THE BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

Get started with online citizen participation in your community
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CitizenLab is a young Belgian company specialised in supporting digital citizen participation.

The CitizenLab participation platform helps cities and municipalities to engage their citizens in local policy in a simple way. Meanwhile, its powerful underlying functionalities efficiently process and analyse citizen input.

Today, over 100 cities and municipalities use the platform as a centralised online hub to engage in dialogue with their citizens: from large cities like Vancouver to small municipalities like Furesoe.

The ultimate goal of this guide is to gather all the insights we’ve gained over the last few years and share them with communities looking to get started with online citizen participation in a structural way.

Questions or remarks? Mail us at hello@citizenlab.co. Would you like more information? Visit www.citizenlab.be.
Introduction

Why digital participation?

Roadmap to digital participation

Step 1: The preliminary process
Successful e-participation always requires a strategic exercise. Determining an internal process and involving the right stakeholders is indispensable.

Step 2: The communication
There’s no participation without communication. How do you get residents to visit the platform regularly? Short feedback loops keep the conversation going.

Step 3: The continuity
Policy participation doesn't end after one project. Depending on where you stand in the policy cycle, you'll have to find the most appropriate way to give your citizens a voice.

Conclusion
Introduction

Every couple of years, we’re expected to cast our vote and weigh in on our local policies.

Election days are not only the ideal moments of reflection about what needs to change with the new legislature, but also about what has shifted in the last few years. One thing is certain: whereas a few years ago we were still hesitantly addressing pilot projects and digital participation experiments, today we can talk about ‘digital democracy’ with full confidence.

That silent revolution is currently in full force. And what’s the biggest exponent of participative democracy? Digital innovation.

Today, more than ever, the digital realm has branched out and spread into the deepest levels of political decision-making. And it’s being fed by a broader social framework, because citizens today are more empowered and outspoken than ever. They crave more transparency and wish to weigh in on the policies of their cities and towns, whenever and wherever they choose.
In this regard, traditional participation instruments are often not very appealing. Only a select number of engaged citizens is willing to attend a time-consuming town gathering. Increasingly, there’s a growing awareness among local authorities that digital applications are a crucial part of the civil-political dialogue.

As a government, it is your duty to create interactions. Between citizens, but also between citizens and the government itself. Facilitating citizen participation in decision-making processes has now become an absolute priority for local governments.

This platform can, of course, be offered both offline and online. In fact, both forms can reinforce each other. While traditional instruments have been around for a lot longer, digital innovation offers governments new opportunities to reach citizens on a much bigger scale, to be more responsive in their communication with citizens, and to gather more valuable insights from these online interactions.
Most likely, this is not new to you. Almost every city or municipality is eager to get started with digital forms of participation. But often, there's not enough expertise to turn it into a success story. A lot of governments are still hesitant to take this leap of faith, despite the realisation that local democracies have entered a new digital era.

That’s exactly why we wrote this beginner’s guide. CitizenLab works with 100 cities and municipalities across the globe. That puts us in a privileged position to share what does and doesn't work when it comes to digital citizen engagement.

To get you started, we've translated our main conclusions into this practical guide. We'll introduce you to digital democracy step by step, and we'll reveal how you can put it into practice in your community.

Have fun reading!
Why digital participation?
Digital participation can mean every interaction — often in the shape of ideas, viewpoints or votes — that empowers citizens to influence the administrative processes within their municipality. That’s why digital participation can only succeed if there’s sufficient space for opinions that effectively affect local policy.

The idea of digitalising local democracies on a participation platform is based on the principle of collective intelligence. The sum of ideas and arguments of all citizens will always be stronger than the ideas of a handful of decision-makers, provided that there are decent facilitation mechanisms in place.

Digital participation can easily make citizen involvement stretch further than just casting a vote once in a while. On the road towards a more continuous democracy, an online participation platform offers governments the opportunity to give their citizens a seat at the table. This can work in the context of a current city project, a topic that interests them, or any time when a good idea pops into their heads.
Below, we’ll list the main advantages of digital participation. You’ll notice that these benefits can be subdivided into tangible and less tangible benefits with a high democratic value.

1. A bigger and more diverse audience, at a lower cost

Especially in less urbanised areas, it can be quite a challenge to not only hear the voices of white, middle-aged men or women. An online approach is more accessible and therefore guarantees a larger and more diverse audience.

It’s not uncommon to have 2,000 online participants. To reach that amount of people offline, you’d have to host at least 20 town meetings. And you’ll feel the difference in your wallet too: in order to have an offline reach of that scale, you’ll have to multiply your budget.

Besides, you’ll also reach new audiences. Consider people who can’t dedicate an evening to a town meeting but would love to have a say when they can, like adolescents, young families or single parents. On the CitizenLab platforms, 45% of participants are under 35.
More benches in the city park

Our city park is a great place for a Sunday stroll. Too bad that there are so few facilities that stimulate contact between residents.

Park benches are a limited investment for the city and would allow more interaction between people.
It all starts with an idea.
More public support for decisions

The goal of digital citizen participation is not so much to focus on the finality of the decision-making process, the process itself is at least as important. You create more transparency, you can share the necessary information, and it’s easier for residents to engage with policy makers.

Digital participation responds to citizens’ primary need to be a part of the process. This stands in striking contrast to decisions taken in an “ivory tower” setting, which have no support among citizens and ultimately feed a growing sense of distrust for the government.

Are social networks or neighbourhood networks already fulfilling this role? The big disadvantage is that, as a government, you can’t steer these debates by offering the necessary information, nor can you provide structured moderation and monitoring on a platform that isn’t yours. This is the ultimate opportunity for governments in offering their own participation platform: to bring citizens out of their online ‘echo chambers’ and stimulate debate between people with different viewpoints on common goals.
Increased efficiency and responsiveness

To make participation work it must be incorporated in an efficient process that suits your internal workflow. Too often, citizen participation is an “extra” on top of an already loaded to-do-list.

In this aspect, new technologies are a giant leap forward. Citizens’ ideas are no longer shared on post-its or notes but can be gathered as digital data that can be processed automatically. Tasks like de-duplicating ideas or questions, passing on ideas to the authorised departments, or simply generating final reports on the participation process, are all things that can be solved with algorithms.

This also transforms the role of the policy maker in organising citizen participation. By saving time on trivial tasks, more time can be spent on substantial matters, and governments can become more responsive to their citizens, with shorter feedback loops.
Improved quality of decision-making and administrative innovation

Digital democracy consists of more than simply the total of online votes. The reasonings and opinions behind these votes are at least as important for inclusive decision-making. Having a wider reach makes it easier to respond to what’s happening in your community.

The elderly might consider health care a bigger priority than adolescents, while some neighbourhoods might value a new mobility plan over everything else. We no longer talk about the citizen – demographic data linked to voting behaviour offers governments the chance to map out all interests and make better-informed decisions.

It goes without saying that residents will become more and more acquainted with the principles of participatory democracy through their regular participation in online processes. So make sure to offer your citizens the opportunity to participate in city projects on mobility or their surroundings, in a participatory budget for the neighbourhood, or to put a good idea on the political agenda. Only then will you reap the benefits of an innovative participation policy.
Roadmap to digital participation
Roadmap to digital participation

Look before you leap. Launching your digital participation platform should rely on strong internal support to digitalise the participation processes, and not on the technology itself.

Look at it this way: your platform is an instrument to achieve a certain goal. You must strive to achieve this goal together. Otherwise, you risk slipping into so-called ‘sham participation’.

Below we’ll answer the questions that will help you in the preliminary process.
Every digital participation trajectory needs a clear answer to the following questions:

Why do you organize this process?
Citizens need to know what they are working on. Give them all the information they need. This way, you create the necessary trust.

Who do you want to reach?
Every audience requires a different method. You don’t appeal to young people in the same way as you do to senior citizens.

When do you want to start and end your process?
Decide whether you want to organise participation temporarily, in phases or permanently.

What is the context?
Do not start from scratch. Have other policymakers already spoken out about citizen participation? Have decisions already been taken? Set the boundaries for your process.

How will you translate the results of your process into policy?
Determine the 'rules of the game'. Make clear internal agreements about what will happen with the input, and communicate this clearly to the citizens.
Top-down or bottom-up participation?

On your participation platform, you should clearly distinguish the city projects from the ideas initiated by the citizens themselves. By combining both possibilities, you’ll create a medium that citizens can use to weigh in on topics and projects they are interested in and, on the other hand, to share their own ideas in an accessible way.

Top-down projects

- Consultations organised by the local government to assess the public opinion within projects.

- It’s important to clearly show the different steps within the consultation, e.g. by means of a visual timeline.

Bottom-up ideas

- Citizens’ initiatives to place new priorities on the government agenda.

- It’s crucial to communicate straightforward rules. The right of initiative can provide an excellent framework to start from.
What kind of citizen engagement?

The method you choose to involve your citizens depends heavily on the degree of influence you’re willing to give them in the decision-making process. There are many degrees of citizen involvement in local policy.

The participation ladder, as described below, is a useful instrument to demonstrate the intensity of mutual involvement between residents and government for each participation process.

This ladder is not a static element, as the different stages can intersect. The highest step is not necessarily ‘the best’ method, as every objective requires a different approach.
What kind of citizen engagement?

1+1=3. Online participation goes hand in hand with efforts in the field. A lot of communication and interaction still occurs through traditional methods, which is a good thing. An online process in itself will rarely be enough. Online and offline participation will always reinforce each other.

Face-to-face encounters often have a major impact on social cohesion and the quality of a discussion. People tend to listen to each other more when there's personal contact.

On the other hand, online debates have the advantage that they can be held at any time. People who are not present at a town meeting can still contribute online. This lower threshold gives access to a whole new audience, including young people.

Some specific tips:

+ What was decided at the municipal council? Share this data via the platform.

+ Did an advisory council provide feedback on the multi-year plan? Insert this as project information.

Do you have an idea report from a town meeting? Import these ideas in your online platform.
How do you involve stakeholders internally?

To make your participation policy work, it’s important to give the process the necessary political and administrative support.

Government and policy: You have to be able to count on them not only financially, but also on a moral and communicative level. Even if the mayor or councilmen are not closely involved in every step, it’s important for them to know what’s going on and to have the necessary insights to make important decisions.

Administration: The role of department leaders, service managers and members of the management team is at least as important. They should be involved in the input given in their area of policy. They receive the reports and check whether the proposals are aligned with the existing policy.
Step 2 The Communication

Successful participation relies on active communication from the very beginning. Choose the right channels and adapt them to your target audience.

How to engage your audience?

What you do online must be in line with your overall communication strategy. Start off with the existing communication channels: your website, information magazine or municipal newspaper, social media and newsletter. Adapt your communication channels to your target audience.

80% of all web traffic is often generated through the above channels. These three channels are therefore not nice-to-haves; they’re absolute must-haves to lead enough people to an online platform.
The following three top channels will most likely set you up for success. We'll give a couple of tips for each:

**1 Direct web traffic**
- Choose a memorable URL.
- Consider the search engines when choosing the domain.
- Use as many keywords as possible in your texts.

**2 Social media**
- Communicate in relevant Facebook groups.
- Use Facebook's ads for a targeted audience.
- Spark the debate by looking into specific opinions.

**3 Linking from the city website**
- Link from the home page of your website.
- Install an interactive widget.
- Put your project sheets on the participation platform.
How do you keep your audience engaged?

Make sure to implement a so-called 'feedback loop'. When people give input, they must be confident that something will be done with it. Let them know when they can expect a reaction or when their input will be analysed. There's no participation without interaction. Whoever reacts and when they do so depends on the agreements that were made in the preliminary process.

Some rules of thumb:

- Keep your platform’s content up-to-date.
- Be clear about the stage of the process.
- Always indicate the next steps.
Practice: Work efficiently on citizen participation

A prerequisite for successful online participation is the installation of an efficient internal process. The collected citizen input (ideas, votes, reactions) must be translated into insights that support the final output (policy choices).

Processing a lot of input manually with an Excel-file manually can be a very tedious task.

Because the hundreds of ideas that you gather deserve the proper follow-up. You cluster similar ideas, assign them to the responsible departments and finally give feedback to the involved citizens via the platform.

When it comes to the analysis of the input, it can also require quite some time to gather the insights into a valuable policy document.

Language tech to the rescue!

With the help of new technologies, the entire processing process can become a lot more efficient. 'Natural language processing' is a subfamily of artificial intelligence that supports the processing of texts.
Technology can be of enormous use by helping you to save valuable time in both the moderation and analysis of your input:

- Spam prevention: automatically intercepting unwanted content;
- De-duplication: detecting similar entries and merging them early;
- Classification: assigning the input to the competent department for feedback;
- Clustering: summarising similar ideas into policy priorities;
- Geolocation: automatically linking input to specific locations or areas in the city or municipality;
- Voting analysis: segmenting voting behaviour according to demography.

Screenshot of an automatic clustering of ideas in CitizenLab.
Toronto, Canada
+ Toronto has its own community housing corporation managing 6% of housing stock.
+ CAD $7 million of their budget is allocated through PB every year
+ more budget for socially disadvantaged groups

New York City, USA
+ started PB in 2012
+ in 2018, over 99,250 residents decided how to spend $36,618,553 across NYC

Paris, France
+ spends 5% of investment budget through PB
+ PB on different levels: city, districts and specific low-income neighbourhoods.

Porto Alegre, Brasil
+ first known case of PB in the 1980s
+ Increased budgets for/quality of health, education, public planning, water

Rosario, Argentina
+ mixed PB with ‘gender budgeting’
+ involved more women and raised awareness on gender issues
Seoul, South Korea
- annual budget of 50 bln won (= 39mln euros) on PB projects
- 117,000 citizens participated in 2017 to revive the Mapo district

Chengdu, China
- started PB in 2011
- Since, 50,000 small projects have been approved
- citizens have a choice to spend budget on immediate actions or as down payment as collective loan for bigger projects
Participation throughout the policy cycle
Agenda-setting

Agenda-setting means enabling your citizens to help determine what will be on the political agenda. Of course, as a policymaker, it's impossible to follow up on every proposal, question or idea in the same way.

That's why it's better to incorporate the processing of the input into a clear flow. You can structure participation processes in roughly three ways:

- City level: suggesting agenda items for the municipal council, advisory council, area analysis, etc;

- Thematically: cultural plan, mobility plan, spatial plan, etc.;

- Geographically: per neighbourhood, district, region, etc.
Practical: how to enable participation in agenda-setting?

You continuously collect ideas and promise the participants quarterly analysis and feedback. This feedback can be provided 'live' during town meetings or during the municipal council, but can also be provided via online channels.

Only proposals that receive a certain number of votes (e.g. 1%-2% of the population) are put on the agenda of the college or municipal council. You can equate this threshold with the right of initiative.

Every 3 months you determine a top 10 of ideas that proceed to an analytical phase.

Citizens whose proposals or ideas have passed the selection can personally present their idea at a steering committee or at the municipal council.

Parameters to decide whether or not to address ideas are: feasibility (timing and budget), support (votes, reactions) and quality (the proposal's degree of detail).
Policy formulation

Policy-making goes one step further than agenda-setting. You involve citizens in the development of a strategy. This could concern policy plans (such as an area analysis, long-term planning or official decrees) or a specific area (such as the broader spatial plan). As a policymaker, you seek support for your policies by putting forward priorities and allowing citizens to respond to them.

Possibilities for participation in the new legislature

Multi-annual strategic planning is at the heart of the policy cycle’s planning component. In the multi-annual plan, local authorities define the broad outlines of the policy for the upcoming years. Every year, the multi-annual plan can be adjusted once. Why not digitalise this process and involve your citizens?

Because you can anticipate participation in every phase of the policy cycle. In the planning phase, when the government faces the challenge of developing an integrated policy plan in a new legislature, participation is preferred.
The Municipal and PCSW decrees impose the obligation to involve citizens in the development of your policy. You can do this online in an easy but qualitative way.

A process of policy planning essentially consists of three phases: analysis, policy determination and action planning.

In the analysis phase, you examine both the environment and the internal context. These will give you an idea of the social and organisational challenges or opportunities you’ll be confronted with as a government. In the policy-making phase, you determine which challenges you'll tackle and what you finally want to achieve. During the action planning phase, you clearly state how you will realise your policy.

“Participation can facilitate and elevate the process of policy planning. The online contribution of citizens provides knowledge of experience, which allows you, as a local government, to focus your policy on your citizens’ actual needs.”
Implementation

Even when it comes to decided policies, there's still room for participation. Once again, not merely to adjust your policy, but also to gain support. This is where you ask citizens to think alongside you about a concrete action plan, about how a decision is made or, why not, about certain legislative proposals.

The emphasis here lies on creating a dialogue about a plan, proposal or decision in question. As a government you're always in charge, but you interact by reacting and moderating. Let your citizens have the opportunity to indicate any confusion, to rephrase things or to suggest possible additions.

A very tangible online application of policy implementation is 'participatory budgeting', in which you involve citizens in budgetary considerations.
Practice: participatory budgeting

Participatory budgets are all the rage. All policymakers are talking about it, and rightfully so. It's impossible to involve citizens more in policy implementation than to let them decide on the allocation of budgets to certain actions or citizen initiatives.

At CitizenLab, we recently consulted over 20 cities and municipalities to determine how we can support online participatory budgeting as efficiently as possible - from the Canadian city of Toronto (2.8 million inhabitants) to the Belgian municipality of Wortegem-Petegem (6,000 inhabitants). The results of this survey have now been translated into a versatile tool on the CitizenLab platform.

1. A methodology for every type of participatory budget

Do you want to advise or decide? Do you work with topics or ideas? Do you allow groups or individuals to participate? Do you work locally (neighbourhood, district) or supra-local (whole territory or more)? Many combinations are possible. Check or uncheck them.
2. Participatory budgeting is a process

After the briefing and collection phase begins the 'financial' phase. An online shopping cart or a scroll bar displaying the content of a policy budget can make everything very tangible and transparent. How much budget do citizens collectively want to release? Which idea received the highest number of votes? Our tool helps them to make these considerations, and finally to bring them to the final phase: effective budgeting.

3. Every process has a different goal

When it comes to participatory budgeting, a preliminary process is essential.
Conclusion

Don’t miss the momentum! Get started with democratic innovation in your municipality.

Your new governing team is getting ready, so this is a perfect time. At CitizenLab, we have the in-house expertise and technology to guide you professionally and provide the necessary digital support. It’s time to enter the digital age!

Would you like to find out more about the possibilities of digital citizen participation for your city or municipality?

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