

# European Civic Technology and Citizen Participation in the Age of AI

A needs perspective



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Sanna-Kaisa Saloranta, Stefan Roch

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# Summary

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This paper explores how civic technology (civic tech) – that is, the use of digital technology to strengthen democracy by informing people, enabling participation and improving government accountability<sup>1</sup> – can enhance citizen participation in Europe at a time of declining trust, polarization, and increasingly AI- and platform-shaped political communication. Taking a needs-based perspective, it outlines: (i) what citizens require for participation to be accessible, safe and easy to fit into their everyday lives – while also remaining politically meaningful; (ii) what civic tech providers need to deliver trustworthy and scalable solutions (including sustainable funding, interoperability, open source-friendly procurement and clearer compliance

pathways); and (iii) what public administrations need in order to adopt and effectively integrate civic tech alongside government capacities. Building on these considerations, the paper asks how civil society and foundations can help increase participation quality, reduce fragmentation through a stronger civic tech ecosystem, and support safe, accountable experimentation with AI.

This paper, the product of a collaboration between the Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sitra, was discussed intensely at the Political Tech Summit (PTS) held in Berlin in January 2026. It was then edited into this final version and supplemented with quotes from the event.

# Introduction

## Changing conditions for citizen participation in Europe

The conditions for meaningful citizen participation in Europe are deteriorating as trust in political institutions is falling, polarization has become common, and digital platforms are increasingly shaping how people engage with politics in a way that often makes it difficult or impossible to have constructive debates. Under these conditions, simply transferring analogue participation formats into digital environments is no longer sufficient. Civic technology (civic tech) approaches must instead be forward-looking while recognizing that the internet and artificial intelligence (AI) are continuing to fundamentally transform how participation works, and that new challenges cannot be addressed using solutions designed for the past.

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*Don't fight the fight of yesterday. The internet is changing. Civic tech needs a future-oriented view.*

*Michael Birkebaek Jensen, Facilitator of Transformation, DemAI, Denmark*

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A quarter of parliamentary seats across Europe are now held by far-right parties that openly question the liberal-democratic status quo on which modern citizen participation is based,<sup>2</sup> and only 36 percent of Europeans trust their national governments.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, digital channels are central to political communication, as nearly all young Europeans and about two-thirds of adults use social media regularly.<sup>4</sup> Around three-quarters of Europeans also expect digital tools to play an important role in political engagement in the near future.<sup>5</sup> As a result, participation currently takes place in an environment defined by volatility, distrust and algorithmically biased communication.

## The potential of civic technology for citizen participation

In today's participation landscape, neither analogue-first approaches nor participation models relying on social media are sufficient to ensure inclusive, legitimate and meaningful engagement. While valuable for trust-building and deliberation, analogue-first approaches (e.g., citizen assemblies) increasingly fall short in terms of reach, accessibility and scalability, particularly on the national and transnational levels. On the other hand, while social media lowers barriers to interaction – enabling political action such as hashtag-based activism (e.g., #FridaysForFuture) – it also amplifies misinformation and affective polarization. If participation is to make a difference and harness the potential of digital communication, it needs to avoid replicating the failures of social media platforms. Civic tech is key in this regard. Well designed and open civic tech solutions can foster structured and inclusive spaces for participation, enable dialogue where social media fosters division, and support collective sense-making where social media spreads disinformation.<sup>6</sup>

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*Democracy is more than clicking, citizens need to produce their own ideas.*

*Simon Strohmenger, Director, Consul Democracy Foundation (Mehr Demokratie e. V.)*

“

Demand for digital participation tools and civic tech has picked up considerably both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, while debates around technological sovereignty and the rapid normalization of the use of generative AI are increasing in practically every aspect of our lives. Although AI represents a profound technology shift, current debates tend to focus too narrowly on the technology itself rather than on the data and information it produces.

At the same time, structural challenges remain, such as the uneven adoption of civic tech by politics and public administration for various reasons, such as regulatory complexity, persistent doubts, and little awareness among citizens and decision-makers about both new technologies and the actual impact of public participation.

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*AI is the biggest development I have ever seen, but there is too much talk about tech, too little about the data and information produced.*

*Olli-Pekka Rissanen, Chief Specialist, Finnish Ministry of Finance*

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## Where can civil society and foundations make a difference?

We are at a critical moment. To integrate civic tech-based participation into political processes, we need a clearer understanding of what citizens, civic tech providers and governments need and how these varying needs can be met. This paper addresses these questions and aligns them by asking what civil society and foundations can do to make civic tech-based participation more credible, safe and politically consequential in Europe.

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*Our research shows that one of the main barriers to participation is a lack of awareness of the opportunities to contribute. It's a failure of communication and marketing.*

*Aleksandra Berditchevskaia, Principal Researcher, Centre for Collective Intelligence Design, Nesta*

“

# What citizens need

Participatory solutions are too often designed around the demands and requirements of political and bureaucratic institutions, treating citizens/users as a resource with plenty of time and patience for often clunky, opaque platforms and little need for transparency about how their input will ultimately be used. That is not in line with the reality of citizens' actual needs.

”

*Like on a motorway, citizens need orientation in citizen participation. They must know where to enter and where to exit.*

*Anne Gross, Project Manager for Skills Development and Participation, Kiel Region*

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## Citizens are busy<sup>7</sup>

Participation processes that demand from citizens a significant investment of time on top of digital know-how not only cause frustration but also deepen inequalities. Most citizens are not politically active and lead busy lives, which leaves them little time for participating in lengthy, complicated and demanding participation processes. Even when time is available, participation solutions must hold up against a myriad of digital infotainment alternatives that compete for citizens' attention. Therefore, to engage citizens effectively, participation needs to be immersive, quick, easy and meaningful – all at the same time. Nevertheless, this is not an end in itself. While easy access is key, sustainable participation solutions also allow for deeper forms of engagement and deliberation.

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*Not every issue fits the same model of participation. Deliberation that lets participants learn from each other likely needs more opportunity for citizens to express their views and respond to them.*

*Tom Wilkinson, Chief Data Officer, Government of Scotland*

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This is supported by a 2022 Sitra survey showing that many Finns would like to participate more in democratic decision-making if it were made easier through accessible digital platforms.<sup>8</sup> Citizens in Europe do want to have a bigger say in politics,<sup>9</sup> but it is unreasonable to ask them to make more time in their daily lives to do so. Participation must be designed to fit into the everyday lives of ordinary people by being visible and accessible anytime and anywhere and by requiring only minimal prior knowledge and skills. This includes offering a simple first point of entry with opportunities to delve deeper, such as through dialogical or collaborative interaction.

”

*Good participation begins with an easy first step. But don't abandon the second step: deeper engagement.*

*Alicia Combaz, Founder, Make.org*

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## Citizens want their input to be taken seriously

A 2022 Bertelsmann Stiftung survey found that the main reason Europeans refrain from participating in politics is the belief that it ultimately does not make a difference (32 percent).<sup>10</sup> This skepticism is justified, as participation is still commonly understood by politicians as merely a tool for communication.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing this political reality – rather than ignoring it – is crucial. Yet participation will only make a difference if citizens' input has concrete impacts and is not reduced to messaging alone.

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*Participation will remain, in part, a communication tool. We should embrace that, but still treat citizens seriously.*

*Ryszard Łuczyn, Deputy Director Minister's Office, Ministry of Digital Affairs, Poland*

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When citizens invest time and effort to provide input, they need to see what changes as a result of their participation – not necessarily as binding outcomes, but as a tangible effect on political and administrative decision-making processes. Otherwise, participatory processes risk increasing frustration rather than fostering greater trust in politics and democratic institutions.

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*Citizens need visible impact. They need to see what is different to what it was before.*

*Jeannette Gusko, Digital Participation Officer, SPRIN-D the Federal Agency for Disruptive Innovation*

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## Trust and safety are becoming increasingly important

When citizens entrust their personal data and opinions to an online platform, they must be able to trust that their data will be protected and not used against their interests. Nevertheless, security concerns are rarely the primary reason citizens choose not to engage.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, growing risks of AI-enabled manipulation and coordinated flooding of participatory spaces require safeguards that go beyond classical data protection by including resilience against the misuse of inauthentic or even malicious AI-generated input. In this way, citizens can be confident that only genuine input from real people is considered.

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*There is a problem with 'participatory slop,' as bad actors are already flooding media systems with AI. We need to harden democratic systems against such misuse.*

*Matt Stempeck, Founder and Curator, Civic Tech Field Guide*

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# What civic tech providers need

## The rapidly evolving civic tech ecosystem needs recognition

In Europe, the private-sector civic tech field has been becoming more and more professionalized. In contrast to the United States, where market consolidation is accelerating through major platform acquisitions by large government technology (GovTech) firms, the European civic tech landscape is evolving along a different trajectory. Many European providers are instead orienting themselves toward a digital commons approach, including open-source solutions or Creative Commons-based licensing. However, despite the growing number of innovative start-ups and initiatives in the field, civic tech providers in Europe continue to encounter persistent structural, legal and financial constraints, which limit their ability to scale and achieve long-term sustainability.<sup>13</sup>

## Impactful civic tech design needs collaboration

To collaborate effectively, civic tech providers in Europe need structures for information-sharing, coordination and learning. Although the civic tech market seems saturated and fragmented, market research commissioned by the Scottish government reveals the concentration of certain technological features supporting participation – and a lack of others. Notably, civic tech tools rarely offer in-depth analytics to translate output into changes in public opinion or policy.<sup>14</sup>

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*The lack of proper analysis systems to evaluate citizens' input sometimes forces administrations to build their own systems.*

*Paulo Rosa, Policy Analyst, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre*

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Generative AI creates new opportunities for civic tech providers to enhance analytics and generate actionable insights that better respond to the broad and time-constrained needs of their primary users (i.e., decision-makers). AI-enabled civic tech can thus be designed to support new, impactful methodological innovations. Realizing this potential requires space for experimentation as well as structures that enable continuous, shared learning. Strong cross-sector collaboration is essential for the European civic tech ecosystem to thrive.

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*We need to discuss participation without the democracy framework and ask pragmatically: What data do you need?*

*Mathias Grossklaus, Innovation Lead, Agora Digitale Transformation, Germany*

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## Providers need support in their effort to create trusted solutions

Civic tech providers face complex and costly compliance challenges under the GDPR, accessibility standards and the EU AI Act. For example, the GDPR offers a solid framework for data protection, but rapid technological change makes security assurance difficult.<sup>15</sup> The struggle with compliance becomes visible and costly in practical implementation, as interpretations of regulations vary between different customers, such as member states, regions, cities and municipalities. Clear standards are needed to enable providers to show customers and end users that their technology is trustworthy and has reached the required maturity level.

New regulations, such as the Interoperable Europe Act or eIDAS, can provide systemic support by promoting interoperability, trust services and authentication, thereby enabling seamless integration, reducing fragmentation and creating scaling opportunities for civic tech across Europe.

For civic tech, interoperability especially means the possibility of switching between providers, combining solutions and data flows, and avoiding proprietary lock-ins. As civic tech tools enable administrations to ask citizens' opinions more frequently, it is also important to understand what has been asked already. Providers need to offer integration with GovTech systems as well as interoperability between different civic tech tools to ensure that administrative or technological silos are not pushed onto citizens. Interoperability and data portability reduce repetition and boost citizens' perception that their time is being respected.

In the age of rising attention to technological sovereignty, the importance of using open source is growing as part of democratic governance. European civic tech providers would prefer to use foundational technologies offered by a European tech stack, but costs create a major barrier. If European alternatives come at a premium, foundational technology may remain out of reach.

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*Providers need foundational European tech at competitive prices. Developing a European tech stack can currently cost up to seven times more, depending on the type of technology – if it's even available.*

*Michael Birkebaek Jensen, Facilitator of Transformation, DemAI, Denmark*

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Civic tech that seeks to connect citizens to democratic decision-making needs to be fully open for critical public examination, research and further development. Building sustainable open-source tools requires more focus on and resources for community management. There is often a lack of understanding about how communities work and share development. At present, public procurement does not encourage

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*Open source does not come for free. Having a civic tech community is key, but the community needs funding.*

*Timo Väliharju, Executive Director, COSS – the Finnish Centre for Open Systems and Solutions*

“

open-source deployment and experimentation, but instead often favors large vendors and proprietary solutions. In the case of civic tech open-source communities, public authorities often lack a clear process for making decisions about how to join the community as a member. There is a need for tested and proven models that demonstrate how civic tech open-source communities and public administrations can seamlessly operate together.

”

*Open-source ecosystems should be treated like a 'natural resource' that needs special care through mechanisms similar to those we use for other resources, such as research grants, fellowships and protective measures.*

*Ivonne Jansen, Strategic Adviser, Province of Zuid-Holland, Netherlands Government*

“

## Funding models need to take the entire ecosystem into account

Civic tech providers need better clarity on future demand and funding opportunities. Traditional venture capital often bypasses the civic tech sector due to its focus on social impact and therefore potentially lower financial returns compared to the mainstream technology industry. New permanent funding structures – and, ideally, ones that are institutionally anchored – are required to meet the needs of networked collaboration, compliance, and innovation in technology and methodology. Instead of concentrating on short-term project funding and only innovating new tools, much innovation can be achieved by combining and enhancing current tools and methodologies. Providers would need funders to take a systemic approach to the European civic tech ecosystem.

Addressing these diverse needs – that is, clear compliance guidance, interoperability, sustainable funding and collaborative structures – is critical for European civic tech providers to deliver scalable, trustworthy and citizen-centric solutions.

# What governments and public administrations need

## The need to balance efficiency and democratic legitimacy

The structural evolution of contemporary public administration is occurring within a complex ecosystem in which civic tech and GovTech serve as complementary pillars designed to address the twin imperatives of democratic legitimacy and operational efficiency.

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*As a democracy narrative, ‘administration just needs to deliver’ is not enough in times like these.*

*Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Advisor,  
Bertelsmann Stiftung*

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Despite rising interest in offering more digital participation avenues for citizens, civil servants and decision-makers face multiple challenges and requirements when adopting and using civic tech effectively. In many administrations, a “spider-web of participation” has emerged, as numerous initiatives, platforms and formats exist side by side, but often without sufficient mapping or coordination. As a result, civil servants sometimes do not fully grasp what is happening in other departments. In the worst case, various government departments end up repeatedly asking citizens the same questions without even realizing it. At the same time, many institutions have a long tradition of cooperating with civil society. This admittedly provides a strong foundation, but it also increases the need for better overview, alignment and strategic integration of participatory activities.

Capabilities for adopting the newest technology are only one aspect. Capacity-building in planning, recruiting participants, moderating and analyzing the process is also needed.

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*We often encounter a ‘spider-web of participation’; there is a need for better and more consistent mapping of what is happening.*

*Heini Huotari, Ministerial Adviser,  
Finnish Ministry of Justice*

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## The need to connect civic tech with internal government operations

Civic tech acts as a bridge, utilizing digital routes to bolster democratic participation and strengthen the ties between citizens and their governments. Conversely, GovTech is more focused on the internal operations of administrations. Its objective is to boost efficiency by digitizing internal work processes, thereby allowing governments to respond more effectively to the inputs generated by civic tech initiatives.

”

*GovTech often ignores civic tech. Civic tech needs more advocacy.*

*Matt Stempeck, Founder and Curator,  
Civic Tech Field Guide*

“

When used in isolation, GovTech risks creating efficient but detached bureaucracies, while civic tech-supported participation without robust GovTech integration may lead citizens to feel frustrated if the administration lacks the capacity to act on their input. Therefore, the primary need for modern public administrations is a balanced ecosystem in which civic tech provides the legitimacy for policymaking and GovTech provides the operational capacity for execution.

In addition, given that the shift from piloting single solutions to institutionalizing and integrating civic tech-based participation into practical workflows is a demanding one, clear guidance on EU regulations and alignment across jurisdictions is needed.

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*National and municipal levels operate under different architectures, with national systems shaped by distinct incentives and decision chains. A good starting point is to launch participation platforms internally to build competence and buy-in before going public.*

*Malik Lakoubay, Director of Policy and Outreach, RadicalXChange, Spain*

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Impactful participation and strategic adaptation of civic tech tools require management, coordination and clearly defined responsibilities between civil servants and politicians. These two groups have different perceptions of participation: While politicians often treat participation as a useful communication tool, civil servants experience civic consultations as an additional burden. These differing perceptions can create tensions – but also possibilities.

”

*Local figures, such as the mayor of a small town, can act as the ‘face’ of a civic tech infrastructure, signaling to citizens that their voices are taken seriously. Yet visibility alone is not enough, as participation outcomes must influence decisions to build lasting trust. Only when this is the case and when participation is anchored in institutional practice can a culture of civic engagement evolve.*

*Katharina Knaus, Digital Participation Officer, Wikimedia Foundation, Germany*

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### Too many tools can overwhelm civil servants

Given the abundance of available tools, it is challenging to ensure in advance that they meet participatory needs, standards and technological maturity levels. However,

administrations often lack the resources needed to properly assess tools, which in turn increases the risk that they will inadvertently purchase and employ the wrong ones. To prevent a situation in which administrations in Europe need to individually assess the latest civic tech tools one after another, there is a need for a robust, updated list of civic tech tools as well as a model for assessing them. Various international tools (e.g., the Civic Tech Field Guide) and organizations (e.g., People Powered) are paving the way in these simplification and standardization efforts by offering open knowledge bases of civic tech tools used in citizen participation.

In Europe, shared impact-measurement frameworks and best practices tailored to the specific goals and contexts of diverse civic tech initiatives are needed. For civil servants, this would enable more strategic adoption of different interoperable civic tech tools serving multiple participation needs. Effectively communicating the impact of civic tech projects through compelling narratives, data-driven reports and case studies is important for attracting additional funding, gaining credibility in government and public spheres, and promoting the broader adoption of successful solutions.

### Limited resources keep citizen participation from harnessing its full potential

Fulfilling civic tech’s promise to connect citizens with their governments will require sustained investment in capacity-building for participant recruitment, moderation, data analysis and impact evaluation.<sup>16</sup> Limited resources also tend to result in weaker communication efforts and, consequently, low participation levels on civic tech platforms. Using civic tech in an impactful way to support deliberation or participation requires hands-on learning and sustainable networks to share best practices. Non-technical spaces for collaborative learning and experimenting together with other civil servants and civic tech developers are needed.

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*We need to convincingly show how civic tech platforms can have an impact on decision-making.*

*Kirsi Hantula, Senior Lead, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra*

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# What needs to be done in Europe?

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Building on the needs of citizens, civic tech providers and governments, we see several promising initial ways in which foundations and civil society can help civic tech strengthen citizen participation in Europe. The following ideas are an invitation for debate:

## Strengthening impact by connecting citizen input and public decision-making

**Set design standards for online participation:** Promote easily accessible, usable and inclusive approaches for all citizens to participate and deliberate online.

**Strengthen communication:** Set standards for good public campaigning and participation promotion within various on- and offline settings.

**Enhance user experience (UX)** by promoting independent UX testing in diverse groups and the establishment of reusable UX guidelines.

**Mediate between the varying needs of citizens and the administration** to ensure that their specific needs are taken into account when designing and implementing tools and processes.

**Promote process transparency and political follow-up,** including clarity guidelines on how citizen input will be fed into political debates and public decision-making as well as clear follow-up requirements.

## A European Civic Tech Hub for a stronger civic tech ecosystem

**Support the creation of a European Civic Tech Hub<sup>17</sup>** as a neutral collaboration environment that connects civic tech providers, open-source communities, practitioners and public administrations across governance levels.

**Strengthen analysis and evaluation capacity** at the European level by establishing shared expertise to assess AI-enabled participation tools and to develop effective methods for translating citizen input into actionable policy insights.

**Promote shared services that reduce cost and complexity,** such as common guidance on GDPR/accessibility/AI obligations, procurement templates (not just pilots!) that support sustainable maintenance, and practical implementation playbooks.

**Enhance interoperability for participation** by supporting the development and implementation of standards and reusable components that enable switching providers, combining solutions and avoiding lock-ins while keeping participation feasible and attractive to citizens.

## Enabling safe and impactful experimentation with AI

**Create spaces for responsible innovation** to test novel approaches, especially for extracting and making sense of large volumes of input as well as for providing strong safeguards against misuse and manipulation.

**Establish AI sandboxes** for participation, in which civic tech actors and public administrations can test AI-enabled functions in a stable and secure environment.

**Promote interdisciplinary evaluation and shared evidence** to enable experimentation to produce reusable knowledge rather than isolated pilots.

Our vision is a user-friendly, secure, and open digital participation infrastructure for Europe that uses AI responsibly to improve participation and make processes more efficient.

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## Endnotes

- 1 We broadly follow the definition for civic technology provided by the OECD: “The use of digital technologies to reinforce democracy by enabling the public to be informed, participate in decision and policymaking, and increase governments’ responsiveness and accountability.” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Tackling Civic Participation Challenges with Emerging Technologies* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), 20, quoting OECD, *Getting Civic Tech Right for Democracy* (forthcoming), [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/04/tackling-civic-participation-challenges-with-emerging-technologies\\_bbe2a7f5/ec2ca9a2-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/04/tackling-civic-participation-challenges-with-emerging-technologies_bbe2a7f5/ec2ca9a2-en.pdf).
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- 5 European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer 551: The Digital Decade* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, March-April 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2759/927260>
- 6 This is demonstrated by well-known examples, such as vTaiwan (<https://info.vtaiwan.tw>), Decidim Barcelona ([decidim.barcelona](https://decidim.barcelona)), Talk to the City (<https://talktothe.city>) and All Our Ideas (<https://allourideas.org/>). For more relevant examples, consult the 2025 digital participation tool ratings of the NGO People Powered (<https://www.peoplepowered.org/platform-ratings>).
- 7 Cf. Kevin J. Elliott, *Democracy for Busy People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).
- 8 Sitra, *Over Half a Million Finns Would Be Keen to Participate More in Decision-Making If It Were Easier* (Helsinki: Sitra, 2023), <https://arkisto.sitra.fi/app/uploads/2023/03/over-half-a-million-finns-would-be-keen-to-participate-more-in-decision-making-if-it-were-easier-1.pdf>.
- 9 Dominik Hierlemann et al., *Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union*, (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023), 8, <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/under-construction>.
- 10 Dominik Hierlemann et al., *Under Construction*, 25.
- 11 Dominik Hierlemann et al., *Under Construction*, 12.
- 12 A survey in the UK and nordic countries revealed that security concerns are not among the main perceived barriers to participation: Peter Baeck et al., *Making Democratic Innovations Stick: Lessons from Public Participation Practitioners and the Public* (London: Nesta, November 2023), based on an Opinium survey of 2,049 UK adults conducted 18–20 October 2023, [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Making\\_democratic\\_innovations\\_stick.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Making_democratic_innovations_stick.pdf).
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- 17 European Commission, *European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52025JC0791>.

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