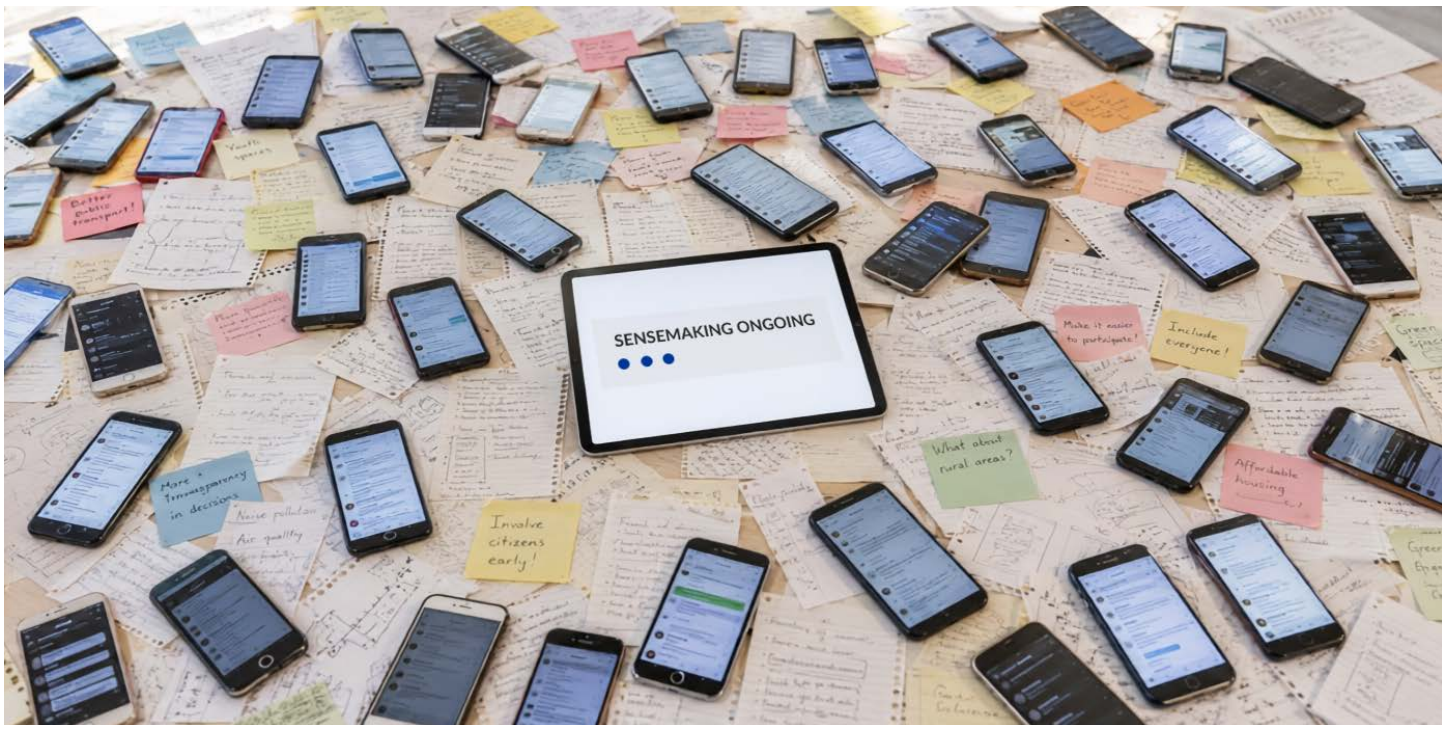
Policy Brief



Democracy and Social Cohesion | 07.2026

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Citizen Participation

Artificial intelligence (AI) offers tremendous potential for citizen participation to deliver on promises that too often remain unfulfilled: broader inclusion, genuine openness, user-friendly processes, scalable participation, and meaningful deliberation. Around the world, governments and civic actors are already using AI to strengthen participation in practice – from analysing large volumes of citizen input, to supporting deliberation using chatbots, moderation systems, and AI-assisted facilitation tools. The overall picture shows that AI can help make citizen participation more accessible, scalable, and meaningful – but also that its democratic value depends on how it is used. It can strengthen participation only if it expands governments' capacity to listen to citizens without replacing democratic judgment, transparency, and trust.

This Policy Brief explores the impact of AI on citizen participation through an empirically grounded typology of nine types of AI applications for citizen participation, illustrated with real-world examples. It shows how AI can help address persistent participation challenges such as limited resources, low accessibility, participation fatigue, and the difficulty of scaling high-quality deliberation. At the same time, the brief highlights key risks of AI-enabled participation, including new forms of digital exclusion, and declining public trust. The brief concludes with recommendations that aim to ensure that AI strengthens democratic participation in a responsible, transparent, and inclusive way.[1]

1 OECD (2026), "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Citizen Participation: Typology of applications, opportunities and challenges for democratic innovation", OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-citizen-participation_a1ee2e0a-en.html.

1. Citizen participation in the age of AI

Existing participation challenges

Democratic governance depends strongly on having a minimum level of public trust and a general feeling among citizens that they have political agency. When citizens feel they have no agency and trust in governing structures is low, democratic decision-making comes under pressure. According to a recent OECD survey, only 39% of all people surveyed reported high to moderately high levels of trust in their government.[2] However, 69% of those who feel they do have a say in government decisions reported high trust, as opposed to only 22% who feel they do not have a say.

Citizen participation aims to involve citizens in public decision-making as well as service design and delivery beyond and between elections, thereby strengthening their sense of agency and belonging. This can take different forms, including the provision of relevant information, broad public consultation, and direct engagement between politicians and citizens.

To make citizen participation effective, several interconnected challenges need to be overcome, and good participation processes need to be connected to actual policy-making processes. However, some participation processes are implemented primarily to comply with legal requirements, creating public scepticism rather than trust. Insufficient coordination between institutions, as well as limited resources and skills, often hinder the quality of participation, leading to duplication, participation overload and, eventually, participation fatigue among the public. Since they tend to engage the "usual suspects", many participation efforts fail to reach out to diverse and underrepresented groups, which weakens their ability to meaningfully influence decisions and increase public trust.

How AI can enhance citizen participation

Even before the surge of AI, public authorities around the world have been using civic tech tools to collect citizens' input, to inform citizens about participation opportunities, and to engage them in certain forms of participation (e.g. online consultation). Examples of these solutions are the "Consul" and "Decidim" platforms used originally in Madrid and Barcelona, which are now being employed in communities around the world.

The possibilities and opportunities of AI build on the foundation laid by civic tech by enhancing how participation can be processed and used.

What is artificial intelligence?

According to the OECD, artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to "a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers from the input it receives how to generate outputs – such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions – that can influence physical or virtual environments", with varying levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment. AI has evolved from early rule-based systems in the 1950s to modern machine learning and deep learning approaches that learn from data. Recent advances in generative AI and large language models (LLMs) enable the creation of text, images, and other content, while most AI systems remain task-specific and are best used in collaboration with humans.

A typology of AI tools to improve and enhance citizen participation

The typology provided below offers a practical map of how different AI tools can support citizen participation. Built on 50 real-world use cases from 22 countries, it groups tools by the tasks they perform ("types of application") and connects these tasks to the participation challenges they can help address.

The typology is intended as a practical orientation tool. Rather than treating AI as a single solution for participation, it helps policymakers and practitioners distinguish between the various functions that AI can perform and the stages of participation in which the use of specific tools can be helpful. In doing so, it sup-

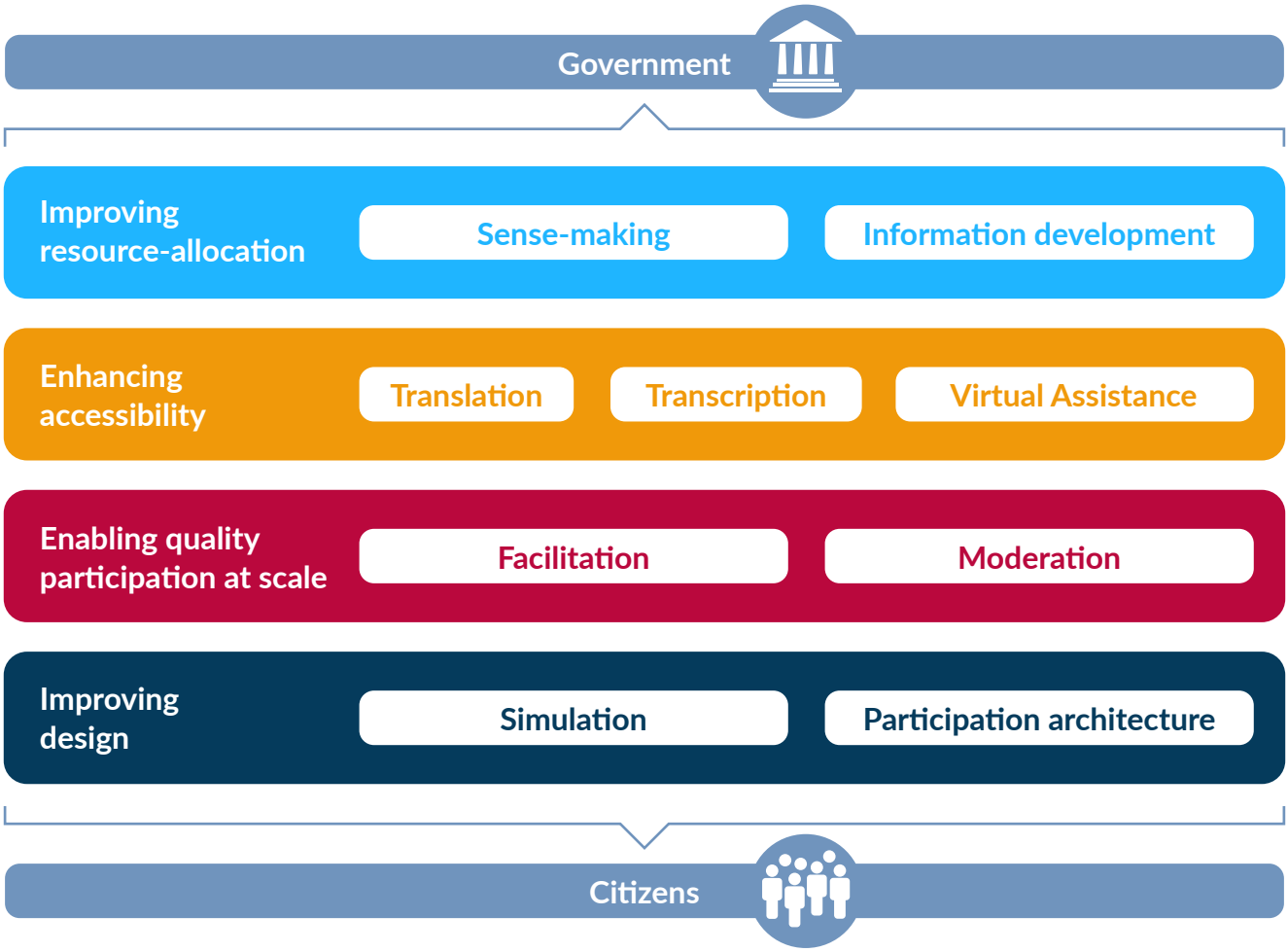
2 References:OECD (2024). *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en.

ports more targeted and responsible design choices for their participation processes. For example, governments can use it to identify whether they need better analysis of citizen input, improved accessibility, safer online discussions, multilingual engagement, or support for deliberation at scale. The typology therefore helps move the debate beyond general expectations about AI and towards concrete use cases, while making clear that AI should support, rather than replace, meaningful citizen participation.

In terms of "types of application", tools are classified based on the tasks they perform in citizen participation, such as analysing citizens' inputs through sense-making tools or assisting users through AI-enabled interfaces (e.g. chatbots). These applications can be used by citizens and governments at different stages of a participation process and in different arenas, mainly in the "front office" (i.e. the government-citizen interface) and the "back office" (i.e. the internal work of public administration). This classification is a deliberate simplification, acknowledging that the categories are not mutually exclusive and that many tools fulfil several functions at once.

The added value of the typology lies in linking specific AI applications to concrete participation challenges. It shows, for example, that sense-making tools can help governments process large volumes of citizen input more efficiently; that translation and transcription tools can lower access barriers; that virtual assistance can make participation easier to navigate; and that moderation or facilitation tools can help maintain the quality of participation at scale. In this way, the typology helps identify where AI can improve resource allocation, accessibility, participation at scale, and the overall design of participation processes.

FIGURE 1 **Nine ways AI can support participation**



Source: Own illustration.

BertelsmannStiftung

2. Nine types of AI applications that can support participation

Sense-making

What it is: AI tools that analyse large volumes of text data, identify patterns, cluster opinions, and summarise contributions.

Functions: Through the use of natural language processing (NLP), these tools enable governments to analyse large-scale citizen input, detect themes, perform sentiment analysis, and identify outliers. They can also help citizens to navigate discussions by summarising contributions, grouping similar ideas, and reducing information overload.

Why it matters: Sense-making tools can allow governments to analyse large volumes of qualitative input and preserve most of its quality while enabling participants to engage more meaningfully in complex discussions. This can substantially improve the use of resources and the overall usability of participation processes for both citizens and governments.

CASE: Cambridge, UK – GoVocal's "Insights":

Cambridge (UK) ran a public consultation in 2024 on design guidelines for its northern neighbourhoods using an online participation platform. Residents shared feedback through surveys and map-based comments. The city used this input to draft five design principles and then gathered additional feedback. An AI tool built in the platform ("Insights") helped analyse the responses and generate a report, cutting the time needed to process qualitative input by about 50%.

Improving resource-allocation

Sense-making

AI-powered tools performing analysis of large amounts of textual inputs, clustering, semi-automated annotation, and outlier identification.

Information development

AI-powered tools enabling partial automation and support in the generation of text, images, and videos as well as adaptation to multiple formats and communication channels.

Information development

What it is: Supporting or even partially automating the creation of content (e.g. text, images, or videos) and adapting this format across different communication channels.

Functions: These tools can help governments tailor information about policy issues, participation processes, and outcomes while helping citizens to draft their contributions. If used carefully, generative AI can enable the rapid production of relevant content and its adaptation to different audiences and formats.

Why it matters: By making information clearer and more tailored, these tools can aid citizens' ability to understand issues better and participate more meaningfully. They also allow governments to allocate resources more sensibly and to reach out to underrepresented groups.

CASE: Swindon Borough Council (UK) – "Simply Readable":

The Swindon Borough Council in the UK built the open-source AI powered tool "Simply Readable", using GenAI to adapt government documents into easy-to-read formats and thereby improve accessibility for people with learning disabilities or visual impairment.

Translation

What it is: AI-powered tools that automatically translate content into multiple languages, enabling multilingual participation.

Functions: These tools allow citizens to access information and participate in their own language while enabling governments to manage multilingual participation processes efficiently. They can also include translation into sign language using AI-generated avatars.

Why it matters: Translation tools address accessibility and inclusion challenges, particularly for linguistic minorities and international processes. By reducing language barriers, they create a more level playing field for participation and improve both inclusiveness and efficiency.

CASE: European Commission – Conference on the Future of Europe:

The European Commission organised the Conference on the Future of Europe, allowing participants to submit their inputs in all 24 official languages of the European Union thanks to the AI-powered "eTranslation" tool.

Transcription

What it is: Speech-to-text and text-to-speech tools that support oral participation and accessible information formats.

Functions: These tools enable participants to submit oral contributions and access spoken content, while governments can automatically transcribe discussions and analyse verbal inputs from consultations or deliberative processes.

Why it matters: Transcription tools improve accessibility for people with disabilities or limited digital skills. They also reduce administrative burdens by automating documentation, thereby improving efficiency and inclusiveness in participation processes.

CASE: Lugano (Switzerland) 2019 – "Project Debater: Speech by Crowd" (IBM):

The tool was used to collect and transcribe around 2,500 oral contributions in a public consultation on self-driving vehicles.

Enhancing accessibility

Translation

AI-powered tools for automated translation into multiple languages.

Transcription

Speech-to-text and text-to-speech.

Virtual assistance

AI-powered chatbots / interfaces providing content in response to queries submitted in natural language.

Virtual assistance

What it is: AI-powered conversational interfaces (e.g. chatbots) that help users navigate information and participation processes.

Functions: These tools provide answers in natural language, guide users through participation platforms, send reminders, and support both citizens and administrators in managing participation processes.

Why it matters: Virtual assistants address barriers related to complexity and accessibility. They help citizens understand policy issues and participation opportunities, thereby reducing self-exclusion and improving engagement while also increasing administrative efficiency.

CASE: Bogotá (Colombia) – "Chatico":

The city of Bogotá in Colombia developed the AI-powered chatbot "Chatico", a virtual assistant that helps residents engage with the participatory platform Gobierno Abierto Bogotá. Residents can also use it to submit reports on matters of corruption and urban management. The city made the chatbot accessible via WhatsApp, which allows users to receive "Chatico" updates directly on their devices.

Facilitation

What it is: AI tools that support or perform functions traditionally carried out by human facilitators in discussions and deliberative processes.

Functions: AI facilitators help structure discussions, ensure balanced participation, summarise arguments, and identify common ground. They can support both online and in-person deliberation processes.

Why it matters: Facilitation tools address the challenge of scaling deliberation. They make it possible to include larger numbers of participants while maintaining discussion quality, inclusiveness, and fairness.

CASE: Chile – "LXS 400: Chile Delibera":

In 2021, the Chilean Senate partnered with the Stanford Deliberative Democracy Center and the NGO Tribu Foundation to organise a representative deliberative process involving 514 Chileans for three days to discuss policy priorities selected in a previous national consultation process. The deliberative sessions took place on the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, which uses the AI facilitator "Alice" to equally distribute speaking time and encourage all participants to take part in the discussion.

Enabling quality participation at scale

Facilitation

AI-powered virtual agents facilitating live discussions and surfacing common ground.

Moderation

AI-powered semi-automated content moderation preventing spam, astroturfing (e.g. AI-generated contributions to alter the results of a public consultation), and hate speech.

Moderation

What it is: AI tools that support the monitoring and filtering of online content to enforce rules and maintain constructive discussions.

Functions: AI moderation tools detect spam, harmful content, hate speech, and manipulation techniques (e.g. astroturfing). They assist human moderators in maintaining safe and structured online environments.

Why it matters: Moderation tools address challenges related to the quality of participation and scalability. By ensuring safe and respectful environments, they enable meaningful engagement at scale and protect the integrity of participation processes.

CASE: Slovakia – "TrollWall":

Slovakia's Office of the President used the AI tool "TrollWall" to filter out hate speech on social media accounts. Similarly, various media organisations (e.g. the New York Times) use AI moderation tools (e.g. "Perspective API") to foster constructive dialogue.

Simulation

What it is: AI tools that generate scenarios and visualisations of potential policy outcomes.

Functions: These tools create realistic visual or interactive representations of future scenarios, enabling participants to explore policy options and their consequences, especially in areas like urban planning or climate policy.

Why it matters: Simulation tools address challenges in understanding complex policy trade-offs. By making future scenarios tangible, they improve the design and accessibility of participation processes and support more informed discussions.

CASE: New York City, USA – "FloodGen NYC":

The Civic Innovation Lab of the NGO BetaNYC developed this advocacy tool, which lets New Yorkers visualise potential flood scenarios.

Improving design

Simulation

AI-powered tools generating scenarios and simulations.

Participation architecture

AI-powered participation platforms based on democracy-affirming principles.

Participation architecture

What it is: AI-powered digital platforms designed to structure and enable democratic dialogue and collective decision-making.

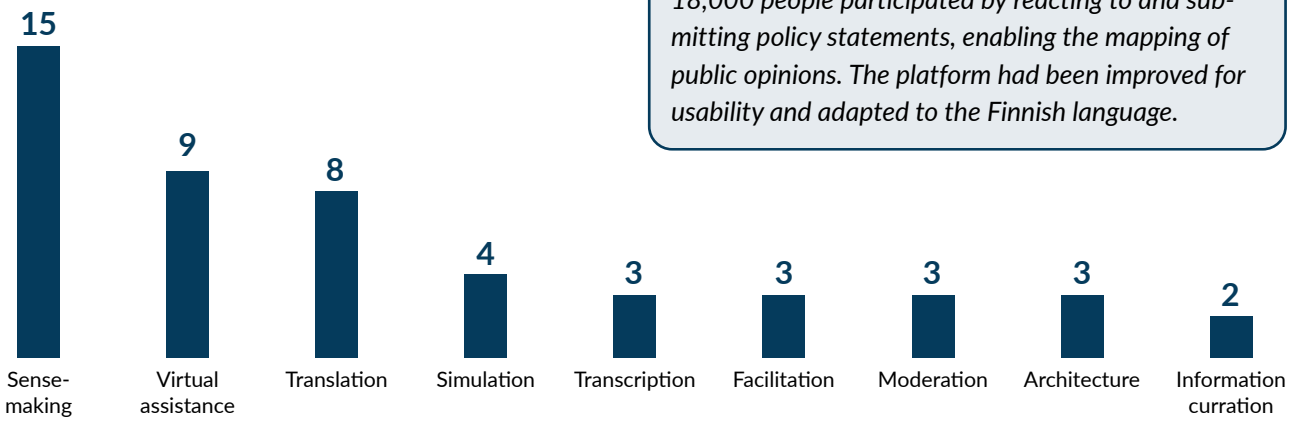
Functions: These platforms use AI to map opinions, identify consensus, and structure discussions in ways that promote constructive dialogue and collective intelligence.

Why it matters: They address structural challenges of participation, such as polarisation, fragmentation, and limited scale. By shaping digital environments intentionally, they enable broader, more inclusive, and higher-quality participation processes.

CASE: Finland 2024 – Sitra's "What do you think, Finland?":

In 2024, Sitra (Finland's Innovation Lab) ran a nationwide public consultation called "What do you think, Finland?" using the AI-powered platform "Polis". Over 18,000 people participated by reacting to and submitting policy statements, enabling the mapping of public opinions. The platform had been improved for usability and adapted to the Finnish language.

FIGURE 2 **Occurrences of AI tools for participation by application**



Source: Own illustration. n = 50

3. Three emerging trends in AI and citizen participation

Early front-runners in the application of AI: sense-making, virtual assistance, and automated translation

Across 50 cases studied, the research reveals that sense-making, virtual assistance, and automated translation are currently the most common AI applications used in participation. This is not surprising in the case of AI translation tools, given that their use for citizen participation is a rather natural extension of their widespread use in digital spaces. On the other hand, virtual assistance reflects governments' push to make participation information more accessible, and sense-making responds to the practical need to analyse large volumes of citizen inputs more efficiently.

Scaling deliberation is a priority when using AI for participation

Deliberative processes are a particularly active experimentation space for AI because these processes are often difficult to scale, are rather isolated from the wider public debate, and are quite resource-intensive. Thus, scaling deliberative processes from small groups in physical spaces to large groups online is an ideal use case for many of the AI applications described above. Before deliberation, sense-making tools can, for example, cluster inputs and support agenda-setting. During deliberation, moderation tools can assist human moderators in handling larger groups, and translation tools can enable multilingual deliberations. After deliberation, sense-making tools can help in summarising discussions and drafting relevant deliverables.

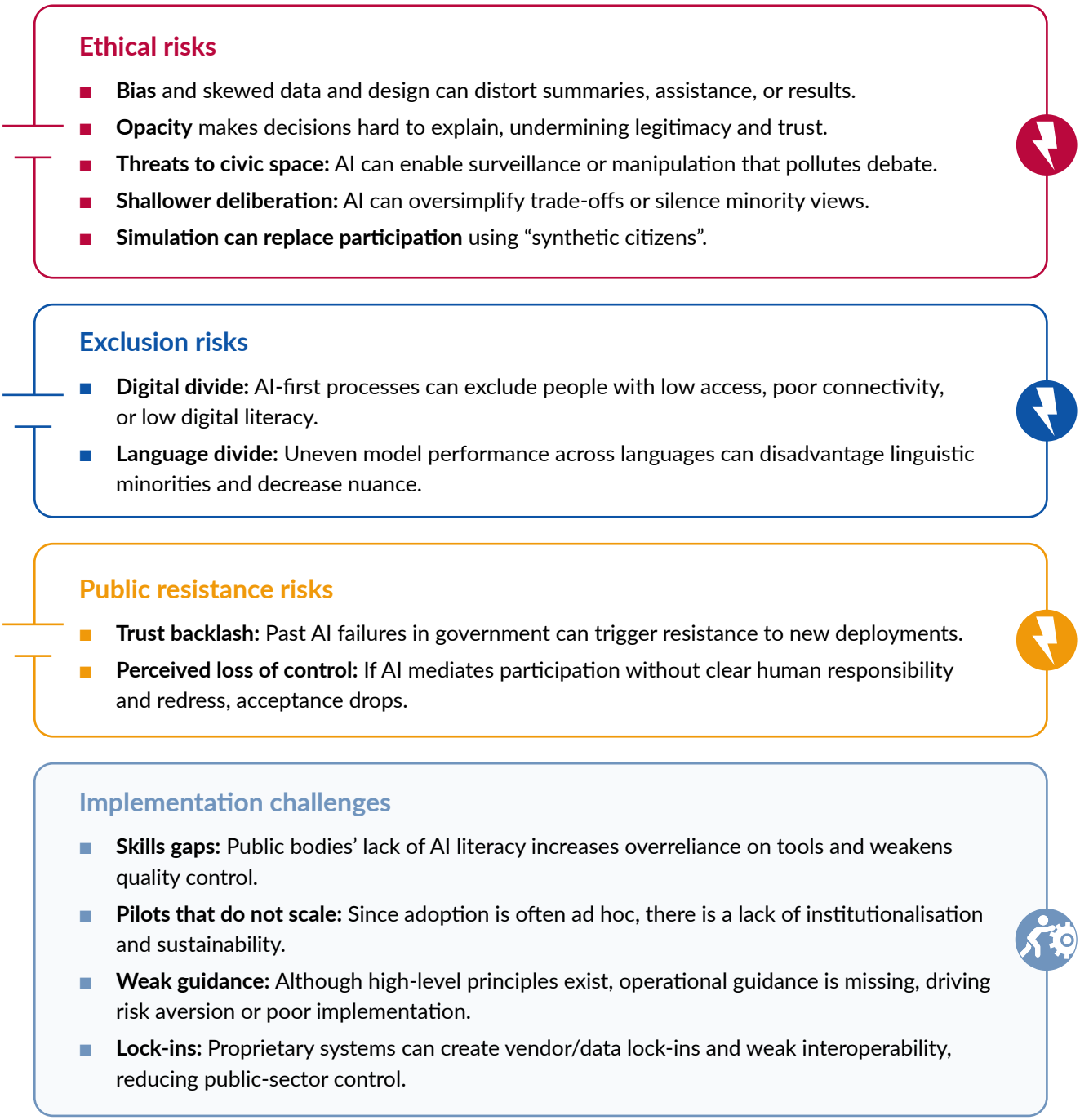
The "agentification" of AI solutions

AI tools can be (and already are being) combined into seamless workflows tailored to the needs of participatory and deliberative processes. Early agentic AI systems that can manage end-to-end processes, learn, self-optimise, and collaborate with humans and other agents with minimal human input are already emerging. These systems are still limited in the realm of participation, but they will soon likely be able to support civil servants along the entire participation process. However, greater autonomy does come with new risks and challenges that need to be weighed carefully. Even with the possibility of increased automation, it may not always be desirable in democratic participation. After all, good participation will always require human oversight, accountability, and the possibility to contest outcomes.

4. Risks to consider when combining AI and citizen participation

A growing body of research suggests that AI in government can come with significant risks, including manipulation, surveillance, weak transparency, declining accountability, and growing inequalities. Yet too little attention has been paid to how these risks affect citizen participation, where they can directly influence the degree of inclusion, trust, legitimacy, and deliberative quality. The following illustration provides an overview of some of the key risks:

FIGURE 3 **Risk and challenges of using AI for participation**



Source: Own illustration.

5. Recommendations for ensuring responsible and inclusive use of AI in citizen participation

In accordance with the OECD Framework for Trustworthy AI in Government, the following recommendations are grouped into three complementary types that help to ensure that AI is used responsibly and inclusively:

Guardrails set the rules and safeguards so that AI strengthens participation without undermining rights, the civic space, trust, or inclusion.

Enablers build the practical capacity to use AI well, including skills, guidance, ecosystems, scaling pathways, and better procurement conditions.

Public engagement ensures that citizens and stakeholders are not just "users" of AI-enabled participation, but partners in shaping how AI is designed, deployed, scrutinised, and governed.

Guardrails for responsibly using AI in civic participation

Ensure rights-based and standards-compliant AI: Governments should be cautious in their choice of tools and align systems with democratic values, the rule of law, human rights, fairness, and privacy so that AI supports participation rather than distorting it. This includes setting clear rules for acceptable use, oversight, and redress, especially in sensitive contexts where misuse could undermine the civic space.

Reduce data and language divides: This is necessary to avoid new democratic inequalities. Governments should invest in closing data gaps and improving performance for "low-resource" languages. Examples include Iceland's partnering with AI providers to improve LLM performance in Icelandic and the Finnish-led Poro initiative, a family of multilingual open-source LLMs designed to cover all official European languages.

Guarantee transparency, auditability, and technical openness: Participation processes require legitimacy. Governments should make the use of AI visible, understandable, and contestable, such as by publishing information on where algorithms are used, how they affect participation workflows, and how citizens can object. A good example of this is the Dutch Algorithm Register. Openness in civic tech can best be pursued through open source, yet this is more complex to apply to AI systems. Depending on the system, the label "open-source AI" may be misleading. Alternative paradigms for the transparency of AI systems include open standards and open weights.

Use AI to widen participation and enhance inclusiveness: Governments need to ensure that the use of AI tools for citizen participation increases their capacity to listen to all citizens and to prevent the exclusion of citizens with limited skills and access. Alternative in-person or low-tech formats of participation should be maintained, and efficiency gains allowed by the use of AI could be used to allocate resources towards these formats. At the same time, governments should be open about their use of AI tools in participation processes to ensure process transparency and establish clear redressal mechanisms to address grievances. To prevent public resistance and strengthen trust, governments should uphold relevant regulations, ethical frameworks, and dedicated strategies to align AI-practices with respect for civic freedoms.

Enablers of effective AI adoption

Build AI capability in the public sector through training and competency frameworks: Governments should invest in awareness-raising initiatives and training opportunities for civil servants to mitigate the risks of using AI in citizen participation and unlock the full potential of AI tools. A structured way to do this is to use competency-based approaches (e.g. a comprehensive competency framework for AI in government) to ensure that public officials have the technical, managerial, and political/legal competences needed for responsible use.

Strengthen innovation ecosystems and communities of practice for AI and participation: Governments can map and strengthen innovation at the intersection of AI development and citizen participation in order to build international multi-stakeholder co-creation platforms and communities of practice. These can enable shared learning and collaboration among public insti-

tutions, civic-tech actors, and AI developers around fit-for-purpose participation tools.

Move beyond pilots and procure interoperable, lock-in-free AI solutions: To make AI-use sustainable, governments should move beyond experimentations and pilots by pursuing coordinated approaches that enable the adoption of AI tools at scale for citizen participation. In parallel, they should strengthen their capacity to procure AI solutions that are fit-for-purpose by carefully considering vendor and data lock-ins and opting for systems that guarantee interoperability.

Public engagement

Co-define principles and strategic priorities with citizens: As AI systems can radically reshape how citizens interact with each other as well as with governments, the public should have a say in how AI-based technologies are designed, developed, and governed. Governments should involve citizens and stakeholders at different stages of the technology cycle to strengthen trust and legitimacy and to ensure that AI systems reflect the needs of all. This can include broad consultations as well as structured deliberation on AI-governance choices.

Use citizen assemblies to define trustworthy AI principles and priorities: Citizen assemblies are particularly well suited for defining priorities and principles guiding the development and governance of AI, as they can effectively deal with society-wide value-based dilemmas as well as develop solutions on acceptable uses of AI in critical areas (e.g. facial recognition and online harm). Governments should consider using citizen assemblies to foster legitimacy around AI usage at all levels of governance, from local to global.

Co-design and co-create AI systems with citizens and stakeholders: Governments should harness citizen and stakeholder expertise to shape AI tools and models that meet societal needs through, for example, the participatory drafting of system rules and open hackathons focused on concrete public problems. This can help to ensure that tools are fit-for-purpose and grounded in real participation challenges.

Enable public oversight for assessing and challenging AI tools: Citizens and stakeholders have a fundamental role to play in the oversight of AI tools. Governments should enable structured public scrutiny (e.g. participatory technology assessment) and support methods that actively test systems for failures and harms. This helps keep the AI systems used by governments visible, accountable, and correctable over time.

Embed multi-stakeholder governance for AI at the national and global levels: Citizens and stakeholders should be involved in AI governance both nationally and internationally. The global governance of the internet is already based on a multi-stakeholder process in which public authorities and non-governmental actors have an equal voice. Though such an approach has its limits, the creation of multi-stakeholder fora in which citizens are represented remains relevant for governing the digital realm. As an example of this at the national level, in Brazil, national institutions, academia, private-sector providers, and third-sector advocates converge in the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee to set strategic guidelines related to the use and development of the internet.

6. Conclusion: responsible AI for better participation

The brief demonstrates that AI is already becoming a key part of how governments design and run citizen participation across OECD countries. Be it translation, virtual assistance, or sense-making, several promising avenues are already being tested. If used responsibly, this creates real opportunities for making citizen participation more accessible, more scalable, and more responsive while also freeing up resources for governments to increase participation quality. However, what has also become clear is that governments will only reap the benefits of AI if they move beyond ad hoc pilots and become strategic in terms of their adoption. In other words, they should: introduce and uphold guardrails that protect rights, the civic space, and transparency; introduce enabling structures that help build skills, provide guidance, and enable interoperable procurement; and engage with citizens in ways that treat them as partners in shaping, monitoring, and governing AI.

Although AI is no substitute for democratic participation, it can help improve it by enabling meaningful involvement and rethinking how governments and our public institutions should work in an AI-enhanced future.

Authorship

This Policy Brief is a concise version of the official **OECD paper "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Citizen Participation: Typology of applications, opportunities and challenges for democratic innovations"**, the product of an OECD – Bertelsmann Stiftung collaboration. The text was adapted and condensed by Stefan Roch (Bertelsmann Stiftung) for this publication.

Imprint

Design
Markus Diekmann

Cover photo
AI-generated (Adobe Firefly)

ID_3070

V.i.S.d.P.

Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh · www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Dominik Hierlemann

Editorial assistance and inquiries:
sandra.stratos@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Tel. +49 5241 81 81403

August 2026 | ISSN: 2197-9796

A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Democracy and Social Cohesion" program deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. Its focus is on issues of social and political participation, discourse and conflict resolution, civic engagement and cooperation, the functioning of democratic institutions and processes, and intergenerational justice.