



Lab 1 - Is hybrid democracy more inclusive?

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Initiatives:

#ForzaNazzjonali (Malta) by Mr Franco CURMI Digital Director for the Forza Nazzjonali party

POP: Public Opinion Platform (France) by Mr Geza TESSENYI, Initiator and main designer of the Public Opinion Platform (POP)

Is media the next democracy platform?, Poll Town (USA) by Ms Keren FLAVELL, Founder and CEO of Poll Town (United States of America)

Discussants:

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The lab in brief

In a time of growing disconnect between citizens and political elites, this lab examined the impact of new instruments for citizen participation, especially taking into account e-participatory tools. These innovative tools – summarised under the theme of *Hybrid Democracy* – can be a new approach to reach broad levels of the population and a new way to address people who are not involved in political processes yet. The aim of the Lab was to explore the effectiveness of these e-participatory tools and to assess their impact on decision-making processes. Furthermore, the lab tried to examine how political parties can capitalise on these opportunities to hand back power to their supporters. Modern ways of citizen participation can help to foster civic commitment, and in conjunction with democracy, help to strengthen democratic processes in a whole.

About the initiatives

#ForzaNazzjonali, Malta

The open democracy platform #ForzaNazzjonali is a new system of e-democracy, created by the electoral alliance Forza Nazzjonali - formed in April 2017 between the Nationalist Party (PN) and Democratic Party (PD) in the run up to the 2017 general elections – to crowd-source proposals and new policy ideas. It mainly targets the younger generation who is having the stronger disconnect from politics. It is a generation too busy to participate and frustrated by seeing that its participation in political decision-making does not impact the society. The online platform allows users to interact directly with the alliance's proposals and make suggestions on how to amend them.

Therefore, the users can also scrutinise and criticise the suggestions, and make entirely new suggestions of their own. More than 2.000 ideas were uploaded, illustrating the success of the website. In terms of functioning, there are two columns per idea where pro and con arguments can be discussed and shared immediately on various social media platforms. The result is a high virality of the idea and the platform as a whole – contributing to the success of #ForzaNazzjonali which managed to reach up to one third of the Maltese population. Lots of effort was put into the visual design of the website to successfully compete with other content on social media. One of the greatest challenges is to track the impact of the shared ideas, which is essential to prove users that their engagement matters and so to motivate them to keep using the platform in the future.

Public Opinion Platform – POP, France

"POP: Public Opinion Platform" is designed to gradually build up real-time democracy within the existing constitutional framework of indirect democracy – without any need for legislative change. Within the concept of real-time democracy, citizens can exercise permanent control over political decisions and the government. It is an experimental tool to improve the workings of indirect democracy and a flexible mix at the same time. It is a platform in its substance – open to all people and all opinions – and a registered political party in its legal structure. The main feature of POP is to invite the expression of real-time majority public opinion on important legislative and governing decisions. POP representatives in the legislature and in government are obliged to vote according to the majority public opinion as expressed by citizens on the platform. The platform is made for all citizens, who feel adult enough to take political decisions about the questions that concern them directly – paying particular attention to abstainers from politics, protest

voters, but also politicians who do not like to make promises that they cannot keep. POP can be used at local, national and regional levels, but it is not implemented in practice at the present time.

Is media the next democracy platform?, Poll Town, USA

Started in 2013 as a Facebook app, Poll Town wants to simplify citizen engagement in the light of low political participation in most democratic countries. The aim of this initiative is to reinvigorate public debate and to engage the silent majority to have their say. In order to reach better and wider audiences, the tool was further developed as an embeddable widget that could be placed on webpages and news stories. Political leaders and government organisations have to pay to embed their polls within news articles. The positive results are more funds for journalism and media as civic hubs, where civic engagement effectively takes place. For a stronger impact, political actors need to overcome their fears of this kind of engagement and to experiment new different ways to bring the community into decision making in order to make the citizenry more active and aware.

Key points issues by the debate

Security, transparency and representation. The reliability of e-democracy outcomes is called into question by the difficulty of certifying who is really behind the internet page. Polls in particular can be misleading as happened in the latest American elections. Low participation in polls and other e-democracy tools then question their effective representation, as they cannot represent the whole electorate (differently from direct democracy tools). For their use IT-literacy and a certain educational background are, in fact, required posing concerns for their effective inclusiveness: not the entire population knows how to use computers and electronic devices or does not have them at their disposal. The example of India where the number of people who have access to the internet is limited questions then the transferability of e-tools to less developed countries. Finally, how can we be sure that such e-tools effectively target the community that will be affected by political decisions in the end?

E-tools are not the solution for everything but, as websites can be citizen-driven, they are a precious opportunity to collect and present their ideas. As in the case of #ForzaNazzjonali, they intentionally target younger and educated people in the light of the existing participation gap between young and older generations. A multidimensional solution, including different and complementary tools suitable to every part of the population, need to be adopted for a greater and more inclusive participation.

Simplification vs. complexity. Complex issues are beyond the yes and no answer and other simplified mechanisms offered by e-tools. Do users understand everything that is at stake while using such tools? How can leaning questions, behind complex topics, affect the results of such platforms? Platforms have to be designed to embrace meaningful discussions instead of focusing only on simplistic participation. In addition, as explained by Poll Town, not every issue fits into a poll. It is not an exact science, as algorithms are in place to continuously check behaviours of the users to ensure its reliability. By the way the majority of e-tools, such as Poll Town, are not designed to replace the voting act: they serve rather to show trends and to give a voice to "the silent majority".

Non-binding e-participatory platforms. The present non-binding character of e-participatory platforms could lead to frustration and disappointment among citizens, once they realize that their online-engagement has no impact in the real world. E-tools can only influence the public opinion, but not the final decision taken by government and parliament bodies. A different result could be obtained if parties embedded such tools in a more binding way: POP, for example, was conceived as a way to give a real influence to citizens on the legislative process. With 51% in the Parliament POP could, in fact, govern. At the same time the non-binding character could be an advantage, as online more extreme and intolerant ideologies tend to rapidly spread and become popular.

E-platforms still have to find a solution to their main dilemma: on the one hand they want to allow as many users as possible to use their websites to express their thoughts. On the other hand, the more binding a decision should be in the end, the more important it is to identify users who are engaging on the platform, creating problems in places where freedom of speech is not guaranteed.

While waiting to find an effective solution to such dilemma, e-tools can be seen as ways to sensitise and train citizens for more active citizenship: they can, in fact, engage in small issues which are not overexerting them. Over the time, by seeing that their engagement has an impact and that they are heard, their trust in political decision-making processes could become stronger.

Recommendations

- ✓ To make the use of e-platforms simpler and faster in order to foster a higher participation.
- ✓ To preserve the consultative role of e-tools as a way to sensitise and train citizens for more active citizenship, while leaving the binding legislative process to representative institutions.
- ✓ To allow users tracking the impact of their engagement and their ideas.
- ✓ To use a multidimensional and multichannel approach, resorting to e-platforms for simple and immediate issues, while addressing more complex issues through offline interactions.