Digital Democracy:
Tools and Approaches for Virtual Participatory Processes

Participatory democracy processes are designed to put real decision-making power over policy or budgeting decisions in community members' hands.[1] Historically, many of these processes have involved in-person interactions. However, given restrictions on in-person gatherings due to COVID-19, many local governments and community organizations have been forced to find new, virtual ways to engage community members. Many people have had to quickly change course, experimenting with new strategies, tools, and platforms in order to adapt in-person processes to virtual formats.
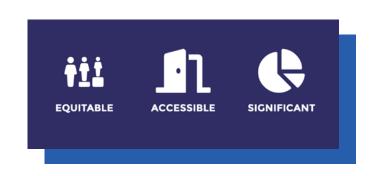
While digital tools and platforms can increase access for some–those who are mobility impaired, for example–they can also exclude the very communities that are already most often left out of decision-making processes. This includes Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), low-income communities who are most likely to lack internet connectivity; and some people with disabilities who are more likely to face accessibility challenges with digital platforms.[2]

To ensure that participatory decision-making processes are inclusive — whether conducted virtually or in-person — they must be:

equitable, ensuring that community members who have been systematically excluded from political processes are centered in decision-making;

accessible, ensuring language access, disability access, and economic access; and

significant, establishing community-led processes that result in communities having decision-making power over significant budgets or policies.

EQUITABLE   ACCESSIBLE   SIGNIFICANT

As some parts of the country begin to lift COVID-19 restrictions, many organizations and local governments may return to in-person formats when engaging community members in participatory decision-making. However, with the right considerations for equity and access, digital tools can supplement or pair with in-person processes to increase access beyond what is traditionally possible in person. This brief offers considerations for making virtual decision-making processes accessible and equitable throughout and beyond the COVID-19 era. It also highlights several platforms and tools used to facilitate digital engagement and participation.

Recommendations for inclusive virtual decision-making processes:

The following is a list of recommendations for ensuring that participatory democracy processes are accessible and equitable when conducted in a virtual format.

Ensure community broadband access.

- Racial and economic disparities in broadband access are well-documented, with BIPOC and low-income communities less likely to have internet access at home.[3] Local leaders must prioritize funding for community broadband to address racial and economic disparities in access to broadband, which could foster broader community participation in virtual decision-making processes. This effort could include coordination with community centers, libraries, and other public locations that offer free computer access and wifi to the public. Participatory decision-making models that feature a smaller group of community members (charged with leading policy or budget proposals, for example) must include a budget for internet access and computers so that all participants may easily engage from their homes.

Consider all language needs and offer translation.

- Participatory democracy initiatives—regardless of whether conducted virtually or in person—should budget for translation costs in all phases of the project, including for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Translators are needed in order to conduct initial outreach, to translate relevant materials, and for live translation at meetings.

Offer technical support.

- Participatory democracy initiatives should have a budget for technical support to help participants with challenges related to digital literacy. Technical support could include low-touch offerings like pre-recorded orientations to a particular program or platform

and personalized offerings like individual phone support in advance of synchronous gatherings. Participatory democracy initiatives should also include a budget for staff that can help individuals navigate new technology should they need support.

Conduct outreach and recruitment through diverse channels.

- Even when participation is fully virtual, outreach and recruitment can and should still be conducted through a variety of mediums—not just online. This could include, for example, signage in targeted community locations, notifications in local papers, or announcements on local radio stations, particularly to target communities traditionally left out of decision-making processes. As with in-person processes, outreach materials should always be translated and written in plain language.

Offer compensation for participation.

- Incentives for participation can help to draw in participants who might not otherwise have the time or resources to be involved. Compensation for participation not only recognizes and honors participants for their critical contributions, but can also help to foster greater participant ownership over a participatory process itself. In the time of COVID-19 in particular, when unemployment rates are soaring,[4] it is especially critical that participants are not expected to lend their expertise for free.

When using virtual meeting platforms, provide diverse mechanisms for conversation and deliberation.

- A benefit of virtual meeting platforms is that they offer diverse ways of engaging with material, even beyond what is possible during a traditional in-person meeting. For example, when leading convenings using Google Meet and Zoom, facilitators should encourage participants to contribute in whatever way they feel most comfortable. This can include participating through the chat function or a Q&A function, utilizing reaction icons, or drawing and annotating during a presentation. Consider using breakout rooms to provide safer spaces for participants who may be hesitant to engage in larger group discussions. Google's Jamboard can provide additional opportunities for small group engagement and visual learning. Note that these activities may require additional staff to support small group breakouts and to monitor the chat to ensure that facilitators are responding to questions and contributions being surfaced.

  In addition, when using virtual meeting platforms like Zoom or Google Meet, facilitators should offer translation and turn on subtitles for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Facilitators may also consider recording virtual meeting sessions in case participants have trouble following the conversation and want to revisit at a later time.

Tools to aid virtual decision-making

The following are several digital tools that are designed to support virtual decision-making processes. The tools featured in this brief are ones that PBP and PBP partners either have tested in some way, or have direct experience using. They range from single-function tools that support one particular component of decision-making (for example, attitude assessment, deliberation, or voting), to full-scale platforms that are designed to support a participatory decision-making process from start to finish.

Tools that support full virtual process engagement

CONSUL is an open source, free participation platform that aims to shift power to engaged residents. It is a full participation platform, meaning it aims to serve the full range of civic engagement needs of a city. Notable users include the City Council of Madrid, which led the platform's development, and the New York City's Participatory Budgeting program.[5] More than 135 institutions and cities in 35 countries have used CONSUL.[6]

CONSUL was created following the 2015 Madrid municipal election, in which leftists ushered in a new coalition of progressive leaders under the Ahora Madrid coalition.[7] In Madrid, the CONSUL platform enables residents to "collaboratively draft, comment, and vote on legislative proposals, submit and vote on participatory budgeting projects, and debate in forums."[8] When a proposal reaches a threshold of 1% of Madrid's registered voters through the platform, it is put to a public vote. If it wins a simple majority, the proposal is considered binding.[9]

Through the CONSUL platform, participants are able to:

- *Debate:* Anyone can open a thread on a proposed topic for discussion.
- *Create proposals:* Anyone can create a citizen's proposal and solicit support. Proposals that receive enough support will be voted on.
- *Engage in participatory budgeting:* Participants can propose and directly decide on how to spend part of a city budget.
- *Vote:* Participants can directly vote on proposals.
- *Collaborate on legislation:* Legislative text can be shared with the public, and participants can comment on any part of the text, which "allows an easy visualization of improvable parts."[10]

Decidim, from "let's decide" in Catalan, is another free, open source, full participation platform that helps "citizens, organizations, and institutions self-organize democratically at every scale."[11] Decidem allows organizations to create "democratic processes for strategic planning, participatory budgeting, collaborative regulatory design, urban space design, and elections."[12] It's used by cities such as Barcelona, Helsinki, and New York City, among many others.[13]

Decidim was originally an offshoot of CONSUL and was designed to coordinate the participatory process for drafting Barcelona's Municipal Action Plan,[14] as well as other participatory processes in the city.[15] Like CONSUL, residents can use the Decidim platform to propose, track, and vote on initiatives. Decidim offers additional features that are not included in CONSUL, such as "support for in-person meetings, collaborative drafting of proposals, modular features, and a social contract over using the platform for the right reasons."[16] Specifically, Decidim allows users to configure:

- *Spaces* for participants to make decisions, such as initiatives, assemblies, participatory processes or consultations; and
- *Components*, which help participants interact with these spaces, such as face-to-face meetings, surveys, proposals, voting, follow-up of results, comments and more.[17]

Tools that support attitude assessment, deliberation, and voting

Pol.is is another free, open-source tech tool whose purpose is to allow users to "collect opinions and identify overlapping areas of consensus."[18] In contrast to CONSUL and Decidim, which are both intended to serve a spectrum of civic engagement needs, Pol.is is a single-function tech tool that allows groups to surface attitudes and opinions about a particular topic. Pol.is was developed by Occupy Wall Street activists and is a tool used by the VTaiwan platform ("Virtual Taiwan"), which the Taiwanese government launched in 2015 in response to mounting calls for transparency in decision-making.[19] VTaiwan has used Pol.is to discuss how best to regulate Uber, develop new regulations for online liquor sales, and create new regulations for the platform economy,[20] which refers to economic activity facilitated by online platforms.[21]

Pol.is enables users to surface attitudes and opinions about a particular question in people's own words, and conducts an analysis on users' submitted comments. It then surfaces areas of agreement and disagreement, which is not something that CONSUL or Decidim do. It works by allowing users to draft agreement statements (for example, "Uber should be regulated"). Users also react to statements by agreeing, disagreeing, or passing.[22] Pol.is then groups together participants who vote similarly, helping to surface nuance with subject areas and identify areas of consensus—even within otherwise opposing viewpoints.[23]

The Stanford Participatory Budgeting Platform is another free, open-source tool that supports voting in participatory budgeting elections in cities, municipalities, and states, as well as in organizations. It was created by the Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team at Stanford University and has been used in cities like Chicago, Seattle, Boston, and New York City.[24] The tool is designed to support one component of participatory budgeting–voting– but is not intended to support a participatory budgeting process in its entirety.

The features of the Stanford PB Platform include:

- A customizable platform that supports various voting methods, including "approval voting, knapsack voting, and ranked voting" as well as support for remote voting.[25]
- Language support in 13 languages including Chinese, French, Hindi, and Spanish.[26]
- Analytics tools, including visualizations, to understand trends in voters' preferences.[27]

Loomio is a free, web-based forum that helps groups collaborate, have conversations, and make decisions that move to clear outcomes.[28] Loomio is designed to be used by any type or size of group. For example, the Wellington City Council in New Zealand used Loomio to consult the public on their proposed Alcohol Management Strategy for the city.[29] Loomio has also been used for smaller-scale participatory decision-making. For example, it has been used to "run community art galleries, to collaboratively manage democratic workplaces, [and] to conduct multi-stakeholder collaboration."[30] Although Loomio is not intended to replace in-person interactions, it aims to lower barriers to participation for people who may not otherwise be able to participate due to issues of accessibility, timing, or geography.[31]

Loomio's main features include:

- *Groups*, which "hold everything in place for a specific set of people;"
- *Threads*, which enable discussion and decision-making on particular topics;
- *Proposals or Polls*, which help to visualize participants' input and feelings about a particular proposal or topic; and
- *Outcomes*, which enables sharing and documentation of next steps.[32]

ENDNOTES

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7   Matt Stempeck, "Next-generation engagement platforms, and how they are useful right now (Part 1)."

8   Matt Stempeck, "Next-generation engagement platforms, and how they are useful right now (Part 1)."

9   Matt Stempeck, "Next-generation engagement platforms, and how they are useful right now (Part 1)."

10 Consul, accessed August 30, 2021.

11 General description and introduction to how Decidim works," Dedicim, August 30, 2021, https://docs.decidim.org/en/features/general-description/; "About," Decidim, August 30, 2021, https://docs.decidim.org/en/understand/about/.

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14 Barcelona's Municipal Action Plan contains the city's vision and strategic commitments. See: Luca Mora and Roberto Bolici, "The development process of smart city strategies: The Case of Barcelona," Re-city: future city - combining disciplines, January 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281005143_The_development_process_of_smart_city_strategies_the_case_of_Barcelona, 155-181.

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