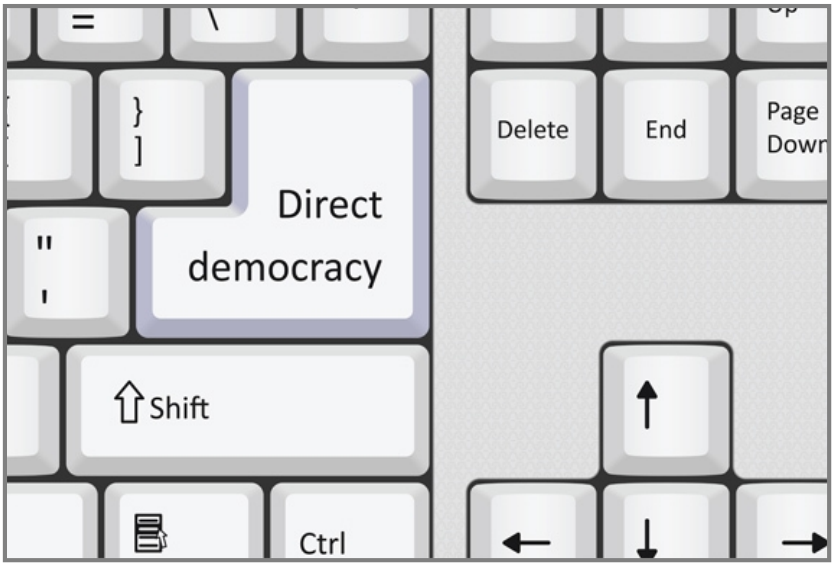
European Parliament

Prospects for e-democracy in Europe

Study summary



IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Science and Technology Options Assessment

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service
Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)
February 2018 - PE 603.213

Prospects for e-democracy in Europe

Study summary

IP/G/STOA/FWC/2013-001/LOT 8/C4
February 2018

PE 603.213

This document is a summary of the study 'Prospects for e-democracy in Europe', requested by the Science and Technology Options Assessment (STOA) Panel. The study was carried out by the European Technology Assessment Group (ETAG), and managed by the Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA) within the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services (DG EPRS) of the European Parliament.

AUTHORS

Iris Korthagen, Ira van Keulen (Rathenau Institute)
Leonhard Hennen (KIT/ITAS)
Georg Aichholzer, Gloria Rose (ITA/OEAW)
Ralf Lindner, Kerstin Goos (Fraunhofer ISI)
Rasmus Øjvind Nielsen (DBT Foundation)

STOA ADMINISTRATORS RESPONSIBLE

Gianluca Quaglio, Theodoros Karapiperis
Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)
Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services
European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, B-1047 Brussels
E-mail: STOA.karapiperis@ep.europa.eu

LINGUISTIC VERSION

Original: EN

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

To contact STOA or to subscribe to its newsletter please write to STOA@ep.europa.eu
This document is available on the Internet at: http://www.ep.europa.eu/stoa/

Manuscript completed in February 2018
Brussels, © European Union, 2018

DISCLAIMER

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

PE 603.213
ISBN 978-92-846-2263-4
doi: 10.2861/201697
QA-06-17-316-EN-N

Table of contents

Executive summary 4
1. E-democracy: a literature review 7
1.1. The EU democratic deficit in times of crisis 7
1.2. The state of research on the European public sphere 8
1.3. The internet and the European public sphere 8
1.4. Experiences with digital tools in different types of e-participation 9
1.5. Experiences with e-participation at EU-level 11
2. Comparative analysis of 22 digital tools 13
2.1. Assessment of the different conditions 13
2.2. Assessment of the outcomes 21
2.3. Analysis of configurations 23
3. Policy options and conclusions 27
3.1. Lessons for existing EU e-participation tools 27
3.2. New options to improve e-participation at EU level 33
4. Annex: an overview of the cases 35

Executive summary

'*There exist more opportunities than ever before for citizens wishing to have their say, via the media or directly to local and national governments, but there is a more pervasive sense of disappointment than ever before that citizens are outside the citadels of power, and that those within do not know how to listen to them.*' (Coleman and Moss 2012: 4)

According to the UN's e-participation index (UN, 2016) e-participation is expanding all over the world. The index measures e-participation according to a three-level model of participation including: 1) e-information (the provision of information on the internet), 2) e-consultation (organising public consultations online), and 3) e-decision making (involving citizens directly in decision processes) (UN, 2016: 54). In the present report, the term 'e-participation' is reserved for all forms of political participation making use of digital media, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement.

The drivers behind e-participation are digitalisation, the development of digital tools that can be used for citizen involvement – social media, deliberative software, e-voting systems, etc. – and growing access to the internet. In European countries, especially those that rank prominently among the top 50 performers, citizens have more and more opportunities to have their say in government and politics. According to the UN, the largest share of e-participation initiatives relates to central and local governments giving access to public sector information and public consultation via digital tools. Recently there has been a growing focus on citizen involvement in policy making, although progress in this field has been modest so far.

A democratic deficit

However, it is not only digitalisation that has been advancing e-participation. Nowadays many European citizens are invited, especially by their local governments, to be more involved. Because of the economic recession and budget cuts, civil service reform and de-centralisation of public tasks, citizens are now expected to be more self-sufficient (i.e. taking over activities that were formerly public services). At the same time, citizens themselves actually want to be more involved. The UN report (2016: 3) states that '*advances in e-participation today are driven more by civic activism of people seeking to have more control over their lives*'. This is confirmed by surveys such as the European Value Studies (2008) where the majority of European citizens indicate they want to be more involved in political decision making.

From other surveys it is clear that many European citizens do not feel as if their voice counts or their concerns are taken into consideration. For example, in the European Social Survey (2014), the majority of respondents gave a negative reaction to the question '*How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?*'. The same holds true for the question: '*And how much would you say that the political system in your country allows people like you to have an influence on politics?*'. When it comes to the EU, the Eurobarometer reveals that exactly half of EU citizens disagree with the statement that their voice counts in the EU. Furthermore, in almost all European countries an increased number of respondents disagreed with the statement that the European Parliament takes the concerns of European citizens into consideration. In general, a majority of 54 % disagreed with the statement.

In recent decades, improvements have been made to citizens' involvement in the EU political process, such as direct parliamentary European elections, the increased competences and legislative powers of the European Parliament and the creation of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). However, in scholarly debates the EU is still regarded as suffering from what was coined a 'democratic deficit' by Grimm (1995). EU policy making as practiced by the European institutions still seems, at least in some

respects, to be not completely open to European citizens. The multilevel system of EU policy making makes it sometimes difficult for European citizens to trace back responsibilities and to hold the EU institutions accountable for the outcomes of their policies (Habermas 2015; Michailidou and Trenz 2013).

The central objective of this study is to determine whether ICT tools could help to increase the EU's democratic quality and its legitimacy among citizens, as well as its entire political system.

Expectations of e-democracy

E-participation and in a broader sense e-democracy – the practice of democracy with the support of digital media in political communication and participation – are seen as a possible remedy for democratic shortcomings at European level (as well as at local and national levels). From the start, and especially in the 1990s, the expectations for renewing democracy through new media were far reaching.

However, after a few decades of e-democracy and e-participation practices at all levels of policy making from municipalities to transnational bodies, the reality has been sobering. After 25 years of e-democracy, Jan Van Dijk – a scholar of e-democracy – concludes that, up until now, the primary achievement of e-democracy has been a significant improvement in access to, and the exchange of, politically relevant information. Evidence of the realisation of e-democracy supporting public debate, deliberation and community building is mixed, and – most disappointing from the perspective of direct democracy – '*no perceivable effect of these debates on decision making of institutional politics*' has been detected (Van Dijk 2012: 53 ff.). Furthermore, van Dijk asserts that e-participation is largely confined to the initial and the final stages of the policy cycle, and that it rarely allows for entries into the core stages of decision making and policy execution. This is more or less (still) in line with the UN report on e-participation (2016) which states that there is a modestly growing focus on citizen involvement in policy making. Although the initial high expectations should therefore be adjusted, e-democracy and e-participation are a reality and both have changed the communication between citizens and governments in, without a doubt, many beneficial ways, for example by providing better and faster access to all kinds of public information for citizens, and procedures of e-consultation and e-budgeting. In the present decade, meanwhile, social media are offering a new form of direct political communication among citizens, communities and policy makers.

This study – taking the STOA report from 2011 as a starting point – investigates how to continue with e-democracy at the EU level in a way that supports public debate and that has an impact on political decision making. The starting point is that e-democracy is one of several strategies for supporting democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes and spreading democratic values; its main objective is the electronic support of legitimate democratic processes and it should be evaluated on these merits. In other words, e-democracy is additional and complementary to, and interlinked with, the traditional processes of democracy (Council of Europe 2009: 11). Alternatively, as the Council of Europe also states in its recommendation on e-democracy: e-democracy is, above all, about democracy.

Research questions

In order to investigate how to continue with e-democracy at EU level, 22 case studies of digital tools have been analysed and compared. The 22 examples:

- are organised at different political and governmental levels (local, national and European);
- enable citizen involvement at different stages of political decision making (agenda setting, decision making and monitoring);
- may be suitable to be implemented and used at EU level in order to counteract the deficit in European democratic processes.

The two central research questions that will guide the analysis are:

- What are the conditions under which digital tools can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes?
- And, how can these tools – and the conditions that make them successful – be transferred to EU level?

The study is divided into three phases:

1. a literature review with a particular focus on the most recent and relevant literature;
2. an empirical assessment and comparison of 22 case studies of digital tools;
3. lessons for existing EU e-participation tools and new options to improve e-participation at EU level.

Research design

The research design consists of the following three elements:

1. A systematic literature review of around 400 seminal publications about: 1) e-participation in the context of decision making, 2) democratic impacts and effects, 3) lessons regarding success and failure, 4) application at EU level, and 5) the European public sphere.

2. A qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA) of 22 case studies. The case studies are based on desk research and 45 interviews with organisers and researchers. The data collection was completed in February 2017. The cases can be categorised into five groups:

Websites that monitor politics	1. TheyWorkForYou 2. Abgeordnetenwatch.de
Informal agenda-setting tools	3. Petities.nl (Dutch e-petitions site) 4. Open Ministry and the Finnish Citizen Initiative
Formal agenda-setting tools	5. Constitution Iceland (crowdsourcing for a new constitution) 6. Future Melbourne Wiki (co-creating a city planning vision) 7. Predlagam.vladi.si (Slovenian platform for e- proposals and e-petitions) 8. European Citizens' Initiative (citizens' proposals for new EU laws) 9. Participatory budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg 10. Internetconsultatie.nl (Dutch e-consultation on draft legislation) 11. Futurium (consultation on EU – digital – policy making) 12. Your Voice in Europe (public consultation on EU policy) 13. European Citizens' Consultation 09
Non-binding decision-making tools	14. Pirate Party Germany 15. Five Star Movement 16. Podemos 17. Participatory Budgeting Belo Horizonte 18. Participatory Budgeting Paris 19. Betri Reykjavik (participatory budgeting and agenda-setting tool)
Binding decision making	20. E-voting in Switzerland 21. E-voting in Estonia 22. E-voting for Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 EP elections within the Green Party

3. Assessment of EU suitability, via desk research and a workshop with experts at EU level, about 1) improving existing digital tools, and 2) new possibilities for e-participation at EU level.

1. E-democracy: a literature review

E-democracy is a widely applied term today and describes a broad scope of practices involving the online engagement of the public in political decision making and opinion forming. As regards theoretical concepts of democracy, e-democracy is based mainly on models of participatory and deliberative democracy. However, after two decades of e-democracy, great expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy through the application of online tools for political participation and public discourse are vanishing. There is, however, no doubt that e-democracy will add new modes of communication among citizens and between actors of representative democracy and their constituencies. These changes not only add to online political processes, but they also affect the modes and conditions of offline political processes in many ways. They are dependent on the great variety of e-democracy tools applied, the nature of the political process these are embedded in, and the skills, demands and expectations of those involved in their application.

1.1. The EU democratic deficit in times of crisis

It is quite clear that scholarly debate, as well as research on the European public sphere and on European citizenship and identification with Europe as a political community, has intensified over recent years. This is due to the symptoms of the current crisis within the EU institutions and in relation to the idea of European integration. It is still believed by many that the perceived democratic deficit of the European Union indicates the need to foster a European public forum as a place for debate across public spheres that are established at (and restricted to) national Member States. Moreover, in that respect, there is a consensus that new modes of political communication via the internet have to play a role here. However, compared with a decade ago, far-reaching expectations and optimism envisaging the internet as a panacea to political disenchantment and as a way to establish new transnational spaces of European bottom-up political communication are scarce.

As regards the state of the European political system, it is argued that, on the one hand, especially in times of crisis, it is necessary to legitimise far-reaching decisions that will influence living conditions in the European Member States deeply. These decisions are to be reached through a lively process of deliberation about pros and cons, about needs, demands and duties. On the other hand, there is pessimism as to whether – in the current crisis that results in people focusing on national interests – there is enough homogeneity in the Union and strong identification with the EU as a transnational political entity. It is the observation of weak European solidarity and the predominance of national perspectives that actually feeds the so-called 'No Demos' discussion among scholars of European politics. The point of dissent here is whether Europe needs to develop a transnational cultural identity (which is held by many to be exclusively bound to the nation state), or whether a political identity – i.e. European citizens' commitment to the fundaments of the European political constitution – is sufficient to establish a new form of 'European citizenship' that would serve as a foundation for solidarity in the European Union. Proponents of greater EU integration base their cautionary optimism with regard to the 'Europeanisation' of European citizens on the further development of the discourse about Europe and thus on the further development of the European public sphere. In this respect, the development of a European identity and solidarity depends on chances and opportunities to discuss and define what is in the common European interest via a common European political discourse. This would include fostering the role of the European Parliament and a European cross-national party system.

Here, what has been coined the 'politicisation of Europe' in the current crisis is – despite the undeniable symptoms of a renationalisation of political discourse and Euroscepticism – regarded as offering the opportunity to strengthen the European identity. Since citizenship evolves in a political process of debate and emerges precisely outside of debates and conflicts about the public good, the current conflicts about EU policies and democratic legitimisation are regarded as a result of the stronger

engagement of citizens with the idea of Europe. On the other hand, it is evident that the crisis brings new forces and actors to the foreground that are not supportive of European integration and offer views that focus on national interests, and thus help to strengthen national identities. There is, however, consensus that the European public sphere has a strong bearing on the development of a European identity as a space for debate where collective identities are constructed and political communities are created.

1.2. The state of research on the European public sphere

Empirical research – mainly mass media research – into the European public sphere confirms that a Europeanisation of various national media publics is indeed observable:

- European issues, policies and actors are visible in the 'national' public spheres, i.e. in mass media coverage of political issues,
- there is reference in national media not only to EU policy making actors (vertical), but also to actors from other European Member States (horizontal),
- the same issues are addressed in the different national public spheres and similar frames of reference, or claims and arguments are put forward.

However, as regards the visibility of European actors, it is worth noting that it appears that the European Parliament lags behind other European institutions as being referred to in national mass media reporting and that national actors gain in visibility owing to the perception of a weak stance by European institutions in the context of the financial crisis. Recent research on media coverage of various aspects of a crisis of Europeanisation (financial crisis, refugee policy) shows the growing dominance of national perspectives and interest in a public discourse on the EU, but does not necessarily dismiss the notion of a European public sphere. It is held that the more that disputes occur among elites and national parties about European issues, the more Europe becomes visible in the national media – which, however, also implies a strong position of those holding EU-critical perspectives. 'Politicisation' of the European Union is an indicator of European issues coming to the fore of national agendas, but this, of course, does not necessarily lead to issues being framed as questions of common European concern which require European solutions. Whether politicised debates about Europe foster common European thinking and identities or renationalisation depends on discursive structures and dynamics. In this respect, the legitimisation of European policies, also via means of e-participation, might be supportive.

1.3. The internet and the European public sphere

With regard to the state of research into the European public sphere, it has been strongly stressed that, so far, the focus of research has been on elite mass media communication and that this research has neglected the relevance of new internet-based communication networks applied mainly by civil society actors. In this respect, some change can be observed, as there is a growing interest in internet-based political communication and its potential for establishing new public spheres. However, a decade ago optimism was widespread that as national public spheres declined, with passive audiences and disenchantment with politics, the internet would support the emergence of a trans-national public sphere that was more inclusive, deliberative and rooted in a transnational civil society. Such far-reaching expectations are scarcely put forward nowadays. Political communication via social media is currently a focus for research, but it is difficult to draw clear conclusions with regard to the role of social media in supporting the emergence of a vivid political public sphere.

- Internet-based political communication is not likely to develop into a supra-national public sphere, but rather establishes a network of a multitude of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels and on various issues.

- It is a matter of debate as to whether this multitude is able to bring about a space of common (public) interests, or whether these dispersed spaces restrict political communication to issue-related or ideologically closed communities.
- Indications and arguments for both can be found: i.e. that social media can empower underrepresented interests, as well as that there are reasons to doubt that social media would help to reduce inequalities in the political sphere.
- Online political communication has the potential to increase the responsiveness of, and exchange with, political representatives and their constituencies. However, so far this potential has been insufficiently put into practice. Online media by political institutions are often used in a vertical, and scarcely in horizontal or interactive, manner of communication.

Since the overall state of research on the empowering force of the internet is still insufficiently developed, the real potential for the internet to bring about a new 'public sphere' is impossible to assess. It can be summarised that there is an online space for political communication with many new features and options that go beyond or bypass mass-media channels. It is, however, a subject of debate as to what extent these features have the potential to democratise political communication and public discourse.

The notion put forward in the STOA report from 2011, that public spaces established by consultation processes offered by European institutions are often restricted to expert communities and at best help to establish segmented issue-related elite publics at European level, is confirmed by recent research. Research into the use of social media and internet sites by civil society organisations active at European level is just about to emerge. The few results available so far indicate that the restriction of publics at the European level to 'epistemic communities' and experts is not easily ruled out by internet-based networks organised by NGOs.

1.4. Experiences with digital tools in different types of e-participation

The assessment of the European Citizen Consultations by Kies et al. (2013), when they say that the ECC '*was a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument*' (Kies et al. 2013: 24), appears applicable for a great many e-participative instruments within various e-democracy sectors. It seems to be an ongoing theme that e-participative projects provide added personal value for participants and community capacity, but suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political impact.

A differentiated offer of **e-consultations** has been developing over the years at all government levels in a variety of formats (from simple questionnaires to open formats and crowdsourcing). However, it appears that, at times, projects that at first glance appear to be participative turn out not to be consultative or deliberative in nature, but have the objective of informing citizens about decisions that have already been made. In cases where citizen input is in fact the objective, there can be great uncertainty about what sort of input is desired and how best to produce it. There is a tension in e-consultation process design between the goals of quality of inputs and inclusivity. Often the issues at stake require highly specialised expertise that the average citizen does not possess but that are only available from civil society organisations. Well-designed e-consultation processes with transparent processing and an appreciation of inputs contribute to heightened legitimacy of policy agendas. E-consultation processes are of low value when topics are too broad, the outputs too general, and the rules on how to integrate outputs into the policy process are lacking.

In the area of **e-petitions,** successful examples of modernisation with the introduction of e-petition systems are observable. The increasing share of online petitions underlines high public acceptance but does not necessarily boost the overall amount of petition activity. Internet use does not automatically increase transparency and enhance the opportunities for participation. There are indications that to achieve such effects requires the cooperation of institutional and organisational reform and

technological modernisation. A certain level of civic knowledge or skills on part of the petitioners was also clearly seen to be needed in order for petitions to be successful.

On concrete topics of life and world relevance, **e-deliberation** systems enjoy high citizen interest and can be a cost-effective tool of engagement. A special advantage of e-deliberation can be that anonymity allows an exchange of ideas without any regard for hierarchical factors such as social status. However, in order to cultivate successful deliberation, and to ensure quality and a level of respect within the online discourse, a moderation system and structure is important. A balance must be struck between structuring e-participative events, such as adding moderators, which can have positive effects on the quality and therefore the impact of the deliberation, and the aspect of inclusivity, which appears incompatible with high expertise levels and complexity. It is obvious that the success of deliberative e-participation events depend on the deliberative skills of the participants. These are not equally distributed in society and require training. New formats of large-scale citizen deliberation (combining offline and online formats), such as the 'citizen forums' in Germany, can have stimulating effects on a wider scale as regards civic discourse and awareness of public issues of relevance.

The area of **e-budgeting** may, at this point in time, have produced some of the strongest results when it comes to influencing decision making, despite not necessarily leading to changed power relations between governments and citizens. Among the impacts identified are: support for demands for increased transparency, improved public services, accelerated administrative operations, better cooperation among public administration units, and enhanced responsiveness. Positive contributions to the political culture and competence of participants can also be expected. (e.g. extended participation opportunities, enhanced transparency of public policy, better quality of decision making, increased legitimacy, and a stronger identification with the local community). Cost reduction and major structural reforms are less likely to be achieved.

As regards **e-voting**, several challenges persist. It can be said that the dimensions of internet voting explored in the 2011 STOA report are still topical. In fact, their relevance is regularly emphasised when online elections in a variety of countries are accompanied by evaluations focusing, for instance, on turnout rates, security aspects, user friendliness or trust. Particularly striking is the large amount of criticism present in the literature. System vulnerabilities are made public on a regular basis, sometimes even by means of lawsuits. All in all, further developments are still needed with regard to technical aspects, legal frameworks, security, transparency and verifiability, as well as oversight and accountability. The Swiss e-voting trial was lauded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2012) for exemplifying good practice, the introduction being careful and limited, and efforts having been made to ensure integrity of the systems and to build public trust. At first sight, internet voting might be perceived as an opportunity to alleviate what is referred to as the EU's democratic deficit – manifested in continuously decreasing electoral participation in EU elections. However, as analyses of various cases within Europe where internet voting has been introduced show, such hopes have not been fulfilled. It is not only the convenience aspect that influences the decision as to whether or not a citizen votes, but rather political reasons such as political interest or satisfaction with the political system. Regarding these kinds of challenges, internet voting cannot be a technological quick fix.

An area to which much attention has been paid these last five years is **social media**. Research on the impact of social media on democracy is still inconclusive and allows only very tentative conclusions to be drawn as to the political dimensions. Research tends to agree that social media is playing an increasingly important role in civic and political life, as these communication opportunities are taken up by social movements and activists. Opinions seem to differ greatly regarding the impact social media use (such as Facebook and Twitter) has on online and offline participation. Results range from Facebook use leading to decreased participation in all areas, to online participation, and even offline protests, being promoted by the same site. However, in general, it does appear that there is a tendency for mobilisation to be medium-specific. While political websites tend to still mainly serve an

informative purpose, more and more politicians are becoming accessible through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, allowing for a dialogue between elected officials and citizens.

Social media seems to challenge established understandings and models of the public sphere. Making sense of the allegedly increasing role of the private, the personal affective, and the emotional perspectives in politics, and thinking ahead about ways for democratic institutions to respond to this possible transformation, seems expedient. Finally, in order to avoid the reproduction of old myths about the transformative potential of social media, future research in this dynamic field should also take the broader media ecology into consideration. More careful contextualisation, which reflects the dynamic interrelationships between traditional news media, digital media and the public, will help to avoid the traps of technological determinism.

A general problem that applies to all e-participatory procedures and tools is that a balance must be struck between structuring e-participative events and the aspect of inclusivity, which appears incompatible with high expertise levels and complexity. Among those making use of e-voting, e-deliberation and e-petitioning there is currently a noticeable overrepresentation of young white males with a high educational background. These individuals tend to migrate from offline voting, deliberation and petitioning to online versions without an increase of overall participation being achieved.

> '[...] *a vast amount of research shows that the costs and benefits of participation are generally skewed in favor of those with higher socio-economic status (SES) and education levels. While other factors, such as membership in civic and political organisations and various social networks, can mitigate the impacts of SES and education, it is clear that unless practitioners take corrective measures, participation of all varieties will be skewed*'. (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012: 1)

Naturally this problem has led to several mobilisation attempts, since a lack of diversity and representativeness of participatory projects inevitably results in decreasing interest from policy and decision makers and therefore in lower impact. Mobilisation has proven to be one of the great challenges of participatory projects in general. One of the explanations for this is that citizens have low confidence that their input in such projects will have any real weight in decision-making processes. Judging by the low significance of e-petitions and e-deliberative events for legally binding outcomes, this scepticism appears to be well-founded, even if a heightened legitimacy of policy agendas can be achieved. Deliberative civic engagements tend not to be embedded in political decision making, often making them short-lived, temporary, and focused on single issues, characteristics that may contribute to the scepticism of citizens regarding their significance. Further barriers preventing mobilisation are language problems and a low interest in European-level matters.

1.5. Experiences with e-participation at EU-level

The democratic innovations introduced in the course of the EU's 'participatory turn' represent a variety of participative instruments, practically all of which make use of digital tools in one or another form. They embody types of e-participation (mainly e-deliberative designs, e-consultations, e-initiatives or e-petitions) which are also practiced at national and sub-national levels; however, the supra-national nature of the EU poses at least three novel challenges to cope with: a large scale, language diversity, and trans-nationality.

Assessments of various types of deliberative participative designs reveal many starting points to improve their democratic quality. The lack of any impact on decision making is one the most striking findings. The often experimental character is not the only reason; at times excessively broad topics, excessively general outputs, and the lack of clear rules on how to integrate outputs into the policy process seem to be the biggest barriers. Opportunities for deliberation allowing for considered judgement are rare and usually limited to national communities. The 'Europolis' and 'Futurum' designs

represented positive exceptions and demonstrated the possibility of trans-national exchange. The fact that the focus is more frequently on civil society organisations rather than on ordinary citizens questions the ideal of inclusiveness. The lack of publicity of these democratic innovations, the silence of the media on them, and the difficulties in mobilising citizens for participation are special points of grievance.

A more differentiated view of the issue of policy impact acknowledges several types of influence: on the participants themselves, the wider public and formal decision making. The latter type of impact, rather than being understood as a one to one translation of suggestions into policy decisions, can mean improved deliberation in governmental bodies and more indirect impact by shaping the preparation of decisions along the various phases from agenda setting and problem analysis to framing choices and finally taking decisions. The impacts that can be expected also depend on institutional strategies in offering particular participative designs, for example, whether conceived as a policy instrument such as e-consultations via the 'Your voice in Europe' platform or a communication instrument with a transformative mission aimed at sensitising participants about EU policy issues such as the ECCs. Furthermore, although e-consultations have become a well-established instrument in practically all Commission directorates-general, which has certainly broadened the input into EU policy making and extended its knowledge base, serious flaws have been pointed out which need to be worked upon, such as a lack of transparency in processing and a lack of feedback.

Finally, experiences with the ECI have shown that the potential to act as an effective bridge between bottom-up claims to participate in EU policy making and formal institutions has not been realised as expected. Much acclaimed as the first transnational instrument of participatory democracy to be formally institutionalised, it has been, up to now, a tool more for civil society mobilisation than for citizen empowerment since it requires enormous organisational capacities on the part of the organisers of an ECI.

What consequences to draw as regards the future of these democratic innovations is of course a political question. From the perspective of participative democracy, the definite recommendation to the EU institutions is to focus on improving the existing e-participation tools at the EU level along the lines suggested by the assessments and the results of the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses presented in the relevant literature. The institutional singularity of the EU as a supra-national entity prevents a simple transposition of experiences to the EU level. Instead, careful selection and adaptation of positive models is required. This would suggest starting initiatives to promote new forms of e-participation and to gather experience through experimentation, for example with crowdsourcing inspired by successful projects at national level. Another option worth thinking about could be how to strengthen the European Parliament's representative character by building on MEPs as bridges to citizens with the support of digital platforms to facilitate citizens' participation in EU policy making. Further experimentation with appropriate new designs to foster the deliberative engagement of citizens would be valuable and, last but not least, a further exploration of the possibilities of integrating e-participative designs with external 'third places', i.e. social media platforms, seems worth considering.

2. Comparative analysis of 22 digital tools

The second part of the study consists of 22 case studies of digital tools at local, national and European levels. To understand which conditions lead to an actual impact on final decision making or agenda setting, the case studies were compared systematically using the crisp-set qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA) method. The comparative analysis leads to two types of findings. First, the comparison of the cases on the conditions and outcomes. The second part of the analysis identifies the conditions under which digital tools can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes: this answers the main research question. Both sections conclude with what can be learned from the paths identified.

2.1. Assessment of the different conditions

The study compares the 22 cases on the basis of 16 conditions and 2 outcomes. However, this executive summary only reports the results for the conditions that are part of the final configurations. These conditions concern whether cases used a combination of online and offline participation, a link was made with the formal decision-making process, the tool was sustainable, the participation process was clear from the start, a mobilisation and engagement strategy was in place, feedback was provided, voting was possible, and whether interaction possibilities existed. The assessment of the other conditions, such as the user-friendliness of the tool, moderation, and whether the initiative is a governmental initiative or not, can be found in the full report. For every condition, and with the help of concrete examples, an assessment was made of how many cases score positively on the condition and the relevance of the condition in relation to the outcomes.

2.1.1. Condition A: a combination of online and offline participation

This condition evaluates whether the tool offers the opportunity to participate not only online, but also offline ('hybrid or blended format'). In total, 14 of the 22 cases gave participants the possibility to participate online and/or offline. The case of Wiki Melbourne, the crowdsourcing of a new constitution in Iceland, and also the case of the European Citizens' Consultation (ECC) are classical examples of how digital instruments can contribute to democratic processes next to offline participatory events. Both have been extensive and long-lasting participation processes consisting of different online and offline phases. In other cases like Futurium and Berlin-Lichtenberg, offline meetings such as workshops, public events, community meetings, etc., also feed the online discussion and vice versa. For political parties such as Podemos, the German Pirate Party, and the Five Star Movement, offline meetings also play a vital role in the decision-making processes. Additionally, in several cases it was possible to vote online as well as offline; (Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Paris, e-voting in Switzerland and Estonia) or to sign a proposal online or offline (European Citizens' Initiative, voting in Estonia, voting in Switzerland, Open Ministry – at least for the Finnish Citizens' Initiative –).

Relevance

This condition can be expected to have an effect on the outcomes since offering both online and offline possibilities encourages the inclusion of citizens. Here the train of thought followed by initiators is usually that everybody should be able to participate in principle, even if they do not have online access or do not have sufficient digital skills. Or, as one of the interviewees of the participatory budgeting case in Berlin-Lichtenberg said: '*Because not everyone is comfortable with just one way [of participating]*'. Another consideration for combining online with offline activities is that deliberation works better offline than online. Kersting (2013: 278-279) is an advocate for a '*blended democracy combining online and offline instruments*', because online spaces can lead to self-affirmation and in-group bonding. And yet another argument for a combination is that online activities that build on existing offline networks are more effective in mobilising 'real world' participation (Gibson and McAllister 2013: 21). However, online and

offline participatory activities do not always have to complement each other. In cases of petitioning (petities.nl) or contacting politicians (theyworkforyou.com), the activities can substitute one another (see Gibson and Cantijoch 2013).

2.1.2. Condition B: link to the formal policy or political process

Almost all cases have some sort of link to the formal policy or political process (18 out of 22 cases). Two types of link were therefore specified on the basis of their different roles in the policy cycle:

a) *a link to a formal currently existing agenda-setting process* (10 of the 22 cases score positively: PB Paris, PB Berlin–Lichtenberg, Five Star Movement, German Pirate Party, Your voice in Europe, Futurium, Wiki Melbourne, Constitution Iceland, Podemos, Dutch E-consultation);
b) *a link to a formal currently existing policy or political decision-making process* (15 of the 22 cases score positively: PB Paris, PB Berlin–Lichtenberg, PB Belo Horizonte, Betri Reykjavik, E- voting Estonia, E-voting Switzerland, Five Star Movement, German Pirate Party, Your voice in Europe, Futurium, Wiki Melbourne, Green Primary, Constitution Iceland, Podemos, Dutch E-consultation).

The cases score positively on either of these two conditions when the tool facilitates the take-up of the participants' input in one or both of these phases of the policy cycle.

The political parties Podemos, the Five Star Movement, and the German Pirate Party form their link to the official decision-making process through political representation. The five PB cases in the study also scored positively on this condition, since the link between the participation process and the official governmental budgeting process is crystal clear. The participatory budgeting case of Berlin-Lichtenberg is embedded in the district budgeting process by what is referred to as the 'Rahmenkonzeption zum Bürgerhaushalt', whereby all procedural rules are also described, as well as in German municipal law (which excludes the transfer of direct decision-making powers to citizens).

The cases in which a link with the formal decision-making process is absent include the Dutch e-petition case, the Slovenian Predlagam case, and the European cases ECI and ECC09. In these cases, participants generate ideas for new policy measures off the cuff, i.e. these ideas do not necessarily match with existing formal decision-making processes.

Relevance

A link to the formal decision-making process might be of vital importance for the actual impact of the participatory input. The idea behind including this condition in the QCA analysis is that the extent to which it is embedded in a legal or policy framework can have a significant impact on whether or not a proposal, request, or general input from citizens is taken up politically and has an impact on the formal decision-making process.

A legal or policy framework does not always guarantee political uptake of the results. Take for example in the case of e-petitions. In all Member States of the European Union, citizens have the right to petition government, parliament or other public bodies. This is codified in constitutions and often in specific national laws and regulations. Sometimes the political uptake is prescribed in specific policy or regulation, as in the Slovenian Predlagam. Proposals in the Predlagam must be given an official response from the competent authority of the government of the Republic of Slovenia, if at least 3 % of the users active in the previous 30 days voted in favour of the proposal, and if there are more votes in favour than against. Official responses are also required in the cases of the Finnish and European Citizens' Initiatives. Badouard (2010) argues, referring to the case of Your Voice of Europe, that obligations to provide adequate feedback place some pressure on the decisions to be taken as well as entailing acknowledgment of the participants as legitimate political actors. A link to the formal decision-making process does not always signify that the outcomes of the e-participation initiative will be legally binding. In fact this is generally not the case.

2.1.3. Condition C: sustainability

The sustainability of a digital participation tool relates to whether or not provisions for the future, such as maintenance and improvement or expansion of the tool, have been made. For example, were user experiences used to improve the tool? The majority of the cases – 14 out of the 22 cases – scored positively here: abgeordenetenwatch.de, theyworkforyou.com, PB Paris, PB Berlin–Lichtenberg, PB Belo Horizonte, Betri Reykjavik, E- voting Estonia, E-voting Switzerland, Five Star Movement, Your voice in Europe, Futurium, Podemos, Dutch e-petitions and Predlagam.

Cases of tools that have not been used repeatedly score negatively. For instance, the European Citizen's Consultation (ECC09) or the Iceland constitutional crowdsourcing case. One interviewee is quite critical of the lack of sustainability of the ECC. '*They [the EU] are aware that we need to try to find new ways of involving citizens. So that's why they have been spending all this money. But then they are doing a one shot experiment and they don't include it into the decision-making process. That is a problem. They don't think of a long-term solution for implementing citizen participation at the EU level. So it cannot work. Then it's better to do nothing.*'

Sometimes tools that have existed for a longer period are not, or are only marginally, improved, and also score negatively on the sustainability condition. One example is the Dutch e-consultation website internetconsultatie.nl or – at least until more recent times, as evidenced by the proposal for revisions from September of this year – the European Citizens' Initiative. This might be explained by a lack of political urgency or willingness. Other reasons for a lack of sustainability can be a lack of funding (in the case of the Open Ministry in Finland) which caused the downfall of the Open Ministry as a crowdsourcing service platform.

Relevance

This condition is taken from a study by Panopoulou et al. (2014), which attempted to determine the success factors for e-participatory projects. The study is based on reviewed literature on e-government and e-participation success, and on a survey of practitioners across Europe. Sustainability was seen as a success factor in the literature as well as by the practitioners. There are various reasons why the sustainability of a tool is important for success, an important one being the attempt to improve the user friendliness of the tool. Or, as one of the developers of the Betri Reykjavik tool said: '*We are always working on simplifying the process, in terms of how to participate. And that, I think, is in general a weakness of participatory processes, that they can be too complicated*'. In other cases improvements have been made over time to increase positive responses from government authorities. This is highlighted by the case of Predlagam, which succeeded by endorsing five or six proposals on a monthly basis (before there was no lower limit) to the competent authorities. The idea is that they now carry more weight and are more likely to succeed.

2.1.4. Condition D: communication or engagement strategy

This condition reflects on the communication or engagement strategies used to mobilise participants. Questions raised here are: has the possibility to participate been effectively communicated to the target group? Have different strategies been used to attract different target groups? Has the strategy succeeded in mobilising different groups of citizens to use the tool? Some of the tools have facilitated different e-participation trajectories, such as the Dutch e-consultation website, Futurium, Your Voice in Europe, and the ECI. In these cases there is quite a lot of variation between the different trajectories. In order to assess the score for the communication and engagement strategy of these tools, particular attention was paid to the extent to which the tool/platform itself was well-known.

In half of the cases (11 of the 22) an effective communication or engagement strategy was in place. The mass media are important mediators in several cases and the attention of the mass media to the tool

and the participatory process is generally important for mobilising participants. As in the case of abgeordnetwatch.de, the annual report of the monitoring website states media partners serve as important crowd-pullers with one-third of the visitors finding the platform through media. This can be seen in other cases as well, such as the Predlagam, Pirate Party Germany, Podemos and the Five Star Movement. Two of the participatory budgeting cases also received a lot of media attention (Belo Horizonte and Paris). However, in these six cases media attention has not been constant. After the first buzz around the launch of the initiative, the attention of the media regressed after a while.

Different target groups require different engagement strategies. In order to reach a high diversity of participants, it can be important to have an offline communication strategy as well. This might be easier to organise for local initiatives, as in the participatory budgeting case Berlin-Lichtenberg. The researcher and administrator that were interviewed for this case stated that decentralised meetings in community centres were an important way for community workers to reach new people every year and to get them involved in the participatory budgeting for the district.

In the other half of the cases, the general public appears to not be familiar with the tool and lay citizens were not mobilised. This was the case for Predlagam, the Dutch e-consultation, theyworkforyou.com, Wiki Melbourne, and the Open Ministry. In the Dutch e-consultation case the researcher interviewed noted that some civil servants did not have a problem at all with the tool being unknown to the general public; they did not want too many responses in the consultations, but they only wanted a few people who knew the ins and outs to react. Remarkably, all the European cases also score low on their engagement strategy: the Green Primary, Futurium, ECI, Your Voice in Europe and ECC. In the European cases not much effort has been invested in gaining a broader reputation among target groups other than the usual suspects (civil society organisations at European level).

Sometimes an active large-scale engagement strategy is not needed in order to mobilise participants. The Dutch e-petition site gets about 2 million visitors per month without having to spend one euro on it. It gets its name and fame mostly through a snowball effect via social media and more importantly – according to the founder – e-mail as well. The low threshold of this tool – sign a petition by entering your name and e-mail address – plays an important role here, as well as easy ways to share e-petitions via social media and e-mail.

Relevance

In the above-mentioned study by Panapoulou et al (2014), a 'promotion plan' is mentioned as one of the success factors for designing e-participation initiatives. They define it in terms of utilising the most appropriate promotional activities for each stakeholder group. The engagement and communication strategy can thus be very significant in predicting the outcomes of the e-participation process. A lack of diversity among participants, and/or low representativeness of the participants, can result in decreasing interest from policy and decision makers in the input and therefore in a lower impact.

Mobilisation has proven to be one of the great challenges of participatory projects in general. One of the explanations is that citizens have low confidence that their input in such projects will have any real weight in the decision-making processes. When it comes to e-participation at the EU level, this scepticism appears to be well-founded, as is made clear in the literature review. Deliberative civic engagement tends not to be embedded in political decision making, often making it short-lived, temporary, and focused on single particular issues. Either that or it lacks even the support and engagement of decision makers. Other barriers preventing mobilisation are language problems and a low interest in European level matters (see Section 3.5.5).

2.1.5. Condition E: clarity on the process

This condition reflects how clearly the participation process has been organised (for participants) and to what extent expectations about the process are managed properly. Is it clear to participants, from the outset, what the goals of the process are? How far does their influence reach? What will be done with their input? Is it clear to participants which actors have responsibilities in the decision-making process? In 15 out of 22 cases clarity for participants had been adequately delivered on the participatory process: abgeordnetwatch.de, theyworkforyou.com, PB Paris, PB Berlin–Lichtenberg, PB Belo Horizonte, Betri Reykjavik, E- voting Estonia, E-voting Switzerland, Five Star Movement, German Pirate Party, Your voice in Europe, Wiki Melbourne, Green Primary, Constitution Iceland and Open Ministry (Finnish Citizen Initiative).

The City of Paris provides extensive information about the participatory budgeting process. Firstly, the website provides a fair share of infographics, FAQs and information, which explain the participative budgeting process and how to participate. In the proposal submission phase, the submitting participant(s) are provided with information regarding the legal framework and support on financial aspects. Also in the case of Melbourne, and in the case of participatory budgeting in Berlin, the expectations on the process were well managed, online as well as offline. The organisers in Melbourne were clear that '*There is no guarantee that all suggestions can be incorporated into the Future Melbourne draft plan. A number of the recommendations fall outside the City of Melbourne's areas of responsibility*'. This kind of transparency did not seem to discourage participants.

In other tools, clarity was particularly lacking with regard to the decision-making process and how the input of participants was part of that process. One of the interviewees on Predlagam argued: '*The policy process is very complex. And citizens should be aware how complex it is. I don't think that they should be fooled. And in this case, in the case of this tool, I think they are being fooled, because there are still a lot of proposals and they are just going into a blackbox where nothing happens with them*'. For the European Citizens' Consultation 2009 the argument was that: '*So the process in itself was clearly presented and well communicated but the organisers were unable to say what would be the impact*'. There are also other such cases. In the European Citizens' Initiative and Podemos, the official steps in the participation process are clear, but almost no proposal reaches the final stage. Politicians from Podemos claim to incorporate input from the online discussions in their considerations, but it is not clear how this indirect influence of participants actually works in practice.

Relevance

Clarity on the process is supposed to encourage and empower participants and ultimately it should prevent participants from being disappointed. However, disappointment can be found in several cases. Beside the Podemos case, the digital budgeting case in Belo Horizonte is probably the most striking. The winning project in 2008 has not yet been finished, because there is a problem in terms of land use and land property. After this disappointment, participation fell significantly: from 124 320 citizens in 2008 to 25 378 in 2011 and 8 900 in 2013. Trust is hard to gain but easy to lose. In the case of the crowdsourcing of the constitution in Iceland, the transparency of the participation process seems to have created a lot of public appreciation and even a sense of co-ownership with the participants, according to one of the interviewees. An actual impact on decision making is easier to achieve if it is clear beforehand exactly how the participatory process will contribute to the final decisions.

2.1.6. Condition F: possibility to interact with other participants

This study investigates the way the diversity of views is managed within the tool. Does the tool offer the possibility to deliberate? Deliberation is broadly defined here as the opportunity for participants to exchange views within the digital tool(s) available in the case. In 13 cases it was possible to interact with other participants in the online tool. For the cases in which crowdsourcing was used to co-create

a proposal, the tools facilitate deliberation between participants: Open Ministry in Finland, the constitutional crowdsourcing process in Iceland, Wiki Melbourne and Predlagam. Registered users of the political parties who are also aiming for collaborative decision making (Pirate Party, Podemos and Five Star Movement) have several tools at their disposal to debate issues. These include the European Citizens' Consultation 09 and the Futurium.

The four participatory budgeting tools include the possibility to comment on proposals to spend the municipal budget. This worked particularly well in the case of Betri Reykjavik where the most popular arguments against the proposal were presented next to the most popular arguments in favour of the proposal. One of the interviewees mentioned that by structuring the debate in this way – views are exchanged strictly by arguing for or against proposals – which really helped to improve its quality: '*What we tried to do was to split the screen in two so people who support the idea can write points for it on the left side of the screen (…), and on the right side of the screen, people who are against the idea can put their points… And almost overnight (…) the quality level of the debate increased a lot*'. It minimises the extent to which a comment can refer to another comment rather than the proposal itself: '*If you see a point, you don't agree with, there's no way to comment on it. You have to write a counterpoint*'.

The possibility to interact does not equal deliberative quality. In some cases in which interaction between participants was facilitated, like the PB in Berlin-Lichtenberg, the diversity of views on the different proposals appeared to be limited: only a few reactions can be found online. In the case of European Citizens' Consultation (ECC09), the online deliberation varied a lot between countries.

Relevance
The need for deliberative possibilities in e-participation projects is debated in the literature. On the one hand, deliberation is supposed to enhance input quality when it comes to e-consultation (Albrecht 2012). In fact, Albrecht even advocates a model of deliberative e-consultations, which not only consists of collecting comments on a policy proposal, but also allows for discussions on these among the participants and with representatives of the EU institutions concerned (see next condition). Organ (2014) points out that even if no legal outcomes of e-participation are achieved, the legitimacy of the policy agenda can be increased through the act of deliberation. In the case studies of Wiki Melbourne and the Pirate Party, the exchange of ideas was seen as stimulating a more constructive mind-set among participants rather than just approving or disapproving of ideas.

On the other hand, deliberative civic engagement seems to be of a temporary nature, being employed for singular issues and spanning only a short amount of time (Leighninger 2012). Kersting criticises the quality of online deliberative instruments, which appear to be '[…] *more oriented towards the construction of identity and community building than towards political dialogue and deliberation*'. (Kersting 2013: 270). He also observes that web forums on the internet are low in deliberative quality, meaning that '[…] *they are not argumentatively-respectful and consensus-oriented, but are often pure monologues and frequently aggressive*' (Kersting 2013: 277). Another interesting argument against deliberation, but in favour of voting or signing, was made by a researcher who studied petities.nl: '*You can only sign or not sign. You cannot co-edit a text for example. At the same time, your voice is not lost as happens often in deliberative settings where a participant can take part in a discussion but where in the end it is difficult to ascertain where and how one's input has been used. With petitions, your voice just counts*'.

2.1.7. Condition G: possibility to interact with decision makers

This condition reflects whether the tool offers the possibility to deliberate with decision makers. As with the former condition, deliberation in this context means the opportunity to ask questions and/or exchange views. Decision makers can be administrators as well as politicians. Do they participate in the online tool?

In eight cases there is some form of interaction between the participants and the decision makers. In five cases this interaction takes place between participants and politicians, obviously in the four cases of the political parties (Five Star Movement, Podemos, Pirate Party and – only in incidental Facebook chats – in the online Green primary) and in the case of abgeordenetenwatch.de, where questions and answers between politicians and citizens are moderated. In the other three cases public servants are involved. In Wiki Melbourne a team of city officers answered questions from participants, corrected factual errors made in edits, linked citizens to relevant documents, and updated participants on events and developments concerning the project. In the participatory budgeting cases of Berlin-Lichtenberg and Paris, policy officers also interacted with citizens about their proposals.

Relevance
Research on the case of ECC09 brought to light that politicians criticised participants for not understanding political reality. In that study Karlsson (2013) therefore recommends a meet and greet between politicians – MEPs in that case – and participants at an earlier stage. In that way they could exchange perspectives and knowledge before the content of the proposals is decided upon. The interaction between participants and decision makers would thus improve the quality of the output (i.e. closer to political reality), and therefore most probably the impact of the participatory input on political agendas or final decisions. This same argument was made by the researcher who studied Predlagam. He claimed the tool to be too open, and recommended that it should provide more information on what kind of input the government wants from citizens and should also provide more such structures in its design. Furthermore, the initiator of Open Ministry proposed an improvement of the participatory process around citizens' initiatives whereby citizens would work together with the parliamentary committee. The hope was that it would stimulate a discussion on the content of the proposal between citizens and politicians to increase mutual understanding and that, in the end, it might help to improve the legal quality of the draft legislation. Interactions between decision-makers and participants contributes to a better match between the needs of decision makers and citizens' input, and to the quality of the input.

2.1.8. Condition H: quantitative aggregation

Many cases (17 of the 22 cases) use some form of quantitative aggregation. In order to be able to make an appropriate comparison, further distinction is made between:

- *voting on (or signing for) proposals with the aim of reaching a certain threshold* (6 of the 22 cases: Five Star Movement, German Pirate Party, Podemos, Open Ministry, Predlagam and European Citizens' Initiative);
- *voting on proposals in order to prioritise individual proposals or decide on elections/referenda* (11 of the 22 cases: PB Paris, PB Berlin–Lichtenberg, PB Belo Horizonte, Betri Reykjavik, E-voting Estonia, E-voting Switzerland, Five Star Movement, German Pirate Party, Green Primary, Constitution Iceland and European Citizens' Consultation).

The first type of vote, often in the form of signatures, is collected in the agenda-setting phase. An example can be found in the Predlagam case, where – mentioned earlier – at least 3 % of users who were active in the previous 30 days needed to have voted in favour of the proposal. Other examples are the Finnish Citizen Initiative or the European Citizens' Initiative where 50 000 and 1 000 000 signatures are needed respectively. When these thresholds are met, the Finnish parliament is obliged to discuss the proposal and vote on it, and the European Commission must examine the proposal for legislation and decide whether or not the initiative warrants taking legislative steps.

The second type of voting takes place in a later phase of the decision-making process. These are votes for specific proposals, in order to prioritise the range of proposals or votes in elections and referenda. An example of this second kind of voting is the participatory budgeting case in Berlin-Lichtenberg,

where different budget proposals are voted upon by participants online and via surveys, resulting in a top ten. In the participatory budgeting case in Paris, the online and offline votes on specific proposals in the final phase of the process determine which projects receive the estimated budgets. Another example is the ECC09 where 88 recommendations from the national consultations were presented on each national website; the 1 635 participants were asked to vote online or by mail for 15 recommendations that they wanted to become the final result of the ECC.

Relevance
Quantitative aggregation is easy to achieve online and the numbers provide an indication of the level of support for a proposal. This indication is relevant for decision makers in considering the proposal. When a proposal is supported by many, this might enlarge the chances of political uptake of these ideas. However, political willingness should also be there. The crowdsourced constitution in Iceland gained the support of 67 % of the voters during a referendum (voter turnout was 49 %), but still the constitution was not voted upon by the parliament on account of political unwillingness.

In other cases, quantitative aggregation creates a threshold for entering the decision-making process to begin with. This is the case for Predlagam, where a proposal that achieves enough votes must receive an official response of the competent authority of the government of the Republic of Slovenia. The cases of the political parties of Podemos and the German Pirate Party show comparable procedures for individual ideas. The ideas need to reach a certain level of support before the proposals are given further consideration. However, care should be taken not to give too much weight and meaning to the voting results regarding digital tools given that the representativeness of the participants could be low (this might be true in many cases).

2.1.9. Condition I: feedback to participants

This condition reflects the extent to which participants get feedback from the organisers and/or the addressees, such as administrators or politicians, on a) their contributions, and b) on the final decisions (i.e. are they informed about the way their contributions have been used?). In 14 cases such feedback was actually given. These were: abgeordenetewatch.de, Predlagam, Open Ministry in Finland, constitutional crowdsourcing in Iceland, Wiki Melbourne, Berlin-Lichtenberg, Futurium, Five Star Movement, PB Belo Horizonte, PB Paris, Betri Reykjavik and the three e-voting cases.

The extent to which feedback was given differed. Some of the cases can be considered to be examples of best practice when it comes to providing feedback. Digital tools can actually be very supportive in providing transparency about the participatory outcomes and final decisions. For example, the wiki tool used by the municipality in Melbourne to open up the vision document for input was an instrument to maximise transparency. All contributions throughout the process and outcomes of offline activities were fed back into this wiki by City of Melbourne officers. The wiki tool manages revisions and shows participants what has happened with their contributions. Also in the case of Betri Reykjavik, the website forum, the municipality website and emails are used to inform citizens about developments in the decision-making process, as well as implementation and later developments (Bjarnason and Grimsson, 2016): '*If there's an idea that is going into processing, people can track it on the website (…) and each time there's a status update, you know, it goes into a committee and is discussed and there are meeting notes, they are sent to all the participants*' (Interview 39, organiser).

When looking at the cases that score negatively on providing feedback to participants, it is striking that it is especially the tools at EU level that often fail to provide proper feedback: ECI, Your Voice in Europe and ECC09. However, the literature review reveals that the website portal for petitions of the European Parliament has been improved regarding this point. In November 2014 a new petitions web portal was introduced, possessing more feedback features on the status of petitions (next to more information on

the Parliament's areas of competence). In the case of ECI, the information supplied by the website itself is generally very good with exceptions in the area of result feedback. There is a lack of clear organiser feedback to supporting citizens due to a gap in the existing OCS (online collection system). The recent proposal for revision of the ECI does address this by allowing organisers or the Commission to collect email addresses to improve communication efforts. With Your Voice in Europe, a synopsis report on the outcomes of an e-consultation is required but in many cases it is not provided (yet). And in the case of ECC09, no feedback was given on the final outcomes of the process.

Relevance
Feedback is significant because it relates to the trust participants have in the process and the political system. The interviewed organiser of Wiki Melbourne put it as follows: '*It is almost like you extend the respect to people as if they were sitting in a room talking to you. You would expect to have to respond to them. Otherwise it's just plain rude, right? […] If you take that mind-set, you just leave a comment: "I just moved this over to this section, because it seemed more appropriate over here" or "Sorry, that point, we're not legally able to change that part of the law, so I had to delete it. But I'll point you to the state government body who is responsible for that". It is those types of contributions and changes that maintain the trust during the process*'. The organiser of Betri Reykjavik who was interviewed is very insistent on the importance of proper feedback as well, also in terms of common courtesy. '*And obviously at the end, when the idea is agreed on or rejected, then everybody gets an email as well. It's super important (…). Otherwise, you're really not respecting people's time*.' This is confirmed in a survey of participants in the Dutch e-consultation case: participants indicated that participation should be rewarded more, for example by ensuring that responses are published on the site without delay.

Feedback, even if the message is that the participants' input is not going to be used, can increase the democratic value of the tool: '*It is more about participating in a democratic process. To me, a petition is also a success when the answer of a recipient is: "sorry, that is not going to happen, for this and this reason". After which the signatories might even agree*', according to the initiator of petitie.nl. In the case of Predlagam, it turns out that – despite the high amount of negative responses – users appreciate the feedback the ministry provides as it shows the ministry is giving adequate consideration to their suggestions. In contrast, in cases where participants perceive responses to be standardised, cynicism increases. Moreover, when the organisation is able to provide participants with feedback, it is a sign of a well-organised participation process. Feedback implies that the organisation knows how it can and will use the input of participants or why it can't or won't. In that way, the impact on decision making is discussed in the process.

2.2. Assessment of the outcomes

As well as the different conditions, the outcomes of the e-participatory processes in which the digital tools were used were also measured. An obvious option for the outcome variable would be 'a positive result' that can be operationalised in very different ways. A common criticism of e-participation practices at EU-level is that they are a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument (as in Kies et al. 2013: 24, with regard to ECC). It seems to be an ongoing theme that e-participative projects might provide added personal value for participants and community capacity, but suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political impact. Actual impact on the policy or political agenda, or on the final decisions made, was therefore the focus of this study. This study identified two key outcome factors defining a positive result of the different e-participation tools: (i) an actual impact on the final decisions; (ii) an actual impact on political agenda setting.

2.2.1. Outcome A: actual impact on final decisions

This outcome measure reflects the extent to which the results of e-participation initiatives were taken-up by the policy makers and/or politicians and actually influenced their final decisions. Van Dijk (2012)

calls the outcome 'influence on political decisions': '*The decisive touchstone of eParticipation in terms of democracy*'. The most relevant question considered was: Is the majority of the input suggested by the participants recognisably incorporated in law proposals, policy documents like EU communications, political party programmes, election results and/or implemented in municipal budgets, etc.? Did the participatory input have a substantive and/or repeated impact on decisions made?

In some cases, the participatory input entailed many different proposals/consultations as is the case for Predlagam, Open Ministry (Finnish Citizen Initiative), the Dutch e-consultation and Your Voice in Europe. In those cases, the score concerned whether the majority of the input had an actual impact. On the basis of the desk research, the questionnaires and the interviews it was assessed that there was a substantive impact on the final decision in twelve cases. That half of the cases showed an impact on decision making is a quite positive result overall, since in the literature it is generally concluded that few decisions of government, political representatives and civil servants have changed on account of the input of citizens through e-participation. Van Dijk (2010) concluded that '*scarcely any influence of eParticipation on institutional policy and politics can be observed yet*' (Van Dijk, 2010). Or Millard et al (2008: 76) writing: '*Most administrations do not (yet) have mechanisms and capacities in place to cope with a significant increase in participation*'.

The cases that score positively on 'impact on final decisions' are: Wiki Melbourne, Berlin-Lichtenberg, Your Voice in Europe, Pirate Party Germany, Five Star Movement, PB Belo Horizonte, PB Paris, Betri Reykjavik, the Green Primary and e-voting in Estonia and Switzerland. It is interesting to note that all the e-voting cases and the participatory budgeting cases have – without exception – an impact on the final decisions. For the e-voting cases, this may not be that surprising, since voting is a legal right with actual impact. The literature review already foretold that, at this point in time, the area of e-budgeting has produced some of the strongest results when it comes to influencing decision making.

2.2.2. Outcome B: actual impact on the policy or political agenda

This outcome factor is related to the outcome factor of 'actual impact on final decisions', but focused on another part of the policy cycle: the agenda-setting phase (before the decision making). Did the input in the online participation process have a substantive and/or repeated effect on the policy or political agenda? Impact on the agenda concerns the effects of the contributions from e-participation on the political or policy debate, without influencing the actual decision-making process per se. For instance, in the case of the Finnish Citizen Initiative, 15 legislative proposals by citizens reached the threshold of 50 000 signatures to be debated in parliament. These proposals were handled properly: initiators were heard by committees, and these committee hearings were open to all MPs and to the media (which was a novelty in itself). However, only one of these citizens' initiatives has led to changes in the law: the gender neutral marriage legislation. So the input of citizens in the form of legislative proposals did have a significant and repeated impact on the political agenda, but the actual impact on final decisions lags behind. The Iceland case also scores positively on 'agenda setting' while not having an actual impact on the final decisions. The Constitutional Council of 25 citizens presented its draft to the Althingi, the House of Representatives in Iceland, where it was discussed. However, the draft met quite some resistance from politicians, which led to troubled parliamentary deliberations. A referendum on the draft constitution followed, with a positive outcome. However, the impact on the decision-making process remained zero, since in the end the parliament never took up the proposed constitution, it was never brought to vote, and it never went into effect.

Eleven cases score positively on the outcome factor 'actual impact on agenda setting'. Two positive cases have already been mentioned: Finnish Citizen Initiative (with the involvement of Open Ministry), and Iceland constitutional crowdsourcing. The other cases are: the Dutch e-consultation, Wiki

Melbourne, Futurium, participatory budgeting in Berlin, Paris and Reykjavik and the collective decision-making tools of the Pirate Party and Five Star Movement.

2.3. Analysis of configurations

Qualitative Comparative Analysis enables systematic analysis of the conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient to produce the outcome. In the previous section, the various conditions were explored. In this section, cases that show similar configurations, i.e. they have exactly the same scores on relevant conditions and the outcome, are grouped. The resulting tables are called *truth tables*. By making these steps, similarities and differences between cases on the conditions and outcome values systematically come to light. The various paths towards the outcomes 'impact on final decision' and 'impact on political or policy agenda' are assessed in the final steps of the csQCA.

2.3.1. Impact on decision making

Two cases were eliminated for the analysis of configurations for the outcome impact on final decisions. The two monitoring websites do not aim for achieving an impact on final decisions and are therefore not included in this truth table. Six conditions are included in the truth table with configurations associated with the outcome 'final impact on decision making'. These six conditions appeared to have a stronger connection with the outcome than other conditions; they showed frequent presence in combination with the positive outcome (and non-presence in relation to the negative outcome).

Table 1 – Truth table with configurations for 'impact on final decisions'

	Link to formal decision making	Sustain-ability	Mobilisation and engagement strategy	Participatory process and goals clarified	Feedback to participants	Voting to consult/ decide	Impact
PB Paris **PB Berlin–Lichtenberg** **PB Belo Horizonte** **Betri Reykjavik** **E- voting Estonia** **E-voting Switzerland** **Five Star Movement**	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
German Pirate Party	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Your voice in Europe	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
Futurium	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
Wiki Melbourne	1	0	0	1	1	0	1
Green Primary Constitution Iceland	1	0	0	1	1	1	C
Podemos	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Open Ministry	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Dutch e-petitions	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Predlagam	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
European Citizens' Coons.	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
E-consultation	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
European Citizens' In.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Out of the twenty cases in this truth table, twelve cases show a significant impact on final decisions. Seven of these twelve cases score positively on all six conditions. These are the cases of Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Paris, PB in Berlin-Lichtenberg, PB in Belo Horizonte, Betri Reykjavik, e-voting in

Estonia, e-voting in Switzerland and the Five Star Movement. This finding suggests that having impact on final decisions, involves:

1. creating a link to the formal decision-making process (in these cases via embeddedness in the policy process, elections/referenda and official political representation);
2. offering a digital tool that has been there for a while and to which several alterations have been made to improve the participatory process (sustainability);
3. having an active mobilisation and engagement strategy;
4. being clear on the participatory process and its contribution to the overall decision-making process from the start (for the participants);
5. providing participants with feedback; and
6. including an option where participants vote in order to decide on prioritising proposals or on elections/referenda.

The other cases show that not all these six conditions are *necessary* to produce the outcome. The Pirate Party in Germany is positively rated on the link to formal decision making (1), the mobilisation strategy (3), clarification of the participatory process (4), and the possibility to vote to (co-)decide (6). But Liquid Feedback – the backbone of online decision-making processes in the German Pirate Party – appeared not to be sustainable and provided insufficient feedback for participants. Your Voice in Europe has positive scores on the link to formal decision making (1), on the sustainability of the tool (2) and the participatory process and clarity for participants on the participatory process (4), but not on the other three conditions. Futurium is linked to formal decision making as well (1), is sustainable as a tool (2), and it also provides feedback to participants (5). The path of Wiki Melbourne also includes a link to the formal decision-making process (1), as well as a clearly communicated participatory process (4), and in addition participants are provided with feedback (5). One of the configurations is inconsistent: the same combination of conditions corresponds with both a positive and a negative outcome. This is the combination of (1) a link to formal decision making; (4) a clearly communicated participation process; and (6) the possibility to vote. These conditions are positively scored in the Green Primary case (with a positive outcome) as well as in the case of the Iceland constitution (with a negative outcome).

The contradictory configurations can be explained by a difference in type of link to formal decision-making. Although both cases have a link to the formal decision-making process, in the case of the Iceland constitution the link still leaves a lot of room to the real decision makers in the Icelandic parliament. The governmental committee published a provisional report in the spring of 2014 in which they identified the Constitutional Council's draft as one of several possible alternatives for a new constitution, leaving the draft constitution on ice. In the Green Primary, the online voting result is directly translated in the election of two 'Spitzenkandidaten' (top-ranked candidates), something which leaves no room to make a different judgement. This comparison of cases makes clear that there are different pathways to an impact on the final decision; i.e. different combinations of conditions lead to the same outcome. The path with six positive conditions shows consistency and explains seven cases; that makes it an empirically stronger result than the five individual paths in which two or three of the conditions are lacking, and of which one path is inconsistent.

The link to the formal decision-making process is present in all configurations with a positive outcome. Thus the minimisation clearly shows that it is *necessary* to establish a link to the formal decision-making process, which then organises the potential uptake of the participatory input. Of the 12 configurations, 11 also include the condition that the participatory process and its aims be sufficiently clarified from the start. Strictly speaking this is thus not a necessary condition. However, the importance of the two conditions is supported by the fact that none of the cases that have a negative outcome score positively on both of the conditions 'link to formal decision' and 'participatory process clarified' (excluding the case of the Iceland constitution; this contradiction was discussed before).

The link to formal decision making, even in combination with clarification of the participatory process, is not *sufficient* to produce the outcome. To create an impact on a final decision it also helps to have a sustainable tool, one which has been improved over time (in 9 of the 12 cases); to have an active mobilisation and engagement strategy (in 8 of the 12 cases); to provide feedback for participants (in 10 of the 12 cases); and to include a possibility to vote (in 9 of the 12 cases).

2.3.2. Agenda setting

Sixteen from the total scope of 22 cases are included in the truth table on agenda setting. The websites abgeordenetenwatch.de and theyworkforyou.com are aimed at monitoring politics, the e-voting cases (including the Green Primary) and PB Belo Horizonte are aimed at making final decisions. These six cases are therefore excluded from this analysis. In the analysis of configurations for agenda setting, six conditions are included. These six conditions have a stronger connection with agenda setting than the other conditions measured in this study.

Table 2. Truth table with configurations for 'agenda setting'

	Combination of online and offline (participants' contribution)	Link to specific existing formal agenda in policy/politics	Possibility to interact with participants	Possibility to interact with decision makers	Clarity on participatory process and goals for the participants	Policy agenda setting
PB Paris **PB Berlin-Lichtenberg** **Five Star Movement** **German Pirate Party** **Wiki Melbourne**	1	1	1	1	1	**1**
Constitution Iceland	1	1	1	0	1	**1**
Futurium	1	1	1	0	0	**1**
Betri Reykjavik	0	0	1	0	1	**1**
Open Ministry	1	0	1	0	1	**1**
Your Voice in Europe	0	1	0	0	1	**1**
E-consultation	0	1	0	0	0	**1**
European Citizen Consul.	1	0	1	0	0	**0**
Podemos	1	1	1	1	0	**0**
Predlagam	0	0	1	0	0	**0**
Dutch e-petitions	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
European Citizens' In.	1	0	0	0	0	**0**

Eleven cases scored positively on the agenda-setting outcome. For five of these cases – Participatory Budgeting in Paris, Participatory Budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg, the Five Star Movement, the Pirate Party Germany and Wiki Melbourne – the path towards agenda setting involved:

1. the possibility to participate not only online but also offline;
2. a link to a specific existing formal agenda in policy or politics;
3. the possibility within the tool to interact with other participants;
4. the possibility within the tool to interact with decision makers; and
5. being clear on the participatory process and its goals from the start (for the participants).

Other cases that succeeded in setting the agenda did not tick all these boxes. The cases of Betri Reykjavik, Your Voice in Europe and the Dutch ministerial e-consultation did not include the possibility to participate offline. In Betri Reykjavik and Open ministry new ideas are raised by participants that do not necessarily relate to a specific existing formal agenda in policy or politics. In

Your Voice in Europe and the Dutch e-consultation case interaction between participants is not facilitated by the tool. The tools of Open Ministry, the Iceland constitution process, Betri Reykjavik, Futurium and the Dutch e-consultation do not offer the possibility to interact with decision makers online. In the case of Futurium and the e-consultation in the Netherlands, it is not made sufficiently clear in the tool how the participation works and/or how the participatory input contributes to the decision-making process.

This comparison demonstrates that in the truth table more unique pathways are identified for agenda-setting processes than for the impact on decision-making processes outcome. The cases observed also showed more variety in their paths towards political agenda setting. The case of the Dutch e-consultation particularly deserves our attention because this case scores positively only on the link to the formal decision-making process. The official policy around the ministerial e-consultation is that unless there is a valid reason that e-consultation does not suit the legislative process, it must be applied. Procedures also prescribe a report on the results of the e-consultation and that naturally facilitates an agenda-setting effect. However, it only represents a modest impact on the policy agenda, which is not significant in all e-consultations. In some cases no input is collected to begin with and in many cases civil servants acknowledge that they do not have much room for manoeuvre or to deviate from the legislative proposal that has already been negotiated. Yet in other instances, knowledge from specialists or tacit knowledge is very valuable for policy makers to help them improve the legislative proposal. Civil servants argue that, in the majority of cases, e-consultation improves the quality of legislative proposals that are subsequently discussed in parliamentary debate. Both interviewees in the case study argued that the e-consultation is an obligatory step and that many civil servants are just doing their duty, something that actually explains why the link to formal policy agenda is such a decisive condition in this case. However, other non-observed conditions might contribute to the agenda-setting effect of e-consultation as well, such as the available knowledge at the ministry on the subject and the quality of the contributions.

Minimisation results in two different formulas. The first formula represents nine cases and has therefore a stronger empirical basis than the second formula, which covers two cases. The first formula indicates that it is *necessary* to create a link to a specific existing formal policy or political agenda. The links take many different forms in the cases. Links are established that connect the digital participatory input through official municipal budgeting processes (PB Paris, PB Berlin-Lichtenberg, Betri Rekjavik). Other links are created through official political representation (Pirate Party Germany, Five Star Movement, Betri Reykjavik), via a law on citizens' initiatives for parliamentary debate (Open Ministry), and via consultation in official policy-making processes (Wiki Melbourne, Dutch e-consultation, Your Voice in Europe, Futurium). However, in most cases more conditions need to be met in order to set the agenda. This is also clear from the cases with a negative outcome; in four of these six cases a link to the formal decision-making process is there, but that is certainly not enough to substantially or repeatedly affect the political or policy agenda. The second formula describes the combination of interaction between participants and a clarified participative process as the necessary conditions to succeed in setting the agenda. This combination of conditions is not present in any of the cases with a negative outcome.

In nine of the eleven cases in which an agenda-setting effect is measured, interactions between participants are facilitated by the online tools. Furthermore, deliberation might increase the quality of proposals and/or demonstrate social support for proposals. Clarified goals and procedures contributed in nine of the eleven observed cases to a substantial or repeated effect on the political or policy agenda, as well as a combination of on- and offline participation tools (in 8 of the 11 cases). A final interesting finding is that interactions between decision makers and participants within the digital participatory process were facilitated in five of the eleven cases with an agenda-setting effect, while this was facilitated in only one case without an agenda-setting effect.

3. Policy options and conclusions

A common criticism of e-participation practices at the EU-level is that they are a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument. It seems to be an ongoing theme that e-participative projects may provide added personal value for participants and may support community building, but suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political or policy impact. In the comparative case study the focus was therefore on the factors within e-participation practices that contribute to an actual impact on the political or policy agenda or on the final decisions made. Subsequently, an assessment was made of how digital tools for citizen involvement, and in particular the conditions that make them succeed in having an impact or enhancing legitimacy in other ways, could be transferred to EU level. This was achieved, first, by drawing lessons for existing EU e-participation tools (an additional paragraph about the lessons from e-voting is also included), and, second, by providing new options to improve e-participation at EU level.

3.1. Lessons for existing EU e-participation tools

At EU level, the cases of Futurium, Your Voice in Europe, the European Citizens' Initiative, European Citizens' Consultation 09 and the Green Primary were studied. What was learnt about these EU cases of e-participation from the comparative analysis? Are the observed conditions that contribute to an impact on decision making present in the EU cases? If not, could the factors be achieved at EU level or do particular challenges arise at EU level? The various factors are discussed below, ranked via their frequency. Afterwards, further ways to improve existing EU tools are formulated, on the basis of the workshop with EU experts. Lastly, lessons about e-voting are discussed.

3.1.1. Organising impact on EU decisions

The six conditions included in the configurations for impact on decision making relate for the most part to a clearly organised participation process in which participants' and decision makers' expectations are well-managed from the outset. What is interesting to note here is that three of the six conditions are in fact *easier* to meet by using online participation tools. For example, digital tools are very useful in creating transparency and accountability, providing a) clarity on the participatory process and b) feedback on the results. Furthermore, it is an advantage of online participation practices that voting processes can be combined with deliberative processes.

- The most necessary condition was identified as a link to a specific formal decision-making process. Three of the EU cases observed – the Green Primary, Your Voice in Europe, and Futurium – established such a link. The European Green Party linked the final choice for their Spitzenkandidaten to the online voting process. The more recent consultations of Futurium, eGovernment4EU and Digital4Science, were linked to the eGovernment Action Plan (2016-2020) and the future Horizon2020 Work Programme (2018-20) respectively. The earlier consultation, Digital Futures, was linked to the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) and the Horizon 2020's 2016-18 strategic programming exercise. In Your Voice in Europe participants are asked to deliver input through questionnaires for specific policy proposals, which are regularly influenced by the online input. In contrast, the Europeans' Citizens Initiative scored negatively, since the ECI facilitates the raising of new ideas by participants that do not necessarily relate to a specific existing formal policy. In addition, the European Citizens Consultation was very broad in scope and not linked to a specific policy or political process either, making it more difficult to generate actual impact in policy or politics. Proposals that are too general do not match the needs of decision makers as was seen in ECC09.

- The second most important condition is clarity regarding the participatory process and its contribution to the overall decision-making process. This indicates that the participation process should be well-embedded in the decision-making process and participants and decision makers need to know what to expect from the start. From the five cases observed only Your Voice in Europe and the Green Primary score positively on this condition. It should also be mentioned that Futurium improved the clarity of the participation process considerably for its more recent consultations. However, the process of Digital Futures that was scored from beginning to end did not reflect this clarity. Your Voice in Europe has clearly made an effort to explain the consultation process and its aims in an accessible way. In the case of Predlagam, a tension between accessibility and oversimplification could be seen. Because Predlagam does not show a focus on the overall, complex decision-making processes, it might – in the words of one the respondents – 'fool' people and will inevitably lead to participant disappointment. Oversimplification is a real risk that should be avoided, especially in relation to the complex EU decision-making process. Wiki Melbourne and Berlin-Lichtenberg are examples of best practice when it comes to being clear about the expectations participants can have. These platforms are also explicit in stating that there is no guarantee that each proposal will be implemented. The case of participatory budgeting in Paris shows how the use of infographics can help to clarify the participation and decision-making process and its contribution to the final decisions.

- A third important condition in the observed cases that succeeded in having an actual impact on policy or political decisions is providing feedback to participants. Providing feedback is again a sign of a well-organised process in which it is clear how exactly the participatory input has contributed to the decisions made. In addition, feedback to participants is a form of accountability. Yet, from the five observed European cases only Futurium and the Green Primary provided participants with significant feedback. Every participant in the Digital Futures consultation received an email with the final report. The eGovernment4EU project that is now running on the Futurium platform will not only provide information about its progress and results on the platform, but participants (i.e. proposers) will also be notified about the decisions on the platform and how the actions will be implemented. The Green Party informed its members about the election results via mass and social media, inter alia.
  The other three EU cases in this study lack participant feedback mechanisms (ECI, ECC09 and Your Voice of Europe). One solution at the EU level might be – as is the case in Predlagam for example – the obligation for government or political authorities to provide feedback. This can create pressure on the actions to be taken and acknowledges participants as legitimate political actors. However, such an obligation alone is not enough as the Your Voice in Europe case and the Dutch e-consultation case illustrate. Furthermore, such an obligation should not result in standardised answers to citizens about their contributions and their impact. It requires an investment of time to make an accessible report or to create another form of feedback, and it might also help to implement feedback options at the tool's design stage. An inspiring example is offered by Berlin-Lichtenberg's Participatory Budgeting site, where decisions on proposals are explained in short messages and in a 'traffic light-format' (green for accepted proposals, orange for proposals in process and red for rejected proposals).

- A fourth condition that contributes to an impact on the final decision is sustainability. It takes time to organise a digital participation process properly and to have it run smoothly and that often implies several adjustments over time. In Futurium the tool was made more user-friendly during the first project Digital Futures and on the basis of experience. DG CONNECT also organised three public workshops in 2015 to collect best practices, ideas and feedback on how to engage with stakeholders online, especially through Futurium. With regard to the Your Voice in Europe (YVIE) tool, the aim is to unify the separate consultation pages to improve the process. This leads to a central management of the page internally. In addition, YVIE strives for simpler visual guidance

and an explanation of where a particular initiative currently is in the decision-making process. The one-time experiment of the European Citizen Consultation is problematic as it did not tie in very well with existing decision-making processes and this could not be revised over the course of time. Time to learn and improve the digital tool are important success factors. Experiments are more risky and have less chance of success or of having an actual impact on decision making. However, the Green Primary shows that an experimental approach can have an impact; in this case the election result for the Spitzenkandidaten of the European party.

- The possibility to e-vote was present in nine of the twelve cases in which an actual impact on decisions made was detected. It is a particular advantage of online participation practices that votes can be collected easily and even combined with deliberative processes. The European Citizens' Consultation included such an option. The national consultations had resulted in 88 recommendations and, subsequently, participants were asked to vote for 15 recommendations they wanted to be part of the final result of the ECC. However, because there was no link to a specific policy or political process, the results barely had any impact. The European Citizens' Initiative does include the option to sign a proposal that would indicate support for a proposal. However, this sort of quantitative aggregation seems to have no significant impact as illustrated by various other cases in this study (such as the Finnish Citizens' Initiative and the Dutch e-petitions case). This lack of impact can probably be explained by the link to the decision-making process.

- The last condition, an effective mobilisation and engagement strategy, is probably one of the greatest challenges of e-participation, especially for the EU institutions. All the EU-level cases, including the Green primary, score low on this condition. The challenge of mobilising and engaging citizens is even greater at EU level than at national or local level, since:
    - EU citizens form a very large and diverse group of people who do not generally share a sense of European citizenship;
    - mass media play an important intermediary role in mobilising the general public at national and local level, but cannot be expected to play a comparable role at EU level (for instance owing to negative discourse about the EU and the differing national foci on EU decision making, related to national interests).

  A lesson from the European Green Party primaries is that it might help to first generate commitment from partners at national level, who can then help to mobilise the various national publics. Another important point to note here is that different target groups require differing mobilisation and engagement strategies, something for which serious investment is needed.

3.1.2. Organising impact on EU agendas

The outcome of the csQCA for configurations leading to agenda setting is less clear-cut. The five conditions included in the configurations that show an effect on the policy or political agenda mostly has to do with how the participation process is organised and the type of participation facilitated. Just as with the outcome of the actual impact on final decisions, a link to an existing policy or political process is also an important condition for agenda setting, as is the clarity of the participation process. Additionally, three other factors contribute to creating an impact on agendas. In the section below, the following questions are therefore addressed: Are these three factors present in the EU cases aimed at agenda setting? If not, could the factors be achieved or do particular challenges arise at EU level?

- First, the possibility within the tool to interact with other participants: in the literature there is an unresolved debate about the need for deliberation in online participatory processes. Deliberation could enhance the quality of the input and cause better proposals to find their way more easily onto the political or policy agenda. Deliberation between participants is facilitated in both Futurium and in the European Citizens' Consultation, but not in the Your Voice in Europe or ECI. The various

consultations at the Futurium platform have an interactive design and participants can react to each other's input. According to the interview with the developer, it resembles a social network more than anything else. During the online first phase of the ECC, participants had the opportunity to discuss each other's contribution but it differed per national website how much deliberation actually took place. Deliberation between participants from different EU countries was not possible, an often heard criticism of the ECC. This puts the focus on a challenge that arises at EU level: deliberation between participants from different EU countries is difficult to organise, particularly because of language barriers. Technological measures, such as translation software, are on the rise, but not able yet to overcome this barrier.

- A second important condition is the possibility to participate not only online, but also offline. Three of the EU tools already provide offline participation possibilities. Futurium encompasses many 'engagement activities', including offline meetings as workshops that feed the online discussions and vice versa. ECC began with an online phase to collect as many proposals as possible, which in turn formed input to the national offline consultations. ECI also offers the opportunity to sign an initiative offline (alongside the online collection system certified by national authorities in Member States).

- A third condition is the possibility within the tool to interact with decision-makers. Examples of good practice in this regard are the Wiki Melbourne case, in which a vision document was co-created between citizens and officials, and the PB Paris case. In the project assessment phase, there is room for the Paris municipality to combine, pair and interpret citizens' proposals. This phase opened up for citizen involvement in 2016: As the organiser interviewed explained, '*We made a big effort to involve citizens into the merging phase and really encouraging them to go together and defend the project together. First of all to have less projects to deal with but also to have more comprehensive projects and finally because we need people to get more involved in the campaign phase*'. The four digital participation tools observed at EU level lack the possibility to interact with decision makers. This might be less problematic in the e-consultations of Your Voice in Europe or Futurium where participants' input is interpreted by officials related to the specific policy at a later stage. However, in relation to the more open tools of ECI and ECC, interaction between participants and decision makers would help to make a better match between citizens' input and political or policy reality. Last, but not least, online interaction can also contribute to an increase in transparency and accountability.

3.1.3. Further ways to improve existing EU tools

During phase 3 of the study – the co-creation workshop on EU suitability of digital tools – attention was given to into three specific existing digital tools at EU level: the European Citizens' Initiative, Your Voice in Europe (YViE), which now goes under the name of 'Consultations', and the European Parliament's petitions system. This resulted in various options and ways to improve them.

Improving the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)

In formal terms, the ECI gives citizens a powerful agenda-setting tool by allowing them to contribute directly to the EU agenda-setting process, if specific conditions are fulfilled, for example that the proposal falls within the remit of the Commission and gathers at least one million signatures (from at least seven Member States). However, past experiences have shown the system for online collection of signatures to lack usability, and, more importantly, the underlying legal constraints and the way they are interpreted in the current implementation have done as much to block as to facilitate a culture of open involvement and engagement with citizens. As of February of 2017, the ECI had produced only three successful initiatives since its implementation in 2012 (18 initiatives have failed to gather the necessary support, 14 have been retracted by the submitters, and 20 have been rejected on formal

grounds). However, as recently as September 2017, a proposal was published for the revision of the ECI regulation to go into effect on 1 January of 2020. Several of the articles within the revision proposal address issues identified within the present study as being in need for improvement. Examples include the need to simplify and harmonise the personal data requirements of signatories, the proposal to allow ECI organisers to choose the date for the start of signature collection, and the need to clarify the liability of organisers and lend citizens' committees legal personalities. The revisions promise to improve aspects of the ECI, particularly in the areas of user-friendliness, accessibility and flexibility. The study has identified the following options as holding the potential to further improve impact of the tool:

- Support for mobilisation efforts by ECI initiators: the ECI digital platform could be broadened (by integrating online community functions as well as functions to support offline meetings) to allow organized civil society to use it as a mobilisation and campaigning platform. The recent revision proposal has already made first steps in this direction by suggesting an online collaborative platform made available by the European Commission in order to provide a dedicated discussion forum.
- Increasing the ECI's publicity among the public: to raise awareness of ECIs requires special effort via the EU's communication channels as well as national media. While the revision proposal contains improvements in the communication between the Commission, organisers and signatories, the strategy to raise public awareness of the existence of the ECI remains rather vague.
- Providing an improved support infrastructure for ECIs: the high organisational demands could be reduced through legal advice, translations and funding, whereby the question of translations has already been taken up by the revision proposal.
- Simplifying and harmonising personal data requirements in cooperation with Member States: this has been identified as an important factor when it comes to dismantling participation hurdles. The effectiveness of the solutions made within the revision proposal should be observed once the revisions are in effect.
- Explaining more elaborately how proposals are used once they pass the qualification criteria: attention must be given to what exactly is the formal process of treating proposals once they pass, and how are they used in decision-making processes.
- Creating a link to a specific formal policy agenda: the ECI facilitates the raising of new ideas by participants, which do not necessarily relate to a specific existing formal policy.
- Learning from user experiences: this can be achieved via user involvement and by working actively with local and national governments as well as NGOs to draw on their experiences.

Improving Your Voice in Europe (YViE)

YViE is a participatory mechanism linked to the EU decision-making process. It functions as the European Commission's 'single access point' to a variety of consultations for citizens and various stakeholders and is currently being integrated into the Better Regulation Portal 'Contribute to law-making'. Since the report for this study was drafted in February 2017, this integration process has progressed and the 'Your Voice in Europe' website now goes under the name 'Consultations'. The public consultations primarily take place in the form of online questionnaires and clear guidance on how stakeholder input is to be processed is provided by the Better Regulation Agenda. The advantage of Your Voice in Europe lies in it being institutionalised and recognised by the Commission as an e-government tool for public policy. While there is a duty to consult, there is no obligation to use the consultation contributions. Ways to improve the potential of Your Voice in Europe are suggested below:

- Increase YViE's publicity among the public in order to raise awareness and help make consultations more accessible to the public; special efforts are required via the EU's communication channels and national media, in particular including the local press.

- Fully implement the planned standardisation of the websites for different consultations and their central management with the ongoing redesign activities: unified appearance, appropriate questionnaire designs to make basic questions about more technical issues accessible, and simpler visual guidance could help to reach out to the wider public.
- Introduce opportunities for exchange and deliberation among participants. Forums for deliberation could enhance the quality of inputs and be conducive to fostering the emergence of a European public.
- Provide translations for consultation pages. Translations can help to increase the participation of a broader public.
- Provide feedback via YViE consultation website as well as via e-mail. Feedback via e-mail on how participants' input is being processed and fed into internal decision-making processes would be a credible sign of the appreciation of contributions made.
- Make use of data analytics to aggregate qualitative inputs and improve scalability. Tools that help to make decisions about the aggregation of qualitative data transparent could help with coping with increased participation volumes.
- Open up back-end data while abiding by data protection rules. Making consultation data and processing tools available to the public could enhance transparency and public dialogue on EU policy decisions.

Improving the European Parliament's petitions system

The European Parliament's petitions portal allows all European citizens and residents to express their right to petition and to submit a petition via the internet. The Committee on Petitions (PETI) is responsible for processing petitions, deciding on which kind of action to take and providing responses to petitions. While this tool provides an important opportunity to communicate with Parliament, if it is to be made more accessible and effective several weaknesses need to be overcome. These include: too many steps to access the petitions page; not enough detailed information on the petition process; a lack of continuous efforts to raise the publicity of the tool; the lengthy petition verification process; and insufficient statistical data on the treatment of petitions on the PETI web portal. The European Parliament petitions portal could:

- benefit from more back-office resources. Whether through additional staff, additional technological support, or a mix of both, users would gain a much livelier experience of interacting with MEPs if the necessary back-office resources were available to ensure swift and qualified responses and interactions with users;
- use simple tools to educate and mobilise. Simple additional tools such as updates via text or e-mail, education on issues via video messages, ad hoc inputs via mini-polling, visualisation of data and policy mechanisms would help greatly in keeping the attention of citizens and qualifying their input;
- provide petitioners with communication and mobilisation support. Since the European Parliament's petition portal tends to be more successful than the ECI and YViE in attracting the attention of non-organised citizens, it would be highly useful to provide these citizens with basic tools to mobilise support for their petitions (handbooks, free publicity mechanisms, etc.). The portal might also be provided with a crowdsourcing functionality for campaigning in order to collect finances to hire a public affairs professional or to collect volunteers amongst the participants for support;
- add various functions for online deliberation. A lot of the pressure to respond directly to questions and petitions could be taken off back-office staffers and MEPs if options for deliberation between participants were added to the portal, e.g. debate options, options for collaboration on petitions, voting both for and against, etc. This would make it possible for citizens and interest experts to share knowledge in the ongoing process of developing and sharing ideas for petitions.

3.1.4. E-voting: invest in removing system vulnerabilities first

As regards e-voting, even after more than a decade of conducting and experimenting with internet voting in various country-specific contexts, several challenges remain. It can be said that the dimensions of internet voting already explored in an earlier STOA report (2011) on e-democracy have not lost any of their relevance. In fact, their relevance is regularly emphasised when online elections in a variety of countries are accompanied by evaluations focusing on, for instance, turnout rates, security aspects, user friendliness or trust. Particularly striking is the large amount of criticism present in the literature. On a regular basis, system vulnerabilities are made public, sometimes even by means of lawsuits. All in all, further developments are still needed with regards to technical aspects, legal frameworks, security, transparency and verifiability, as well as oversight and accountability. The Swiss experiment was lauded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2012) for being an example of good practice, the introduction having been careful and limited, ensuring integrity of the systems and building public trust. At first sight, internet voting might be perceived as an opportunity to alleviate the EU's democratic deficit, as manifested in continuously decreasing electoral participation in EU elections. However, as the analyses of various cases within Europe where internet voting has been introduced show, such hopes have not been fulfilled. It is not convenience alone that determines whether a citizen decides to vote or not, but rather political reasons such as political interest or satisfaction with the political system. When up against these kinds of challenges, internet voting is no technological quick fix.

3.2. New options to improve e-participation at EU level

The discussion about increasing openness and participation at EU level often centres on regulatory reform, such as the further improvement of the legislative function of the European Parliament, more formal rights for citizens to voice their opinions, or consultations such as those conducted by civil society organisations. However, no matter which regulations are put in place, openness in administration is just as much a matter of culture as it is one of formal structures. To address the space of possibilities available to the European institutions within already existing formal structures, the conditions above provide guidance as to how to make progress with existing e-participation practices at EU-level. In addition, the following four options are suggested as new forms of e-participation:

- *Conduct experiments with participatory budgeting in relation to the structural funds*. E-budgeting produces the strongest results when it comes to impacts on decision making. Among the gains identified are: increased transparency, improved public services, accelerated administrative operations, better cooperation among public administration units, and enhanced responsiveness.

- *Expand online engagement with MEPs beyond petitions*. More specifically, a public means of posing questions to MEPs and their staff and a blogging functionality where MEPs can share work-in-progress and receive input from interested citizens would be useful. For such additional tools to have an effect on the relationship between European citizens and their MEPs, they would have to be both technically and strategically integrated with social media and mass media.

- *Create a platform for monitoring Member State actions during Council decisions*. Much of the information needed to establish such accountability is already available, either through the common EU web-platform, civil society services such as votewatch.eu, and the web portals of national governments and parliaments. However, this places an unfair, and for most people prohibitive, burden of information gathering and analysis on citizens; key information is simply not available through ordinary channels.

- *Explore the crowdsourcing of policy ideas for the Commission*. Early stage policy development could benefit from an open and frank sharing of ideas between citizens, Commissioners and their staff.

A crowdsourcing mechanism could help to facilitate interactions between citizens and decision makers in an informal way. It would be a platform to gather ideas for policy formulation downstream by giving decision makers and their staff a forum for gaining immediate feedback on tentative ideas and considerations.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the most striking deficit when looking across the board at e-participation at EU level is the serious weakness regarding follow-up and learning efforts on the part of the organisers responsible with a view to improving existing mechanisms and developing of new ones. The core question for a strategy of improving participation, while staying within existing formal frameworks, seems to be: what is the common unifying vision? As long as each of the existing mechanisms and experiments remain stand-alone mechanisms with discrete functions and implementation programmes, the EU will remain an opaque jungle to the average citizen. If, on the other hand, a unifying vision of moving gradually towards an organic European participation infrastructure was agreed upon by all actors, the currently separate efforts of the different institutions and services involved in opening up European decision making could begin to build on each other, rather than carving out separate corners of what might appear to citizens to be a bureaucratic universe. Therefore, this study advises working towards a general European e-participation infrastructure including, for example, a one-stop shop for e-participation to provide synergy between the EU institutions.

4. Annex: an overview of the cases

Function		Cases	Short description	Scale	Country
Monitoring		*Abgeordnetenwatch* http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/	Privately organised digital platform providing information on the activities of German MPs, MEPs and the members of eight state parliaments and 52 local councils – such as voting, lobbying activities, etc. – and offering the opportunity to ask them questions.	National	Germany
		Theyworkforyou.com https://www.theyworkforyou.com/	Privately organised website that provides information on the activities of members of the UK and Scottish parliaments and Irish and Welsh assemblies, including voting records, expenses, speeches during debates, questions put to ministers, etc.	National	United Kingdom
Agenda setting	**Informal**	*Petities.nl: Dutch e-petitions site* https://petities.nl/	Private e-petition site that is not embedded in an official petition system, with 2 million visitors per month, offering a broad diversity of petitions, offering tools to petitioners to create political impact with their petition.	National	Netherlands
		Open ministry: law proposals for Finnish Citizen Initiative *http://avoinministerio.fi/*	Private digital platform helping citizens to use crowdsourcing to draft a bill. Online tools are used to collect ideas and for discussion and co-creation purposes. Legal experts test and edit the initiatives pro bono.	National	Finland
	Formal	*Future Melbourne Wiki* http://www.futuremelbourne.com.au/wiki/view/FMPlan	Civic participatory process to draft a new strategic vision on the city of Melbourne. A concept plan was published and via a Wiki citizens could read, discuss, make adjustments, co-write the plan which was approved by the city council.	Local	Australia
		Participatory Budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg https://www.buergerhaushalt-lichtenberg.de/	Consultative participatory budgeting initiative where local citizens can make financial proposals on the activities/facilities in the neighbourhood and construction investments in the district.	Local	Germany
		Predlagam: platform for e-proposals and e-petitions http://predlagam.vladi.si/	Government -initiated e-participation platform with an active interface for petition-type proposals for new policy by citizens which can be commented and voted upon. The proposals can amend the current regulation.	National	Slovenia
		Law proposal regarding the constitution in Iceland http://stjornlagarad.is/	A council of citizens drafting a new constitution for Iceland while using internet and social media to publish their progress and get input from other citizens.	National	Iceland
		Internetconsultatie (Dutch e-consultation) https://www.internetconsultatie.nl/	Digital platform for online consultation of citizens and professionals on draft bills, general orders to the council, ministerial decrees and policy notes.	National	Netherlands
		European Citizens' Initiative http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome	First supranational instrument of participatory democracy in the EU giving the citizens an opportunity to request the European Commission make a legislative proposal.	European	EU

Function		Cases	Short description	Scale	Country
		Futurium https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en	Digital platform initiated by the European Commission to facilitate a process to design future EU policies based on scientific evidence and stakeholder participation using different digital tools, such as data-crawling to extract knowledge from social networks.	European	EU
		Your voice in Europe http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_nl.htm	Web portal initiated by the European Commission to organise consultations and feedback opportunities for individual citizens and stakeholders to comment on EU policies at different stages of the policy lifecycle.	European	EU
		European Citizens' Consultation 09	First pan-European offline and online consultation process on what the EU can do to shape the economic and social future in a globalised world, resulting in different recommendations which were voted upon and presented during a citizens' summit.	European	EU
Decision making	**Non-binding**	*Betri Reykjavik* https://betrireykjavik.is/domain/1	A digital platform for participatory budgeting under the municipality budget giving citizens the opportunity to suggest, debate and vote for budgetary decisions and other communal projects.	Local	Iceland
		Five Star Movement Italy http://movimento5stelle.it/	Italian political party making extensive use of new technology to communicate and collaborate in the decision-making process within the party itself (including election and voting on representatives).	National	Italy
		Die Piratenpartei https://www.piratenpartei.de/	German political party making extensive use of new technology to communicate and collaborate on the decision-making process within the party itself.	National/district	Germany
		Podemos https://podemos.info/	Spanish political party making extensive use of new technology to organise direct democratic involvement, transparency and accountability within the party itself.	National	Spain
	Binding	*Participatory Budgeting Belo Horizonte*	Digital platform to engage the voting population in decisions on budget allocation of pre-selected projects as proposed by City Hall.	Local	Brazil
		Participatory Budgeting Paris https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/	Digital process in which citizens can participate in the distribution of an increasing share of the city's budget by voting on pre-selected projects and submit proposals themselves.	Local	France
		e-voting for Estonian elections http://www.vvk.ee/voting-methods-in-estonia/	Estonia provides citizens the possibility to vote electronically in local, national and European elections, ten to four days prior to the actual election day in addition to the traditional voting method.	National	Estonia
		e-voting for Swiss elections/referenda https://www.ch.ch/en/online-voting/	In Switzerland, e-voting includes not only the casting of votes in elections and referendums, but also the giving of 'electronic signatures' for initiatives, referendums and proposals for candidates for membership of the National Council.	National	Switzerland
		The Green Primary www.greenprimary.eu	The Green Party (a political party within European Parliament) used e-voting for the selection procedures of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections.	European	EU (European Parliament)

Digital tools could create stronger connections between European citizens and the EU decision-making process and, by doing so, might contribute to reducing the EU democratic deficit. This report investigates what lessons can be drawn from local, national and European experiences of the use of digital tools for the functioning of EU decision-making procedures and institutions. For that purpose, a review of current literature on e-democracy and the European public sphere has been carried out; 22 local, national and EU experiences with existing digital tools have been investigated and evaluated; and an analysis has been made of the suitability of the most promising digital tools for implementation and use at EU level.

The most important factors for successful e-participation identified in the report are: a close and clear link between e-participation processes and a concrete formal decision-making process; the participatory process and the contribution of its outputs to the overall decision-making process have to be clear to participants from the start; feedback to the participants about what has been done with their contributions is an indispensable feature of the process; a participative process should not be limited to one event but should be imbedded in an institutional 'culture of participation'; e-participation must be accompanied by an effective mobilisation and engagement strategy, involving communication instruments tailored for different target groups.

This is a publication of the Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)
EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament

PE 603.213
ISBN 978-92-846-2263-1
doi 10.2861/201697
QA-06-17-316-EN-N

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.