



Citizen participation as a public debate The "Forum against Fakes" project

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shortcut
What it's all about

An innovative combination of online and offline participation

How can we protect ourselves from disinformation? This question was the starting point for the Bertelsmann Stiftung's project "Forum gegen Fakes – Zusammen für eine starke Demokratie" ("Forum against Fakes – Together for a Strong Democracy.", hereinafter referred to as the "Forum"), in cooperation with Stiftung Mercator and the Michael Otto Foundation for Sustainability. The aim was to initiate a broad public debate on how society deals with disinformation and to develop specific citizens' recommendations.

To this end, a combination of two formats was trialled: broad online participation and a diverse citizens' assembly. The strengths of both formats were utilised: A 120-member citizens' assembly conducted in-depth discussions with the help of feedback from online

participation and the knowledge of experts and stakeholders. The easy-access online participation, with its high visibility through broad advertising in social and traditional media as well as in the public sphere, enabled hundreds of thousands of people in Germany to participate actively. Online participants were able to submit proposals and put them to the vote or comment on the citizens' assemblies (preliminary) recommendations. This interaction resulted in 15 recommendations, which were submitted to the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community in the form of a citizens' report in September 2024.

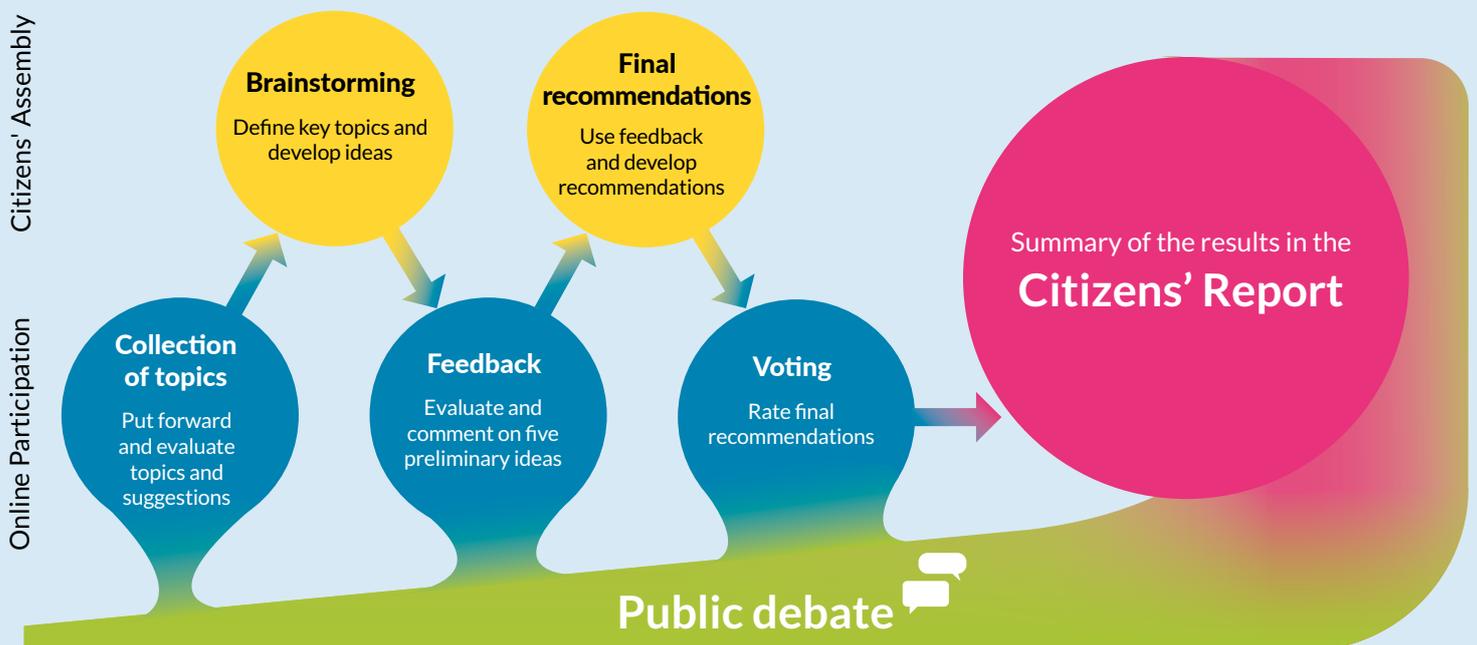
The recommendations were met with a broad and diverse response in the media and in society. They gave further impetus to the debate on how to deal with disinformation.



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How it works

The combination of a citizens' assembly with three-stage online participation

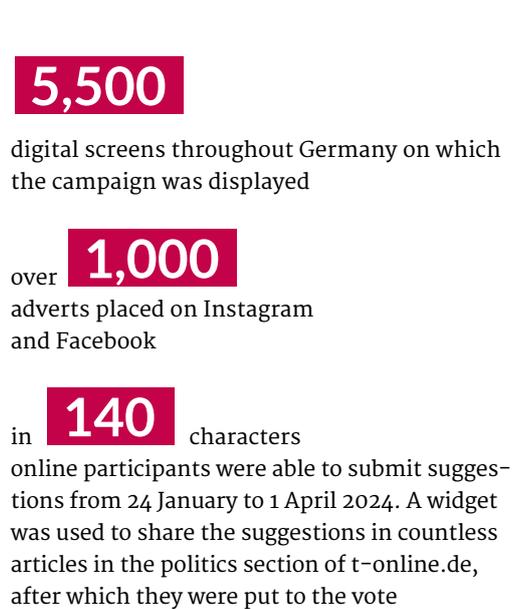
Online participation opens up the citizens' assembly to public debate and vice versa. This combination gives the recommendations a high level of social resonance.



Online participation in figures



The publicity campaign in figures



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Good to know

Visibility and broad communication: Cornerstones of the success of the “Forum against Fakes”

Visibility is complex, but fundamentally important

In order to have an impact on society and politics, participation must be visible. This requires a considerable number of resources in areas such as communication, press and public relations, branding and design, media partnerships and advertising on social media, and in public places. A clear communication concept and a strong network of partners and multipliers were the basis for the impact of the Forum.

The higher the online participation, the greater the added value for the citizens' assembly

Online participation was deliberately designed to be user-friendly and low-threshold, to generate as many ideas and feedback as possible. The integration of widgets in social media and websites enabled direct participation. Above all, the cooperation with the news portal t-online ensured a broad reception. Participants were able to take part without prior knowledge of the topic and without having to register. It was possible to give input via very short statements that could be understood quickly and evaluated directly by others. The large volume of diverse input carried the public debate into the citizens' assembly and directly enriched its work on the recommendations.

Broad online participation strengthens the impact of the recommendations

Recommendations based on the input of not just 120, but thousands of participants have a greater chance of making a political and social impact. Following the publication of the recommendations, there was a lively public debate on social and traditional media about how to deal with disinformation. This can increase the pressure on political decision-makers to actively work on political solutions for dealing with disinformation, taking the recommendations into account.

Citizen participation and public debates belong together

A liberal democracy thrives on having informed citizens who are involved in politics. At the same time, citizens expect their involvement to bring about political change, so it makes sense to think about public debates and citizen participation together. Participants in citizens' assemblies want their work and recommendations to be widely recognised in politics and society, which can be achieved by the combination of citizens' assembly and public debate.

Citizens' assemblies often take place outside the broad public debate. This is by design: Participants should engage intensively with a topic in a protected space and come to conclusions by weighing up the pros and cons of various alternative courses of action. However, due to its limited number of participants, the citizens' assembly remains a "black box" for many people. The format is effective in achieving well-founded results through the high quality of the debate, but it usually falls short of lending them sufficient public weight. On the other hand, broad debates potentially have a political impact. However, they often lack balance, constructive interaction and a focus on the common good.

The "Forum against Fakes" shows that citizens' assembly participants perceive the connection of their work to the public discourse as an enrichment, a form of effective feedback, and a way of increasing the visibility of their own work. In turn, the feedback from online participants shows how important it was to them to have their input actively taken on board to influence concrete recommendations.

Whether it is climate change, war or migration – public debates are conducted with immense intensity. Left to their own devices, there is a risk that these debates, especially on social media, will spread disinformation and uncertainty, which often leads to frustration and rarely to concrete solutions. The Forum shows that the combination of a citizens' assembly and online participation can be a building block for dealing with such debates more constructively and enabling citizens to have a democratic say.

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Open online participation helps to open the citizens' assembly "black box" to the general public and increase the political weight of the results.



shortcut *More on the topic*

How what is created can have a real impact

The Forum is an impressive demonstration of what can be achieved in just a few months when a large number of people get involved in debates and citizens engage in informed discussions: balanced recommendations that have been carried forward by a broad public. The perception by the Forum's participants that they have made a difference is also a valuable result.

However, effective participation can only be realised long-term if the initiated debates are continued after the participation phases and when the solutions developed help to shape the political discourse. A carefully considered follow-up process is

therefore required, supported by a network of relevant stakeholders in the respective subject area.

The Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community informed potential addressees about the Forum at an early stage and started a reflection process with the authorities and stakeholders concerned. A report to the citizens' assembly on the Ministry's further proceedings is planned for 2025.

Particularly with politically sensitive topics such as those dealt with in the Forum, it is vital to ensure the greatest possible transparency and ongoing communication at all stages of the process.

Important for practitioners

- Make online participation as easy and accessible as possible!
- Use moderators to ensure balanced and respectful interaction online!
- Define specific points at which online participation and the citizens' assembly interlock!
- Plan a substantial portion of your budget for communication!
- Establish a broad partner structure with actors from media, civil society and politics!
- Think about the follow-up process from the onset!

More information at

forum-gegen-fakes.de/de/englisch

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