

The rise of digital democracy

Thanks to digital technologies, today we can bank, read the news, study for a degree, and chat with friends across the world - all without leaving the comfort of our homes. But one area that seems to have remained impervious to these benefits is our model of democratic governance, which has remained largely unchanged since it was invented in the 20th century.

The lack of change wouldn't matter if democracy was clearly working well. But many argue that this gap between the way in which citizens go about their daily lives and the way in which politics and democracy are carried out has contributed to declining trust and confidence in democratic institutions. Large minorities in the US and Europe no longer see democracy as a good system of government.¹

Over the last two decades, there have been thousands of experiments. In some areas, such as campaigning or monitoring the actions of MPs, there is a rich field of innovation, with myriad apps, platforms and websites gaining significant numbers of users. Petitions sites, for example, can be found across much of the world in one form or another.

Other experiments have focused on areas such as participatory budgeting, opening up the problem-solving process for a range of social issues, to a focus on how digital can enhance the more traditional activities of parliamentary and democratic work, such as voting or case management.

But not all of these experiments have lived up to early hopes and expectations.

Although campaigning tools have mobilised hundreds of millions of people to influence parties and parliaments, the tools closer to 'everyday democracy' have tended to involve fairly small and unrepresentative numbers of citizens and have been used for relatively marginal issues. Part of the reason is that the controllers of democracy effectively have a monopoly on whether new ideas or methods are adopted – a pattern very different to consumer markets.

The reformers have also made mistakes. Often they have been too linear and mechanistic in assuming that technology was the solution, rather than focusing on the combination of technology and new organisational models.

¹ <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

Some of the experiments have also run into the same problem as social media - a tendency to polarise opinions rather than bridge divides, as people gravitate towards others who share their political affiliations, as false information circulates, and dialogue hardens against opposing positions rather than helping people to understand different views.

The potential for local authorities

In response to these challenges, Nesta's research on digital democracy², smart cities³ and digital transformation in local councils⁴, has attempted to seek out and summarise the best practice in digital democracy from across the globe.

Amid all the experiments that we have encountered, some of the most promising developments are happening at the local level. This is partly because the decisions taken by local authorities have direct and visible impacts on people's lives, which in turn improves motivations for people to get involved. It is also because city leaders have been more willing to take risks in running local experiments than politicians at the national level.

From our research it seems there are three distinct activities that digital tools enable: delivering council services online - say applying for a parking permit; using citizen generated data to optimise city government processes; and engaging citizens in democratic exercises. In Connected Councils Nesta sets out what future models of online service delivery could look like.⁵

Here we will focus on the ways that engaging citizens with digital technology can help city governments deliver services more efficiently and improve engagement in democratic processes. We frame our response under four broad recommendations for how councils can run more successful digital democracy experiments:

Resist the urge to build an app

This can be tempting - the majority of people who live in your local authority probably have a smartphone. But first, take a look at the download stats for a few city government apps on the Google app store - they're not pretty. Apps

² <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/digital-democracy-the-tools-transforming-political-engagement/>

³ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/rethinking-smart-cities-from-the-ground-up/>

⁴ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/rethinking-smart-cities-from-the-ground-up/>

⁵ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/connected-councils-a-digital-vision-of-local-government-in-2025/>

are also expensive to develop and maintain. The city governments around the world that we talk to often feel like pioneers in the citizen engagement field. This may be because, unlike areas like the environment and data sharing, there aren't many good global networks on citizen engagement in the digital age. But there are many examples of cities that have used digital technologies to engage citizens, both internationally and in the UK. Before you call in the app developers, contact the city governments and civic minded organisations that have already done what you're planning to do, to see if you can cooperate and build on their experiences.

Alongside this, it is also a good idea to support the development of open source technologies. Examples of this include the [D-CENT](#) toolkit, including [Consul](#) which has now been adopted by almost 100 governments worldwide. The idea is to build a shared library of digital tools that city governments can add to when they want to run a new citizen engagement exercise, rather than start from scratch each time by building proprietary software. This is also something that respected global bodies like UNICEF think [is worth putting their money behind](#), with their \$9m fund to develop open source civic technologies.

Case study: Decide Madrid, Spain

In 2015, Decide Madrid, a platform for public participation in decision-making, was launched by Madrid City Council. Decide Madrid has four main functions: proposals and votes for new local laws; debates; participatory budgeting; and consultations. Decide Madrid allows any resident to propose a new local law which other residents can vote to support. Proposals which gain support from 1 per cent of the census population are then put to a binding public vote. The Council has one month to draw up technical reports on the legality, feasibility and cost of successful proposals, which are published on the platform. Registered users can open and contribute to debates, vote for or against motions, or provide additional comments. Debates do not trigger a specific action by the City Council but are a useful way of gauging public opinion.

The platform - which is based on open-source software called Consul - also enables suggestions, discussions and an annual participatory budgeting programme, which allocated €60 million in 2016. Decide Madrid benefitted from dedicated PR and communications support which raised its public profile. €200,000 was spent in 2016 to promote the participatory budget, equivalent to €4 per voter. The nature of

participatory budgeting means that citizens can easily see the benefits of participating as direct financial investments are made in their chosen projects, and a user-friendly website design seamlessly integrates the different opportunities for participation open to citizens in one platform.

Think about what you want to engage citizens for

Sometimes engagement is statutory: communities have to be shown new plans for their area. Beyond this, there are a number of activities that citizen engagement is useful for. When designing a citizen engagement exercise it may help to think which of the following you are trying to achieve (note: they are not mutually exclusive):

Better understanding of the facts

If you want to use digital technologies to collect more data about what is happening in your local authority, you can buy a large number of sensors and install them across the city, to track everything from people movements to how full bins are. A cheaper and possibly more efficient way for councils to do this might involve working with people to collect this data - making use of the smartphones that an increasing number of your residents carry around with them. Prominent examples of this included flood mapping in [Jakarta](#) using geolocated tweets and pothole mapping in [Boston](#) using a mobile app called StreetBump.

Generating better ideas and options

The examples above involve passive data collection. Moving beyond this to more active contributions, city governments can engage citizens to generate better ideas and options. There are numerous examples of this in urban planning - the use of Minecraft by the UN in [Nairobi](#) to collect and visualise ideas for the future development of the community, or the [Carticipe platform](#) in France, which residents can use to indicate changes they would like to see in their city on a map.

It's all very well to create a digital suggestion box, but there is evidence to suggest that deliberation and debate lead to much better ideas. Platforms like [Better Reykjavik](#) include a debate function for any idea that is proposed.

Based on feedback, the person who submitted the idea can then edit it. Every month, the 15 highest-voted proposals on the site are officially processed and the City Council provides a formal response to each one.

Better decision making

As well as enabling better decision making by giving city government employees, better data and better ideas, digital technologies can give the power to make decisions directly to citizens. This is best encapsulated by participatory budgeting - which involves allowing citizens to decide how a percentage of the city budget is spent. Participatory budgeting emerged in Brazil in the 1980s, but digital technologies help city governments reach a much larger audience. '[Madame Mayor, I have an idea](#)' is a participatory budgeting process that lets citizens propose and vote on ideas for projects in Paris.

Case study: Madame Mayor, I have an idea, France

In 2015 Paris launched Madame Mayor, a participatory budgeting process with total of €500 million over five years. All proposals are generated by Paris residents. The process has five phases: proposals are made, then refined through deliberation. There follows a period of public review, checking the ideas meet minimum criteria such as public benefit, and technical and budgetary feasibility. The shortlist of ideas is selected by an elected Committee made up of representatives of political parties, the City Administration, civil society, and citizens. Support is provided for projects to assist people in promoting and campaigning for their idea. There follows a vote, either online or in person. Successful proposals are included in the December budget and work begins the following year.

In 2015 over 5,000 ideas were proposed, whittled down to 624 which were then put forward for a public vote. In the final stage 67,000 votes (+/- 3 per cent of the population) were cast and 188 projects accepted.⁶ In 2016, participation rose dramatically with 158,964 people voting on a final selection of 219 ideas, from an initial 3,158 proposals.⁷ The experience has found that raising awareness and achieving participation is hard, and so is the process of managing and processing

⁶ https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/jsp/site/Portal.jsp?document_id=2228&portlet_id=159

⁷ <https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/plugins/download/BP2016-DossierDePresse.pdf>

thousands of ideas. Over the last year the Paris team has responded by increasing the size of the team working on citizen engagement, strengthening relations with civil society, and continuing to invest in offline and online promotion of the programme. They also slightly restructured the budget to reserve a proportion exclusively for the most deprived areas of the city.

Remember that there's a world beyond the internet

As smartphones and apps proliferate, it is understandable that someone would think that engaging residents online means setting up a website and waiting for people to come and use it. But the most successful examples of digital citizen engagement rely on traditional media to promote the initiative. My Ideal City, an initiative designed to crowdsource ideas for the redevelopment of the city centre in Bogota, used a daily one-hour radio show to promote the project. As a result, 10,000 suggestions were submitted to the platform.

It is also important to note that digital technologies are best at reaching new audiences, and so should be used to supplement traditional participatory processes rather than replace them. The main participants in the Estonian city of Tartu's 2013 online-only participatory budgeting pilot were 30 to 36 year olds. While this was a success in terms of reaching a demographic that does not usually attend community meetings, it shows that traditional methods of community engagement cannot be abandoned.

Do not forget that even if online tools theoretically could reach a huge audience, in reality, they often function best as a new channel for those that are already adept at engaging with city government. See research from mySociety for more on this.⁸

Pick the right question for the right crowd

You have worked out what you want from residents, chosen the right tool, then launched your campaign, hopefully doing a good deal of promotion through more traditional channels. Why are you still getting hardly any response? This is probably because you have picked the wrong question for the wrong crowd.

⁸ <https://www.mysociety.org/files/2014/12/manchester.pdf>

“How can I consult all the X million people in my city?” is a question we have been asked a number of times when talking to city government officials. Our immediate response is often, why would you want to do that? If you were to ask local residents, you would find that most people have not engaged in a meaningful way with their local council, other than voting and filling in forms online.

It is worth thinking about the relationship between representative and direct democracy here, and how new digital tools fit into this picture. What new digital tools enable is a strengthening of representative democracy, not a return to the days of Athenian direct democracy. Most people, most of the time just want the politicians they elect to do a better job, they aren't looking to be involved in the day to day business of government.

So when you are trying to crowdsource ideas, think about which segment of the crowd you are trying to engage. If you're looking to come up with a better alcohol management policy for the city, to take one recent city government crowdsourcing initiative as an example, the general population probably is not the best crowd to consult on this, as they lack the expertise to deal with the question. See the blog written by Nesta's Chief Executive Geoff Mulgan for more on this.⁹ In this case, digital tools might be most useful in helping you access a wider pool of experts.

The crowd sometimes might also mean city government employees or suppliers. The Boston StreetBump example, in which an app was used to map potholes in the city, was largely used by city government employees, not citizens.

However, there may be times when you want to engage a large number of residents - people know a huge amount about their cities, the problems faced in daily life, and this knowledge, or collective intelligence, can be of huge value to city governments. Here are two things to consider:

- You need to choose something that people care about. In Jakarta, researchers are able to map flooding via Twitter because this is an issue that costs lives, every year, in the city. Flood mapping via Twitter in Lewisham wouldn't, I suspect, lead to the same outcomes as it isn't as important to local residents in London as it is to Jakartans. Find out what issues people in your city care most about and engage them on that.

⁹ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/designing-digital-democracy-a-short-guide/>

- Secondly, people need to know that their engagement is going to be valued. Tempting as it is to set up a digital suggestions box, if people feel that their contribution is going to be ignored, they will find it hard to engage. This is where things like participatory budgeting help as people know that there is a chance their idea will be put into practice. But even if you don't have a budget, making clear what will happen to suggestions will prevent misunderstanding and disappointment.

Case study: Better Reykjavik, Iceland

Better Reykjavik, launched in 2010, is a platform which enables citizens to suggest, debate, rank and vote on ideas for improving their city. It was developed by a civil society group called the Citizen's Foundation, but the project is notable for the level of support it has gained from Reykjavik City Council, who have agreed to process 15 of the top ideas made on the platform every month. Between 2010 and 2017, 1,045 ideas were considered by the City Council, with 220 approved, 289 rejected and 336 still in progress.

More than 70,000 people have visited the site since its creation. Anyone can post an idea on the Better Reykjavik platform, or comment either 'for' or 'against' an idea. Ideas, as well as the related individual comments, can then be up- and down-voted by the rest of the community.

The platform benefits from its clear link to decision-making processes, including clear feedback on why final decisions are made. This incentivises engagement and makes people feel their contributions have value. Take-up has been encouraged through social media advertising. One future challenge relates to investigating how citizens can be encouraged to post ideas for addressing some of the more complex issues that the city faces.

When we talk to city governments and local authorities, they express a number of fears about citizen engagement: Fear of relying on the public for the delivery of critical services, fear of being drowned in feedback and fear of not being inclusive - only engaging with those that are online and motivated. Hopefully, thinking through the issues discussed above may help alleviate some of these fears and make city government more enthusiastic about digital engagement.

Growing the field of digital democracy

Though most digital democracy initiatives are undertaken in response to the perceived failure of current ways of doing things, or in the hope of further improving the legitimacy and quality of democratic decision-making, very few innovators are actively evaluating how well their use of technology is achieving these aims.

We therefore conclude with a call for all practitioners to consider a simple set of evaluation criteria from the outset. This means going beyond using the number of participants as the only measure of impact. Other, more difficult questions, need to be asked, such as: who participated and why? Did the process inform citizens about important political issues? Did it succeed in improving public trust, or propensity to engage in the future? These questions will help our understanding of the effect participation is having on citizens' attitudes to democracy.

A good example to look at here is Open North, a Canadian non-profit that has developed an interactive online consultation method called Citizen Budget. Open North is using a mixed methods approach to understand the project's impact on local communities. After 5 years of implementation they conducted a blind observational / longitudinal study, tracking public meetings and documents (in particular related to budgetary deliberations). They have also established a framework to understand tangible impacts (qualitative evidence, policy decisions, reports and plans, policies, new institutions, new processes) and intangible impacts (participant empowerment, social learning, willingness to participate in the future, increased understanding and trust in government, and so on). Overall they have found positive impact, though the results are still ongoing, and measuring more intangible outcomes (e.g. 'increased trust') has proven to be challenging.¹⁰ Other useful guides for designing and measuring impact in digital engagement include The World Bank's detailed framework.¹¹

A more rigorous approach to evaluation won't always be easy and there will be inevitable tensions between wanting to lower the barriers to participation (and hence limiting the amount of data you can request from participants) and wanting to measure the impact achieved. Honest discussion around failures can also be difficult for projects seeking adoption in an already reluctant political environment. However, understanding what does and

¹⁰ <https://digitalsocial.eu/images/upload/29-Digital%20democracy.pdf>

¹¹ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23752/deef-book.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

doesn't work is essential to developing the field of digital democracy and demonstrating the role it has to play in our societies.