Developing Participatory Spaces using a Multi-stage, Multi-level, Multi-mode, Multi-lingual, Dynamic Deliberative approach (M4D2)

Results in Brief

Creating citizen spaces to encourage democratic engagement

Online deliberative platforms could be a useful tool for engaging citizens in the decision-making process and strengthening democracy, according to the EU-funded EUCOMMEET project.

Europe’s capacity to overcome challenges and crises rests, at least in part, on having a healthy representative democracy. If citizens are not part of the decision-making process, or if they feel ignored, overcoming difficulties becomes that much harder.

“One solution is to make our politics more inclusive, participatory and deliberative,” says EUCOMMEET project coordinator Pierangelo Isernia, a professor of Political Science at the University of Siena in Italy. “We need to bring democratic discourse and the practice of democracy closer to the needs and demands of the citizens.”

The goal of the EU-funded EUCOMMEET project was to explore how this could be
achieved – and to identify some of the challenges to implementing more deliberative and participatory forms of democracy.

Isernia notes that one key challenge is finding ways to include citizens who are not very interested in politics. Another is that involving citizens in deliberations – especially at the EU level – is a large-scale undertaking, and can be expensive. Many politicians are also unsure about the value of citizen-based deliberations, or how their input can be usefully fed into the decision-making process.

**Deliberative and participatory democracy**

To address these challenges, the project designed a set of online participatory spaces, within which citizens could discuss and deliberate. These were conceived as being flexible, interactive and scalable, and involved the use of innovative technologies for automated moderation and translation.

The project next set up an open-source deliberative platform, to enable these spaces to function. These spaces were then implemented in five countries: France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Poland.

The pilot experiment consisted of a series of online deliberative sessions involving a cross-section of between eight and 10 citizens. Around 400 people participated in all activities over the entire project period.

These sessions began at the local level (involving residents of the same city) before moving onto the national level, and concluding with an online plenary at the European level. These plenary sessions involved citizens from at least three different countries.

“A number of innovations were tested during these trials,” adds Isernia. “These included the automated moderator tool and translation tool. We also integrated text translation to meet the need of multilingual deliberations.”

A key success, notes Isernia, was demonstrating that such a system could be robust and support open dialogue. “We had no idea of the impact that these technologies would have on the quality and nature of deliberation when we started,” he says. Isernia and his team are still going through the data generated by the project.

**Open-source platform for discussion**

A key lesson for policymakers is that successfully developing an online deliberative platform is not just a question of overcoming technical challenges. It also demands that strategies are developed to involve and motivate a cross-section of people, particularly those disinterested in politics.
The main task now is to digest, process and analyse the vast amount of information collected during these experiments. This will help the team to identify how citizen deliberations can be used to help reduce polarisation, and perhaps strengthen European identity.

“The open-source platform we developed can now be used, adapted and improved for future use by local, national and European authorities,” remarks Isernia. “Our hope is that EUCOMMEET can be a springboard for future online citizen-based deliberations, something that is still in its infancy.”

**Keywords**

EUCOMMEET, citizens, democracy, politics, translation, multilingual

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