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Document Overview

For this deliverable, two policy briefs have been prepared based on the reviewed sources.

The first policy brief is devoted to deliberation as a format of public participation. It explains that deliberation differs from consultations in that it is based on the exchange of arguments, mutual learning, and the development of collective recommendations. Mini-publics are discussed separately as key institutional forms of deliberation, including their types, advantages, and risks. The document also describes typical challenges (such as “tokenism” or the superficial use of deliberation) and the conditions for its effectiveness. In addition, it provides examples of successful integration of deliberative formats into political processes at both national and local levels, along with practical recommendations for implementation.

The second policy brief is devoted to **digital participation** as a complement to traditional offline engagement. It explains that digital tools are **neither inherently superior nor inferior but produce different effects depending on the purpose and desired outcomes of participation**. **Online** platforms are particularly effective for widening *inclusivity, engaging large numbers of people*, and *enabling data-driven analysis*, while **offline** formats remain more suitable for *building trust*, *fostering deeper deliberation*, and *ensuring legitimacy in divided contexts*.

The brief highlights **three practical challenges** for municipalities, civil society organizations, and international development projects:

1. identifying where digital participation adds the most value,
2. recognizing where analogue methods are more appropriate,
3. combining both formats effectively through hybrid approaches.

It draws on academic research, empirical evaluations, and real-world case studies of platforms such as Pol.is, Decidim, and Consul. The overall aim is to provide a rigorous analysis that offers clear, policy-relevant guidance for practitioners.

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1. POLICY BRIEF 1. Deliberation: definition, use, and fit to the democratic political process

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September 2025

In recent decades, calls for greater citizen participation in democratic decision-making have led to a surge in consultative formats, such as public hearings. Yet, they often become platforms for "loud minorities" (Fung & Wright, 2003). As populist forces increasingly instrumentalize differences in people's experiences and origins to foster societal polarization and undermine social cohesion, a different approach to citizen participation is needed. This brief presents deliberation as an alternative approach to citizen participation, introduces typical formats of deliberation with a focus on mini-publics, and presents conditions for maximizing its effectiveness and integrating deliberation into a democratic political process.

Methodologically, this brief relies on the systematic review of academic literature on deliberative democracy, including classic works on the functions and limits of deliberation (Pateman, 1970; Dryzek, 2000; Mansbridge, 1999; Smith, 2009), approaches to democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Bächtiger et al., 2018), as well as empirical studies of mini-publics and practical formats of deliberation (Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Farrell, Suiter & Harris, 2018). Particular attention is given to analyses of the conditions for effective deliberation (Rapeli & Himmelroos, 2020; Eun, 2024) and the risks associated with excessive formalizing of deliberation without real impact (Curato et al., 2018).

Deliberation: definition and functions

Deliberation is an alternative format of public participation. While consultations and dialogues merely collect diverse opinions, deliberative participatory formats aim at creating reasoned decisions through collective discussion, mutual learning, and the exchange of information.

Unlike public consultations, which are common in representative democracy when authorities inform citizens about potential decisions and gather their feedback, deliberation goes beyond reaction and involves generating new ideas through the exchange of arguments (Smith, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). When participants are selected at random to approximate the social diversity of a nation, community, or city, such as in deliberative mini-publics, deliberation helps balance "loud" and "quiet" voices.

Thus, unlike other forms of participation, deliberation:

- does not fix preferences but allows them to change based on arguments (Fishkin, 2009);
- is not limited to symbolism but generates real policy recommendations (Fung & Wright, 2003);
- is not reduced to a simple statistical majority but seeks inclusion, legitimacy, and balance (Dryzek, 2000; Warren, 2008);
- combines both official formats and interaction with "everyday practices" (at the community level) (Mansbridge, 1999).

Deliberation cannot be situated either within the direct or representative democracy toolbox. Unlike direct democracy (e.g., referenda), deliberation does not presuppose binding decision-making in a democracy. Unlike representative democracy, participants in deliberation, as a form of citizen participation, are regular citizens, not elected representatives. At the same time, deliberation can be used flexibly in combination with other democratic institutions, thanks to its **core functions:**

- **Enhancement of legitimacy in political decisions and the strengthening of trust**. When citizens are involved in discussions and see that their arguments are heard, they are more likely to support even those decisions that do not fully align with their initial positions (Fishkin et al., 2021). In this sense, deliberation serves as a "trust bridge" between society and government. Citizen participation in decision-making generates a political socialization effect – people tend to trust institutions more when they feel their involvement in political processes (Pateman, 1970)
- **Shifting focus in conflicts from (personalized) antagonism toward reasoned discussion**. Deliberation opens space for "rational discourse," where even polarized groups are compelled to listen to one another (Dryzek, 2000). At the local level, this is especially critical: issues such as budget allocation or land use often generate tension that can be mitigated through joint problem-solving.
- **Substantive and civic learning from expert input.** Typical deliberative processes provide participants with access to verified information, opportunities to ask questions to thematic experts, and space to debate arguments with others. At the same time, given a task to arrive at collective recommendations or judgments, citizens learn to listen to each other, change their views in light of arguments, and take responsibility for collective decisions. This fosters a sense of shared purpose and strengthens civic competencies.
- **Correcting misconceptions and reducing the impact of biases and manipulations**. Listening to other participants, especially in mixed groups where individuals with different opinions discuss them with each other, helps correct mutual stereotypes (Rapeli & Himmelroos, 2020). When adequately facilitated, deliberative processes provide for the lacking "everyday talk" (Mansbridge 1999) with the "other" in the age of disinformation and online fragmentation.
- **Reducing self-interest in policy preferences**. Through listening to others, their needs and preferences, participants become more supportive of collectively beneficial policy choices even if those choices do not directly benefit them (Eun, 2024).

Choosing the right format for deliberation

Before choosing an appropriate format or tool for deliberation, three criteria should be considered: **who participates, how communication occurs, and the level of influence participants have** (Fung, 2006).

When it comes to participants, typical deliberative formats ("mini-publics") rely on random and stratified sampling for participant selection, which enables the representation of society across key social characteristics and, consequently, produces more balanced outcomes than ordinary opinion surveys (Fishkin, 2009). This feature is also one of the largest challenges, since there is a high rate of rejection to participate among randomly selected people due to the way individuals conceive their own roles, abilities, and capacities in the public sphere, as well as in the perceived output of such democratic innovations (Jacquet, 2017). Participants can also be invited based on their expertise, interest, and specific characteristics without random selection, depending on the purpose.

In terms of communication, deliberation is not just about collecting opinions but about **dialogue and argumentation**. Participants receive balanced information, have time to reflect, and then discuss together. The key here is reciprocity, reason-giving, and facilitation – so that the conversation is constructive, inclusive, and oriented toward joint recommendations. Everyday conversations among citizens can evolve into genuine deliberation that fosters collective decision-making, but only when certain conditions are met (Mansbridge, 1999).

Finally, the level of influence can vary. In some cases, participation is **consultative**, with recommendations that authorities may or may not follow. In others, it can mean **joint decision-making**, where citizens and officials co-design policies. And in the strongest formats, there may even be **delegated authority**, where citizens' decisions are binding. The higher the level of influence, the more crucial it is to engage in genuine deliberation, as it requires responsibility and careful consideration of the broader public interest.

Deliberative mini-public as a common form for institutionalized deliberation: main features and types

Deliberation can take many forms – from "everyday conversations" in a community to parliamentary hearings, digital and institutional deliberation (Bobbio, 2010). Regarding deliberation as a form of citizen participation, the most common set of deliberative formats is known as "mini-publics." They are typically structured and oriented toward inclusion, reason-giving, and transparency (Fishkin, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999).

In light of contemporary challenges – such as institutional distrust, martial law, or demographic shifts – the choice of type must be strategically grounded, taking into account goals, resources, the expected level of influence, and the policy context. Deliberative practices are evolving, often combining online participation tools with offline discussions and seeking to engage previously marginalized groups. This broadens the scope of deliberation from local planning to national reforms (Escobar, 2014; Geissel & Newton, 2012).

The table below summarizes common types of mini-publics along the three criteria (participant composition, mode of communication, and level of influence). It also provides clarifications regarding the advantages and potential risks associated with the type of mini-public.

Table 1 Types of mini-publics: characteristics, advantages, and risks

Type of mini-public	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
Deliberative Polling	Random sample	Small groups + experts + pre/post surveys	Communicative Influence / Consultation: shaping informed public opinion, but no binding obligations for authorities	Opinion change, legitimacy	Costly, challenges with neutral information, and weak policy feedback
Citizens' Juries	Random sample (12–24 people)	Hearings, argumentation, recommendations	Advice / Consultation (sometimes joint decision-making if embedded in the political process) – authorities receive recommendations, may take them into account	Depth, trust	Small number of participants → representativeness issue; scaling difficulties; challenges in implementing recommendations

Type of mini-public	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
Planning Cell	Randomized, multiple groups	Facilitated work, experts	Joint decision-making – co-production of policies in collaboration with the administration	Institutionalized decisions	High cost, administrative complexity, lack of flexibility, difficulty in replicating across contexts
Citizens' Assembly	Stratified random sample (50–200)	Extended facilitated discussion	Advice / joint decision-making, sometimes Delegated Authority (if authorities commit to implementing results)	Legitimacy, inclusiveness	Scaling challenges, high organizational costs, and a need for a clear institutional implementation mechanism
Consensus Conference	Random citizens + experts	Hearings + joint position development	Advice – joint production of a consensus position presented as recommendations	Citizen–science dialogue	Group pressure and consensus may undervalue less popular views

Other formats of deliberation

Besides mini-publics, with their institutionalized and structured methods, deliberation can take other forms. The following table summarizes semi-formal (advisory) and informal formats, where deliberation is a constitutive element, participants are not randomly selected citizens, but either self-selected citizens or self-selected, invited experts:

Table 2 Formats of semi-formal and informal deliberation

Format of Deliberation	Type of Format	Level of Deliberation	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
Citizens' Panels	Institutional/permanent	Partial	Volunteers / selected residents	Periodic discussions	Advice / Consultation – participants provide regular recommendations, but no guarantee of implementation	Regularity	May be unrepresentative, low level of influence, sometimes a symbolic function
Advisory Panels	Institutional	Partial	Experts + community representatives	Formal meetings/exchange of positions	Advice – classic advisory body format	Direct link with authorities	Low openness
World Café / Dialogue Sessions	Informal	Partial	Open participation	Group discussions, exchange of views	Communicative Influence – idea generation, public debate	Inclusiveness, accessibility	Superficiality, lack of influence, dominance of active participants,

Format of Deliberation	Type of Format	Level of Deliberation	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
					without formal impact		difficulty summarizing outcomes
National Dialogues / Strategic Dialogues	Hybrid	Partial–full (depends)	Stakeholders, citizens, & sometimes politicians	Facilitated strategic discussion	Joint decision-making / Delegated Authority (e.g., in post-conflict or constitutional dialogue)	Trust, transformation	Scaling difficulties
Deliberative Town Halls	Hybrid/local	Partial	Open participation	Moderated discussions, dialogue with authorities	Communicative Influence / Advice – depending on context, may play an advisory role	Direct interaction	Risk of formality, superficial discussions, dominance of active participants, difficulty summarizing outcomes
Scenario Workshops / Future Labs	Hybrid/planning	Partial	Representatives + community	Co-design of policies/visions	Advice / Joint decision-making – scenario planning often leads to joint policy development with authorities	Innovativeness, co-creation	High facilitation requirements, risk of abstract discussions, may lack direct policy impact.

Organizing deliberation: typical pitfalls and how to avoid them

As with any other participatory format, planning deliberation involves certain risks, specifically:

- **"Deliberation-washing"** – the superficial use of the term without meeting the actual criteria of genuine exchange of arguments and consensus-building. For instance, online surveys without mutual discussion, or the use of "consultation" and "deliberation" as interchangeable terms, lead to confusion of goals and expectations. Such a devaluation of the term deliberation undermines its capacity to serve as an effective instrument for making well-reasoned and legitimate decisions (Fung, 2006).
- **"Tokenism"** – the illusion of participation without any substantive meaning, which often is caused by the lack of feedback (Curato et al., 2018). Thus, even when citizens take part in discussions, authorities may fail to communicate how their recommendations were actually considered (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Typical examples include public hearings without minutes or responses to submissions, online surveys without published results, and

discussions that have no real impact on the final decision. Such practices not only devalue the very idea of participation but also reduce citizens' trust in democratic institutions (Bryson et al., 2013). At the same time, without embedded mechanisms of influence, even the best-organized deliberation may leave participants disappointed (King et al., 2004).

- **Neglect of the social context** – for example, low levels of trust, a lack of facilitation skills, or domination by more active participants (Escobar, 2011; Cornwall, 2008) – can reduce the quality of deliberation and its outcomes.
- **Inappropriate choice of format to the purpose –** choosing with inertia or just by following innovation, without considering the topic, level of tension, access to information, or expected outcomes. As a result, even well-organized initiatives may turn out to be structurally inaccessible to broad groups of the population, such as internally displaced persons, youth, or people with disabilities. Inclusion does not occur automatically; it must be carefully planned through the use of quotas, support, effective communication, and enabling environments (Cornwall, 2008).

Considering these challenges, deliberation can have real substance rather than merely a symbolic function only if certain structural conditions are met – in particular, clear criteria for selecting the appropriate format. Effective deliberation requires:

- ✔ Broad diversity **of participants**: The selection of citizens must aim to represent the social, gender, geographic, and other forms of diversity within a community.
- ✔ I**nformational support** is critically important: participants should have access to balanced and reliable materials, as well as input from technical experts and interest groups, to account for diverse perspectives on an issue.
- ✔ T**he process must last long enough** to allow participants to review the materials, reflect on positions, and engage in meaningful dialogue.
- ✔ N**eutral facilitation** and an **official mechanism for responding to results** are key elements for maintaining trust and influence (Fishkin, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Curato et al., 2018).

Deliberative mini-publics and the political process in a representative democracy: making results officially count

The results of deliberative processes cannot remain "behind closed doors": they must be made public, and authorities should provide an official response to each recommendation. The legitimacy of deliberative formats depends on transparency and accountability, which also prevent them from becoming merely symbolic (Fung & Wright, 2003). At the same time, citizens are more willing to participate in deliberative formats if they feel the process is transparent and that their voice genuinely influences the outcome (Neblo et al., 2010). Therefore, it's critical to plan how to embed deliberation in a political process.

Practical examples

Practice shows that deliberative formats can be successfully integrated into the policy process at both local and national levels.

At the national level, deliberative practices are increasingly being integrated into formal political cycles. The example of Ireland (Farrell, Suiter & Harris, 2018) demonstrates how citizens' assemblies became a tool for preparing constitutional referendums (same-sex marriage, repeal of the 8th Amendment). In Canada, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Warren, 2008) showed the possibility of institutionalizing the role of citizens in policymaking. Deliberation also matters in the global context, though its legitimacy is most deeply rooted in local practices (Dryzek, 2000).

Such examples can be seen within the broader approach of "deliberative systems" (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012), where local and national practices interact and reinforce one another.

At the local level, deliberation becomes particularly important, as municipalities are a "natural environment" for democratic innovation where decisions directly affect residents and can be more easily integrated into policy (Fung & Wright, 2003; Fishkin, 2009). Through instruments such as participatory budgeting, neighborhood councils, and citizens' assemblies, deliberation can be embedded into agenda-setting, strategic planning, and conflict resolution (Warren, 2008). Everyday conversations within communities also foster social cohesion and strengthen the legitimacy of political decisions, showing that deliberation occurs not only through formal institutions but also through local practices that underpin the broader democratic system (Mansbridge, 1999).

Conditions: How to embed deliberation in a policy process

Several directions can ensure effective integration of deliberative outcomes into representative democracy (Fishkin, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999; Dryzek, 2000; Sørensen & Torfing, 2023):

First, mandatory consideration of recommendations in representative bodies. This means that the results of citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, or other formats must be officially submitted for review by local councils or parliaments. Authorities should publicly respond to each proposal. Such a practice significantly enhances transparency and trust. In addition, it is crucial to conduct systematic research on the actual impact of deliberative processes on policy, taking into account the design and format of these processes (Dacombe & Wojciechowska, 2024). Evaluation of deliberation should consider empirical analysis of real debates (Steiner et al., 2004; Thompson, 2008; Bächtiger et al., 2018).

Second, linking deliberation to political cycles. The most effective formats are those organized not "after the fact" but precisely at the time when key documents – budgets, development strategies, master plans – are being adopted. This enables the integration of citizens' recommendations into decision-making processes at the stage of policy formation.

Third, institutionalizing deliberative practices in community charters or council regulations. For example, it may be mandated that citizens' assemblies be held on strategic or conflict-sensitive issues. At the same time, there is a risk that such institutionalization may be purely formal. To avoid this, additional mechanisms of accountability and reporting are required. Additionally, since formal deliberative mini-publics are costly, institutionalization clauses should account for a public body's ability to allocate or raise funds for them. This is especially an issue in developing economies.

Fourth, connecting deliberative outcomes with referendums or votes. This is especially relevant for decisions of constitutional or strategic importance. An example is the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, whose recommendations were put to a provincial referendum (Warren, 2008). At the same time, there are pertinent risks that majority voting without deliberation preceding it may reject the results if the issue is highly controversial.

Fifth, involving the executive branch. Governments and administrations can embed recommendations into development programs, strategies, and budgets. Since the executive branch is often the key actor in the practical implementation of policy, its engagement is critically important.

Sixth, creating mechanisms of accountability and monitoring. Authorities should report regularly on the implementation status of recommendations and establish independent committees or advisory bodies to oversee the process. This practice prevents results from being "forgotten" and avoids discouraging citizens who actively engage in implementation.

Seventh, developing hybrid formats. These may include neighborhood councils, advisory bodies attached to municipalities, or working groups on budgetary issues. Such institutions ensure the continuity of participation and the ongoing integration of deliberative outcomes into the political process.

Thus, the integration of deliberative formats into representative democracy must be comprehensive, encompassing mandatory governmental responses and institutionalization, as well as transparent reporting and the creation of permanent mechanisms for joint decision-making. This would transform deliberation from an episodic tool into a sustainable component of democratic governance.

Recommendations for practitioners

We encourage authorities, municipalities, civil society organisations, and international development projects to take into account the following recommendations for effectively using deliberation:

- Select deliberative formats strategically, aligning them with the problem, policy stage, and expected outcomes.
- Design inclusive participant recruitment through random or stratified sampling.
- Develop balanced and accessible briefing materials, and invite experts representing diverse perspectives.
- Allocate sufficient time for participants to study materials, deliberate together, and revise their views.
- Engage trained and independent facilitators to ensure equal voice, respectful dialogue, and prevent dominance.
- Publish deliberative outcomes and require official responses from decision-makers.
- Provide feedback to participants and the public on how the recommendations informed the final decisions.
- Integrate deliberation into political cycles by linking it to budgeting, strategic planning, and reform processes as early as possible.
- Anchor deliberative practices institutionally in statutes or council rules while maintaining flexibility.
- Establish monitoring and evaluation systems to track implementation and assess impact on policy and trust.

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2. POLICY BRIEF 2. When to Go Digital? Using E-participation Tools for Effective Local Governance[1]

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Over the past three decades, the rise of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped the ways in which citizens interact with governments, policymakers, and one another. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have not only transformed commerce and social life but have also generated new expectations about how democracy can and should function in the digital age (van Dijk, 2013; Dahlberg, 2011). At the **municipal level**, where governance is the closest to citizens' everyday lives, digital participation tools offer both an opportunity and a challenge: if introduced properly, they have the potential to broaden engagement and democratise decision-making, but if introduced poorly, they risk excluding digitally vulnerable populations and weakening trust.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the digitalisation shift, prompting many governments and organisations **to adopt digital tools** for consultation, service delivery, and participation almost overnight (Fuller, 2023). **Global concerns about declining trust in institutions, political polarisation, and democratic backsliding** pushed policymakers and international donors, such as the United Nations and European Union, to **invest heavily in e-participation platforms** (United Nations, 2014; Hennen et al., 2020). Yet despite decades of experimentation, the **evidence is mixed**: while digital tools can dramatically expand access to information and allow unprecedented scale of participation, they do not always translate into meaningful influence on decision-making (van Dijk, 2013; Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016).

This research brief addresses three practical questions confronting *municipalities, civil society organisations, and international development projects*:

1. *When should digital participation be used?*
2. *When should offline engagement be preferred?*
3. *How can offline and online participation formats be combined effectively?*

[1] Darkovich, A., & Khutkyy, D. (2025). *When to go digital? Using e-participation tools for effective local governance* [Analytical brief]. Kyiv School of Economics; University of Tartu.

The argument advanced here is that **digital participation is neither inherently better nor worse than traditional methods**. Instead, its value depends on the *purpose of participation* and the *desired outcomes*. If the aim is to maximise inclusivity, scale, or data-driven analysis, digital tools provide unmatched advantages (Le Blanc, 2020; Townley & Koop, 2024). If the goal is to build trust, foster deep deliberation, or achieve legitimacy in divided contexts, offline formats are more effective (Garry et al., 2022; Tomini & Sandri, 2018). Ultimately, the most resilient approach is hybrid, sequencing digital and analogue methods to play to their respective strengths.

This brief draws on a wide body of academic literature, including foundational works on digital democracy (van Dijk, 2013; Dahlberg, 2011), empirical evaluations of e-participation (Aichholzer, Kubicek, & Torres, 2016; Lindner, Aichholzer, & Hennen, 2016), and case studies of platforms such as Pol.is, Decidim, and Consul. It also builds on practical experiences of municipalities worldwide and the perspectives of international donors promoting participatory governance. The goal is to **provide both an academically grounded analysis and policy-relevant guidance for practitioners.**

1. What is Digital Participation?

1.1. Conceptual Foundations

The term *digital participation* is often used interchangeably with *e-participation* and sometimes conflated with *digital democracy* or *digital government*. Clarifying these distinctions is essential. Digital participation refers specifically to the **use of digital technologies**—such as online platforms, social media, and mobile applications—**to involve citizens in governance processes**, whether by *accessing information*, *expressing preferences*, or *influencing policy outcomes* (United Nations, 2014). It is a subset of digital democracy, which encompasses broader transformations of political communication and governance through ICTs (van Dijk, 2013). Unlike digital government, which focuses on efficiency in service delivery, e-participation emphasises citizen involvement in decision-making.

Van Dijk (2013) defines digital democracy as *"the pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication"*. Within this, he distinguishes *e-participation* as the application of digital media specifically to enhance citizens' roles in governance and administration. Similarly, the United Nations (2014) frames e-participation as "the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative, and deliberative".

A seminal framework by Macintosh (2004) provides further clarity by identifying three functional levels of e-participation:

- **E-enabling**: Providing access to relevant, understandable information. This is the foundation of all other participation, as citizens must first be informed before they can engage meaningfully.

- **E-engaging**: Facilitating two-way interaction, such as consultations, surveys, or online forums where citizens can deliberate and respond to government proposals.
- **E-empowering**: Enabling citizens to directly shape outcomes, such as through participatory budgeting, online referenda, or collaborative policy design.

This three-level model remains influential because it highlights the spectrum of participation, **from passive information reception to active co-decision-making**. Importantly, research shows that most digital initiatives remain at the first two levels, with relatively few achieving genuine empowerment (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016).

Since digital participation can take the form of **accessing information, expressing preferences, or influencing policy outcomes**, it is essential for policymakers and practitioners to first clarify ***what they want to achieve*** with a given initiative. Without a clear purpose—whether the goal is to *inform, consult, or empower*—e-participation risks becoming a symbolic exercise rather than a meaningful democratic practice.

1.2. Different views on Democracy and Participation

Van Dijk (2013) distinguishes between government-centric and citizen-centric approaches. Government-centric models—such as *legalist* or *competitive democracy*—view digital tools primarily as a means **for information provision, election campaigning, or efficiency in decision-making**. In contrast, citizen-centric models—such as *participatory*, *pluralist*, *deliberative*, or *libertarian democracy*—emphasize broader **citizen involvement, community-building, and even bypassing traditional institutions**.

This distinction matters because municipalities and donors may approach e-participation with different assumptions. A city government might see an online platform primarily as a way to **improve service delivery feedback** (a government-centric view), while NGOs might **emphasise empowerment and bottom-up agenda-setting** (a citizen-centric view). Recognising these differences helps clarify why expectations and evaluations of digital participation often diverge.

2. When and Why Digital Participation Excels

Digital participation is not simply a technological innovation—it alters the very possibilities for how citizens and institutions interact. While sceptics emphasise risks, the literature is clear that when used for the right purposes, digital tools provide distinct advantages compared to traditional participation methods. This section identifies the main domains where digital participation excels, drawing from comparative studies, case evaluations, and municipal experiences worldwide.

In sum, digital participation excels in contexts where the goals are **inclusion, scale, speed, transparency, diversity of input, data-driven analysis and continuity**. These strengths explain why international donors and municipalities increasingly invest in digital platforms. However, as the next section will show, these advantages **do not render offline participation obsolete**. The very areas where digital tools shine—breadth, efficiency, and scale—can come at the expense of depth, trust, and legitimacy, making analogue methods indispensable complements.

2.1. Inclusivity and Accessibility

Perhaps the most widely recognised strength of digital participation is **its potential to lower barriers to engagement**. Traditional offline forums—town hall meetings, consultations in city halls, or neighbourhood workshops—are often dominated by **those with the time, mobility, and resources to attend**. Citizens with caregiving responsibilities, multiple jobs, disabilities, or those living in remote areas are frequently excluded. Online participation mitigates these barriers by enabling engagement at any time and from any place with an internet connection (Mertes et al., 2022).

Empirical research supports this. In Zurich, participants in e-consultations reported convenience, time savings, and location independence as the top advantages of online participation (Mertes et al., 2022). Similarly, in Canada's "Consulting with Canadians" in Lethbridge capital investment consultation platform, over 70% of contributions were submitted **outside business hours**, highlighting how digital tools enable participation on citizens' own schedules (Fuller, 2023). This inclusivity is particularly important for municipalities seeking to reach youth, diaspora communities, and traditionally underrepresented groups.

2.2. Scale and Cost-Efficiency

Digital participation enables municipalities to consult thousands—or even millions—of citizens at marginal cost. Unlike physical meetings constrained by venue size, staffing, and logistics, online platforms scale easily. For example, Paris' participatory budgeting process has engaged **over 100,000 residents annually** through a digital voting platform, far more than could be mobilised through face-to-face meetings alone (Wetherall-Grujić, 2024).

This scalability matters especially for national or international consultations. The European Commission's "Futurium" platform allowed stakeholders from across all member states to contribute ideas on digital policy, producing a diversity of perspectives that no single set of workshops could have captured (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016). For municipalities with limited budgets, digital platforms thus represent a **cost-effective way to maximize citizen reach.**

2.3. Speed and Responsiveness

Traditional participation processes are often lengthy, requiring weeks or months to organise meetings, recruit participants, and synthesise input. Digital platforms enable almost instant consultation. Municipalities can **launch a survey or online forum in days**, gather input within weeks, and adapt policies rapidly. This speed is particularly valuable in crises. During natural disasters, **digital participatory mapping has allowed citizens to report hazards** or request assistance in real time. Le Blanc (2020) documents how digital participation during floods and earthquakes provided emergency managers with situational awareness that would have been impossible through analogue means. The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated this advantage, as municipalities used online tools to gather feedback on local restrictions, service delivery, and vaccination rollouts.

2.4. Transparency and Traceability

Digital participation platforms often create a public, searchable record of contributions. Unlike closed-door workshops, online forums allow citizens **to see each other's input**, track the number of votes or comments, and monitor how decisions evolve. This transparency increases perceived fairness and accountability (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016).

For example, Madrid's Consul platform (https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/consul-project/) makes all proposals, votes, and meeting minutes publicly accessible. Citizens can observe not only which projects win funding but also how each step of the process unfolds. This traceability builds trust in the process—even among those whose preferred projects are not selected. Transparency is especially valuable in contexts where citizens distrust government decision-making, as it signals that inputs are not disappearing into a "black box."

2.5. Input Diversity and Collective Intelligence

Digital platforms allow municipalities to **tap into the "wisdom of the crowd".** Citizens can contribute data, expertise, or lived experiences that may otherwise remain invisible to decision-makers. Iceland's 2011 constitutional reform process, which crowdsourced ideas online, illustrates this: ordinary citizens provided hundreds of detailed proposals, some of which were incorporated into the draft text (Fuller, 2023).

2.6. Continuity and Sustained Engagement

Offline participation is typically episodic—citizens attend a meeting, express views, and leave. Digital tools enable ongoing dialogue. Citizens can revisit platforms to check updates, vote on new proposals, or monitor implementation. This continuity supports long-term civic engagement and accountability. Barcelona's Decidim platform exemplifies this by allowing citizens to track policy proposals over multiple years, from initial submission to implementation. Such sustained engagement helps transform participation from a one-off exercise into a culture of ongoing democratic involvement (Hennen et al., 2020).

3. Limits of Digital Participation and the Continuing Need for Offline Engagement

The promise of digital participation is considerable, but its **limits are equally important**. Over the past two decades, research has shown that **technology alone cannot solve deeper challenges of democracy.** When poorly designed or deployed without sensitivity to context, e-participation may even **undermine inclusivity, legitimacy, and deliberative quality**. The limitations of digital participation highlight why offline engagement remains indispensable. **Digital divides** and **self-selection bias** threaten inclusivity; **trust and legitimacy challenges** weaken political impact; **limited deliberative depth** constrains quality; and **slacktivism and overload** risk trivialising participation. These are not reasons to abandon digital tools but reminders that they must be designed with care and complemented by analogue processes. For municipalities, donors, and

NGOs, the key lesson is that **digital participation expands possibilities but cannot replace the symbolic, deliberative, and trust-building functions of face-to-face democracy**.

3.1. The Digital Divide

Despite widespread internet penetration, **access remains unequal across regions, income groups, age cohorts, and educational backgrounds**. Even in advanced economies, rural residents may lack broadband, older citizens may be less digitally literate, and low-income households may share limited devices (van Dijk, 2013). Municipalities that rely solely on online participation **risk privileging younger, urban, and tech-savvy populations** while excluding those with fewer resources.

Access is also more than a question of connectivity; it requires digital literacy. Citizens need to navigate websites, interpret policy documents, and formulate inputs in writing. These are skills that not all residents possess. Van Dijk (2013) notes that digital participation can inadvertently *raise new barriers* by requiring additional competencies beyond those of traditional citizenship. As a result, groups already **marginalised in offline settings**—such as the elderly or people with limited language proficiency—may be doubly disadvantaged online. For policymakers, this raises questions of representativeness. Without inclusive design and offline alternatives, digital initiatives may produce participation that is **broader in numbers but narrower in social diversity.**

3.2. Representation and Self-Selection Bias

A second, related limitation concerns **who chooses to participate online**. E-participation processes are often voluntary and self-selecting, attracting citizens who are **already politically active, educated, and engaged** (Dahlberg, 2011). This can create distortions in which online inputs do not reflect the wider community's views.

Evidence from European e-consultations shows that responses are disproportionately drawn from urban and younger demographics (Aichholzer & Strauß, 2016). Similarly, large-scale digital consultations in Latin America found that **participation skewed toward middle-class citizens**, even when platforms were open to all (Hennen et al., 2020). The risk is that policymakers **mistake "digital majorities" for actual majorities**, overrepresenting certain voices while overlooking others. Offline methods, by contrast, can be designed to guarantee representativeness. Citizens' assemblies or mini-publics (Fishkin, 2011; Gastil & Richards, 2013), use **random stratified selection to mirror the demographics of the population**. While expensive and limited in scale, such approaches deliver outputs with higher legitimacy. This contrast underscores why municipalities cannot rely exclusively on digital input for policymaking.

3.3. Legitimacy and Trust Challenges

Even when digital participation **increases turnout, it does not automatically generate trust**. Citizens and officials alike often question the **authenticity and legitimacy of online inputs**. Governments sometimes **treat online platforms as symbolic exercises** rather than channels of

genuine influence (van Dijk, 2010). When citizens see that their contributions are ignored or decisions remain unchanged, cynicism grows.

Surveys highlight this tension. In Switzerland, participants recognised the convenience of online participation but still viewed offline meetings as more secure and legitimate (Mertes et al., 2022). The visibility of leaders and the symbolism of face-to-face dialogue remain powerful. A handshake at a town hall, or the ability to directly question a mayor, conveys accountability in a way that anonymous online comments cannot.

3.4. Limits of Deliberative Depth

Another key weakness of online formats is the difficulty of sustaining rich deliberation. Digital forums often **encourage brief, fragmented, or polarised exchanges**. Without the cues of voice, tone, and body language, misunderstandings are more common, and discussions may **escalate into conflict** (Dahlberg, 2011).

Offline formats, especially when **professionally facilitated, allow more reasoned argumentation** and empathetic listening. Deliberative mini-publics, neighbourhood councils, or citizen workshops foster spaces where participants can clarify positions, challenge each other respectfully, and work toward consensus.This is not to dismiss the potential of online deliberation. Well-designed platforms like Pol.is have demonstrated the ability to structure large-scale input and identify consensus points (CrowdLaw for Congress, 2019). Yet even in these cases, most successful processes integrate offline discussions to deepen the deliberation.

Digital tools excel at **mapping broad opinion landscapes**; **analogue settings remain superior for negotiating differences and building trust.**

3.5. Slacktivism and Input Overload

Finally, the ease of online participation can dilute its meaning. Signing an e-petition, clicking “like,” or submitting a brief comment requires little commitment. While such actions increase visible participation, they **may not reflect deep engagement or informed preferences**—a phenomenon sometimes called *“slacktivism”* (van Dijk, 2013).

From the perspective of governments, high volumes of low-quality input can overwhelm administrative capacity. Municipalities may struggle to process thousands of repetitive or superficial comments, leading to frustration among both staff and citizens. Without mechanisms to filter, synthesise, and prioritise contributions, digital participation risks **becoming performative rather than impactful. Offline participation, although smaller in scale**, tends to demand greater commitment. Attending a meeting or deliberative workshop signals stronger motivation and often results in more substantive contributions.

4. Toward Hybrid Models: Combining Digital and Analogue Participation

The preceding sections highlight that digital and analogue participation each generate distinct democratic effects. Digital tools broaden access, scale, and speed, while analogue methods provide trust, legitimacy, and deliberative depth. The challenge for policymakers, municipalities, and international donors is therefore not to choose one over the other but to design **hybrid participation models** that combine these effects strategically. Hybrid processes acknowledge that digital and analogue methods are complements, not substitutes, and that the quality of participation depends on sequencing, integration, and institutional commitment.

In this part of our Brief, we show case studies of different combinations of digital and analogue participations in the world.

Table 1. Cases of Hybrid Participations in the World

Case	Digital Phase / Features	Offline Phase / Integration	Outcome
vTaiwan (Taiwan)	Citizens submit opinions online via **Pol.is**, agreeing or disagreeing with statements. Algorithms cluster opinions and highlight areas of consensus, creating an "opinion landscape."	Stakeholders (government, civil society, industry) **meet face-to-face**, using Pol.is maps to focus dialogue on contested issues.	Produced **consensus-driven recommendations** on topics such as Uber regulation and alcohol e-commerce, some of which were incorporated into legislation. Demonstrates digital inclusivity feeding into analogue legitimacy.

Decidim (Barcelona)	An **open-source platform** where citizens **propose, debate**, and **vote** on ideas. All proposals are published online for transparency.	Module for **assemblies allows offline meetings** to be registered on the platform. Minutes, decisions, and outcomes are uploaded for public access.	In strategic planning, thousands of online contributions were complemented by neighborhood assemblies. Outputs were **integrated into final policy documents**. Demonstrates how to avoid fragmentation by merging online and offline inputs.
Consul (Madrid)	Citizens propose projects, **vote** on participatory budgeting allocations, and comment on regulations via the platform.	Results from **in-person neighborhood meetings** and **workshops** are entered into the system by municipal staff.	Integrated both online and offline inputs into a single stream, preventing “dual channels.” Adopted by 100+ cities worldwide, showing scalability of hybrid design.

5. Policy Guidance for a Hybrid Design

Drawing from our analysis, we advise authorities, civil society organisations and international development projects to consider several principles of designing hybrid offline-online democratic processes:

1. **Purpose-driven sequencing**: Use digital tools for inclusivity, transparency, and agenda-setting; use offline forums for deliberation, trust-building, and consensus-building.

2. **Multistakeholder co-creation**: When designing a democratic initiative, make sure to create it as a joint effort of authorities, civil society organisations, and international development projects—such collaboration experience should increase initiative quality and elevate trust.

3. **Integration, not duplication**: Ensure offline outcomes are fed into digital platforms and vice versa, avoiding fragmented processes.

4. **Accessibility and inclusivity**: Provide multiple entry points—online portals, SMS participation, in-person meetings, and paper forms—so all groups can engage.

5. **Identification and cybersecurity**: Find a right balance between advanced authentication methods and cybersecurity measures versus minimalistic and convenient user experience.

6. **Transparency and feedback loops**: Publish both digital and analogue inputs visibly, inform about progress, and demonstrate citizens how their contributions influence decisions.

7. **Experimental approach**: Be prepared to listen to feedback, learn from mistakes, and revise participatory policy making design in an iterative manner.

8. **Capacity-building**: Invest in digital literacy and facilitation skills to ensure both formats function effectively.

9. **Awareness-raising**: Launch wide communication campaigns combining web and social media promotion with visual promos in administrative service centres..

10. **Institutional commitment**: Ensure political will to act on citizen input, pushing digital and analogue participation beyond symbolic exercises to truly empowering initiatives.

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