

Building Resilient Innovations in Democracy, Governance and Excellence - BRIDGE

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THANKING MY SECOND FAMILY, MARIA C.

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WHEN TO GO DIGITAL?

USING E-PARTICIPATION TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Policy brief

2026

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WHEN TO GO DIGITAL? USING E-PARTICIPATION TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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*:

01

When should digital participation be used?

02

When should offline engagement be preferred?

03

How can offline and online participation formats be combined effectively?

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 Worldwide.

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.

Case	Digital Phase / Features	Offline Phase / Integration	Outcome
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 neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood 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:

01 Purpose-driven sequencing:

Use digital tools for inclusivity, transparency, and agenda-setting; use offline forums for deliberation, trust-building, and consensus-building.

02 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.

03 Integration, not duplication:

Ensure offline outcomes are fed into digital platforms and vice versa, avoiding fragmented processes.

04 Accessibility and inclusivity:

Provide multiple entry points (online portals, SMS participation, in-person meetings, and paper forms) so all groups can engage.

05 Identification and cybersecurity:

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

06 Transparency and feedback loops:

Publish both digital and analogue inputs visibly, inform about progress, and demonstrate citizens how their contributions influence decisions.

07 Experimental approach:

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

08 Capacity-building:

Invest in digital literacy and facilitation skills to ensure both formats function effectively.

09 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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