ACT FOR DEMOCRACY

Policy solutions for the future

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PARTICIPEU: A European digital, legal and cultural platform

Student contest winner.

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Executive summary

Political polarisation and the uneven use of digital tools in policymaking are eroding participation and trust. This proposal offers a focused response: a single European Participation Platform, underpinned by a clear legal framework and support to promote grassroots participation.

Key proposals

The Platform: a secure, open-data hub
- A single digital space where citizens can contribute, deliberate and submit proposals safely.
- Results published openly and linked to defined follow-up requirements, including binding effects where legally feasible, ensuring meaningful impact and reducing tokenism.
- Designed to be used virtually by every civil society organisation and European Union institution.

Legal framework: clarity, rights, and safeguards
- Define when and how the Platform and participatory outcomes are binding and set safeguards against manipulation and exclusion.
- Ensure interoperability with existing public administration systems and compliance with EU standards.

Support: capacity, outreach and culture
- Provide advisers, resources, and education campaigns to encourage deliberation and integrate participatory methods.
- Create an open repository of methods, case studies and best practices to lower the barrier to entry for organisers.

Taken together, these measures aim to reverse declining public trust by giving citizens reliable, legally robust, and culturally supported channels for participation.

Context

Across Europe, democracies are experiencing a slow but steady decline in citizens' trust and participation (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). The liberal and representative model cultivated in the last century has been facing increasing pressure to keep up with the transformations that society has undergone, such as digitalisation, new communication modalities, and a different socio-economic context. This increasing gap between the political systems and citizens has amplified dissatisfaction and weakened trust in the foundation for our democratic lives.

A significant issue lies in the growing distance between citizens and the traditional access points to politics: parties, unions and civil society organisations no longer perform the same integrative and participatory functions they once did (Mair, 2013). In particular, political parties are often perceived as clientelistic and technocratic entities, where the space is owned by hierarchies internal to the political parties. This phenomenon of gatekeeping access to parties grows dissatisfaction among citizens, as they feel that they cannot have a voice in their political lives.

Moreover, politics has not kept up with the digital transformation of almost every aspect of our lives (Chadwick, 2017). After the digital revolution, policy-making institutions have not been able to reinvent themselves and to find new ways to include citizens. Further to this,

social media platforms, a prominent part of everyday life, are privately owned and have become polarising digital spaces because they are profit-driven.

This often translates into "echo chambers", where people share their disaffection and dissatisfaction with the current political status and uphold each other's views, without being given opportunities to act (Sunstein, 2017).

Participatory mechanisms, where present, have also been subject to tokenism, increasing citizens' distrust in these procedures, as they are seen as minor concessions and not real practices for inclusion (Arnstein, 1969).

These trends fuel a broader discontent with traditional politics, being shown after every election, with low turnout and rise in anti-establishment groups, and a spread of disengagement. To counter this trend, new deliberative and technological instruments are needed to close the gap between the political systems and citizens, and rebuild trust, which is essential for our political lives.

Main proposals

1. *The Platform*

Developing a European Participation Platform that follows the FAMOS approach: Free – Accessible – Modular– Open-source – Secure.

Free: The Platform should be intended as an essential service that is made available to all EU citizens without any cost. The principle is the same as Europass, but instead of facilitating the creation of CVs as an active labour market programme, it would facilitate the creation of participatory processes as a democratic service.

Accessible: The Platform can be effective in incentivising grassroots processes and participation only if it is accessible to as wide a population as possible. Simplicity and clarity are key, while the platform should include appropriate design features and support mechanisms to assist users affected by the digital divide. For instance, an AI chatbot could guide users with limited digital literacy through the platform's functions.

Modular: It means that the Platform should make it possible to design any participation process in terms of scale, context and steps. For example, it should be possible to design everything from a student assembly in a school, a residents' meeting, a party congress or an executive director's meeting. In order to do so, the design phase of a given process with the Platform should include modules with all relevant methods of crowdsourcing, discussion, voting and implementation where the users are free to transpose existing processes or experiment with new ones. The library should include easy descriptions for each participatory step, suggesting possible synergies, mode of use, incompatibilities or challenges. A good example, or a starting point, is the "Modules" structure adopted by Decidim (n.d.).

Open-source: An open-source model should be adopted, as happened with Your Priorities (Citizens Foundation, n.d.), Decidim or Pol.is, so that any actor is free to experiment, analyse and test the functioning of the Platform, encouraging a wider use on the one hand, and enabling rigorous public scrutiny, that would improve

accountability, transparency and the software's functioning in the future.

<u>Secure</u>: It is necessary that security is granted both at the infrastructural and individual level, in order for the service to be reliable and credible. Strong identity management could be easily granted with the national identification services already in place for other EU digital services. End-to-end encryption and hosting the service on EU-owned data centres would be the most important of the many infrastructural features that should be implemented.

It is necessary to consider, depending on the scale of funding, whether the Platform could be only a design tool, where the process per se would be serviced by a local host (e.g., a participant's computer), or whether the European servers could host small/medium processes as in the Your Priorities platform.

2. *Legal framework*

One of the main issues of participatory processes is tokenism (Arnstein, 1969), as the results of said processes usually are not binding on the institutions commissioning the process, and the process becomes a public-relations exercise instead of a democratic practice. To avoid this, it is recommended that the legal foundations be expanded, as much as the political environment allows, building on the existing legal framework. In particular, in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), articles 10 and 11 lay the basis for participatory democracy, and are already the premise for similar initiatives, such as the European Citizens' Initiative (Treaty on European Union [TEU], 2012, Arts. 10-11).

These two articles articulate the Union's democratic architecture and its promise to be transparent, inclusive and citizen centred. Article 10 is the normative basis for EU decision-making to be closer to citizens and a digital participatory platform makes this principle operational in the digital age (TEU, Art. 10, 2012). Binding follow-up mechanisms guarantee that participation has a real impact and enforce the principles of "openness" and "closeness". Article 11 is already the foundation for the ECI, but this proposal addresses the limitation of producing non-binding results, ensuring that an open, regular and productive dialogue with civil society is maintained (TEU, Art. 11, 2012).

Together, they provide the basis for extending participatory democracy through the digital Platform and make the Platform's outcomes subject to binding implementation requirements. The legal framework proposed would be adopted and implemented via a Regulation, following Article 294 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [TFEU], Art. 294, 2012). A Regulation would allow for a legal definition of participatory outcomes and establish mechanisms and requirements that ensure binding follow-up on outcomes, while defining safeguards in case of possible challenges and illicit behaviour such as vote tampering, vote buying, or other forms of manipulation. Moreover, this legislation should enable all types of institutions, such as universities, local governments or civil society organisations, to adopt multi-level governance through the Platform or to run other participatory processes that comply with the regulation. A clear legal framework must set out the

relevant requirements, obligations and safeguards to make this possible. When choosing to adopt this Platform, the institutions would agree to be bound by its outcomes, as defined in the Regulation, and ensure that every stakeholder is made aware. This would enable every kind of participatory process to have an obligation to respect its results while ensuring open and extensive participation.

Finally, the Platform has to comply with Article 16 of the TFEU, which ensures data protection and digital governance, allowing the adoption of the harmonised rules to ensure the legitimacy, privacy and procedural integrity of digital participation (TFEU, Art. 16, 2012).

3. *Supporting a cultural shift*

For participatory practices to take root across diverse social contexts, the European Union should promote a new democratic culture grounded in grassroots participation and deliberation. The scale and mix of interventions will depend on the resources the Union allocates; two broad options are advisable.

A comprehensive approach would combine targeted support and formal education. Support should take the form of a Europe-wide network of practitioners and advisers in the field of participatory democracy, available through multiple capacities, to assist emerging participatory initiatives in designing and implementing best practices within their resource constraints. There are several organisations that could be optimal partners in developing a public-private partnership, such as the Association Civic Tech Europe (n.d.). On education,

the EU should encourage the systematic inclusion of participatory methods in school curricula, alongside civic and political education, so that young people learn both institutional knowledge and practical engagement skills. Moreover, practical, in-person and online workshops, similar to employability skills training already in place at the national level, could provide useful resources to civic actors interested in starting a participatory process.

If resources are more limited, a targeted approach could focus on a communication campaign to raise public awareness of the benefits and potential of participatory processes, drawing on respected public figures, civic influencers and policy experts.

This effort should be complemented by the creation of an open, accessible repository cataloguing participatory and deliberative formats, discussion and voting methods, and documented best practices, available to civil society, public bodies and any organisation or individual seeking to organise participatory processes. An example that could be used as model or base would be Participedia (n.d.), a public library of participatory processes.

Limitations

Medium to long-term strategy with limited short-term effects

The proposal seeks a cultural shift in democratic participation, which by definition unfolds slowly; immediately, highly visible results should not be expected. If short-term wins are the priority, this programme alone is unsuitable. To stay politically credible, the strategy should be sequenced so

that early, time-bound pilots and high-visibility interventions demonstrate impact while the deeper cultural work continues.

Conclusion

To fight against the political distrust and dissatisfaction is not simply to propose tools, but to understand its causes. By presenting this Platform, we aim not only to improve participation in the European Union, but also across different organisations and levels of governance. This could help to close the gap between citizens and the political bodies by addressing structural issues such as tokenism, mounting distrust and the lack of digital public political spaces. Moreover, by making results binding and the Platform easy and accessible, we strive to reconnect democracy with every citizen. A brighter future for a European participatory democracy is possible: we need to make sure everyone is included and can participate.

Resource-intensive programme

A secure, interoperable and inclusive Platform, plus outreach, education and advisory networks, will require substantial funding, digital infrastructure and expert human capital. The brief sets out tiered options, but lower-resource variants are unlikely to deliver the desired cultural change, just as a single service (for example, Europass) cannot by itself resolve complex structural problems like employment. Realistic budgeting, phased roll-out of core capabilities (security, accessibility, open APIs) and co-financing mechanisms are therefore essential.

Ambitious programme likely to encounter political backlash

Given the current political climate and rising sovereignist sentiment, any proposal that expands a European democratic space, or makes participatory outputs binding, will face fierce resistance from some governments and institutions. That makes full legislative adoption politically contested and potentially slow. Nonetheless, with the strong leadership of the European Commission and careful framing as a response to the EU's "democratic deficit," adoption remains possible. Moreover, the more limited approach (the Platform, a communication campaign and a public library of methods) could be advanced administratively within existing or near-term budgets to build momentum.

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