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A Public Servant’s Guide to Democratic Citizen Engagement and Public Participation

Matching Goals with Methods

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# Part 1: Introduction

People throughout the world who are paying close attention to the health of representative democracy are seeing sobering reports on the condition of democratic governance (Freedom House 2019; Mounk 2018). Government leaders are finding that the broad sense of political legitimacy they have counted on as an outcome of competitive elections is not necessarily transferable to specific issues that are sharply contested within their overall constituency. This dynamic often results in what political theorist Mark Warren has referred to as “pluralized ungovernability” (Warren 2009: 7). In short, it is becoming increasingly clear that “the sources of legitimacy in one country or in one policy area may not be easily translatable to other countries or other policy areas” (Centre for Public Impact 2017: 1).

A growing majority of people feel distrustful of—and disconnected from—the very political leaders and governmental institutions they elected to represent them. Citizens perceive government at all levels as failing to take their concerns and interests seriously. This growing sense of disconnection and distrust is creating a demand on the part of people to have more of a say over decisions that affect their lives. They are hungry for forms of politics that are more aware of and responsive to their fears *and* their aspirations. One response to this growing sense of disconnection and distrust between citizens and government is an increased interest in new forms of citizen engagement.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Use of the term ‘citizen’**  The term citizens as it is used here refers to all residents of a community. This definition makes it possible to broaden the scope of this paper to include all legal residents of a polity, not only those who enjoy specific legal rights and duties such as voting. |

## What is citizen engagement?

One of the earliest organizations created to promote and improve methods of citizen engagement, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), defines citizen engagement as “any process that involves the public in problem solving or decision making” including “all aspects of identifying problems and opportunities, developing alternatives and making decisions” (IAP2). However, citizen engagement is only one of many labels in the broad field of political thought and action focused on providing people with a larger role in addressing public problems. Other widely used terms for this type of activity include public participation, public engagement, participatory governance, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and democratic innovation. Each label reflects real and sometimes subtle differences in the purpose and form of this work, but they all refer to giving people a significant say in democratic governance.

Some forms of non-electoral citizen engagement have had a long history, such as public hearings, townhall meetings, and public opinion surveys. The last thirty years or so have witnessed an explosion of diverse and widespread forms of citizen engagement, such as citizens’ juries, community-based monitoring, deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, and innovative applications of social media, among others. A few projects such as Participedia and LATINNO are in the early stages of creating a global inventory of this type of work. This research suggests that there are hundreds—if not thousands—of relatively new channels of citizen involvement in governance, often outside of the more visible politics of electoral representation, and occurring throughout the world (Fung and Warren 2011: 341–42; Pogrebinschi and Ross 2019).

Whatever label or specific method is used, these forms of political participation are usually intended to supplement, and not replace, representative electoral politics. Moreover, whether the engagement is led by government, civil society organizations, or ad hoc citizen groups, its success is often dependent on the will and ability of institutional decision makers to support the process from start to end.

## Purpose and scope of this paper

Citizen engagement practitioners inside and outside of government have developed many different ways to engage people, and they continue to improve these methods while creating new ones. This rapidly increasing field of practice presents challenges for public leaders who are trying to select methods of engagement appropriate to their particular situation.

To help address this challenge, this paper responds to two essential questions: (1) What can democratic institutions and political representatives do to improve citizen engagement? and (2) How can citizen engagement improve democratic institutions? The goal is to help political leaders or government officials such as members of legislatures, local councilors, mayors, political parties, and appointed government officials navigate the task of identifying the most appropriate forms of citizen engagement for the public issues facing them. To do so, this paper draws on multiple schools of thought and practice to provide government officials and participation leaders with guidance as they consider the variety of citizen engagement options.

As opposed to putting all the responsibility for improving politics on citizens, the primary focus here is on the responsibility of democratic institutions—such as governments, parliaments, and parties—to keep everyday people at the center of governance and decision making.

Although this publication is not intended to serve as a fully developed ‘how to’ guide, it identifies and provides answers to fundamental questions about the goals and design of citizen engagement. It does so by pointing to some of the best, practical resources available for anyone who assumes responsibility for planning and implementing public participation initiatives. In short, it aims to provide a roadmap to help reflect on—and answer—essential underlying questions about:

* why, when, and how to use citizen engagement,
* design factors to consider when developing concrete steps for implementing citizen engagement, and
* which methods of public engagement are likely to provide the best fit for different contexts and issues.

# Part 2: The Context: Challenges to Democracy

## Concerns about the health of democracy

Much of the world is experiencing deep concern over the health of democracy. To varying degrees throughout the globe, across regions and nations, electoral democracy is under increasing strain.   
Some of democracy’s greatest challenges manifest themselves in growing numbers of disaffected citizens, centrist parties and coalitions that are no longer able to govern, various forms of populism that disdain mediating institutions and technocratic experts, and autocrats who make claims that they can do better.

International IDEA’s 2017 release of its biennial report, *The Global State of Democracy* (GSoD), provides data-driven insights into the source of concerns about the state of democracy (IDEA 2018). For example:

* The global expansion of democracy has come to a halt in the past decade.
* The number of countries experiencing democratic decline is now greater than the number experiencing democratic gains, breaking a trend that stretches back to 1980.
* This democratic decline is not necessarily characterized by a deterioration in the conduct of elections, but more often by a worsening situation with regard to respect for civil liberties, and restrictions on civil society or the media.

Some analysts provide assurances that while vigilance in the protection of democratic norms, institutions, and practices is warranted, democracy remains surprisingly resilient. Their optimism is rooted in the perception that “[d]emocratic breakdowns are surprisingly rare, often short-lived, and generally unrepresentative of broader trends” (Levitsky and Way 2015: 56). From this perspective, the current, global state of democracy “is one of trendless fluctuations—upturns and downturns in individual countries, but with no broad tendencies of decline or progress in democracy” (IDEA 2017: 8).

A countervailing view is grounded in new ways of thinking about how to measure ‘autocratization’—that is, a gradual or sudden decline in the attributes that constitute a democratic polity. This research suggests that since the late 1970s the world has been in the midst of a “third wave of autocratization” in which “the number of countries undergoing democratization [has declined] while at the same time autocratization affects more and more countries” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019: 1102). Moreover, a close look at modern historical patterns reveals that unlike earlier eras of autocratization, the current wave “mainly affects democracies” and “very few autocratization episodes starting in democracies have stopped short of turning countries into autocracies” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019: 1108).

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## Sources of citizens’ concerns about democracy

What is driving this weakening of democracy? Among the most frequently noted drivers of these trends are: (1) illiberalism; (2) an inability of some democratic governments to address people’s chief concerns; (3) corruption and an attendant decline in trust of institutions; (4) social and cultural change; and (5) real and perceived loss of sovereignty.

*Illiberalism:* Democracies around the world are facing a wave of illiberalism in which elections continue to provide a fundamental measure of legitimacy, but in which anti-liberal parties and leaders “are indifferent to liberal checks and balances and do not see the need for constitutional constraints on the power of the majority” (Krastev: 2018).

*Poor performance in governance and politics related to basic needs:* People are disappointed in the inability of electoral democracy to address many of their chief concerns (Norris and Inglehart 2018). For example, increasing income inequality can erode citizens' support for democracy as a system that provides broad-based and steady improvement in living conditions (Han and Chang 2016). Making matters worse, citizens see increasing inequality in income and wealth as a symptom of the ‘elite capture’ of politics by vested interests who manipulate the rules of the economy to their benefit at the expense of the wider public (Oxfam 2014).

*Corruption and lack of trust:* As inequality and the power of vested interests increase, more citizens see widespread government corruption as the driving force of politics. They view corruption as the spoiler of democracy in that it preys on the ability of the system to hold politicians to account. This decreases the public’s trust and sense of legitimacy in the political system and in government (Uslaner 2016). The Edelman Trust Barometer 2017 warned of a “World of Distrust” and placed trust in government at its lowest (41%) over the last 17 years (Edelman 2017).

*Social and cultural change:* Rapid and large-scale social changes such as large migration flows, as well as changing attitudes toward religion, gender roles, and sexual freedom provide fuel for polarization (IDEA 2017c: 202–05). This polarization takes different shapes from place to place, but few countries escape the increasing division of society into groups that are sharply contrasting in views and interests. These divisions become deeper “when political entrepreneurs effectively highlight and activate underlying cleavages in a society, bringing to the fore, constructing or reinventing a dominant cleavage around which other cleavages align” (McCoy et al. 2018: 18).

*Real and perceived loss of sovereignty:* Some citizens feel an additional loss of control when the ability of their national government to act independently is superseded by bilateral or multilateral agreements, or by the jurisdiction of supranational entities. When governments are unable to take decisions freely in order to solve urgent societal matters, or when these decisions are seen as responding not to the needs of national interest, but to the interest of other groups or nations, distrust in politics can increase (Norris 2011; van der Meer 2017).

## Responding to citizens’ hopes and concerns

Among other responses, dissatisfaction with democracy appears to be influencing a spike in protest movements. The *Jilet Gaunes* in France, the *Sunflower* movement in Taiwan, or Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom are similar in their demands for improvements in democratic mechanisms to equip everyday people with more voice, influence, and power (Youngs 2017).

It is heartening to note that people’s criticism of how democracy is working does not necessarily reflect on their support for democratic values. This is supported by van der Meer’s observation that “lack of trust in political authorities and institutions need not be detrimental to democracy. Rather, mistrust may well be inherent to vibrant democratic societies, as long as it takes the shape of vigilant skepticism rather than numbing cynicism” (van der Meer 2017).

In a similar vein, Kriesi found that this “...critical evaluation of democracy does not undermine the citizens’ support for democracy. Quite to the contrary: democratic principles are actually strengthened by the dissatisfaction of the citizens with the economic and political performance of their countries in the crisis! By creating ‘critical citizens’, the economic crisis contributes to the strengthening of democratic principles” (Kriesi 2018: 68; 79).

This paper takes the view that the vast majority of democracies contain enough critical citizens who are ready to work with their elected and appointed officials to improve the challenges facing their communities and countries. When done in good faith, with proper planning and resources, engagement can enlist people’s civic energy for productive solutions.

The rest of this paper is devoted to providing guidance on how to engage citizens in these ways.

# Part 3: Why and How to Engage Citizens

Before embarking on citizen engagement, public officials should first wrestle with *why* they need to engage and *how* they plan to do so.

## *Why* engage citizens?

This basic question focuses on the objectives and underlying reasons for public institutions to undertake citizen engagement.

Sometimes public engagement is mandated by law or is the result of a one-time administrative directive. Even in these situations, public officials and entities should be clear about why they want or need citizen engagement, what they aim to achieve, and why engaging citizens is essential to addressing the issues at hand (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). At other times engagement is the product of bottom-up pressure from everyday people to have a greater say in government decisions than they can achieve through elections.

Yet, when public officials think proactively about engaging citizens, the most common answers are: to make better policy, to strengthen the effectiveness of government, and to support democratic values and principles.

### To make better policy

One of the main reasons public authorities consider using citizen engagement to achieve policy goals is that they feel stuck. They see evidence of poor policy decisions being made, or the failure of what at first appear to be good policies. Public officials also see examples of policies that are unsustainable because there was too little public involvement in their crafting and implementation, resulting in policymakers’ failure to understand people’s true concerns or to grasp the types of solutions people will support over the long term (Thomas 1995).

The types of policy issues for which public officials may want to initiate public engagement range from comparatively simple matters such as a local community decision about appropriate playground equipment for a park, to complex problems such as struggling economies, climate change, and large-scale population migration. The latter types of issues are sometimes referred to as “wicked problems” because it is especially difficult “to delineate their boundaries and to identify their causes, and thus to expose their problematic nature” (Rittel and Webber 1973: 169). Many of the forms of citizen engagement discussed in this paper are designed to make progress on precisely these types of particularly challenging issues.

### To strengthen the effectiveness of governance

There are, of course, many other reasons to use citizen engagement that—while they may not seem immediately relevant to the pursuit of better policy—nevertheless serve to advance goals related to the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of democratic governance. When planning a public engagement process, it is useful to think of goals as “broad, general directions or desired impacts” (Cameron 2018: 2). Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) identify the essential, practical, and everyday tasks of governance as:

* Informing the public
* Gathering input, feedback and preferences
* Generating new ideas and information
* Supporting volunteerism and problem solving
* Making a policy decision
* Developing a plan or budget

A citizen engagement strategy might aim at reinforcing one or many of these everyday tasks in order to make governance more effective. When analyzing whether to implement citizen engagement, public officials should identify which of these everyday tasks of governance they want to advance.

### To support democratic principles and values

One set of broad goals reflects a sense that public engagement has the potential to embody and support democratic values (Smith 2009), thus strengthening the connection between people and government. The strengthening of democratic values happens through:

* strengthening ***inclusiveness***in decision making,
* making public policy more***responsive***to popular control,
* encouraging the ***exercise of*** ***public judgment*** by which citizens become more informed on issues and better able to understand the perspectives of others,
* making policies more***transparent*** to those participating in the engagement process and to the rest of the population, and
* increasing ***efficiency*** in policy implementation.

## Wrong reasons for engaging citizens

## It is also important to be aware of bad reasons for engaging people. In the long run, it will be counterproductive to invite people to have a say in formulating public policy if the important decisions have already been made. People will see through disingenuous efforts to co-opt them with processes that display a veneer of genuine participation, but that do not intend to provide any genuine power or influence. Such efforts are likely to have a counter effect of further decreasing trust in government and undermining future attempts at authentic engagement.

Yet, even well intentioned citizen engagement can foster negative effects if it is not well thought out and planned. The rest of this paper provides frameworks, strategies, and examples to inform the design and implementation of high-quality citizen engagement.

## Deciding *how* to engage citizens

Designing or adopting an approach to citizen engagement requires public officials and entities to anticipate and work through numerous tradeoffs. No single method can achieve every type of goal, so it is important to have a clear understanding of the pros and cons of the available methods. This section reviews some of the main things public officials need to think about when deciding

which approaches are most likely to support their goals and objectives.

### How to manage citizen expectations of governmental commitments

The degree to which various approaches to citizen engagement can support policy goals, the essential tasks of governance, and democratic values varies widely. But whatever approach participation leaders take, stakeholders and other people need clear, accurate information about (1) why they are being invited to participate in a process, (2) what they are being asked to do, and (3) how their ideas and efforts will be incorporated into the government’s plans (Fernández-Martínez et al. 2019).

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Keep in Mind —**   * Communicate clearly from the outset * Report back to participants and to the general public * Be transparent throughout the process |

People require these types of up-front political commitments in order to make enlightened choices about whether to invest their time in the engagement process. This is true whether the government staffers themselves will implement the public participation, or if consultants will be hired to carry out the work. Any amount of good will on the part of people toward government that may be created by citizen engagement will be lost if people come to feel that the government wasted their time and failed to respect the ideas they contributed to the initiative.

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| [Sidebar mini-case]  **Community Mobility Network in San Casciano Val di Pesa, Italy**  Local government bodies in the Italian region of Tuscany are legally mandated to initiate citizen engagement on public projects valued ​​above 50,000,000 Euros, or at the request of affected parties. When the rural town of San Casciano Val di Pesa decided to design a new community transit system, the municipality used multiple channels of engagement, including a dedicated online platform (Open Toscana), social media, and various types of face-to-face meetings with a diverse cross-section of community residents. The assorted channels of communication and engagement kept people up to date on each phase of the process, provided them with opportunities to participate, and informed the community about how the engagement would factor into the municipality’s final decisions (IOPD).  In Phase 1, organizers conducted interviews and meetings with residents and local organizations, using this information to map the region’s existing transit services. The next two phases included focus groups, briefings on best practices, and co-design workshops to provide guidance on the shape of the new mobility network (Anci Toscana 2016). These efforts allowed municipal authorities to inform and manage peoples’ expectations throughout each phase of engagement. Project results included the start of a free shuttle service, a carpooling network, and stronger relationships among local organizations.  **See <**[**https://participedia.net/case/5283**](https://participedia.net/case/5283)**> for a more detailed case study of this example.** |

This does not mean, however, that people always expect public officials to blindly accept and implement their recommendations. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation (see [Figure 1](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1dBe8cIaR5LuFBC15OmL-cGDAC7ZGbpPB)) provides a useful illustration of the range of options available to public officials as they identify the level of participation needed for the situation at hand.

One attempt to create a highly empowered approach to citizen participation can be seen in Madrid’s “Observatorio de la Ciudad” (City Observatory), which the City Council established in 2019 as an ongoing institution. The Observatory’s members are 49 citizen volunteers who are randomly selected to reflect the demographic diversity of the city’s population. The Observatory is charged with monitoring the municipality’s actions and deciding whether any of the most popular policy proposals submitted through Madrid’s public participation platform (decide.madrid.es) should be sent to a local referendum. The Observatory is also empowered to develop its own proposals and send them to referendum (Smith 2019b).

When other, less empowered forms of participation are more appropriate, it is still critical to convey expectations. For example, one of the most common approaches to engagement is that of public consultations, which are *not* designed to give citizens binding decision-making power. When done well, public consultations can provide a more timely and nuanced companion to information that public authorities typically glean from elections or public opinion polls. To achieve the greatest benefit in terms of effectiveness and trust building, government representatives should be clear from the outset about the goal of the consultation. Afterward, it is essential that they report back to participants and to the general public whether and how the consultation influenced their actions.

One big challenge to these mutual agreements between citizens and government sponsors of public engagement is that even the most well planned initiative may need to reconsider its goals as the process unfolds. It is often unclear what the exact nature of the public’s ultimate influence could or should be until people have had an opportunity to explore their concerns, desires, and interests and to deliberate about how to address them (EPA 2014). One promising practice is to be transparent along the way, and have systems in place to assess whether the approach to citizen engagement is meeting the stated goals and people’s expectations.

Public managers should keep these same principles in mind as they build an understanding of—and a commitment to—citizen engagement within their staff. When front-line staff understand why engagement is an essential part of their job, it is much more likely that engagement initiatives will be well-organized, transparent, and responsive.

### How to manage political polarization

‘High polarization’ situations are those in which public attitudes are strongly divided about the nature of a public problem and how to address it (e.g. climate change or human migration), whereas “low polarization” situations exist when most people have achieved basic agreement about public policy goals (e.g. improvements to transportation infrastructure). The more starkly divided along partisan, religious, or ethnic identity lines people are about a policy issue, the more difficult and important it can be for elected representatives, public managers, and citizens to collaborate with one another in the exploration of—and decisions on—alternative solutions to public policy challenges.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Keep in Mind —**   * Focus on building trust * Ground the process in constructive conversation * Use trained facilitators |

A recent review of eleven country case studies of polarization showed “growing polarization when people find the other bloc’s views not only objectionable but also unintelligible and threatening” (Somer and McCoy 2019: 11). Polarization inhibits people’s ability to work together in a spirit of mutual respect that allows them to truly listen to one another with an open mind and to be prepared to change their position when presented with appropriate evidence (Strickler 2017). Recent work in social psychology suggests that some kinds of social contact—such as social media platforms designed to encourage people to take sides—can inflame intergroup biases. Yet, research also demonstrates that conditions can be created to reduce polarization between groups (De-Wit et al. 2019). This has implications for many decisions about the design of citizen engagement, from how participants are recruited, to how expert information is presented, to the structure of participant discourse. The comparative ability of different process designs to create this type of environment for the productive exchange of ideas is one of the most widely studied dimensions of public participation (Bächtiger et al. 2018).

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| [Sidebar mini-case]  **An Indigenous Approach to Mining and Land Conflict Disputes in Tanchara, Ghana**  While much of the research focus in the Global North centers on the role of dialogue and deliberation within highly structured forms of public participation such as Citizens’ Assemblies and Deliberative Polls, these forms of political communication are also used to good effect within a wide range of formal and informal citizen engagement settings, including within the context of traditional, indigenous communal practices.  When faced with challenges related to mining practices in the Upper-West region of Ghana, the small, remote community of Tanchara worked in partnership with the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development to help the community organize consensus-building assemblies. Interactions in the assemblies were grounded in local, traditional processes that included strong deliberative elements. Results included establishment of new ‘biological community protocols’ that codified in writing the traditional rights, sovereignties, laws, and knowledge of indigenous people over their resources and land. The district assemblies also contributed to revitalization of the traditional role of women within Tanchara political life (CIKOD TV 2011; Yangmaadome et al. 2012).  **See <**[**https://participedia.net/case/4887**](https://participedia.net/case/4887)**> for a more detailed case study of this example.** |

Perhaps the most dramatic effect of polarization is its potential for undermining people’s ability to engage in the productive give-and-take of ideas. In response, polarized environments call for participant interaction that is grounded in deliberative and dialogic processes to break through entrenched attitudes and perceptions. Dialogue promotes “constructive communication, the dispelling of stereotypes, honesty in relaying ideas, and the intention to listen to and understand the other,” while deliberation encourages the use of critical thinking and reasoned argument as a way for people to make decisions on public policy (McCoy and Scully 2002: 117). While this type of discourse can be a natural part of everyday life, citizen engagement among diverse participants on polarized, high-stakes policy issues requires the help of trained facilitators to ground the process in these types of discourse (Curato et al. 2017: 33).

### How to manage complexity

Many of the issues about which public officials initiate citizen engagement have high levels of complexity. Issues can be complex in several ways. They may involve high levels of technical and scientific detail, be highly interdependent with other issues, require tradeoffs among different goals and values, and/or call for solutions grounded in interdependent practices and policies from all levels of society and government. While it is clear that citizen voice and participation are essential to addressing such issues, it is both more difficult and more important to clarify engagement goals in these cases.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Keep in Mind —**   * Help participants identify underlying values while examining a range of viewpoints * Provide accurate & balanced information in a variety of formats * Draw on participant knowledge that is grounded in personal experience & cultural traditions |

Public engagement on this type of issue requires process designs that allow people to learn and talk together in structured, facilitated settings. The engagement should be designed to help participants reflect on professional expertise and personal experiences alike, thereby providing a format that encourages people to identify solutions grounded in the integration of local knowledge and values alongside critical thinking and reasoned argument (Carcasson 2016). As noted above, processes that are grounded in deliberation and dialogue can provide opportunities for this type of productive give-and-take of ideas.

A significant challenge to citizen engagement on complex issues is determining how best to provide participants with accurate, balanced, and nonpartisan information in ways that are accessible and relevant to non-experts. Poorly constructed processes can privilege participants who have more education or expertise, while simultaneously leaving other participants feeling disempowered. It is better to provide the minimum necessary amount of information than to overwhelm participants with too much detail (Public Agenda 2008). Engagement designs that fail to address these challenges can result in participants being poorly informed and intimidated to the point where they give up on fully engaging in the process. Done properly, however, engaging people on technically complex issues can stimulate productive discussions that break through policy stalemates (Berry et al. 2019).

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| [Sidebar mini-case]  **Regulating Bio-Banks in Western Australia**  When asking people to engage with complex topics, it is important to ensure that they are equipped to make informed judgments. Policy around medical research is often technically complex and ethically fraught. To inform its policy on the regulation of biobanks and the use of biological samples, Western Australia employed a multi-stage method of deliberative public engagement pioneered by a multidisciplinary team of researchers with backgrounds in group dialogue and facilitation, medical ethics, and public communication.  The initiative began with a learning phase that included comprehensive and balanced presentations from experts and stakeholders designed to inform participants’ deliberations and decisions over the next few days. The briefings were followed by facilitated, small-group deliberations in which participants reviewed and discussed the technical information, asked clarifying questions, and worked to understand one another’s perspectives on the issue. The small-group sessions were followed by plenary deliberations, in which participants worked through tradeoffs and value-based judgements, allowing them to identify areas of consensus as well as persistent disagreement (Burgess et al. 2016). The resulting report was a set of well-informed, carefully developed recommendations, most of which were addressed or integrated into the final policy (Molster 2011).  **See <**[**https://participedia.net/case/5975**](https://participedia.net/case/5975)**> for a more detailed case study of this example.** |

The most important strategies for convening this type of citizen engagement include (1) providing expert information that is accessible and accurately sourced, (2) helping people explore complex public issues from a wide range of views that help them uncover underlying values, and (3) using trained facilitators to guide participants’ work. The most effective participant resources encourage people to consider personal experiences, understand values that underlie their and others’ positions, and to weigh underlying conflicts and tradeoffs related to these and other factors.

Some citizen engagement methods such as Citizens’ Assemblies, Citizens’ Juries, and Consensus Conferences use in-person contributions from content experts and/or issue advocates as a core element of their processes. Whatever form information is provided to participants, it is essential that the resources include a baseline of information, represent a range of perspectives, and be communicated in ways that are accessible to a diverse cross-section of participants.

Effective, trained facilitators are essential for guiding a participatory process and creating environments that promote an inclusive and productive give-and-take of ideas. Facilitators also know how to help participants identify and integrate different types of information. It is equally important that facilitators encourage people to consider other forms of knowledge such as personal experiences, values, and cultural traditions, as it is to help participants weigh the insights of experts and specialists. The ultimate goal of these exchanges is usually to find areas of common ground and shared priorities, rather than full agreement. In some instances, however, the aim is to develop majority and minority proposals.

### How to manage the identification and recruitment of participants

The make-up and size of the ‘public’ that is being encouraged to participate in any given citizen engagement initiative will vary in relation to one’s goals and available resources. In terms of goals, the overarching question is whether the situation requires participation from a broad cross-section of the general public, or if participation will be limited to only some groups or individuals.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Keep in Mind —**   * Determine how many and what kinds of participants you want to engage * Create a comprehensive plan for participant recruitment * Provide targeted incentives to include the hard-to-reach & the unaffiliated |

An ‘open to all’ approach can seem to be in direct alignment with the democratic value of strengthening inclusiveness in decision making. However, decades of research show that without an effective strategy for recruiting a diverse and representative cross section of the population you are trying to engage, “citizen participation in the political process will simply reinforce and amplify the existing differentials of power and influence within society” (Smith 2009: 15).

Fortunately, practitioners of citizen engagement have developed and tested a range of strategies for recruiting people of diverse backgrounds. Some approaches, such as organizing a vigorous, targeted campaign to recruit groups who typically are less likely to participate, can be highly effective. These efforts often include assistance in the form of food, child care, transportation, language translation, and convenient meeting times to help overcome barriers that prevent people from participating (Lukensmeyer 2013: 132–53).

Sometimes, though, it is not the general public one is trying to engage, but only some groups or individuals. For example, a community-based participatory research project may need to focus on people who are at high risk of particular health challenges, such as expectant mothers, the elderly, people with disabilities or people struggling with a substance use disorder.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **When Citizens Take the Lead in Creating Engagement**  The primary focus of this paper is on how government institutions and officials can lead efforts to implement forms of citizen engagement that provide people with meaningful ways to have a greater say in decisions that affect their lives. In essence, the types of engagement discussed in this paper are those in which the government *invites and creates spaces for* people to participate.    There are just as many—if not more—situations in which citizens self-organise engagement in order to solve problems, make decisions, and urge the government to recognise, facilitate, or adopt their ideas (Falco and Kleinhans 2018). In these instances, people are not passively waiting for an invitation from their government to engage. Instead, citizens are *creating and claiming* spaces for engagement, typically through actors such as community associations, faith based institutions, civil society organisations, and social movements. Citizen-created forms of engagement can also be *ad hoc* and impermanent, such as with protests and occupations. And while citizen-led forms of engagement are most often organized at the local level, they are also found at national and global levels (Gaventa 2006).  The practices and principles described in this paper will help government officials improve their ability to respond appropriately and effectively to engagement that is initiated by citizens. |

In some situations, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) may be the most effective conduits of everyday people’s ideas and experiences. This is likely, for example, where governments are struggling to meet basic needs, or where social exclusion based on class, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other group identities inhibits the ability of individuals from marginalized groups to have a voice in public policy (Piper and von Lieres 2015). It is important, however, that organizers of citizen engagement initiatives not take for granted that these professional stakeholder representatives of CSOs truly understand and represent the perspectives of the people for whom they claim to speak.

#### Random selection of participants

An often-heard critique of citizen engagement is that it is impossible to tell whether any given group of participants is representative of the population affected by the issue under consideration. Recruiting participants by means of random selection is one of the most often-used strategies to address this concern. Random sampling gives each person—and each combination of people—an equal chance of being either invited to participate or being overlooked. Whether conducted via letters of invitation, telephone, email, or SMS text, random selection is therefore more likely to result in the type of diverse and statistically representative group of participants that government officials often seek.

Proponents of random selection say it is ideally suited to situations of high political polarization or legislative gridlock. This is in part because the reason people who choose to participate through a random sampling process are much less likely to already have strong and fixed opinions about the issues under consideration than would be the case if they self-selected to participate (Vergne 2018: 6–7).

There are, however, potential downsides and flaws in using random sampling to recruit participants. Conducting a random sample can be expensive and time-consuming. Research also suggests that some groups, such as people with low incomes or education, and people who are not native speakers of the majority language, are less likely to attend, even when paid to do so (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012: 51). One way to address this type of problem is to use ‘quota sampling’ whereby random samples are taken within certain strata of the population such as gender, ethnicity, age, income, education, etc. While this method does not does not meet strict standards for random sampling, it can be a relatively effective and inexpensive way to meet demographic targets.

While there are strengths and weaknesses to using either random sampling or ‘open to all’ methods of recruiting participants, some situations may benefit from using both techniques in complementary ways for different phases of an overall engagement strategy (Leighninger 2012: 22).

# Part 4: Selecting an engagement method

The examples above illustrate a small sample of the many factors and tradeoffs one needs to reconcile when selecting or designing the optimal combination of citizen engagement methods for different situations.

Many of the forms of citizen engagement developed over the last thirty years use innovative designs and techniques. Public participation practitioners have developed many ways to do this work, and they continue to improve these practices while also creating new ones. Yet, having access to all these methods can create difficult choices for public officials. It is difficult to say which process is best for which situation, simply because the contextual factors vary so much. The goals and objectives of citizen engagement are likely to vary for any given situation, as will the resources available to implement the engagement process. Moreover, the characteristics of each method interact with varying social and political contexts in ways that can make it challenging to replicate or adapt processes to different situations.

Too often, though, citizen engagement methods selected to address an issue are based on the cognitive biases of participation leaders, rather than on an understanding of the available knowledge and resources within the participation community. For example, government officials may select a citizen engagement method they first learned about from a report that happened to cross their desk, casual acquaintances, or because a particular method is fashionable. While the method they learned of may have been appropriate and successful in one circumstance, public engagement leaders need to assess whether that same method is optimal for the specific context in which they are working. Lack of appropriate forethought can result in poorly organized initiatives that increase inequalities in political participation while contributing to decreasing trust in democratic institutions. (Bellamy et al. 2018).

What follows are recommendations related to some of the major decision points that public officials face when deciding which methods and tools are appropriate for their goals and context.

## How do different phases of the policy cycle align with citizen engagement?

A good starting point is to examine where citizen engagement will be useful within the policy cycle of a public issue. Whether policy proposals are being developed by legislative committees, government agencies, lobbyists, grassroots activists, or think tanks, eventually they must work their way through a policy cycle (Dye 2008: 41). Yet in reality, policy development is seldom a linear process. It often unfolds in an iterative fashion, with unexpected starts, stops, and revisiting of prior assumptions and decisions. Given this, it is important to consider where public engagement would be most effective in any given cycle. In addition, one shouldn’t assume citizen engagement is necessary for every issue, at every stage of the policy cycle.

Keeping in mind that policy analysts envision many different configurations for the policy cycle, [Figure 2](https://drive.google.com/open?id=16K0tvoiJF3eKwNtgeo1iVL8PWZ2tz82R) illustrates a version that will feel familiar to people who work on public policy (Lukensmeyer and Hasselblad Torres 2006). This chart is designed to help public officials identify what they are trying to achieve via citizen engagement at each stage of the policy process; potential rationales for involving the public at different stages; and some of the key challenges related to engaging people at each stage. For example, the optimal engagement strategy during the agenda-setting stage may call for a different mix of participants—and a different approach to how people interact with one another—than would be the case during the policy design stage in which participants will be called on to evaluate alternative proposals and develop policy recommendations.

## What degree of decision-making authority might be given to citizen participants?

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation ([Figure 1](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1dBe8cIaR5LuFBC15OmL-cGDAC7ZGbpPB)) identifies the increasing degrees of shared authority over decision making associated with different approaches to citizen engagement, ranging from ‘inform’ to ‘empower.’ The part of the spectrum that identifies the ‘promise to the public’ associated with each level of participation can be useful as one prepares to manage people’s expectations regarding how ideas generated in a citizen engagement will be factored into the creation and implementation of public policy (Nabatchi, 2012a, 2012b). Figure 1 also identifies examples of tools and methods that make a good fit with each level of participation on the IAP2 spectrum.

Note, however, that some public participation experts are hesitant to use the IAP2 Spectrum because it can be interpreted as emphasizing the degrees of power over decision making *allowed to* citizens by authorities. In light of this, the Spectrum is sometimes criticized for overlooking the potential for citizens and nongovernmental organizations to initiate public engagement, let alone create and implement solutions to public problems on their own (Scully 2012).

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## What amount of time and effort does citizen engagement require?

Another way to assess the range of possible approaches to public participation is to think in terms of *‘thin’* and *‘thick’* forms of engagement. Thin forms of participation provide ways for *individuals* to be involved while acting alone. Voting in an election is, of course, an individual act of thin participation, and so are activities such as signing an online petition, ‘liking’ a political message on social media, and donating money to a cause. Thick forms of engagement encourage people to work together in *groups*, with intensive forms of discourse such as dialogue, deliberation, and debate providing a foundation for assessing what needs to be done and how to do it (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015: 14–21).

It is important to ask whether a situation requires thick participation that engages groups of people in learning, deciding, and acting together, or whether the circumstances can be addressed with thin participation that engages people as individuals and requires less of their time and effort. Keep in mind that it is not useful to think of thin engagement as weak or inferior to thicker forms. Rather, the key is to determine which forms work best for different contexts. Indeed, any given situation may call for a citizen engagement strategy that includes both thin and thick elements (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015: 261–77). Moreover, it is possible that thin processes—such as using online reporting platforms and hotlines—can motivate people to engage in thicker processes that provide them with opportunities to exercise greater influence over policy decisions (Scott 2019).

## What types of methods and tools are available to support engagement?

A useful way to think about the range of design choices is to think of a *method* as a comprehensive outline or plan of action. In this sense, a method is similar to a blueprint used to guide construction of a building. *Tools and techniques* in the participation ‘toolbox’ are used to implement citizen engagement methods. [Figure 3](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iTWniLlZ5tsLelBYjCsVFPtQ1vq2mES1/view?usp=sharing) provides a list of key functions that serve as the building blocks of comprehensive methods, together with a few examples of the tools and techniques used to perform those functions.

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| [Sidebar Box]  **Keep in Mind —**  *Methods* are comprehensive ‘blueprints’—such as citizens’ juries, referendums, and participatory budgeting—that are used to guide citizen engagement.  *Tools & techniques* in the participation ‘toolbox’ are used to implement participatory methods, such as ways to recruit participants, facilitate discussions, and make decisions. |

Because there is a huge variety in the range of available participatory methods, the focus here will be on describing a handful of the *types* of methods that are often used by elected and appointed public officials to engage citizens. (The web-based research platform Participedia <[www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net/)> documents over 250 examples of *specific* methods and tools, organized into about 15 *types* of methods.)

### Mini-Publics / Random Public Assemblies

Forms of citizen engagement that combine the random selection of participants with deliberation are often referred to as ‘mini-publics’ in that they are “an assembly of citizens, demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making” (Escobar and Elstub 2017: 1). Among other benefits, this approach provides a structure that allows people to work together productively on highly polarized issues (DeWit et al. 2019).

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| [Sidebar mini-case]  **Ontario Residents’ Panel to Review the Condominium Act**  In 2012, when the province of Ontario, Canada was in the midst of a boom in condominium construction, its Ministry of Consumer Services was charged with updating provincial legislation governing the rights and responsibilities of developers, owners, corporations, and other relevant stakeholders. In part because of increasing diversity in the types of condominiums being built and how they were operating, the Ministry decided to gather insights not only from experts and stakeholders, but also from condominium owners and renters. In order to do so, they hired a consulting firm with expertise in designing and implementing a type of mini-public called a “Citizens’ Reference Panel.” The ensuing Residents’ Panel was one of four parts of an overall consultation process. The other components were stakeholder roundtables, town hall meetings, and open submissions from the general public.  Participants in the Residents’ Panel were selected with a combination of random sampling and quotas that resulted in a group of 36 condominium residents (24 owner occupants, 6 renters, 6 landlords) who were broadly representative of the gender, age, geographic distribution, and type of residence of Ontario’s condominium community. The panel met three times, with two-week breaks between each meeting. The meetings included: (1) presentations from experts and stakeholders, such as staff from the ministry, builders, and mortgage lenders; (2) deliberations in which participants explored the pros and cons of assorted options for revising the existing condominium regulations; and (3) drafting and refining a report containing recommendations for the ministry. In between meetings participants were asked to do ‘homework’. For example, during the first break they had conversations with over 300 additional condominium residents. Then, during the second meeting the citizen participants organized what they had heard into themes to be included in their report.  Almost one year later, the panel reconvened to review the ministry’s report, which was also informed by recommendations sourced through the other components of the consultation process. The Residents’ Panel concluded that the ministry’s report “effectively responded to a large majority of their priorities and concerns.” Giles Gherson, who then served as Deputy Minister of Consumer Services, later noted that “the citizens’ work was taken seriously. A large number of their recommendations made it into the condo act” (Chwalisz 2017: 20–25; MASS LBP 2013).  **See <**[**https://participedia.net/case/4614**](https://participedia.net/case/4614)**> for a more detailed case study of this example.** |

With a few exceptions (one of which will be described below in a subsequent section), most mini-publics serve as consultative bodies, with little or no formal power over governmental decisions (Smith 2019a: 99). Proponents of mini-publics make the case that these types of processes can nevertheless be useful because they help answer the question: “How would an informed cross-section of the public assess proposed legislation, or develop new policy, after balanced learning, substantial deliberation and considered judgement” (Escobar and Elstub 2017: 11).

Mini-publics can provide valuable insights into public perspectives on policies about which many people may be uninformed, uncertain, or deeply divided. A possible downside for public officials who are facing a potentially unpopular decision is that much of the remaining voting public may not recognize the legitimacy of a mini-public’s proposals because they have not experienced its supportive conditions (Curato and Parry 2018: 4). However, emerging research suggests that the public tends to have confidence in mini-publics because they are made up of people like themselves who have gone through a process of learning and reflection (Warren and Gastil 2015).

[Figure 4](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1ERBA0hgbQLf_dlXvolIGwYgWdA523wgK) provides brief summaries of the key characteristics of five of the most widely used types of mini-publics: Citizens’ Assemblies, Citizens’ Juries, Consensus Conferences, Deliberative Polls™, and Planning Cells.

### Popular Assemblies that are ‘open to all’

Popular assemblies are places where anyone who is interested can come together to “engage in face-to-face interactions and decision-making” (Smith 2009: 30). Sponsors of many of the most widely used types of popular assemblies are as committed to recruiting diverse, demographically representative groups of participants as are implementers of mini-publics. However, other considerations lead organizers of popular assemblies to use participant recruitment tactics in which people ‘self select’ to participate.

One reason for using an open-to-all approach is that it typically costs less than implementing random selection. The main reasons, though, are that less restrictive forms of participant recruitment are especially useful when one’s goals include “maximizing the possibility of nongovernmental action by bringing more problem solvers to the table” and mobilizing people over the long term (Leighninger 2012: 21). This includes providing citizens with opportunities to play an active, hands-on role in implementing solutions developed in the engagement process. Popular assemblies are also more likely than are mini-publics to provide as many people as possible with opportunities to learn and practice civic skills that foster ‘better citizens’ who are more informed; better able to understand and appreciate the beliefs, values, and positions of others; and more empathic, active, and collaborative (Pincock 2012).

The following two sections provide brief introductions to Participatory Budgeting—perhaps the best-known form of popular assembly—and to the important role that civil society organizations often play in the implementation of popular assemblies.

#### Participatory Budgeting

Originating in 1989 in the Brazilian municipality of Porto Alegre, variations on the original model for Participatory Budgeting (PB) have since spread to over 3,000 cities throughout the world. Much of PB’s popularity is due to: (1) its focus on real power over allocation of public resources; (2) its ability to provide citizens with improved insights into the ins and outs of how government works; (3) its emphasis on targeted recruitment of lower-income people and other traditionally underserved residents; and (4) its ability to catalyze increases in the number of—and collaborations between—civil society organizations (CSOs), including the creation of new partnerships between CSOs and government (Wampler, Touchton, and McNulty 2017, 2018).

The original structure of Porto Alegre’s PB combined participation in open assemblies with the election of citizen representatives to decision-making bodies. Many variations on the model that was first used in Porto Alegre have emerged over the last thirty years, including in Porto Alegre itself, where support for PB among local government leaders has waned (Abers et al. 2018).

A recently released how-to guide provides useful benchmarks for determining whether PB is a good fit for any given situation and, if so, how to structure it. Not surprisingly, the most important decision is whether the PB should be “decisive,” i.e., the government commits to act on the participants' decisions; or whether it will be “advisory” in that “results are merely taken into account and viewed as suggestions in the allocation or draft of a budget” (Citizen Lab 2019).

#### Partnering with civil society organizations

A key reason why PB initiatives are often successful in recruiting a diverse, representative cross-section of citizen participants, and in keeping them engaged throughout the entire process, is that engagement leaders typically enlist local CSOs in implementation of the process from start to finish. This type of joint action between government, CSOs, and NGOs is fairly common in the work of popular assemblies.

Many CSOs are accustomed to involving diverse collections of the public as volunteers in doing everything from delivering basic goods and services, to participating in community meetings where they discuss and plan how to address all types of shared, public challenges. Given this, it is not unusual for CSOs to draw on their experience and reputation as good-faith brokers who can provide assistance with much of the work required to implement citizen engagement. CSOs can be especially useful allies in situations where one of the goals of citizen engagement is to create an environment for new collaborations in which success depends in part on the ability of individual participants and organizations to play a direct role in implementing ideas generated during the deliberative and decision-making parts of the process.

### Direct democracy via referendums and citizen initiatives

The two principal mechanisms for direct democracy are referendums and initiatives. Referendums are called by government on either an ad hoc basis or because standard procedures require the government to call them under designated conditions. Depending on the rules by which it is administered, the result of a referendum may be either advisory or legally binding.

There are two basic types of direct democracy via citizen initiatives. The first is an *agenda initiative* in which citizens place an issue on the legislative agenda, providing they collect a designated number of signatures. The second is a *popular initiative* in which the electorate is allowed a direct vote on a constitutional or legislative measure. Popular initiatives are also provisional to the ability of its promoters to collect a designated number of signatures. As with referendums, the result of a citizen initiative can be either advisory or legally binding (Kaufmann 2017: 6–7; International IDEA 2017a: 17).

Supporters of direct democracy argue that referendums and initiatives: (1) allow citizens to distinguish their general support (or lack thereof) for party platforms from their preferences on particular issues, especially when underlying circumstances may have changed; (2) provide a means by which citizens can compel an incumbent government or legislative majority to address tough decisions; and (3) afford an additional and often necessary check on the tendency of public authorities to privilege their own interests and those of their elite supporters at the expense of everyday people (International IDEA 2017a: 8–10).

On the other hand, some scholars who support the use of many of the other forms of citizen engagement discussed in this paper are less enthusiastic about direct democracy. The essence of the argument against referendums and initiatives is that they “are not an accurate way of finding out what ‘the people’ want. Complex issues are boiled down to a binary, ‘simple’ choice. Most individuals do not have the time or the resources to become familiar with all the nuanced arguments” (Chwalisz 2017: 3l). In its worst form, “direct democracy can polarize debate, exacerbate political divisions and increase the potential for destabilizing reactions such as boycotts or violence” (International IDEA 2017a: 13).

Fortunately, the differences between direct direct democracy and other forms of participatory citizen engagement can be reconciled to good effect. The following section provides brief descriptions of how democratic innovations such Citizens’ Assemblies and the Citizens’ Initiative Review can be used to supplement the ‘thin’ act of a citizen’s individual yes or no vote, with opportunities for ‘thick’ engagement experiences grounded in opportunities for in-depth learning and deliberation. These types of hybrid approaches provide illustrations of how to “institutionalize the role of citizens in the decision-making process” (Cottakis 2018).

#### The Irish Citizens’ Assembly (Saoránach An Tionól) and the Abortion Question

The case of Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly (Saoránach An Tionól) illustrates what is possible when a consultative mini-public works in tandem with the force of a legally binding referendum. In July 2016, the two houses of the Irish legislature (Oireachtas) authorized the convening of a Citizens’ Assembly to explore several difficult issues facing the nation, including the Constitution’s 8th Amendment, which provided the foundation for some of the world’s most restrictive abortion laws.

The Assembly was comprised of 99 registered voters randomly selected to represent Ireland’s demographic diversity, and was chaired by a former judge of Ireland’s Supreme Court. The assembly was charged with making “such recommendations as it sees fit and report” to the Oireachtas. If the government accepted the assembly’s recommendations, it committed to holding a national referendum on the matter (Dáil Éireann 2016).

The Constitution’s 8th Amendment was the first issue considered by the assembly. The assembly’s enabling legislation required that it establish expert advisory groups and make its decisions by a majority vote of the members present. The assembly also received and published over 12,000 submissions from members of the public and interest groups by post and online. Members heard testimony, weighed evidence, and deliberated for 5 weekends over the course of several months.

To create the final report the Assembly took a series of votes. In the second ballot, 56% of the members recommended that the 8th amendment should be revised or replaced. Another ballot revealed that 64% of the members supported the lawful termination of pregnancy without restriction, with differences of opinion ranging from whether there should be absolutely no restrictions (8%), to access to abortion for up to 12 weeks gestation (48%).

The assembly’s final report on the 8th Amendment was presented to the Oireachtas in June 2017. After careful consideration of the assembly’s recommendations, the Oireachtas called for a national referendum to be held in two months’ time on whether or not to abolish the 8th Amendment. The assembly proceedings were accessible to the public via a dedicated website ([www.citizensassembly.ie](http://www.citizensassembly.ie)). The government also published a draft of substitute legislation that could be enacted should the referendum pass. On May 25, 2018, the referendum passed by a majority of 66.4% in support of abolishing the 8th Amendment. One of the architects of the Irish Citizens’ Assembly, David Farrell, noted that the assembly "proved invaluable in acquainting the political classes with the fact that the Irish public had become much more liberal in recent decades" (McGreevy 2018).

#### The Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review Panel on Mandatory Criminal Sentencing

The Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR) demonstrates the potential of combining a mini-public with a large-scale popular initiative in order to improve the electoral process. It also illustrates the benefits of looking to non-governmental organizations as a source of innovation and experimentation in citizen engagement.

Healthy Democracy, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, led efforts urging the Oregon (USA) state legislature to pilot the first CIR in preparation for the 2010 statewide elections. The primary goal was to see if the CIR could be an effective way to “help voters make better judgments about the overwhelming number of statewide ballot initiatives and referenda” that emerge in Oregon every two years (Warren and Gastil 2015: 569). The core of the CIR method is grounded in the Citizens’ Juries process that has been used since the 1970s hundreds of times in many different places.

In essence, the CIR convenes about 20 voters for several days to hear from experts and advocates on contesting sides of a ballot initiative. After deliberations that are informed by intensive weighing of evidence, “the CIR panelists write a one-page statement for the official Oregon State Voters’ Pamphlet, which the Secretary of State delivers along with mail-in ballots to every registered household. This CIR Statement consists of ‘Key Findings,’ ‘Majority’ and ‘Minority’ arguments, pro and con, as well as the final panel vote” (Warren and Gastil 2015: 570).

The 2010 CIR addressed Oregon Measure 73, which called for increased mandatory minimum sentences for certain sex crimes and for driving under the influence. Surveys of voters’ attitudes about Measure 73 were fielded in August and again about two weeks before the November election. Voter support for the measure in August was around 70%. The CIR participants, however, “wrote a scathing critique and sided against it 21-3” (Gastil 2017). Measure 73 passed, despite findings from the research that among those who read the report, doing so “doubled the number of voters at least leaning against the sentencing measure” (Gastil 2017). However, in this case only 20% of voters reported reading the CIR participants’ statement.

The research also demonstrated that the CIR “can improve the factual accuracy of voters’ beliefs and the coherence of their values considerations related to an issue” (Gastil et al. 2018: 556). Findings from a similar study of the 2012 Oregon CIR were comparable to those from 2010 (Knobloch et al. 2014). These findings helped build support in 2011 for passage of a bill in the Oregon state legislature establishing a Citizens’ Review Commission. Oregon convened additional CIRs in 2012, 2014, and 2016. CIRs have also been piloted in three other states, and at the city and county level.

### Online Engagement

Information and communications technologies (ICT) are being used throughout the world—and at all levels of governance—as vital components of overarching strategies to engage citizens in budgeting decisions, developing public policy, and even the drafting of legislation. The most ardent advocates of online engagement view it as an essential tool for “greater participation, better decisions, and more trust” (Simon et al. 2017: 4). That said, while this work is often exciting and innovative, it is not yet clear whether and to what extent online forms of engagement are improving the quality of public life and democractic governance. Among other dilemmas, while ‘digital democracy’ tools can be used to motivate healthy citizen engagement, they can also exacerbate political fragmentation and be employed by political elites to suppress emerging social movements (Nyabola 2018).

The goals and principles that guide decisions about how and why to use ‘offline’ (i.e., in-person) methods of public engagement also apply to online engagement. It is, for example, as important to manage citizens’ expectations and to plan a strategy for recruiting participants within the digital sphere of engagement, as it is to do so for initiatives that are grounded in face-to-face interactions. Similarly, one should have a good reason for adopting online tools; it is generally not a good idea to use them simply to try something new (Simon et al. 2017).

It is also important to note that online digital democracy tools are most effective when they work in tandem with innovative offline forms of engagement (Dubow et al. 2017; Falco and Kleinhans 2018). For example, while most of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (BCCA) took place in face-to-face meetings, the initiative also provided a password-protected discussion platform on which participants and staff engaged in online discussions resulting in over 3,000 comments about electoral systems and the Assembly’s progress (British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004: 27–30). The BCCA also made frequent updates to the project website. Some of the cases noted earlier in this paper also included online tools as part of their overall strategy.

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| [Sidebar mini-case] Estonian People’s Assembly (Rahvakogu) Accusations of money laundering on the part of Estonian MPs and other government officials to fund political party operations resulted in large-scale public protests and calls from civil society activists for comprehensive reform. Following a series of roundtable discussions between Estonia’s President, civil society groups, and political representatives, the national government agreed to launch a multi-phase process of citizen consultation and deliberation on issues related to the electoral system, political corruption, and public participation.  The overall process design was a hybrid of online and offline forms of engagement that took place from January through April 2013. In the first phase, an online platform (rahvakogu.ee) was used to inform the public and to crowdsource proposals for reform from individual citizens. The three-week online phase resulted in over 2,000 proposals and 4,000 comments being submitted, and in 60,000 people having an opportunity to learn about the process and view the submissions. In the 2nd phase, which was convened offline, policy analysts grouped the proposals into five policy themes. The themes were then reviewed by 30 policy professionals who assessed the probable impacts of the proposals.  The third phase consisted of a series of five in-person ‘seminars’ in which citizens who had submitted online proposals were invited to meet with elected officials and experts. Together, they evaluated and refined the proposals, ultimately recommending 18 distinct pieces of legislation. The final step was a ‘Deliberation Day’ in which 314 citizen participants (out of 550 invited via random selection) met in facilitated groups of about 10 people each. Participants reviewed briefing materials prepared by policy professionals, deliberated the pros and cons of the proposals, and cast deciding votes in which the People’s Assembly approved 15 of the 18 proposals. The Estonian President then presented the proposals to the national parliament. One year later, 7 of the 15 pieces of proposed legislation had either been adopted into law, partially implemented, or integrated into the government’s list of commitments.  As impressive as the entire process was, there were some weaknesses, most of which related to an overrepresentation of young people, men, and members of the political left during the online phase. Despite the use of random sampling to create a pool of invitees, participants in the Deliberation Day event tended to be older, with higher levels of education and a history of civic engagement, than is typical of the Estonian public (Estonian Cooperation Assembly 2016; Govlab 2019).  **See <**[**https://participedia.net/case/1462**](https://participedia.net/case/1462)**> for a more detailed case study of this example.** |

Many, if not most, government initiatives in online engagement have focused on “open government” practices that share large amounts of institutional data in an attempt to advance transparency. While these efforts are commendable, there is a strong case to be made that they “have left the mechanics of democracy—the basic institutions, processes and structures of governance—as well as the relationship between citizens and the state, largely unaffected” (Simon et al. 2017: 9). The most effective response to this challenge is to focus on ways in which online tools can be used in combination with in-person forms of citizen engagement to enhance what each collection of methods and tools has to offer. [Figure 5](https://drive.google.com/open?id=19Vd0V5-wJcFJjP_gFuKcgX8tmUOfE6gn)  and [Figure 6](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1YK4p6N3cZYIdbFxYW7D5zDmAIwWL7IJb) illustrate numerous ways of thinking about how these two streams of engagement can be used—both alone and in tandem—to strengthen the role of citizens in governance.

# Part 5: Conclusion and way forward

Citizen participation in democratic governance—that is, in the cumulative ways by which society makes decisions about how to address shared challenges—is essential to the health of democratic polities. The tools and mechanisms for engaging citizens in governance are becoming better known and more widespread. Increases in their use are demonstrating the potential for citizen engagement in politics and governance to complement and improve the work of political parties and legislatures. The challenge for political representatives is to understand, embrace, use, and respond to these new and evolving approaches to citizen engagement.

Yet, one should not assume that the forms of citizen engagement discussed in this paper can serve as a panacea for the many challenges confronting democratic governance (List 2017). As Richard Youngs has emphasized “Participation will need to be a catalyst for reforming democracy, not a stand-alone alternative” (Youngs 2019). “Each dynamic—indirect representation, direct popular influence and deliberative citizen participation—has its rightful place in democratic renewal” (Youngs 2018).

New forms of citizen engagement continue to evolve and improve as they are used in a wider variety of situations. Ten years ago, Mark Warren called for more focused research on questions such as “What kinds of processes are likely to generate better than worse outcomes—more legitimacy, justice, or effectiveness, say—given the characteristics of the issues and the constraints of time and money? (Warren 2009: 11). In the ensuing years, academic research, practical application, and program evaluation have increased significantly our understanding of which methods and strategies for citizen engagement work best for specific purposes, under specific conditions (Curato et al., 2017).

This paper has synthesized a sample of what has been learned from research and practice. It has also shared key learnings in the form of principles and frameworks that government institutions and public officials can use to identify the optimal strategies and methods for different contexts. Guidelines and principles for how to implement better citizen engagement have also been published by international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([Figure 7](https://drive.google.com/open?id=12y0gKmPjDUe4l4M3dXfdgqvwrplEj2YL)), individual nations ([Figure 8](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1UxGO1zVGBzwMUcJOkpqHLK4rIlVAHdnj)), and government agencies at regional, provincial, and local levels (Barcelona City Hall 2019; DELWP 2015; 東京都 調布市 2010).

If governments at all levels are to understand the public’s concerns and be responsive to them, the challenge for our institutions is to connect people to their elected and appointed representatives in ways that have meaning and substance. This requires governments to create and provide adequate support for mechanisms to initiate and be accountable to citizen engagement. It also means that the governments need to improve their ability to respond to—and when appropriate collaborate with—engagement initiatives that emerge from outside of government.

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| --- |
| **A Few Final Pieces of Advice: Do citizen engagement well, or not at all … but do it!**  Poorly executed citizen engagement is worse than no engagement. People will develop even less trust in government if the process is undertaken for insincere reasons or if it is poorly designed and executed.  Here a few of the most common pitfalls to avoid:   * Don’t ask people for their input if the relevant, important decisions have already been made. Doing so will only increase citizens’ distrust in—and alienation from—government. * Take the work seriously. Don’t assign the work to a junior staff person with little experience and little or no power to find and allocate resources. Invest enough time and money to make sure the engagement is done properly. * Don’t choose which method of engagement to use simply because it sounds interesting or has worked somewhere else. Do a careful search for methods that are a good fit for the problem and for the social/political context at hand. * If at all possible, staff from the relevant government agency should take primary responsibility for designing and implementing the engagement. If you hire an external consultant to help, pay close attention to how the work is being done, and stay involved from start to finish, * Whenever possible, identify, work with, and build on existing networks and CSOs. * Evaluate what happens before, during, and after citizen engagement. Evaluate both the process, i.e. management and administration of the work; and impact, i.e. the outcomes and effects. * Don’t work in isolation. Connect with other people who do public engagement and learn from them. |

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## Further reading

***Practical advice on how to structure and facilitate miscellaneous forms of citizen engagement***

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## About the organisations

Participedia