



Trailblazers of digital participation:

Taiwan's Join platform and vTaiwan

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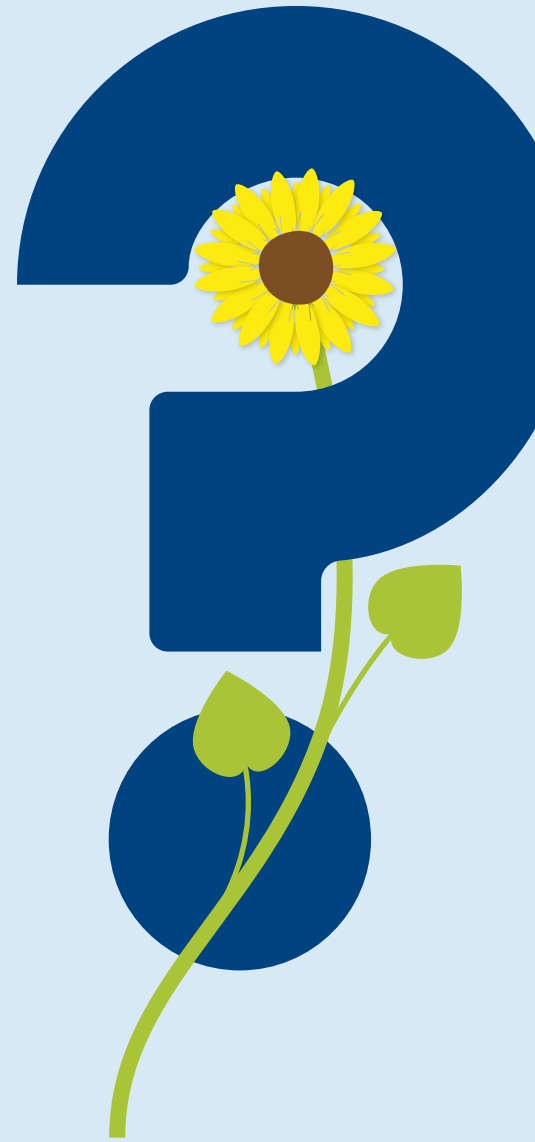
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What it's all about

The Join platform & vTaiwan

From “sunflowers” to innovative citizen participation

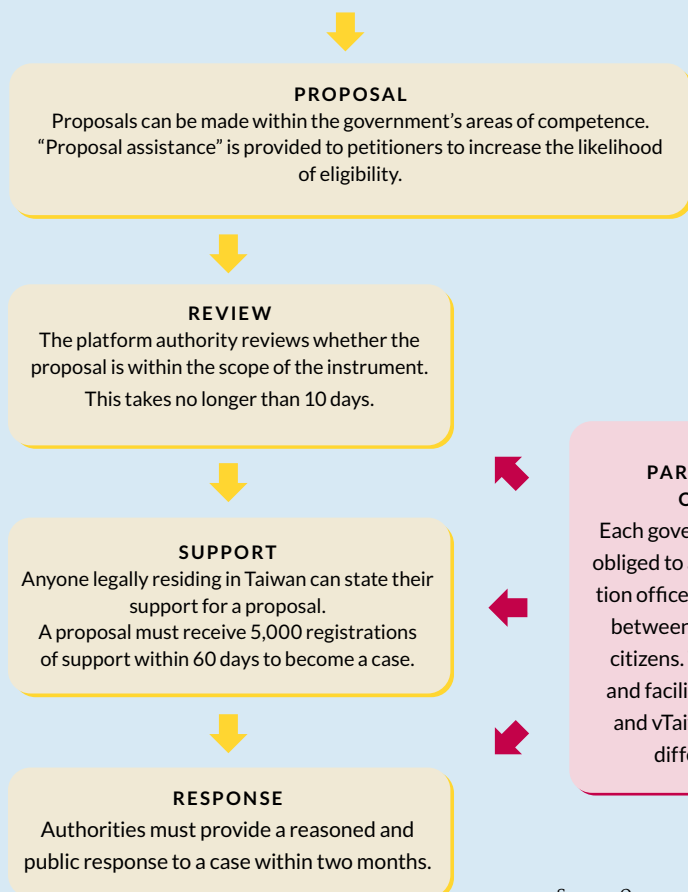
Over the past decade, Taiwan has developed into a vibrant and innovative participatory democracy. A key milestone in that process was the so-called “sunflower movement” in 2014, when hundreds of protesters occupied the parliament to protest a new trade bill with mainland China. What in other countries could have led to lasting conflict and rupture was the starting point of a prolific cooperation between Taiwan’s old political guard and the innovative tech community representing the protesters. Together, civil society, “civic hackers”, and government developed and implemented several advanced participation instruments, substantially increasing citizens’ impact on policy making, most notably vTaiwan and the Join platform.

Though born out of the same civic ethos of cooperation between society and government, vTaiwan and the Join platform are two distinct participation instruments. vTaiwan is an online-offline platform run by a collective of “civic hackers” called gOv (“gov-zero”). It is designed to enable open, in-depth, and lengthy consultation processes between the government, citizens, and policy stakeholders. The Join platform is a government-run participation hub that is most notable for its petitioning function but also offers several feedback and discussion options. It allows anyone legally registered in Taiwan to file a proposal with the national government and gather support. A proposal that receives at least 5,000 supporters will be discussed by the relevant government agencies, who must provide a reasoned response.

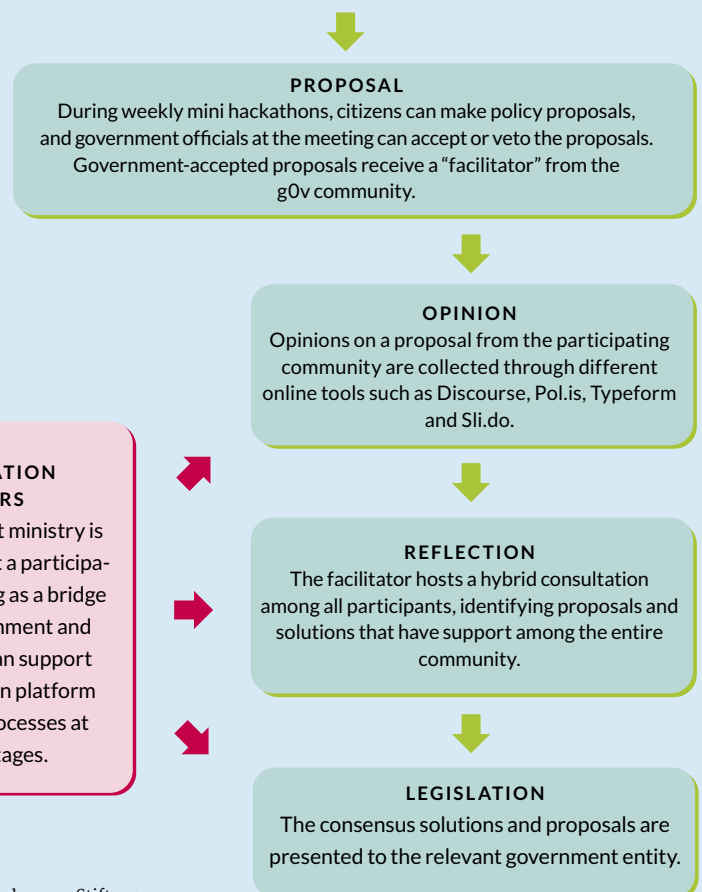


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How it works

Petitioning at the Join platform



A consultation through vTaiwan



PARTICIPATION OFFICERS
Each government ministry is obliged to appoint a participation officer, acting as a bridge between government and citizens. They can support and facilitate Join platform and vTaiwan processes at different stages.

The Join platform

The case of menstrual cups

PROBLEM

Menstrual cups were banned for several years in Taiwan, and only certain international products could be sold in physical shops, not online. A group of start-up business women wanted to change that.

PARTICIPATION

The group started an online petition on the Join platform and gathered the support of 6,100 people within two weeks.

IMPACT

The group was able to develop legislative comparisons with other countries, question what constitutes a medical device in Taiwan, and develop ideas for better access to menstrual products, particularly online, for Taiwanese women. The proposal was approved by the relevant authorities in March 2017.

vTaiwan

The UberX case

PROBLEM

The arrival of the app-based taxi service Uber Taiwan in 2013 created conflicts with other taxi services and the authorities. In August 2015, at the request of several government entities, vTaiwan hosted the Uber case.

PARTICIPATION

Stage I: gov facilitators helped define the topic and reached out to possible participants (Uber drivers, taxi service providers, policy makers, and others) to participate via the Pol.is tool.

Stage II: more than 4,500 citizens participated on Pol.is and voted on 145 opinions. Two groups emerged from the process, one pro-Uber, the other against.

Stage III: a two-hour public meeting was organised with all relevant stakeholders and the public to refine the results from stage II.

IMPACT

Stage IV: proposals from the public meeting were developed into a draft bill and sent to parliament, many proposals passed.

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Good to know

Strengths and limitations of the Join platform and vTaiwan

The Join platform

vTaiwan

STRENGTHS

Straightforward

It offers a clear and well-designed platform, making it easy to petition and rally support. By June 2022, 13,853 proposals had been made, with 289 meeting the threshold.

Strong institutionalisation

Participation officers are involved in supporting petitioners and in steering and facilitating the process. The process is swift and authority responses tend to be thorough and genuine.

Engaging, open, and innovative

vTaiwan offers an engaging and open participation process at several flexible stages. For example, the opinion stage can last several rounds and use different online tools as Pol.is or Sli.do.

Consensus in online interaction

With its use of consensus-finding tools such as Pol.is and its stakeholder support, vTaiwan is a role-model for constructive and interactive online engagement.

LIMITATIONS

Lack of deliberation

Though it allows for comments and suggestions by citizens, and government responses engage with the topics raised, there is little in-depth interaction in the petitioning process.

Low threshold

5,000 supporters is a low threshold. In Latvia a petition on the public platform manaballs needs 10,000 signatories to advance. A low threshold can lead to a lack of diversity among supporters.

Complex and tech-intensive

Several stages and intense engagement make for a demanding participation process, but can hamper inclusivity. Tech-savvy, educated participants are at an advantage. Thus, vTaiwan is now mainly used for policies concerning the digital sphere.

Lack of institutionalisation

It struggles to strike a balance between open and flexible processes on one hand and clearer rules and structures on the other. The government can refuse to discuss issues on vTaiwan.

No perfect offering but plenty of inspiration: What others can learn from Taiwan

When asked what Taiwan can offer other countries, digital minister Audrey Tang replied it has “no perfect offering”. It would be impossible to transfer the unique Taiwanese blend of common sense, trust in authorities and vibrant protest culture directly to any other political context. Taiwan does not provide a readymade model, but rather the sense that constant experimentation and innovation in citizen participation is necessary to improve old approaches and develop new ones that are fit for purpose.

Still, Taiwan’s experiences with the Join platform and vTaiwan are a welcome testing ground for new and innovative formats and methods combining various tools, methods, and strategies. An important lesson from both instruments is the need for a participatory culture and infrastructure within government and public service. Both instruments work because their purpose and functioning are clear to the government and the citizenry. Both are embedded in an infrastructure of participation officers, facilitating participation at all levels, and a genuine openness from public officials and politicians to Taiwan’s civic tech movement and citizens’ input.

For citizen participation in Taiwan, the challenge is to avoid complacency. Taiwan needs to continue to strike a delicate balance between experimentation and tangible outputs for citizens. vTaiwan was once the next big thing in participatory democracy, but over time, the drawbacks of its complexity and tech focus started to show, with other alternatives such as the Join platform gaining popularity. During the pandemic, Taiwan succeeded in introducing several innovative, inclusive and effective policy innovations that further solidified citizens’ trust in their political system. If Taiwan continues on this road, it will remain an inspiration for aspiring democracies all over the world for years to come.

Digital citizen participation works in Taiwan because public authorities are open to experiments and innovation. Additionally, citizens trust authorities and have the required technological know-how.



The future
of democracy



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About Taiwan

Population

23.5 million (roughly a third of Germany’s population)

Population density

641 per km² (roughly three times that of Germany)

BTI Transformation index ranking in 2022

3 (out of 137 countries)

V-Dem participatory principle of democracy ranking in 2022

4 (Germany: 20)

Other participatory innovations in Taiwan

The presidential hackathon is a platform for the tech community and the government to connect and explore new solutions through innovative ideas based on open data.

The social innovation lab opened in Taipei in 2017 as a hub for all social innovation initiatives in Taiwan. Digital minister Audrey Tang holds regular meetings in the lab with social innovators.

“**Media literacy**” was introduced to Taiwan’s school curricula, including lessons on critical social media usage, identifying disinformation, and media production.

Sources and further reading

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Authors:

Stefan Roch

stefan.roch@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Charlotte Freihse

charlotte.freihse@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Bruno Kaufmann

bruno.kaufmann@swissdemocracy.foundation



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Bertelsmann Stiftung, Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256, 33311 Gütersloh, www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en

Responsible: Dr Dominik Hierlemann, Prof Dr Robert Vehrkamp, Anna Renkamp

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