stakeholders and engage when a consultation is about to be published.

The Digital Engagement team also work in collaboration with officials in other departments. For example, they work with:

“Equalities to make sure that we’re meeting our accessibility requirements. If we’re targeting particular audiences, for instance the deaf community, how can we incorporate British sign language into our consultation process? We work with Data Protection to make sure that everything is compliant. So, quite a cross section of teams that are involved in the wider process”.

The Scottish government move people internally from one unit to another on occasions to cope with circumstances when there is a peak of work and support is needed in this area. This occurred, for example, when there was an unexpectedly high number of responses to a consultation. The government can also externalize or contract out an analysis of the responses or the writing up of a report.

There are no other external actors responsible for running the platform or contributing to its functioning. The only external actors involved are those responding to a consultation in the You said phase of the process.

2.6.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

The Digital Engagement team is currently composed of only two members (one working full-time for the platform and one part-time) and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the platform. The Engage team, who works on wider engagement and open government issues has three members of staff (two working full-time and one part-time). The other teams involved in the consultation process vary considerably in terms of resource. There are numerous policy teams spanning the whole remit of the government, a team of analysts, as well as a group of social researchers that are currently working to redraft the best practice guidance and can help design the consultation questions. In addition, “There’s an entire new team of people for the Scottish Approach to Service Design. That’s sort of co-production, having the users involved in the design of services”. All of the officials are civil servants.
There are no specific skills or competencies needed to run a consultation using Citizen Space, as the platform is easy to use and intuitive. However, for technical and non-content related aspects, firstly Delib, and then the Digital Engagement team provide support and training including using YouTube videos to make the policy teams aware of all the features offered by the platform. The representative from Delib said:

“We provide lots of support around that. And training, onsite training, we create adoption plans so that you can effectively scale the technology and therefore the participation work across the organisation. And that’s really important because otherwise it just ends up in these little central silos, and that is not making the world better, it’s not really changing how organisations think”.

A member of the Digital Engagement team explained that:

“We have an online ticketing system where people can ask questions. We provide support and some training for people that we’ve identified that do consultations on a regular basis but for most teams we just provide support and more often than not we upload the consultation on the system for them”.

Overall, interviewees were enthusiasts of the platform and more generally the Scottish Approach. This was summed up by one who said:

“I am definitely a huge, huge proponent of engagement and participation. I would never argue against that... I think it’s extremely important in terms of being able to provide better services...having the engagement from people as early as possible and sustain that throughout the process”.

2.6.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

It is important to recognise that We asked, you said, we did is only one piece of a complex puzzle of arrangements. Unsurprisingly, interviews often had the tendency of going wider than We asked, you said, we did in response to specific questions about the impact of the initiative.
Our interviews reveal that the use of the initiative has intensified the collaboration between the Scottish government on one side, and citizens/stakeholders on the other. It has also fostered improved communication amongst stakeholders themselves towards a common interest in a specific consultation. The Scottish government is now further developing the ways in which they can work collaboratively with citizens/stakeholders rather than simply consulting once the decision has been taken.

Respondents highlighted some positive and negative aspects related to the technical side, the process and the impact on policy-making. The platform is user-friendly and works smoothly. The view from stakeholders included:

“I think there’s not much to go wrong, so I think I have to say it’s very simple, easy to use, works well” and “The fact that it’s searchable by open date or close date allows you to be able to track the time available to respond to the various different consultations”.

The authors’ own experiences of using We asked, you said, we did would support these views.

We need to be aware that all of our interviewees, including those within Scottish government and external organisations, have access to the internet and computer-related skills. We did not speak to anyone who did not have internet access or associated skills. There was, however, an awareness of this issue. One interviewee explained that:

“There’s always a skills gap, a digital skills gap. There are certain areas in Scotland that are still waiting for broadband...That’s why we’re not trying to use digital as the only means for engagement, but rather, to augment other forms of engagement”.

The Digital Engagement team have no specific performance indicators and are not able to provide specific trends. Nevertheless, from the Scottish government website, it is possible to count the number of consultations per year and the responses of each consultation. There is a wide variety in the number of responses to each consultation. For example, the ‘Amendments to Scottish Road Works Regulations 2018” received only 8 responses, while there were 3,600 published responses on whether motorsports should be allowed on closed
public roads. The consultation revealed that there was clear support (99%) for the proposals to give powers to close public roads for these events.

There are many organisations who have participated in We asked, you said, we did. These include local councils, NHS Scotland, Charted Institute for Housing, Police Scotland etc.

We need to be wary of simply examining the raw numbers because each consultation is unique and may have specific targets. This means that the number of responses is not indicative of a successful consultation. For example, there are consultations that aim to reach:

“A niche audience of 150 people and if you got 150 responses that would be an overwhelming success. Similarly, you could run a consultation that involved the whole Scottish public, 150 responses would not be a success”.

Sometimes, the policy teams predict how many responses they expect given the effort made to involve citizens/stakeholders. They can then marry this with the statistics provided by the Digital Engagement team using Google analytics. Each policy team is then able to say whether the consultation has been successful or not. It was quite surprising to discover how ad hoc this analysis currently is. The Scottish government is planning to develop this area in the near future is already talking to “Delib about getting some more data to be able to make sense of it. ... and understand our process a bit more”.

We asked, you said, we did provides a process which guarantees that public ideas and concerns are considered by officials and feeds into the policy-making process. Our interviewees revealed the importance of this engagement:

“All information about what we do with consultations goes to parliament, so whenever any piece of new legislation or action goes to parliament it is accompanied by information which will include whether or not and how we consulted”.

Some consultations involve all citizens, but most are targeted towards specific stakeholders (e.g. demographic groups, academic groups, policy organisations, age groups) by different policy teams. The use of We asked, you said, we did means that it is possible for participants to follow up on the process after they have submitted their input. The website
(https://consult.gov.scot/we_asked_you_said/) shows an analysis report for each evaluation providing the ‘We did’ part of the process.

However, there are possible discrepancies when the We did part is not aligned with the You said part, due to a misunderstanding about the intrinsic nature of a consultation. This is a familiar story of consultations, whether they are facilitated by electronic means or not.

It can generate complaints, as in the case of the same-sex marriage consultation, when, as an official explained:

“The consultation responses were predominantly against same-sex marriage...At the same time there was independent research done on a random sample of people, a representative research survey, which showed that actually the majority of the population were in favour of same-sex marriage. So, when that was taken forward into legislation, same-sex marriage came in in Scotland, but there were a lot of people who were unhappy about that and felt that the consultation responses hadn’t been considered properly”.

Within the platform there is a feedback form that asks about the experience of the consultation itself and the platform as a method to respond. Officials can get good insight from this and ask for improvements from Delib. Having the opportunity to provide consistent feedback to Delib was highlighted as being of significant benefit for the officials.

One successful example of the use of the platform is the consultation about the content and timing of the Scottish independence referendum. It is one of the first two e-consultations that took place in 2014. Through the e-consultation they produced a comprehensive consultation report that identified some key findings about how the referendum should be run that shaped the Scottish government’s proposal for the referendum. As one of the interviewees said:

“We got 26,000 responses through the platform which was very good. Then the team that was running the independence referendum utilised some of that information for the subsequent referendum. We determined that it fit our requirements and we then rolled it out for some other consultations and then rolled it out for every consultation from 2015”.
Another example that was provided as being successful was one about the reforming of the Gender Recognition Act where:

“The Scottish Government had already formed a policy of seeking to reform the Act but wanted to consult on its proposals and also some of the areas where it hadn’t made up its mind”.

They received 15,000 responses and interviewees suggested that the platform fell over in the last hour because so many people were submitting responses.

It is not possible to evaluate the impact of We asked, you said, we did on accountability or trust in government. However, interviewees tried their hardest:

“The Scottish Household Survey and the Social Attitudes Survey do record whether people trust Scottish government or UK government more, and consistently Scottish government is considerably more trusted”.

2.6.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

The case study has examined the use by the Scottish Government of an e-participation initiative called We asked, you said, we did, which is a part of the platform Citizen Space. This e-participation practice is used at the national level for e-consultations that engage various stakeholders (e.g. citizens, NGOs, businesses) in the policy-making process. We asked, you said, we did has been used in all the aspects of the policy cycle, from the formulation of a new policy to its evaluation. The national, organisational and individual-level factors on the functioning of the initiative have been described together with an analysis of participation and impact.

We asked, you said, we did allows for the participation of the public in policy-making and the processes are transparent because of the presence of the We did section. The responses to the consultations can, however, often be quite generic. For example, the Scottish government may say that preparations are underway to develop new regulations and the feedback received from this consultation will help shape that process. The government often commission independent analyses of the consultation responses and this helps to provide rigour and independence.
Organisations which have responded to consultations in *We asked, you said, we did* have found it easy to use. It provides a platform for consulting on implementing and detailing policies changes, but its success partly depends upon drafting relevant consultation questions and being used at an appropriate time to make the responses meaningful. When drawing lessons, officials reflected that the questions should be posed so that the process is about change (and how to implement this) rather than about a decision to make (Yes/No). In addition, in order to get a bill in front of parliament by a certain time and comply with the nature of the legislative processes, an e-consultation must be planned a long time in advance to obtain high number of responses and to have enough resources to manage the process. Importantly, to keep the participation of citizens, they need to be informed why their proposals have not been considered.

*We asked, you said, we did* is only one piece of a bigger system. All interviewees were clear that an online process needs to be complemented by some off-line activity with the aim of being as inclusive as possible. The e-participation practice looks likely to be continued to be used in future years as it fits within the government’s *Scottish Approach* of a consultative and cooperative style of politics.

**References**


2.7. Spain: E-participation Platform “Decide Madrid”

Vicente Pina, Lourdes Torres, Sonia Royo and Jaime García-Rayado

2.7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the e-participation practices carried out in the Madrid city council through the Decide Madrid platform.³¹ Decide Madrid received the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award in the Category “Making institutions inclusive and ensuring participation in decision-making”.

We have chosen a local government for our study because municipalities play an important role in the everyday lives of citizens, both in the administrative and service delivery fields (Pina & Torres, 2001) and in the sphere of democratic participation (IDEA, 2001; Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000). Several authors suggest (e.g., Fung & Wright, 2001; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Mizrahi et al., 2010) that participatory decision making has greater usefulness at the local level. The Madrid city council participates in several networks that foster citizen participation at the local level (Open Government Partnership, Sustainable Cities Platform – originating from the Aalborg process –, Local Governments for Sustainability and the Covenant of Mayors), and has become an international reference point in terms of citizen participation due to the different initiatives it has launched.

Madrid is the largest municipality in Spain and has a long-standing experience in neighbourhood-based participation. Decide Madrid, launched in 2015, is the first e-participation practice involving direct citizen participation in Madrid where, traditionally, citizen participation was carried out offline and mainly through associations. With this platform, the city council of Madrid aims to encourage the participation of citizens in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals, in order to improve their quality of life. Until 2018, more than 400,000 users have been registered in the platform, participatory budgets being the participation option that has attracted the highest level of participation. The supporting software Consul has been adopted – and is in the process of being implemented – in around 100 institutions from 33 countries.

³¹ https://decide.madrid.es/
Porto Alegre, the first city in the world that implemented participatory budgets in 1989, adopted Consul in August 2018 in order to implement its first online participatory budgets and online polls. Thus, this research focuses on an example that could be considered a best practice in e-participation.

The methods used in order to carry out this case study include desk research and semi-structured interviews. The first consists of content analyses of Decide Madrid, the website of Madrid city council, and relevant legal documents, governmental reports, official statistics and other reports prepared by third parties. The second is made up of 9 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 3 senior managers (2 politicians and 1 civil servant), 2 technical staff (civil servants) and 4 users of the platform.

2.7.2 Overview of the national context

Spain belongs to the Southern European (Napoleonic) public administration style, characterised by its bureaucratic structures and legalistic philosophy grounded in administrative law. The 2008 financial crisis and numerous cases of corruption have lowered citizen trust in public institutions and politics. Political parties and corruption were important problems perceived by Spanish citizens in the last ten years (Centre for Sociological Research, CIS, 2018). One of the requests of the “15M” indignation movement that emerged in 2011, was the improvement of democratic procedures. The political party “Podemos” formalized the “15M” movement in 2014. In Madrid, it was associated with other left-wing political parties through “Ahora Madrid”.

In Spain, municipalities are the third layer of the public administration after the central and the autonomous (regional) governments. They manage around 14% of the public expenditure of the country (Eurostat, 2019). The initiative Decide Madrid was introduced by “Ahora Madrid” - which governed in minority from 2015 to 2019, supported by the socialist party,

32 See https://opdigital.prefeitura.poa.br
33 One of them was an active member of a municipal association and another was member of the political party “Podemos”, in the coalition governing Madrid by the time data collection took place.
after the local elections of May 2015 - because citizen participation was one of the flagships of its electoral programme.

“Citizens have the right to participate in public affairs either directly or through representatives [...]”; “It is the duty of the authorities [...] to facilitate the participation of all the citizens in political, economic, cultural and social life” (art. 23 and 9 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution). More recently, Law 57/2003, on Measures for the Modernization of Local Governments, introduced specific ICT procedures to facilitate the effective participation of citizens in local public life matters and Law 40/2015 introduced the requirement for local governments to carry out online public consultations (effective since 10/02/2016).

The digitalization of administrative processes has been a priority in Spain since the 90s (see European Commission, 2015). The Spanish Certification Authority (CERES), created in 1996, received numerous international prizes34 and is highly valued by citizens (8.2/10 in 2017). In 2006, the electronic identity card (DNIe) was launched. Then the Law 37/2007, on Citizens’ Electronic Access to Public Services, improved the development of e-government infrastructure, strategies, action plans and e-services for citizens and businesses (European Commission, 2015, 2018). In the E-Government Development Index, Spain was ranked 16th in 2002 (UN/ASPA, 2001) and 17th in 2018 (UN, 2018). As regards e-participation, Spain was 5th in 2018 (UN, 2018). The use of ICTs by citizens in Madrid exceeds the national average (INE, 2018; Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2018a). Data for 2017 shows that 91.7% of the households in Madrid have broadband Internet connection and that 91.3% of the inhabitants have connected to the Internet at least once in the last three months, the use of mobile devices being the most common type of connection (96.2%). Madrid city council has traditionally ranked above the average in e-government empirical studies (Torres et al. 2005, 2006; Pina et al., 2007, 2010).

Madrid has a long experience in neighbourhood-based associations who collaborate with the municipality in the co-production of public services (Medero & Albaladejo, 2018). Since the beginning of the financial crisis, the number of associations has significantly increased and

34 http://www.cert.fnmt.es/en/que-es-ceres/premios
those with social, health and support purposes have seen the biggest increases and the highest number of members (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2018b).

To create Decide Madrid, some examples of citizen participation were reviewed: Iceland (Better Reykjavik platform), Brazil (Porto Alegre) and Switzerland. Madrid joined the Subnational Government Pilot Program of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2016 and has been a formal member since 2017, promising to develop participatory budgets and collaborative and efficient legislative mechanisms, and to expand the policy of citizen participation (OGP, 2018).

2.7.3 Description of the e-participation initiative

Through the Decide Madrid platform “the City Council of Madrid aims to encourage the participation of citizens in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals, in order to improve their quality of life. It is a strong commitment to a management closer to citizens that will allow the city council to receive their proposals and to create direct communication channels with citizens, helping to make the most appropriate decisions for the general interest.”35 In the interviews, politicians stated that they aim to develop channels of direct democracy encouraging the direct participation of both individuals and collectives. Technicians focused more on achieving individual direct participation.

The initiative Decide Madrid is implemented only at Madrid city level, but the software developed, “Consul”, has been implemented or is in the process of being implemented in about 100 organizations around the world, most of them in Europe (especially in Spain) and Latin America.36

Participation can be carried out through five sections (debates, proposals, polls, processes and participatory budgeting). It allows citizens to participate in three moments of the policy cycle: 1) agenda setting, 2) policy analysis and preparation, 3) policy formulation and, to some extent, policy monitoring. In the participatory budgets, citizens can check the status of the

35 Translated from the Spanish version available at: https://decide.madrid.es/condiciones-de-uso
36 See http://consulproject.org/en/
approved projects (technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, in processing, in execution, ended) and their chronology. In all cases, the topics eligible are only those under Madrid council competences.

The platform is open to everyone without registering, but participation is limited according to the different types of activities. Everyone, including associations, NGOs and companies, can be registered in the platform, create debates or proposals and make comments in all sections, except in those that are restricted by the city council (e.g., some processes are restricted to residents of Madrid). However, only registered citizens of Madrid over 16 can verify their accounts and then they can create proposals for participatory budgeting and support and vote proposals. Organizations can make proposals, but only individual citizens can vote.

Verification processes and almost all participation activities can also be done offline in any of the 26 citizen attention offices. Moreover, support for the projects could be collected by using a printed signature form and presenting it to a citizen attention office. However, the platform must be used to participate in debates, in almost all processes and to make comments in all sections. Decide Madrid is accessible to people with disabilities.

The five ways of participation are:

Debates: In this section users can state their concerns, views and ideas about topics such as problems of coexistence, damage or improvements in public goods and services. They can post, comment or state agreement or disagreement. Debates are also a tool for users to develop, organize and boost actions in other sections of the platform such as proposals.

Proposals: Users make a request which can be complemented by audio-visual tools and supporting documents. Verified users can support the proposals and those proposals with the support of 1% of the people over 16 registered as residents in Madrid (27,662 inhabitants at 2018) are voted on.

Polls: Polls are carried out when a proposal receives 1% support or when the city council wants citizens to decide on an issue. The polls include decisions about whether a proposal should be carried out or to choose among different projects. These polls can be open to all citizens or to the citizens of one district.
Processes: In this section, the city council seeks inputs to develop or modify regulations or actions undertaken by the council. The way the processes are carried out depends on the topic and the information that the city council needs, for example, specific debates about regulations or policy documents drafts, provision of documents in text format so that citizens can propose changes, requests for proposals for an activity (such as films to be projected in the cultural centres) etc.

Participatory budgeting: Annually, citizens can decide directly on how a part of the next year’s budget will be spent (at present 100 million euros, 2% of municipal budget approximately). The projects can be for the whole city or for specific districts and they can affect current expenditures, subsidies or public investments. Citizens can vote on projects for the whole city and/or projects for only one district of their choice. Participatory budgets follow different phases: first citizens registered as residents in Madrid can present projects; then, when there are repeated projects, their proponents are informed so they can merge the proposals and an initial analysis is carried out to assess whether the projects are within the council’s competences. Later, citizens show their support of the projects to establish a priority order and the most supported projects are analysed to ensure that they meet the requirements and their viability and cost. Finally, a voting period on the resulting projects is opened.

In its electoral program, the political party “Ahora Madrid” included a commitment to “Implement tools for citizen participation through the Internet […]”. In 2015, the city council created Decide Madrid to achieve this commitment and it has been operational since September 2015. This initiative belongs to the set of proposals with which “Ahora Madrid” tries to include citizen participation in the management of the city by (1) “making participatory processes and budgets”, (2) “promoting digital participation tools” and (3) “fomenting the collective management of common resources” (Ahora Madrid, 2015). To achieve these objectives, other initiatives have been needed, like the development of new local regulations for citizen participation and initiatives to reduce the digital divide.

The first poll (held in February 2017 and dealing with the improvement of Gran Vía Avenue and “Plaza de España” and the first two proposals with enough support) and the participatory budget of 2016 (held from February and June 2016) had more participation than expected and more resources and organization for the offline participation were needed, according to the
technicians interviewed. As these were the first processes with visible results in the city, their
good results were critical to gain the confidence of citizens in subsequent processes.

The interviewees state that during the setting up of the platform and the development of the
participation processes, the platform has had three main detractors: the most important
media in terms of audience and two right-centre political parties. These parties were critical
of the initiative for two reasons: one of them was against “direct democracy” and so it opposes
everything related to this platform and the other criticises some of the methods of
participation of Decide Madrid. For example, they question the reliability of the method to
obtain supports in the proposals section due to the speed with which some proposals get a
lot of support and the confidentiality of the postal vote (Europa Press, 2017; Ramos, 2018).

In addition to the regulation at the national level described in the previous section, the
participation of citizens in Madrid is regulated by the Organic Regulation of Citizen
Participation of the Madrid City Council approved on May 31, 2004 which has been modified
six times, the most recent in May, 2018. Some previous municipal regulations about citizen
participation existed (published in 1988 and 1992), even before the legal requirement
established by Law 57/2003.

This regulation established the right of citizens, entities and collectives to participate in local
governance. As regards individual citizens, it covers the rights of citizens to information, public
consultation, public audience, participation in the formulation of public policies, and to make
petitions, initiatives and proposals, among others. There is no specific mention to e-
participation in this regulation.

The guidelines and procedures that support the working of this platform have been approved
by different agreements37 of the city council since October 2015. These guidelines and
procedures have been amended in the following years as the platform has been improved.
However, they only refer to the platform to explain that participation can be exercised
through it, except in the case of public consultations which have to be done using the

37 Agreements of the 29th October 2015; 10th September 2015; 3th December 2015; 22th February 2016; 15th
September 2016; 20th October 2016; 18th January 2017 (published in the official gazette of Madrid city council No. 7.530,
7.496, 7.554, 7.604, 7.746, 7.771 and 7.828, respectively).
platform. Therefore, the existence of Decide Madrid is not guaranteed by any law and depends on political will.

A brief summary of these agreements could be as follows: In September 2015, the guidelines for the exercise of the right of proposal were adopted. They were subsequently modified in September 2016 to reduce the support needed by proposals to go to vote and increase some of the deadlines. In December 2015, the guidelines for the conduct of public hearings through the open government website were adopted and, in September 2016, they were modified to create a simpler type of public hearings for Decide Madrid. In February 2016, the guidelines for the development of participatory budgets through the open government website were approved. In October 2016, a directive established that a public consultation in Decide Madrid has to be carried out before the approval of a norm and it regulated the different aspects of the consultations (such as content and deadlines).

This platform is based on “Consul”, an open-source software developed by the city council for Decide Madrid, which uses an open-source programming language (Ruby). The “Consul” code, freely available on the Internet, allows any organization, public or private, to use and adapt the platform to its own needs, as long as it complies with the “Affero GPL v3” license. This type of copyleft license protects developers’ rights by securing the authorship and gives users and developers the opportunity to copy, modify and distribute the software. Moreover, this license encourages other developers to make subsequent software modifications available for reuse (Free Software Foundation, 2007). In this way, the improvements made by any organization using “Consul” can be exploited by the rest, fomenting collaboration between them. Madrid is the partner that is the most significant driver of Consul at the moment but, according to the interviewees, it is expected to be more decentralized in the future. This collaboration allows the improvement of the platform. Even if later governments of Madrid decided to stop Decide Madrid, it would be easy to implement it again.

2.7.4 Organizational characteristics of the initiative

The city council owns Decide Madrid and “Consul”, though it is open source software. Decide Madrid is managed by the General Directorate of Citizen Participation whose competences are citizen participation and social innovation programs. This directorate belongs to the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area which depends directly on the
Mayor’s Office and also includes the General Directorate of Transparency, Electronic Administration and Quality and the General Directorate of Citizenship Services (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015a).

All government areas (10) and administrative units of the city council are partners and contribute to Decide Madrid by proposing topics and evaluating proposals made by citizens. The Service of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy (included in the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area) is a particularly relevant partner to promote the development of participation processes of groups at risk of social exclusion (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015a).

Another relevant partner is “Medialab Prado”, created in 2000, a citizens’ laboratory and a meeting place for the production of open cultural projects which belongs to a city council-owned company. Some innovation projects in citizen participation related to Decide Madrid are being developed in “Medialab Prado” (e.g. “Training and research on citizen relations with Decide Madrid”) and the annual congress of the “Consul” project takes place there. The city council also contracts external companies (e.g. “Agora Voting S.L”) to comply with the data protection law (e.g. encryption of votes to ensure anonymity).

At international level, the most important informal partners are organizations using Consul, as they collaborate in improving the software and in the implementation of this platform around the world.

The other directorates of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area participate in some relevant processes and verification processes of Decide Madrid that involve a continued internal collaboration between them: the General Directorate of Transparency, Electronic Administration and Quality deals with data protection, quality and its evaluation; the General Directorate of Citizenship Services manages the institutional portal/platform and the citizen attention offices, where citizens can participate offline.

Specific collaboration with other areas of government occurs, for example, when a citizen wishes to verify his/her account and the General Directorate of Citizen Participation compares

38 https://www.medialab-prado.es/en/medialab
this information with the register of inhabitants that is the competence of the Economy and Finance Area (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015b).

When offline activities are carried out in parallel with Decide Madrid, they are managed, in some cases, in collaboration with the Area of Government of Territorial Coordination and Public-Social Cooperation. This area is in charge of city council management at district level and it also coordinates and promotes sectoral councils, associations, local forums and other participation groups (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015c). This collaboration is regulated, as these competences are backed by agreements of the city council but is not continuous: It only occurs when offline activities are carried out in parallel with those developed through the platform. However, Decide Madrid does not always include information about the offline citizen participation processes managed by the Area of Government of Territorial Coordination.

Other types of collaboration depend on the will of each area, staff motivation and the accountability structure. All governmental areas and administrative units of the city council collaborate by proposing topics for the processes/consultations and evaluating the proposals made by citizens. According to the interviewees, this collaboration in the evaluation of proposals (e.g. cost, design, legal issues) is critical as they have the relevant knowledge. At the beginning of the Decide Madrid, the General Directorate of Citizen Participation sent the information of the debates and processes to other areas affected, but now the areas directly revise these sections.

Moreover, the General Directorate of Citizen Participation often contacts the other areas as continuous communication is needed to monitor projects and to ensure that the other areas implement the results of consultation processes carried out through Decide Madrid. In response to citizen concerns about delays in the execution of participatory projects, the city council is setting up a Participatory Budget Execution Office to improve the monitoring of the implementation of approved projects, so the collaboration with other areas in the monitoring phase will be more formal.

The city council decided that the results in polls and participatory budgets are binding, so all areas should adopt the proposals accepted and collaborate with the activities of Decide Madrid. However, this agreement has no legal coverage, so the application of the results of
the citizens’ participation through Decide Madrid is only ensured because all areas depend directly on the Mayor’s Office which acts in cases of disagreement (e.g. when the managers of one of the areas or directorates involved disagree with citizen proposals because of technical or cost-related issues). The huge quantity of proposals for participatory budgets to be evaluated increases the workload of the other areas of government. Sometimes, citizen’s proposals change the planning, priorities and ways of working of the areas. Consequently, according to the interviewees, at the beginning of Decide Madrid, there was some resistance and complaints from the other governmental areas because they had extra work but with the same resources and because citizen participation changed the way they worked. Now they are adapted to the new organizational culture. In order to adapt the organizational culture, the area in charge of Decide Madrid has organized training courses about citizen participation for their own and other staff areas, but they are not as consolidated as other training courses.

The creation, implementation and the operational costs associated with Decide Madrid are funded by the city council’s budget. The use of Decide Madrid is free. Madrid participates with other three city councils (Zaragoza, La Coruña and Santiago de Compostela) in an open government project with Red.es, a public company of the Ministry of Economy and Business. This project is funded with FEDER grants and aims to improve the platform and create new modules, among other things. The politicians interviewed note that the purpose of participating in this project was to establish a collaboration channel with other municipalities rather than obtaining funds (which were obtained in 2018). Politicians and some technical staff interviewed state that the funding has been sufficient in all the phases of development of Decide Madrid, although other technical staff think they need more funds. All the interviewees state that financial sustainability is guaranteed.

The General Directorate in charge of Decide Madrid had 40 civil servants in September, 2018 (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2018c), including administrative staff, lawyers, social workers, computer scientists and communications staff, together with the three senior managers and advisors from different backgrounds (software companies, universities and public administration). The general directorate staff came from other governmental areas because the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area was new. In order to recruit them, an open process for the city council personnel was established and they carried out individual interviews to ensure that the candidates were motivated and could adapt
smoothly to the organizational culture that the managers wanted to develop. All of them work full-time in the General Directorate in charge of *Decide Madrid* in activities related to the platform, citizen participation, national and international collaboration as regards citizen participation and the promotion of the platform and social innovation programs. According to the interviewees, there are 130 civil servants from other areas of government that participate occasionally in the analysis and evaluation of proposals and approximately 10 interim civil servants with different competences (depending on the projects in implementation phase) who work temporarily in this area for the Participatory Budget Execution Office.

Sometimes, occasional staff are contracted for specific aspects such as social media or platform developments (e.g. people with knowledge in advanced technologies that civil servants in the area do not have for the design of new modules for the platform). However, this is an unusual practice because the contracting process is slow and there are many restrictions for this type of contracts. Interviewees emphasise that the limited number of employees is one of their problems along with the method and restrictions in public administration contracting-out that make it difficult to have staff with knowledge in the most advanced or latest technologies.

The general directorate and area in charge of *Decide Madrid* must follow the regular organizational processes as a part of the city council. However, the general directorate shows some differences in decision-making processes, as the staff have more autonomy than in other areas. *Decide Madrid* is embedded in the overall formal policy-making processes because other areas of government use the platform to carry out public consultations and public audiences.

*Decide Madrid* acts as an intermediary between citizens and the other areas of government. According to the interviewees, *Decide Madrid* has made a progressive change in the perception of other staff areas about direct citizen participation in the policy cycle and the use of open-source software.

Within the possibilities allowed by local and national regulation, the General Directorate of Citizen Participation has generated a particular subculture within the city council, given the greater autonomy of its staff, the looser definition of jobs, more teamwork than in other
units/departments/areas and staff commitment to citizen participation (due to the method of staff selection previously described).

2.7.5 Individual-level aspects of the initiative

According to the interviewees, the political leaders who decided on the creation of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area and Decide Madrid and the selection of the managers and staff were Manuela Carmena (the Mayor), a councillor responsible for the Area of Government, and an executive advisor who is also the Director of Decide Madrid. Other leaders are the General Director of Citizen Participation, who is responsible for the day to day operations as administrative leader, the Head of the institutional extension unit, who focuses on the promotion of Decide Madrid among other organizations and the Consul network, together with other politicians with related competences.

The highest political leader of this initiative of citizen participation was Manuela Carmena, the Mayor. She played an important role in the promotion of the initiative and the coordination of the areas involved. She had a long career in the judicial system as a judge and she was already retired when was elected Mayor of Madrid.

The councillor responsible for the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area sends proposals to the city council plenary, proposes projects of regulations, sets targets for the area and approves, evaluates and assigns resources for action plans. He had wide experience in programming and has created and managed software companies.

The executive advisor elaborates and communicates guidelines for the General Directorate of Citizen Participation together with the councillor responsible for the Area of Government. According to the technicians interviewed, the executive advisor is more focused on the supervision and implementation of these directives. He holds a PhD in Theoretical Physics and is one of the creators of Incoma, a software programme that allows debates between lots of people.

The administrative leader (General Director of Citizen Participation) is responsible for the execution of the guidelines established by the executive advisor and the councillor. He is responsible for managing and evaluating the services and organic units of the general
directorate, staff management, drawing up draft provisions, agreements, covenants and plans and monitoring and controlling the annual budget of the general directorate. He was a graduate in Law, a civil servant since 1981 and has been an executive advisor in positions related to higher education and technology in different public administrations.

*Decide Madrid* has no significant relationships with non-governmental leaders, media or international consultants. Promotors of *Decide Madrid* were only advised by Citizens Foundation (the non-profit organization that manages Better Reykjavik in Iceland) about technical issues of the platform at the beginning of the initiative.

Administrators of *Decide Madrid* are civil servants whose most common tasks encompass contact with citizen, collaboration with other areas of government and management and organization of their respective units. They influence how *Decide Madrid* works within the guidelines and under the close supervision of the director of *Decide Madrid*. They have the typical restrictions of this type of employment, such as fixed schedules. However, the interviewees indicate that managers and staff adapt their schedules to citizen participation, diffusion and collaboration activities, sometimes doing overtime. The interviewees highlight the importance of the knowledge of legal matters, advanced technologies and languages and of skills in dealing with citizens (for staff and administrators), indicating that the most lacking aspects are those of languages and advanced technologies. The most critical situations they suffered were in the first poll due to the high level of offline participation - that exceeded their forecasts -, and in the first participatory budgets, because of their lack of previous experience in dealing with controversial projects proposed by citizens and the variety of topics presented. Their performance is evaluated through annually-defined targets.

### 2.7.6 Evaluation of the e-participation initiative

*Decide Madrid* presents aggregated statistics (number of supports and votes, percentage of participation by gender, age group, district, and via web or offline, when appropriate) both for the first polls (up to 2017, inclusive) and for the participatory budgets. For the participatory budgets, the platform also provides data about which projects are technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, in processing, in execution or ended. Until July 2017, the general directorate in charge of *Decide Madrid* published reports where the results of the platform were analysed and the results of satisfaction surveys and suggestions and claims systems were
shown. Disaggregated information about debates, proposals, processes, participatory budgets and website statistics is not available in Decide Madrid, but in the open-data platform, without any direct link to related information in the e-participation platform. These variables are not contextualized and there are no references to the goals of the initiative. Interviewees said that the General Directorate has more information and its own indicators, revised monthly for internal purposes. According to the politicians interviewed, they focus on the number of users and participants, participation growth and impact on the decisions of the city council (e.g., money spent on participatory budget projects).

All interviewees agree that there is a growing trend in terms of users, participation and impact of the participatory budgets, although some citizens think that the citizen participation in proposals has decreased. The first participatory budgets were for the budget of 2016, where 60 million euros were assigned to 206 projects. The number of participants was 45,529 (including those that proposed, supported and/or voted); 5,184 projects were initially proposed, and 32,725 citizens voted in the final phase. In subsequent editions, the amount devoted to participatory budgets has increased up to 100 million euros and the participation has also increased. In 2017, 67,132 citizens participated, 3,215 projects were received, 38,866 citizens voted, and 311 projects were selected. The figures for 2018 are as follows: 91,032 participants, 3,323 projects proposed, 53,891 citizens voted, and 328 projects were selected.

Up to the end of 2018, 25,418 proposals have been made and only two proposals have obtained enough support to go forward to the voting phase. In total, 13 polls at city level and 21 polls at district level have been carried out in 3 voting periods. In the first voting period, 214,076 citizens participated and 963,887 votes were counted (one citizen can vote in more than one issue), there were more participants by mail (54.0%) than through Decide Madrid (35.1%) and ballot boxes (10.9%), but more votes were cast through the platform (49.3%). In the second and third voting periods, participation decreased and there were only 92,829 and 9,854 votes (the third voting period was only at district level and not all districts had projects), respectively. This could be explained by the fact that voting was only allowed through Decide Madrid and ballot boxes, the topics were much less important and that these polls were initiated by the city council (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2019a).
From the beginning of Decide Madrid to the end of 2018, according to data from the open-data platform (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2019a, 2019b), 5,627 debates have been started, with a decreasing trend in number of debates (37.8, 1.5, 1.13 and 0.73 debates started per day in the last four months of 2015 and the years 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively) and comments in debates (151.5, 21.9, 7.2, 6.5 comments per day in the last four months of 2015 and the years 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively). Also, 70 processes have been initiated in Decide Madrid (6, 5, 36, and 23 in the last four months of 2015 and the years 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively). Information about the number of participants in debates and processes and the number of comments in processes was not found.

According to the politicians and technicians interviewed, there are no differences between how the platform was presented and how its usefulness is perceived by the decision-makers, with the exception of the previously described resistance of some managers from other areas. Some citizens indicate that many of the debates and proposals created are used by citizens to make a punctual criticism when they are angry about a public service or issue but without greater implication. One of the citizens interviewed thinks that the methodology of participation through the platform does not allow the citizens an effective direct participation: “[… It does not achieve its objectives […] because a lot of citizens get lost in the website”.

The General Directorate of Citizen Participation promotes citizen participation using advertising posters on buses, bus stops and street lamps; press releases, emails, social media, informative sessions for districts and associations working with groups at risk of exclusion, local forums and, in some cases, letters to all the citizens of Madrid. The General Directorate of Citizen Participation has a communication unit that collaborates with the General Directorate of Communication for these tasks. Decide Madrid allows citizens to visualize the contents of the sections of debates, proposals and participatory budgets, prioritizing the most active, highest rated or newest content. The platform provides detailed information about how the different sections work. All interviewees agree that the most important motivation is the possibility of seeing their contributions implemented or considered. Citizens note that they do not have enough information about the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects already approved. The monitoring of citizen participation through the platform only covers participatory budgeting.
According to the interviewees, elderly citizens, immigrants and other citizens at risk of exclusion are those under-represented in e-participation processes. On the other hand, districts with a longer tradition of citizen participation tend to participate more in Decide Madrid, according to the interviewees.

A positive unexpected consequence of the platform that favoured the legitimation of the results was the higher participation at the beginning of the initiative that surpassed the predictions.

The users of Decide Madrid decide what is discussed in the platform in most cases, with the exception of public consultations and processes. The politicians and technicians interviewed give a lot importance to free communication among users, so there is only a slight moderation before the comments are published to ensure there are no illegal comments (e.g., incitement to violence, insults or discrimination). The moderation is carried out by the staff of the General Directorate and volunteers at specific moments (e.g., at the beginning of Decide Madrid). Citizens can select other citizens’ activities as inappropriate and moderators can revise them. Experts are not systematically engaged in the deliberation processes; they can participate as any other individual citizen or through associations’ accounts.

Citizens are provided with information to facilitate their participation in polls, participatory budgeting (e.g., technical reports) and processes (e.g., the proposal for public consultation and other related laws, documents or information about the topic). Different formats are used to display this information in the platform (e.g., pdf documents, images or videos). In processes, the text of the document opened to consultation is very often embedded in the platform, so that citizens can make their comments directly in the text and other citizens can see them easily.

As explained above, citizens can only follow up their contributions in participatory budgets, as they have a monitoring section in the platform. In the other sections, citizens can only see other users’ reactions (supports, assessments and votes). No summaries based on proposals or comments from participants are disclosed. The citizens interviewed complain that they lacked information about the outcome of their contributions. As explained in Section 2.7.3, offline participation is carried out for polls and participatory budgets through local forums and meetings in districts.
According to the technicians interviewed, there have been more than 1,000 actions decided by citizens up to the end of 2018. At the beginning of Decide Madrid, internal summaries of debates and processes were prepared by the General Directorate in charge of Decide Madrid addressed to other areas of the city council, but now the respective areas revise the debates and processes that affect them, as occurs with comments in participatory budgeting projects and polls. The proposals in the polls and participatory budgets that go to vote and win, are carried out by the city council if they pass the same controls and additional studies that are made for the rest of the projects of the city council. For the other sections of Decide Madrid (debates and processes), the respective area analyses citizens’ comments and decides what to do, but no feedback to citizens is usually provided in these cases.

According to the citizens interviewed, Decide Madrid has increased citizen participation in Madrid (online and offline). The platform has channelled associations’ initiatives to online participation in debates and processes, to defend associations’ values and to present projects and proposals that were previously carried out offline. However, some citizens interviewed think they can put less pressure on the municipal government online than offline. Decide Madrid coexists with other offline collaborative and participatory practices carried out by the Area of Government of Territorial Coordination and Public-Social Cooperation, as described in Section 2.7.4. As also explained in Section 2.7.3, in some cases, some of the activities of Decide Madrid are also carried out offline.

2.7.7 Conclusion and lessons learned

The development of ICTs and changes in the economic, political and social environment in the last ten years have increased interest in new methods and mechanisms for citizen participation in public life. The commitment of the coalition governing Madrid city council from May 2015 to May 2019 to online "direct democracy" led to the implementation of Decide Madrid in 2015, creating a new direct relationship between citizens and the city council. This case confirms the relevance of political will when introducing digital innovations affecting the ways citizens participate in municipal life.

At present, the Spanish legislation requires that all software used by any public administration should be available on an official website of the Central government to be used for free by the rest of Spanish public administrations. The decision to make Decide Madrid readily available
as open source software beyond Spanish public administrations and the international network of users created guarantees that improvements by other entities can be easily shared. Because of this, the platform has gained increasing reputation among governments around the world.

Decide Madrid has introduced changes into the organizational culture of the city council and into the traditional ways of citizen participation. The city council has carried out several actions as a result of the contributions of citizens through Decide Madrid. A high level of participation has been reached at some moments and the dissemination of the software has led to the creation of an international network of public sector entities using this platform. Even so, the feedback generated from the first experiences in Madrid shows that there is some room for improvements related to transparency, communication with citizens and the way that some participation tools are used.

Firstly, more offline and online activities seem to be needed in order to clearly inform citizens about the different participation options in Decide Madrid, the correct utilisation of the different options to express their opinions, what security measures are used, what is going on in the platform and what they can expect about the input provided. All of this could increase citizen trust in the platform and encourage them to register, verify their accounts and participate. The city council could also try to increase the involvement of associations or experts (e.g., by promoting the platform, moderating debates or monitoring approved projects) in order to foster higher levels of participation among individual citizens.

Secondly, to improve C2C dialog through Decide Madrid, some moderation seems to be needed in order to avoid confrontation, repetitions and disrespectful criticism. Citizens also indicate the difficulties to support some proposals due to the lack of a detailed plan and estimated cost. The time spent by citizens in making proposals causes disappointment when they expire without enough supports to go to vote. Although the platform has some tools to search and visualize proposals by topic, overlapped proposals or those having a high level of support could be analysed by staff from the city council, with the agreement of the proponent, to try to group or improve them and get the necessary supports. Furthermore, the information about the possibilities of participation, rules and customs, and some of the FAQs could be
provided in a visible section inside the different participation options in addition to the general “Help” section.

Thirdly, feedback is crucial for citizens to perceive the value of their contributions and encourage their continued participation. However, in Decide Madrid, citizens can only monitor the participatory budgets. In order to improve transparency, some information now included in the open-data portal (number of users and activities carried out in the platform) should be made available in Decide Madrid and some performance indicators could also be included. A system could be put in place to summarize and give visibility to the comments made by citizens in the different processes, with indications about whether they have been taken into account or the reasons for not incorporating the input provided. A more prominent role could also be given to the social media and Web 2.0 tools in order to give more visibility to the platform and its activities.

All in all, the analysis carried out shows that in Decide Madrid there is substantial room for improvement in terms of transparency throughout the platform and of due process in the proposals section. Most of the barriers to effective citizen participation are directly linked to poor provision of information, overlapped proposals and failure to influence the decision-making process. This causes a feeling of lack of legitimacy among citizens and a reduction of participation in the platform. Managers should provide citizens with the necessary information at each point (before, during and after the participation). The way in which the challenges brought out above are tackled and the maintenance of the commitment to e-participation of future governments of the city council will determine the increase of citizen participation and the viability of the initiative.

References

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3. COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

As indicated in Chapter 1, there has been a lack of a systematic approach to institutional matters surrounding the design and functioning of e-participation platforms. The case studies show that the establishment of e-participation platforms can be driven by a variety of motives, from specific “chance events” such as scandals or public outbursts, to targeted campaigns by supra-national organizations to national incremental improvement of policy-making. E-participation platforms can be originated either top-down or bottom-up, from platforms initiated and steered by influential individuals or non-governmental organizations to platforms launched by governmental organizations and imposed top-down to either national, regional or local government organizations. As e-participation initiatives are rather recent and their origins vary, also their degree of institutionalization differs to a large extent.

Table 4 summarizes the main characteristics of the seven e-participation platforms introduced earlier in this report.

**Table 4: Overview of the inception and institutionalization of e-participation platforms.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the platform</th>
<th>Active since</th>
<th>Top-down vs bottom-up inception</th>
<th>Administrative level</th>
<th>Branch of government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Parlement et Citoyens</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>meinBerlin</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Local/District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>De Stem van West</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Minsak.no</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Regional/ Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>We asked, you said, we did</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Decide Madrid</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All selected e-participation platforms were established in 2013-2016, thus providing examples of very recent practices. The analysis of the seven cases indicates that the inception of e-participation platforms has been driven by a variety of motives. It appears that a significant aspect in driving the adoption and implementation of e-participatory practices is the concern
about distrust in politicians and political institutions in general. In most countries, the evolution of e-participation platforms has been part of the improvement of policy-making processes to increase citizens’ trust in political institutions through the provision of new opportunities for citizens’ participation as demonstrated by the cases of Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Scotland. In such incremental cases, the government was leading and funding the establishment and running of e-participation platforms (top-down practices).

The relationship between public trust in politicians and public support for e-participation initiatives appears to be inverted: more distrust of politicians means more civic support and pressure by civil society organizations to institutionalize e-participatory practices. For example, in the cases of Estonia and France, the launch of e-participation platforms was triggered by specific “chance events” which substantially contributed to the public distrust in governing elites. In Estonia, the e-participation initiative was set up in the aftermath of a political scandal, which involved the financing of the ruling party at the time and resulted in a drop of trust in political parties. In France, a growing mistrust of politicians has been evident for a long time, most recently exemplified by the Yellow Vests’ movement. The e-participation platform Parlement et Citoyens was set up to explicitly improve trust between citizens and elected politicians by moving forward from electoral patronage to a cooperation relationship in order to make citizens and their representatives aware that they belong to the same political community. Such “chance events” in Estonia and France paved way for bottom-up inception of e-participation platforms initiated by influential individuals and/or non-governmental organizations.

Next to internal drivers behind the development of e-participation platforms, it is also possible to acknowledge the influence of some external drivers. For instance, it could be concluded that at least in some of the countries in our pool – Estonia, France, Scotland and Spain – the international Open Government Partnership has had positive, though indirect, impact on developing e-participation platforms. Also, the Dutch case indicates that the cross-European D-CENT project which was co-funded by the European Commission and run by a consortium of ten partners across Europe between 2013 and 2016 was beneficial in the establishment of the e-participation platform.
In addition to political scandals, perceived level of corruption and elitism on the part of the decision-makers, the austerity measures adopted after the financial crisis of 2008 also have had a profound effect on the level of trust in governments as seen from the Scottish and Spanish cases. Open government with its emphasis on inclusion and participatory policy-making has been seen as a way for governments to alleviate some of the tensions that governments have faced during the cutbacks. For example, the Scottish government reacted to falling public trust with a range of reforms that made it clear they wanted Scottish communities to be involved in all levels of the policy process, especially giving feedback on improving service delivery. As a result, the Scottish government adopted the Scotland Community Empowerment Act in 2015, and since then the Citizen Space platform (which hosts the *We asked, you said, we did* initiative) has been used for every single consultation the Scottish government has organized.

In many European countries, the executive branch of government increasingly controls the parliamentary agenda, the administration often plays an important role in drafting bills and the role of the legislative branch in policy design is in the decline. Accordingly, often the notion of participatory policy-making has been associated with the executive branch, as the executive branch has been usually made responsible for organizing participatory processes for engaging the civil society. The Dutch, German, Scottish and Spanish platforms address online participation between the executive branch and citizens. But this study also shows that some cases of e-participation address the link between citizens and politicians rather than citizens and civil servants by that trying to bring the legislative branch “back in” the policy-making process. This applies both to the national and local levels. The Estonian and French examples present cases of “participatory parliamentarism”, whereas in the cases of Norway the e-participation platform mediates collaboration between local-level politicians and citizens. However, the limited involvement of the legislative branch in policy design may also constitute an obstacle to the development of e-participatory initiatives and may thus undermine the expectations set on novel e-participation initiatives.

The degree of institutionalization of e-participation practices varies to a large degree. On the one hand, there are initiatives which have been launched by the government in a top-down mode by using a centralized approach and formal regulation. This is best exemplified in the Norwegian and Spanish cases. On the other side of the institutionalization continuum lies the
French case which was established bottom-up by individuals and which relies on the voluntary use of online tool by parliament members. An interesting case is offered by the Estonian example which, albeit being established and run bottom-up by a quasi-governmental organization, enjoys a medium degree of institutionalization due to a detailed regulation in the law.

All in all, the rich empirical material collected through the case studies allows for developing further our existing knowledge on the institutional, administrative and organizational aspects of e-participation. The collected case studies form a basis for systematic analysis on how e-participation initiatives are actually organized and administered within the government and how collaborative partnerships both within the government and with non-governmental actors affect the performance of e-participation platforms. This, in turn, facilitates to develop a model of supply-based success factors of e-participation platforms by that further contributing to both the existing academic knowledge as well as providing valuable information to policy-makers who are involved in the establishment and development of e-participation platforms. A further developed analysis of the e-participation case studies will be presented in the forthcoming Research Report, (D5.2), and the practical policy recommendations in the Policy Brief (D5.3).