

The Beginner's Guide to

Inclusion in e-Democracy

An introduction to setting up an inclusive and representative digital participation project.



Get your citizens engaged
on local topics

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Cover illustration: Undraw.io



Introduction

Over the last decade, the rise of the digital age and the brand-new digital democracy tools it has brought along have tinkered with our democracy's core DNA.

For a long time, traditional ways of (offline) citizen participation such as town hall meetings or citizen initiatives required a significant time investment and effort that few were willing or able to make. People juggling demanding jobs or families often found it difficult to clear their calendars for citizen participation initiatives, and their voices were at times left out of the public debate. The same goes for minorities or marginalized groups, who didn't always feel addressed or represented by their administrations.

Citizens still headed to the ballot box every couple of years - but the more regular, bottom-up forms of citizen participation were really only fit for a handful of democracy enthusiasts.

Recent innovations have challenged these assumptions. Suddenly, new possibilities have appeared for governments to interact with their citizens and to truly include them in decision-making.

Today, the digital revolution has made it a lot easier to involve a broader audience in citizen participation initiatives. Converting the democratic process into an easy tool that citizens can access on the go or from the comfort of their own homes has helped to significantly lower the threshold for participation. Digital participation platforms allow citizens to let their voices be heard in just a few clicks, which has had a positive impact on the willingness of citizens to get involved with local government and to weigh in on decision-making.

But **inclusion** remains an important factor. It's one of the main building blocks of our modern democracy, and a lack of it drastically decreases the value of our democratic processes. Without inclusion there can be no real representativity, which means the data gathered through citizen participation projects isn't reliable and doesn't really reflect the citizens' voice.

In this guide, we'll explore different ways for local governments to make their participation efforts more inclusive, from designing a platform to communicating about its launch.

What's inclusion?

Digital participation is inclusive when you reach every group in society (irrespective of demographics such as gender, social class, age, or location), and when they have the necessary tools to fully participate.

Over the last few years, the rise of digital forms of democracy and participation have proven their worth in reaching audiences that were not receptive to the previous offline efforts.

But it's important to keep looking at every project with a critical eye. Are there other sides of the coin? Are there certain groups that administrations just can't reach with digital? Let's take a look at the different types of people that digital participation might exclude:

- **Older citizens.** It's important to be aware of the age gap that comes with digital literacy. Older citizens find it more difficult to keep up with online initiatives, and as a local government it is vital to make extra efforts to include them. A participation process that doesn't represent demographic groups accurately is not a democratic one (unless of course your project is specifically aimed at a certain age group).
- **Citizens with little to no internet access.** The internet is almost everywhere these days, and at times we lose sight of the fact that internet access is not in fact readily available to everyone. As a local government, it's important to create alternative opportunities for these people to participate and let their voices be heard.
- **Citizens who don't trust the government.** People's trust in democracy is steadily declining across the globe, and it's a challenge for governments to keep their citizens motivated to participate and weigh in on local governance.
- **Citizens with disabilities.** It's important to ensure that citizens with vision impairments or other disabilities can participate in a smooth and hassle-free way. In this guide, we'll offer a few practical tips to make that possible.

A lack of inclusion and representation can have very real consequences, especially when this happens on a large scale. A recent example would be the the Mexican 2018 presidential elections. For the very first time, an indigenous woman, **María de Jesús “Marichuy” Patricia Martínez**, emerged as a potential presidential candidate.

In Mexico, independent candidates must collect 866,000 votes to compete for office. These votes must be collected via a mobile application, which only works on relatively recent smartphones which easily cost three times a monthly wage. In other words, a Mexican citizen needed three things to give their independent presidential candidate a digital boost: **electricity, mobile data and a smartphone**. But since a large part of Mexico's indigenous population doesn't have access to these luxuries, María could not participate in the elections.

In this case, a lack of inclusion in the election process directly affected the representation of citizens in local government, limited people's choice of potential candidates, and left certain groups out of the debate altogether.

Let's now take a look at what it takes to set up a fair, diversified and democratic participation process. In the next pages, we'll explore the necessary steps to make your participation efforts as inclusive as they can be.



1. Set-up and communication

Inclusion should be on your mind from the very beginning of your digital participation trajectory. The way you shape your project will finally determine who can and wants to participate.

What are the things you need to keep in mind in the early phases?

1. Use the right language

The importance of language is often underestimated. The way you speak to or about people defines how they think about certain topics, other groups or even themselves. Make sure you use inclusive language during the communication of your project.

Here are some pointers to remember:

- **Be careful with stereotypes.** When generic statements about groups based on identity (gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, class etc.) are used in official communications or by experts, this can confirm existing stereotypes in readers. To avoid these sensitivities, avoid general statements, don't mention identity traits unless they're truly relevant, and back your statements up with numbers.
- In referring to individuals, make sure to use the right gender pronouns (he/him, she/her, they). Again, it's a good rule of thumb to avoid the use of gender-specific language if it's irrelevant to your point.
- In addition to using the right kind of language, you'll also have to make sure that your participation trajectory is available in different languages. Define which languages are spoken in your community, and make sure to offer **multilingual communication** if it's needed.
- If you're setting up a survey, it's very important to think about the way you are building your questions. Biased questions lead to biased and inaccurate answers, and that will have its effect on your participation efforts.

Some practical tips to use when building a survey:

- **Avoid mixing possible answers** into your question and keep your questions as neutral as possible.
Don't: "How bad is the traffic problem in the city centre?"
Do: "Describe the traffic situation in the city centre."
- **Don't make assumptions** about your citizens and their lives, and keep your questions as open and generic as possible.
Don't: "Which library do you use?"
Do: "Do you use library services? If so, which ones?"
- Add a **"prefer not to answer"** option. That way, citizens won't abandon the survey completely when they don't feel comfortable answering a certain question.
- Be inclusive in the **options** you offer. If you're asking people to fill in their gender, make sure you include options besides "Mr" and "Mrs" for instance.



2. Think about privacy

We live in a digital age where privacy is becoming increasingly more rare and valuable. Asking for too much personal data at the start of your participation process can scare people off. **Here are some ways to avoid this:**

- If citizens fear that their real name could lead to digital discrimination, give them the option to **choose their own username** (regardless of whether this fear is justified or not).
- **State clearly** why you are asking for certain personal data, and how you're going to use it.

3. Make it visual

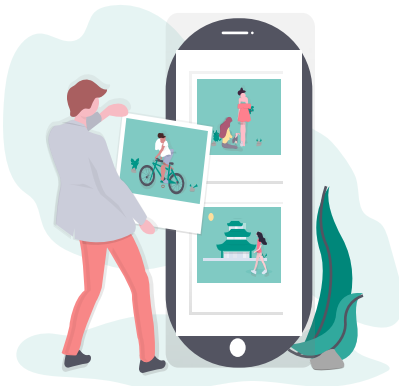
Human beings are visual creatures. In order to make everyone feel like a part of your participation project, you'll have to reflect inclusion in your visual communication.

- When setting up your campaign, opt for images that **represent the inclusive society** you're hoping to reach.
- Always **reflect differences** in culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability in your visual communication.

4. Keep an eye on the launch

It's vital to think about the way the project is launched and how this kick-off is communicated to your citizens. The launch of your project is a potential breeding ground for bias, but there are things you can do to overcome this challenge.

- **Ask yourself** the following questions:
 - Where and how will the project be announced?
 - Are there social media campaigns, and if so, who are they targeted at? Do these target groups represent the real-life audience that you want to include?
 - Are there offline ads and if so, where are they placed? Which newspapers will publish them and which audiences do these media target? If there are posters or flyers, in which neighbourhoods will they be distributed?
- Aim for **wide-spread communication** that reaches different groups of citizens. Generalise your social media campaigns, target different neighbourhoods, and make sure everyone hears about your project.
- A great way to improve inclusion is to **collaborate with community influencers** to spread the word. For many citizens, including minorities and those who distrust the government, a middle person (from an organisation, religious or cultural institution, etc.) can make participation more accessible.





2. Combine online and offline

So you survived the launch and communication phase of your participation project. But the work doesn't end here. Even if everyone feels represented in your communication, you'll still have to enable them to actually participate.

Think of it this way: even if you've convinced all of your citizens to participate, there will always be people who don't have a suitable device or internet connection to participate online.

As a local government, it's vital to make the participation process as smooth as possible, and to eliminate bias as much as possible. **Here are some things you can do:**

- **Provide your own computers.** For example, Belgian municipalities of Londerzeel and Marche-en-Famenne placed computers in the library and in the town hall to offer every citizen access to the CitizenLab platform. And because there was always a municipality representative present, people with less digital skills got the necessary help to let their voices be heard.
- **Mix online and offline participation.** Some cities are careful not to place not all their eggs in a (digital) basket. Paris placed around a hundred ballot boxes in the streets for citizens to vote on the participatory budget. And in Mol and Temse, among others, administrations collected all the ideas and votes from offline sessions and placed them, along with the online entries, on their participation platform.



3. Customise the software

So far, you've done everything in your power to reach everyone and to facilitate participation. But you're not at the end of this journey yet!

The software you use, and that software's code, must also follow a number of principles in order to be sufficiently inclusive. There are two main things to keep in mind to make your software inclusive:

1. Clarity over creativity

Keep an eye on the **general user experience**: people should find the way to your platform regardless of how digitally minded they are. Buzzers and bells seem nice, but if they distract attention from the central actions, they cause more harm than good.

*Make sure that your platform is compatible with both **mobile devices and desktop computers**. At CitizenLab, we see that 47% of users reach their platform with a mobile device.*



2. Pay attention to visual impairments

An inclusive participation process enables people with visual impairments, such as the elderly, to participate digitally.

Software-wise, there are a few things that help to make the process smoother and clearer for these citizens:

- Give images in your software a so-called **'alt attribute'**: a verbatim description of the image that can be read by computers for the blind and partially sighted.
- In addition to a clear icon, you can also place a piece of text on each button and label your input fields.
- Work with **pronounced colour contrasts** to make text easy to read for everyone. On our platforms, we offer municipalities the possibility to choose the colour that matches their branding. However, if this compromises the readability of the platform, they receive a warning.



4. Measure the results

Finally, you'll want to measure how inclusive your participation process actually is.

It is absolutely vital to understand **who** is taking part in your project, and to measure **how this sample of citizens represents the general population**. How does the sample of participating citizens stack up against other data samples? How representative is your project, really?

Asking yourself these critical questions helps to evaluate the inclusion and representation of your participation process, but it can also be a starting point to focus even more on underrepresented population groups. **True inclusion will always be a process, and will require evaluation and adaptation.**

Now that we've got the basics down, it's time to get to work. And because the theory is still very different from actually ensuring inclusion in your city or municipality, we've included a helpful check-list to simplify the process.



Checklist: what you need to remember

1. Keep an eye on the **language** you use to communicate throughout the project. Make sure that it is neutral, doesn't affirm stereotypes, and doesn't make assumptions about your audience.
2. Make sure that your written communication reflects the **different languages** in your community, and that your visual communication reflects its ethnic and **cultural diversity**.
3. When launching your project, it's a good idea to **communicate as widely as possible**. Working with community influencers is a great way to reach as many citizens as possible.
4. Protect your users' **privacy**. State clearly what you're going to do with their personal data, and offer options for them to participate anonymously.
5. **Mix offline and online participation** approaches to reach a wider audience. Combining a digital platform and an offline strategy (flyers, posters, newspaper ads, postcards, ...) will help you to reach people of all ages and backgrounds.
6. If you have a digital participation platform, make sure that it is as **clear** as possible, that it is compatible with all kinds of devices, and that its software is set up with attention to visually impaired citizens.
7. **Measure your results** along the way and adjust your strategy if needed.



Get started with digital citizen participation
in your city or municipality!

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