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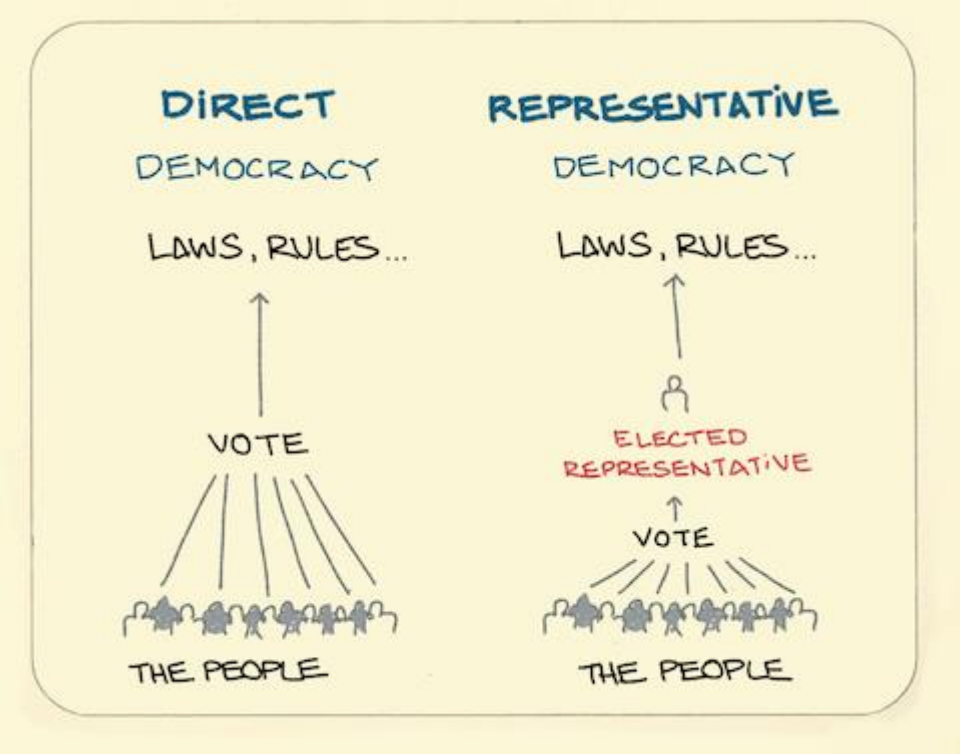
Online Platforms for public participation

A success or a delusional democratisation?



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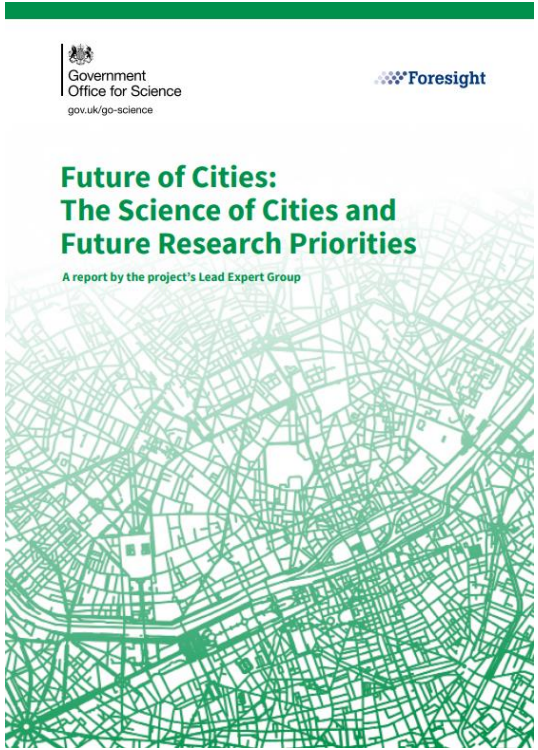
Representative democracy – an outdated model?

- A gap has developed between the activities of citizens and the way in which politics and democracy are carried out contributing to:
  - **A decline in trust and confidence in democratic institutions**
  - **A lack of innovative approaches to solving the complex and dynamic issues faced by contemporary cities today.**

Towards a direct democracy?

- "…the democratic ideal is not the election of representatives but the greatest *participation* of the people in public life" (Levy, 1997)
- Enable "everyone to help develop and refine shared problems on a continuous basis, introduce new questions, construct new arguments and formulate independent positions on a wide range of topics" (Levy, 1997)

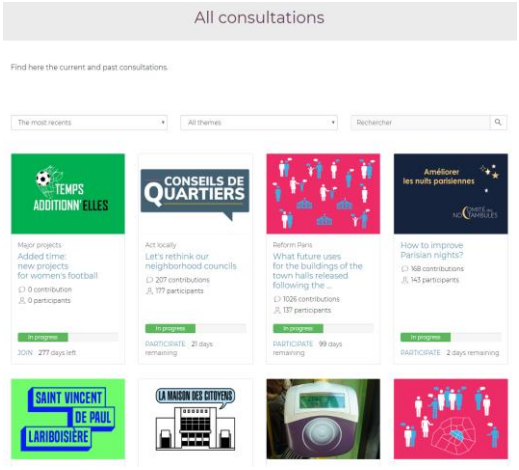


The Future of UK Cities

- "…within the same national system widely different levels of political participation might happen at the local level, and different national systems appear to give rise to different levels of participation."
- "…how to optimise the participation of citizens in city decision-making?"

(Government Office for Science, 2016)

Current Projects



Better Reykjavik

Online consultation forum

Madame Mayor I have an idea

€500 million to projects proposed

Decide Madrid

Requires support from 1% of the census population

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Issue 1 - Resources

- Ideas generated must still be processed by civil servants
- In 2016 €200,000 of public money was used to promote the Decide Madrid process which, despite leading to a spike in activity, was short-term

Issue 2 - Visibility of proposals

- Still receive a large number of proposals leading to duplication
- How to identify proposals of interest?
    - Machine learning and Natural Language Processing to cluster similar posts?

Issue 3 - Addressing more complex problems

- Cycle lanes or the greening of the city over initiatives to tackle pressing socio-economic problems
- A fear the budget is too small to create any meaningful change?

Issue 4 - Participation

- Awareness? Lack of time, interest, online access?
    - **Decide Madrid:** less than 10% of the city's population is registered on the online platform. Only 2 out of over 13,000 proposals have ever made it through
- Diversity? A small and unrepresentative number of citizens?
    - **Better Reykjavik:** participation is more biased towards those that are University educated, those who have higher salaries and people aged between 36 and 55

A delusional democratisation of predefined participation?

- May involve externally-defined programmes of participation
- Carry out pre-defined or fixed practices, extended only to certain groups
- Instrumentality (citizens as data providers) rather than empowerment (citizens opening up information spaces) giving a ‘delusion of democratisation’ (de Albuquerque and de Almeida, 2019)?

A deliberative democracy?

- Require a *continuous* process of knowledge co-production
- "…an open-ended and continuous learning process in which the roles of the 'teacher' and 'curriculum' are raised and the matter of what is to be learnt is settled in the process of learning itself" (Held, 1998)

What is citizen participation?

- A collective feedback loop or a form of dialogical communication.
- Online platforms should utilise the ‘collective intelligence’ of the community allowing for a form of co-production.
- How to promote a continuous feedback loop? How to measure this collective intelligence?