



THE FUTURE OF **DIGITAL DEMOCRACY**

Interviews about **citizen participation, innovation** and **leadership in the digital age**

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*These interviews are a translation of the original conversation

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Foreword

This white paper includes interviews with a variety of experts in the field of digital democracy. These conversations were assembled with the ambition to share knowledge and contribute to the ongoing debate of improving our democracies – and preparing them for the future.

The viewpoints, insights or arguments shared in this whitepaper reflect the vision of the experts and are not directly linked to CitizenLab. We facilitated these conversations to gain insights into the visions of a variety of thought leaders and to share these perspectives with practitioners.

The twelve interviews do not represent all perspectives on digital democracy, but serve as a initial series for sharing different expert views. Feel free to reach out to us in case you would have suggestions for perspectives to include in future series.

We would like to thank all of the experts and their teams for their contribution to this white paper and for sharing their expertise so generously.

Who could have imagined what 2020 would look like just a decade ago?

Over the past ten years, our modern democracies have undergone radical change. We have seen technology transform things for the better, and for the worse. We have marvelled at how social media could bring people together, before worrying about the destructive powers of its algorithms. We've seen citizen participation grow in scale, and filter bubbles narrow our horizons. Trust in our institutions has eroded, old powers have crumbled, new powers have emerged, and governments are looking for ways to navigate this new landscape.

What will the next ten years have in store for us? From where we stand, the possibilities seem endless. The Internet and new technologies are offering opportunities to redistribute power. Top-down models of governance are no longer being seen as legitimate or efficient, and citizens now expect decision-making to be shared, open and participatory. While this would have been impossible just a few years ago, new digital tools are now allowing governments to collect input from citizens on a large scale, increasing trust and administrations collecting insights to enrich their decision-making process.

The past 10 years have been about involving larger numbers of citizens in politics, but our next challenge is **how to engage them in a meaningful way**. We must find ways to merge online and offline processes and allow for in-depth deliberation at scale. This could be done by augmenting the depth of offline processes, such as citizens' assemblies, with the scale of online tools, such as ideation, votes, and data exploration. It could also be done by bringing offline processes online, and creating spaces for deliberation which are inclusive and transparent, and where the success metrics are meaningful engagement rather than vanity clicks.

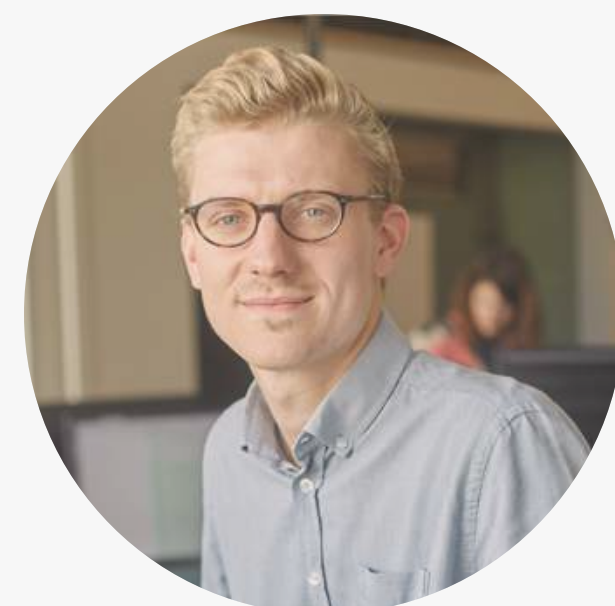
Developing technologies are about to take citizen participation a step further. One of the main barriers to citizen participation is still the manual processing of the input collected. Yes, some of our tools are already helping - but we need to do better. Emerging technologies such as natural language processing (NLP) offer unprecedented opportunities to separate the signal from the noise, and help transform unstructured citizen input into valuable, actionable insights for governments. Collective intelligence will only be unlocked by the use of artificial intelligence - on the conditions that this intelligence is open, well regulated and as unbiased as possible. As Civic Tech organisations, advocacy groups and citizens, it is our role to demand the highest standards of transparency and inclusivity.

But although technology is important, it is not everything. In the race to innovation, it is sometimes easy to forget that these tools are intended for humans - busy, flawed, over-solicited humans. If we want our tools to be used by civil servants, we have to ensure they fit in with existing workflows and make their life easier, not more complicated. We have to start from the human needs, and try to solve the practical problems hindering the processing of citizen input today.

Finally, **we can't do this alone.** Democratic innovations need to be driven by governments, and citizen participation can only be impactful if it is supported by political goodwill. Political leaders need to show the way by engaging in open and honest conversations. As Stephen Boucher tells us, we have to remember that this is an era of "Democracy R&D". Not all experiments will succeed, not all consultations will end up with the results we were hoping for, but we can only go forwards from there. Changing mentalities and encouraging innovations within governments will get us further than improving existing technology.

See you in 10 years. We look forward to seeing how our democracies will reinvent themselves, for the better.

Wietse Van Ransbeeck,
CEO and co-founder of CitizenLab



“There’s a will to re-establish a sense of control.”



Daniel Korski discusses the power of GovTech

Daniel Korski is the CEO and co-founder of PUBLIC, a venture capital fund that aims to solve public problems by helping the most innovative technology start-ups do business with the public sector. He also Chairs the GovTech summit, a conference that brings together governments, start-ups and investors.

Daniel has over 20 years of experience working in public policy and international relations. He has previously worked for the British and US Governments as a special advisor to the prime minister David Cameron, as a special advisor to president Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and as a policy advisor for the UN representative of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

CitizenLab - “How did you get into GovTech?”

Daniel Korski - “When I started out, there was no “GovTech industry”. I had been working in government for a few years, and was seeing technology transform everything around me at breakneck speed - from financial services to advertising. The motivation to build PUBLIC grew out of the frustration that public services were being left out, and that progress made in technology wasn’t serving the public good. In other words, if the only thing technology has done for us is get pizzas to us faster, then we can say it’s failed us.”

C - “What’s the biggest hurdle for GovTech today?”

DK - “There are a couple. The buyer side still sometimes lacks digital skills, so it doesn’t always recognise value when it sees it, and fast-moving start-ups often encounter skepticism or fear from governments. There’s also an issue with the procurement system. A lot of the current procurement processes stem from a 2014 European initiative, which actually opens up to interesting alternative procurement methods; but few people know that, and even fewer are willing to experiment with these new methods. These issues are improving, but they’re making it more difficult for GovTech companies to fundraise than for usual B2C (businesses to consumer) companies.

*“If the only thing technology has done for us is get pizzas to us faster, then we can say it has **failed us.**”*

Finally, when it comes to innovation, government has a slight tendency to focus on edge cases; however, they could deliver a service to the 95% of the population that aren’t concerned by the edge case and save enough money to deliver additional services to the 5% who need a tailored service. Although understandable, this is sometimes detrimental to service quality overall.”

C - “In the future, will governments build their own services, or will there be better legislation to increase cooperation between Big Tech companies and governments?”

DK - “The main challenge for governments is figuring out what they should buy, and what they should build themselves. The answer is straightforward: if it’s a commoditized product, then there’s no need to spend time and resources building it from scratch. Certain things should however be the preserve of governments: creating frameworks for citizens’ data, owning data layers, and so on. The final question is about who are the new players that can engage - who do we want to see working with the government? Do we want Alexa to use public health data and give out certified medical advice? As governments are realising that there’s a lot of innovation coming from the outside in, the future is going to see start-ups playing more of a role.”

C - “The political landscape is shifting, trust is eroding, and there’s a huge legitimacy crisis in Europe. Is GovTech embracing these changes?”

DK - “GovTech is actually part of the solution. Some GovTech companies focus on the citizen and state interactions, and some others focus on the way that the state is delivering services. Both types of companies are helping solve the legitimacy crisis. People are upset for many reasons; one of them is that they feel that they’re not getting the sort of support or service they deserve or pay for, and think that somebody else is getting a better service. In France there’s a serious divide between countryside and cities, in the UK this divide exists between South East and North... those divides create frustrations, and reflect a disaffection with the level and nature of service provision of public services. GovTech companies are at the forefront of trying to solve that. They’re very mission-driven, seeing beyond the financial gain.”

C - “You mentioned north south, city countryside divide. Is this, as some have been suggesting, a golden age for local government?”

DK - “I wouldn’t say we’re in the age of local government. However, for a long time, people have

been feeling that power and authority have moved away from them - moved to the big city, to the state level, to the European level. In recent years, there's been a will to re-establish a sense of control which has translated into the election results we know.

At the same time, local governments face many challenges that they can't solve by themselves. Anything from traffic management to environment degradations are issues that small cities acting in isolation won't be able to address. So there will always be a complex interplay between different levels. Rather than the age of local government, I think the theme is that we're living in an age of re-establishment of control; citizens want more control. Whichever layer of government allows a sense that citizens have an influence on service delivery is likely to thrive."

C - "Should citizen participation be embedded in local government to help re-establish that sense of control?"

DK - "It's not a surprise that countries with a lot of intermediate layers of governance (like Scandinavian countries) are on the whole more stable, more prosperous and happier. France and the UK are very centralised, hierarchical governance systems. There, you have the double challenge of a very strict, centralised state and of an eroding intermediate layer - these things have come together at a particular point of globalisation history, with a series of economic pressures, contributing to the Gilet Jaunes [*yellow vests*] crisis or Brexit. This isn't being seen in Denmark or Norway, which are states which have maintained strong intermediary bodies. In addition to formal processes of democracy with elections at regular intervals, they have very active intermediate layers of governance (unions, associations...), which are an essential deliberative component of these societies. The organic deliberation which emerges has led to great results."

C - "Do you think there's a duty for governments to inform citizens and publish transparent information?"

DK - "It's valuable for governments to open as many

*"It's not a surprise that countries with a lot of intermediate layers of governance are on the whole **more stable, more prosperous and happier.**"*

datasets as they can and to provide open APIs so that citizens can seamlessly make use of these datasets. There's both a democratic value for researchers and activists to test and explore, and an operational value when companies use it to create valuable services for customers.

There are two main issues when it comes to government transparency. The first one is that the open datasets provided are sometimes in the wrong format; the second issue is the standard that we should demand when governments use algorithmic decision-making processes: what can citizens do if they don't like the outcome? How much transparency is there about how much data is being used to arrive at a position? How much training data was used for the algorithms? For this second question, there are a number of steps that we have to take to maintain consent for algorithmical decision-making; but it's doable!"

Going **further...**

"What's the difference between Civic Tech and GovTech?", Apolitical

"The reverse pitch: PUBLIC", Tech.eu

Learn more about **PUBLIC**

Learn more about the **GovTech summit**

“21st century democracy must reflect the society of its time.”



Paula Forteza about the future of Civic Tech

Paula Forteza is a member of French parliament, representing the second constituency for French residents overseas (Latin America and the Caribbean). She looks at the digital sector through the lense of modernization of public action, and is striving to make digital technology an opportunity. She is working towards a more efficient and technologically viable regulation, and towards a green and sustainable digital environment; developing the place of women in the digital world; demanding an ethical digital environment, concerned about the privacy of users; and reinventing democracy through Civic Tech. Her parliamentary activity has focused on implementing regulations to lay the foundations for an ethical, open and decentralized digital environment.

Before entering politics, Paula Forteza worked for the government of the city of Buenos Aires, for Etalab (a government lab for innovation) and for the organization of the World Summit for Open Government. She is currently a candidate for the 19th arrondissement of Paris alongside Cédric Villani.

CitizenLab - “Where do you see Civic Tech in 5 years?”

Paula Forteza - “In five years, I think that Civic Tech will be firmly rooted in the political landscape - but only if they manage to solve three main challenges:

First of all, they must be able to unlock institutional barriers, and open up spaces for citizen participation with real impact. The Gilets Jaunes [Yellow vests] movement has shown that citizens want to be heard by the government, and want to have official channels to participate in decision-making. The current democratic and institutional system does not provide that. Citizens are opting for private petition platforms (Change.org, mesopinions, etc.) to fill this gap, but these tools are not yet powerful enough to truly impact public policy. In order to address this need for change, a new regulation around citizen participation was passed at the National Assembly in 2019, allowing a more responsive right of petition. From now on, procedures will be automatically triggered when a critical threshold of signatures is reached.

*“We need to think of **Civic Tech as common goods** rather than business models.”*

The second challenge is creating digital tools which can adapt to the different participation types and needs of our changing society. A more deliberative democracy is gradually developing alongside tools like citizens' assemblies and initiatives such as the grand Débat National or the citizens' convention for the climate. However, tools for these new forms of participation (whether that's engagement or analysis) are still lacking. Democracy and politics are based on dialogue and deliberation, and meaningful dialogue with citizens can't take place only on digital channels. These digital tools must also be adapted to the ways in which our youth interacts, with their new language, and their new types of communication. Civic Tech must be able to "gamify" the participation process to attract young people, give them the opportunity to engage and participate

images, gifs, videos, audio... 21st century democracy must reflect the society of its time.

It's also necessary to create Civic Tech tools that are ethical and open. We can't hand over the keys of our democracies to black boxes. It's therefore essential that all these tools are based on open source software. Civic Tech tools raise fundamental questions about the exercise of democratic sovereignty in the digital age. They must precisely avoid repeating the mistakes made by social networks, namely centralized models without any democratic control or transparency... Today, only 40% of our citizens say they trust digital tools, and only 35% trust social networks. We need to rebuild the citizenship pact and rebuild trust by ensuring full transparency of the processes implemented and by ensuring democratic governance. We need to think of Civic Tech as common goods, rather than as a business models. I'm thinking for example of Decidim, the free software used by the city of Barcelona to allow online and face-to-face participation, which is open source, with democratic governance and has institutional impact.”

C - “What lessons can be drawn from the Grand Débat? How can this process be implemented in a more permanent way?”

PF - “The Grand Débat was launched by the President to rebuild dialogue with citizens, with the aim to re-examine our democracy and the ways in which citizens can be included in development of public policies. While the overall participation figures were encouraging - more than 1.9 million contributions, 10,134 meetings with more than 500,000 participants and more than 630 pages in the comment books placed in townhalls over the country - demonstrating the importance of this type of exchange, we must nevertheless go further and invent tools with binding mechanisms, allowing a direct impact on decision-making. The existing mechanism has somewhat shown its limits. Taking into account so many contributions is extremely complex and difficult to scale. Analysing millions of contributions has been difficult both in terms of process and tools used. It's important to remember that today consultation is done through elections or polls, two methods which only allow for closed

questions and answers and prevent new ideas from emerging. We must therefore find a third, freer, more open way to carry out citizen consultations.

I think that the ongoing Citizens' Climate Convention [following ideas expressed during the Grand Débat, a citizen assembly on climate was launched in France in late 2019] is a good example of what can be achieved in terms of citizens implication and transparency: participants received training on the topic, a representative sample of people was selected, participants are looked after. I'm convinced that we need to ask citizens about issues that will really have an impact on their daily lives, and climate is one of them. This is why I'm today advocating for the creation of a citizens' assembly on the place of new technologies in our society. This would be a unique opportunity to carry out a rigorous impact analysis on various topics such as facial recognition, digital identity, personal data..."

“To rebuild the bond of trust, change must come from within institutions.”

C - "In a time of mistrust and legitimacy crisis, how is it possible to create trust in online spaces where citizens and governments interact?"

PF - "Civic Tech is playing a role in modernizing our democracies. The tools we use to allow that type of dialogue must be trustworthy, and therefore transparent. The trust citizens place in these platforms will depend on the level of transparency and control we have over participation tools.

Going beyond the platform, the conversations that take place must also lead to co-construction and not be an alibi for consultation. But it's important not to be naïve - digital will not be a magical solution. To rebuild the bond of trust between citizens and government, the impetus for change must come from the institutions, as part of a long-term commitment to openness and more regular collaboration with citizens. More participation in our decision-making bodies requires more time, more resources and therefore a real political will."

C - "Despite the French 'open data by default' law, there are still few examples of citizens seizing data sets published by the government and local authorities. How do we encourage innovative use of this data?"

PF - "The Law for a Digital Republic did indeed establish open data as a default principle more than 3 years ago. Its application is still rather partial: less than 8% of the local authorities directly concerned by the law have opened at least one dataset. Not all of them, of course, are reused by citizens or companies for many reasons: lack of homogeneity, lack of visibility on their long-term availability, insufficient quality... The reuse of public information is a right, but not a duty. Datasets issued by the administration have generally been produced for specific administrative needs and are therefore not always adapted or easy to reuse.

Some instances of public service have gone a step further by publishing data outside of administrative logics, aimed solely at sharing information with citizens. Hackathons can encourage citizens to reuse certain datasets: I created the "datafin" hackathon in 2018 to explore the state's financial data, and in 2019 we organised a hackathon to explore nearly 2 million contributions of the Great Debate. More broadly, I believe it is important to enable citizens to develop the skills needed to use data, in particular by continuing to invest in digital education from an early age."

Going **further...**

[Read the full interview on our blog](#)

[“Citizens’ panels ready to help Macron to set French climate policies”, the Guardian](#)

[Open data in France, Wikipedia](#)

[Open government partnerships: Paula Forteza](#)

“Governments have no other option than involving citizens.”



Tiago C. Peixoto on emerging technologies and citizens' assemblies

Tiago C. Peixoto is a Senior Public Sector Specialist at the World Bank's Governance Global practice. He focuses on citizen engagement, public sector performance and digital government in developed and developing countries. In 2019 he co-authored, with the renowned technologist Tom Steinberg, the World Bank's report on the role of emerging digital technology in citizen engagement. His hands-on and research experience derives from working, among others, with the European Commission, the OECD and the Brazilian House of Representatives. He has featured in TechCrunch as one of the 20 Most Innovative People in Democracy, and in Apolitical as one of the 100 Most Influential People in Digital Government.

CitizenLab - “What advice would you have for governments when it comes to using digital technology for citizen engagement?”

Tiago C. Peixoto: “Governments should first answer fundamental questions such as: (1) If citizen engagement is the answer, what is the problem? (2) Which method, or combination of methods (e.g. crowdsourcing, deliberation) are required to address this problem? (3) Are all of those affected by the problem (e.g. children, undocumented immigrants) eligible to take part in the process? (4) How can we ensure that the process actually has an impact on public decision-making?”

Once these questions are answered, my key advice is to design for inclusiveness. This involves two essential steps. First, conduct serious user experience (UX) research, accompanied by multiple iterations of UX testing, before zeroing-in on one or more technological solutions. Second, ensure there’s a strong combination of online and offline channels for participation: as earlier research shows, those who are most in need are less likely to participate, and the combination of channels increases the diversity of participants.”

C - “Which institutional upgrades do you think have the most potential in the near future?”

TCP: “If I could bet on one democratic upgrade that we’re likely to see in the near future, I’d say it will be the combination of citizens’ assemblies with traditional direct democracy institutions, such as initiatives and referendums. Governments will soon have to take hard decisions to address issues that range from climate change and income inequality to the regulation of artificial intelligence and biotech. But taking decisions will be all the more difficult given the ongoing crisis of representative democracy and the declining trust in politicians. To avoid backlashes and social unrest, governments will have no other option than involving citizens in decisions. But given the recent track-record of a few disastrous - and highly visible - referendums, governments and citizens will be wary of resorting to direct democracy as we know it. Political leaders will then have to look for alternative options, and they will inevitably stumble upon successful cases

that combine deliberation with a popular vote, such as those from Ireland [In 2016 a citizens’ assembly tackled the sensitive topic of abortion and proposed to legalize it, which the Irish people accepted via a referendum] or Oregon in the United States [*which uses a Citizens’ Initiative Review system as an official part of the state elections. It entails that citizens’ panels provide concise yet informed overviews of reasons to vote in favor and against certain measures*]. In short, it shouldn’t take long for governments to realize that this combination offers them both the legitimacy that popular vote confers to decisions, and the informed judgment that these decisions require.”

“My key advice is to design for inclusiveness.”

C - “Why are Citizen Assemblies particularly relevant to tackle large policy questions?”

TCP - “The fact that a regulatory choice can be highly technical shouldn’t be used as an excuse not to engage the public. Well-informed practices of public engagement can be found in equally complex areas such as nanotechnology, genetically modified organisms, and stem cell research. But why citizens’ assemblies? First, they lend themselves particularly well to complex issues that require informed deliberation. Second, random selection means that we have a ‘microcosm’ of the population affected by the decisions. Overall, concerning policymaking, the design of citizens’ assemblies offers the best mechanism to: (1) truly leverage collective intelligence, and (2) provide insights on what the population as a whole would think if they had the chance to learn about the issues at stake, hear different points-of-view, and discuss among themselves what the best policy options might be. Governments might still want to legitimize citizens’ assemblies’ decisions or recommendations through popular vote. It’s therefore my impression that in coming years, we’ll see more of the combination of citizens’ assemblies with traditional direct democracy institutions.”

“Bringing citizens into the process early on can increase trust.”

C - “How can governments best deal with the trust issues citizens may have regarding online interaction?”

TCP - “There’s a path dependency of offline trust that’s transferred to online environments. If there’s already a low level of trust in government, trust in government systems is likely to be low, regardless of whether they’re online or offline. But that doesn’t mean that governments should do nothing about it. If governments bring citizens early on into the process (e.g. through a credible citizens’ committee, or a group of civil society organizations), this can substantially increase the trust that people have in the process and, consequently, in the systems. From a more technical standpoint - when it comes to trust in the online system itself - there are many things that governments can do. For instance, if governments are developing their own technology (which in many cases is not necessary), they should open their source code to enable third parties with recognized expertise to validate the integrity of the system.”

C - “In what ways can augmented reality become a game-changer for citizen engagement?”

TCP: “Behind every public good and service there are decisions and decision-makers that are not visible to the public. If augmented reality becomes widespread, public decisions that currently go unnoticed will become visible to the public - mostly in public but also in private spaces. But it’s not all good news. Whether this favors healthy citizen engagement or, on the contrary, subjection to fake news and private interests will fundamentally depend on policy choices. We contend that the regulation of what’s shown in augmented reality is likely to be just as political as the regulation of social media platforms, and perhaps even more so.”

C - “You make a case for governments to embrace the ‘user-centred digital government movement’. What does this entail?”

TCP - “It means that governments will have to in-source Internet-era skills that are still uncommon in the public sector. This includes positions such as UX researchers, agile product managers and content designers. For civil servants and governments in general, this means acknowledging that when it comes to service delivery there’s a natural empathy gap that affects the way services are delivered, and making sure that gap is bridged. Studies by cognitive scientists and psychologists consistently reveal a gap where decision-makers overestimate the similarity between what they value and what others value, which is also reflected on service design. Acknowledging that empathy gap and finding ways of addressing it, particularly through user research, is the first step towards public services that are faster, cheaper and better.”

Going further...

“The impact of emerging digital technologies on citizen engagement”, World Bank Report 2019

“The benefits of citizen engagement”, Tiago C. Peixoto on DemocracySpot

“Citizens Assembly behind the Irish abortion referendum”, Involve

“Citizens’ Initiative Review in Oregon”, Healthy Democracay

“Six ways that public servants can develop their empathy”, Apolitical

“What’s changed isn’t the technology - it’s the government listening.”



Marci Harris on how to create the conditions for meaningful engagement

Marci Harris is the CEO and co-founder of PopVox, a platform that helps citizens communicate with their governments. She developed the tool while working as an American Congressional staffer on the team drafting the Affordable Care Act. Marci is passionate about the responsible use of technology to benefit humanity. She serves on the boards of the People-Centered Internet and LaunchTN, was named a “Top 100 Most Creative People in Business” by Fast Company (2012), and has been a fellow with the Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Center for Democracy (2016), New America California (2017), and is an affiliated scholar with the CITRIS Policy Lab at UC Berkeley.

CitizenLab - “Could you tell us why you founded PopVox, and what your main objective behind it was?”

Marci Harris - “PopVox started in 2010. At the time, I was a congressional staffer. When the congressman had to vote on a bill, he’d ask his team three specific questions: “who’s on it?”, “where are the groups?”, and “what are we hearing about it from the district?”. Knowing who co-sponsors the bill, which interest groups are aligning with it and what constituents have to say about it are important pieces of information that help members of Congress take positions on bills. Back in the day, even though every staffer was looking for the answer to the same three questions, it was really difficult to find the information. The data was spread across different systems, and the methods used to manage constituent input were very unpractical. My early goal for PopVox was therefore to solve the issues I was encountering in my own job. The idea was simple: we wanted to provide an answer to these three questions and to make them available to the public. We set up the platform to share bills online, allowing groups and constituents to share their positions on the bills and ensuring that citizens’ input was shared with congressional offices in a way that could be easily processed.

Around 2011, we launched the beta and solved that technical problem... but we also found about 20,000 other problems that needed to be addressed. We’ve spent the past 10 years building upon the underlying technology and listening to a large number of voices both inside and outside of Congress to figure out how to leverage technology for better interactions between constituents and lawmakers, for better information to lawmakers, for better understanding of the process for constituents... It’s sometimes frustrating to look around after a decade and realise you still haven’t fixed Congress!

One of our biggest learnings is that for most of what we work on, technology isn’t the key. We’re seeing some great success right now in some of our work with committees in Congress to receive public input on draft stage bills. What’s changed here isn’t the technology, but it’s having members of Congress who are listening and willing to use the input.”

*“Bringing the public in is the only way to come up with **efficient, legitimate solutions.**”*

C - “How is it possible to foster that type of behaviour from politicians?”

MH - “I don’t think we as external companies and groups can foster this behaviour - I think it needs to come from within and the moment has arrived that people inside institutions really see the need for these tools. Idealists, like us in the Civic Tech world, have been convinced of the potential of technology for years, and we’re now at a stage where members of the institutions are also proactively starting to seek out this technology.

We’ve recently been working with the Natural Resources Committee and the House of Representatives on a process to receive public input into the draft of a bill (the input is usually collected after the bill has been drafted). When we pointed out to the staffers that the high amount of transparency they were implementing could generate very positive but also negative input, the team responded this was exactly what they were after. That type of behaviour wouldn’t have been possible a few years ago, and the shift partly comes from evolving expectations from the public. Citizens are now used to highly personalised experiences, and to have their voices listened to in consumer interactions. There’s a growing desire to see this replicated on the public level through increased interactions with their government.

On the government side, there are two factors behind the accelerated adoption of transparency and engagement technologies that we’ve seen in the last couple of years. First, Congress is suffering from a lack of capacity - the work of public servants is increasingly complex, and they need better tools to do their job more efficiently. Secondly, the ongoing legitimacy crisis means that Congress can’t just work behind closed doors anymore. Bringing the public in is the only way to unstick the gears and to come up with effective, legitimate solutions.”

C - "How can participation be made inclusive?"

MH - "In the early days of Civic Tech, we piggybacked off existing advocacy systems in the US. Large advocacy groups would use our tools and direct large numbers of users to them, e.g. through widgets on their website. This is the old way of doing things, focusing on numbers and quantity rather than on quality. This fits well into advocacy tactics that rely on building an audience and playing on large numbers to influence politics, but I don't think this is the optimal way to do civic participation today.

The project we're working on with the Natural Resource Committee is taking a different approach. It has fewer participants, higher friction but also higher quality engagement and the final input is more incorporated into the legislative process. Over the past couple of years, PopVox has also been working with political scientists and running pilot programs to recruit representative samples of citizens and engaging them on particular issues. The aim is to test whether this improves the constituents' experience and the quality of the input that's collected, and whether it has a higher impact on decision making. There are a lot of these citizen panel experiments happening, and the next challenge is figuring out how to do that at scale. I see a lot of innovation coming in that regard over the next decade - I'm not sure where it's going to go, but we're interested in being part of the conversation.

Another thing I think about a lot is the use of data and evidence in policymaking. There's this idea that there's necessarily a trade-off between both, and that collaborative decisions come at the expense of data and evidence, or vice versa. I think that we should actually aim to mix both notions: get the public better informed through the use of data and evidence, and get public input to inform decisions."

C - "How do you create the conditions for meaningful engagement on the PopVox platforms?"

MH - "First and foremost, PopVox is not set up as a discussion platform. It's a platform for people to send a message to their lawmakers, and I think this

has protected us from a lot of the trolling and issues that you can see on other platforms. Another important element is that users who sign up to the platform have to provide a real address, a real name, and a real email. This information isn't made publicly visible on the platform, but it is shared with the member of Congress that you're contacting.

One of my colleagues is doing research on the 'public square vs the Ballot Box' notions. The idea is that there's a wide range of anonymity and participation levels in the offline world (from shouting in a public square to signing an editorial in a newspaper), and that this range should be replicated in the online world. Of course, you shouldn't expect to have a great impact if you're just shouting in a square - higher quality engagement is what gives a greater opportunity to impact the process."

C - "How do you get citizens to go higher on the participation ladder, and engage meaningfully?"

MH - "I put the responsibility for meaningful engagement on the government side. I think that we Civic Tech actors have had it wrong for the past decade. We thought that if we could create the tools, improve the user experience and reach out to large numbers of people, then we could fix the situation. Those are of course all important pieces, but ultimately I think what really matters is having a receptive government on the other side. Over the years, I've seen that the secret recipe for success is when lawmakers or committees truly pay attention and engage with the citizens' input. There are of course a lot of basic things that can be done on the user side (localisation and languages, user experience, good copy...) that we in the Civic Tech field can work on - but ultimately the real question is: are people's voices having an impact?"

Going further...

Learn more about [PopVox](#)

'[People and Technology can beat the Lobbyists](#)', a TED talk by Marci Harris

[Read the full interview with Marci Harris on our blog](#)

“It’ll take more than critical thinking, it’ll take civic-thinking.”



***David Lemayian
discusses the role of
Civic Tech***

David Lemayian is the Chief Technology Officer of Code for Africa, the continent’s Civic Technology, open data and data journalism initiative. David is an experienced technologist with a track record of finding creative ways to use technology in government and civil society organizations. He co-created TaxClock, a web-based tool that allows citizens to understand how their national budgets are allocated to various parts of the economy. Furthermore, David built the GotToVote toolkit that has been used in 8 countries to help citizens register to vote.

CitizenLab - “What major challenges do you think technology will help the government address in the next 10 years?”

David Lemayian - “It depends on the type of government. An extractive government will use technology to spread propaganda and stifle public discourse online. They might even use technology to track dissidents or monitor journalists in even more pervasive ways in the next 10 years. More inclusive governments will use technology to engage with their citizenry - in public participation and in service delivery. These governments could exploit emerging technologies to tackle problems in new ways; drones for better survey methods, medicine delivery, or temporary mobile towers. Also, they could use old technology better - provide open contracting portals at local levels, make more data accessible to more citizens to engage and participate more effectively, and keep those in power accountable.

At the end of the day, tech is a tool. The major challenges of procurement corruption and more transparent reporting will depend on how the particular government would use it and the political goodwill behind implementation.”

C - “From health to police and education, algorithms are playing an ever-growing role in public service. What can be done to ensure the technology is inclusive?”

DL - “To be inclusive, there will have to be a human rights-based approach to algorithmic accountability. There first needs to be sufficient awareness on the level of impact of such technology with examples of both opportunities and threats. For blind-spots to be uncovered, it'll take more than critical thinking - it'll take civic thinking. Regulations around fairness, ethics, and data protection will also have to be cemented and include international governance bodies to police corporations that would take advantage of loopholes in developing-countries' laws.”

C - “What are the ambitions of Code for Africa (CfA)?”

DL - “Code for Africa is an ecosystem builder. We work through civil society partners and newsrooms to empower them, rather than trying to do everything ourselves. CfA is also an advocate of open knowledge systems. We, therefore, ensure that everything we build is open source, open data and open access, within a strong do no harm ethical data framework. Our ambitions remain aligned to these goals by creating investigative labs and incubating initiatives that use leapfrog technologies for good.”

C - “How would you describe the current status of the Civic Tech ecosystem in East-Africa? What hopes do you have for its future?”

DL - “The Civic Tech ecosystem in East-Africa is going through a maturity phase. We've been some of the pioneers testing the grounds for Civic Tech on the continent, and we've seen some initiatives end, others continue to thrive, and others join the field of Civic Tech. My hope for the ecosystem's future is to see more collaboration with the governments. Due to political challenges, unlike in the West or in developed countries, the local Civic Tech, in many cases, had to circumvent the government to make citizen engagement happen; leaving the government behind or hostile to interventions. To the extent possible, it'd be good to have Civic Tech implementations adopted more strongly by governments in East Africa.”

*“In many cases, Civic Tech had to circumvent the government **to make citizen engagement happen.**”*

C - “How do you perceive the role of civil society regarding achieving transparency in governance? What actions should governments take themselves?”

DL - “I’d say the role of civil society in achieving transparency in governance is to, in an independent manner, help citizens decipher the impact of public matters. It’s important citizens gain understanding of complex national and local issues and the impact of budgets, policies and laws.

Governments, on the other hand, should see such interventions as an opportunity to learn and strengthen communication with their citizens to achieve a better standard of living for its people.”

*“Civil society should, in an independent manner, **help citizens decipher the impact of public matters.**”*

C - “How can governments use technology to better engage their citizens?”

DL - “From tackling internal systems to creating a cohesive whole, governments can use technology to improve efficiency and transform a State into more inclusive political systems. Online and mobile technology can also be used to improve public participation such as in local budget meetings or to request for a road to be repaired.

In developing countries, the main barrier would be skills and political gaps. Attracting talent that can feasibly and efficiently tackle technology adoption might be left up to expensive consultants who create short term fixes without long-term considerations. Political goodwill can be hard to also garner if the leaders don't understand the application and the electorate’s unaware or disinterested.”

C - “How does GotToVote [a toolkit that allows citizens to register to vote in an easy manner] solve this issue?”

GotToVote tried to solve these issues by for instance helping the electoral body in Ghana registration centre information into a single place for the first time. We then made GotToVote open source and available for anyone to re-use. In Malawi, we worked with local, in-country civil society organisations who were looking to implement new official channels for citizen participation. In 2019 when UNDP [*United Nations Development Programme*] offered support to the same elections body, at the top of their list of requests was an SMS system. That’s why we believe in building ecosystems and helping governments and civil society experiment with technology; it lowers the barrier of adoption.”

Going further...

Learn more about **GotToVote**, **TaxClock** and **CodeForAfrica**

Building elections toolkit, David Lemayian on Medium about GotToVote

GitHub: David Lemayian

“The Shrinking Civic Space in East Africa”, Cipesa report March 2019

**“Humanise the
technologist,
technologise the
humanist.”**



Adriana Groh speaks
*about the future of Public
Interest Tech*

Adriana Groh is the director of the Prototype Fund, a Berlin-based organisation which funds innovative, citizen-led projects which benefit the public interest. Adriana has a background in political science and sociology, combined with a passion for democratic innovation. Before joining the Prototype Fund, she launched Wepublic - an app to allow voters in the 2017 German general election to communicate with political parties and crowdsource interesting questions.

CitizenLab - “Can you tell us about Public Interest Tech, what it means and why it matters today?”

Adriana Groh - “Public Interest Tech is an idea that comes from the United States. In the 1960s, law students in Ivy League universities started a movement called Public Interest Law: instead of joining corporate law-firms right after graduation, some of them pledged to use their skills for the public good and to start off their careers in public institutions. In recent years, this idea has taken root amongst coders and engineers. These profiles have extremely valuable skills, and can make a hugely positive impact by working for a few years in public institutions, think-tanks or NGOs. The idea behind Public Interest Tech is to humanise the technologists (making it clear to them why their skills are needed for the public good), and also to technologise the humanists (helping the government acquire the skills it needs to adapt and innovate). It’s also about openness: open resources that are free to use for everyone who wants to contribute to open knowledge and use their skills for the public good.

The Prototype Fund supports projects which are aiming to improve the public good. The “Public Interest Tech” framework allows us to cluster many different technologies under one umbrella. They’re all open source, participatory and sustainable, meaning they can be modeled, used, and adapted by other people. More importantly, they’re all aiming to enhance the public good.”

C - “So... what is the public good?”

AG - “That’s a question we get very often! Today, there’s no clear-cut definition that everyone agrees on. It’s difficult to define the notion of public good: it’s always evolving, and can be approached from many different angles. You could say a public of project interest is something which benefits a societal group without disadvantaging another group; you could also define it as something which improves equality, sustainability or wealth distribution. In the case of the Prototype Fund, we’ve decided to go with a narrower and measurable definition of Public Interest. The projects we fund have to address a specific issue of importance for a specific societal group: it could for instance be

*“Public Interest Tech has the power to **break the barriers** we’ve built between CivicTech and GovTech.”*

technology to help deaf people, or to improve public commuting within a certain geographical area.”

C - “It’s often said that whilst Civic Tech is about increasing the legitimacy of governments, GovTech is about improving efficiency. Is Public Interest Tech about striking a balance between these two notions?”

AG - “There’s currently a very clear-cut division between Civic Tech and GovTech. They are funded differently, structured differently and rely on different legal principles. However, it’s not necessarily helpful to have these divisions - neither notion was sufficient enough to define the projects that we want to fund at the Prototype Fund. Public Interest Tech is wider than Civic Tech or GovTech, and it has the potential to break the barriers we’ve created between these two notions. Combining Civic Tech and GovTech allows us to think about infrastructure and security alongside questions of efficiency and legitimacy, which helps us take innovations further.”

C - “Governments need to innovate to respond to 21st century challenges. Where should this push come from: the private sector, or governments themselves?”

AG - “Both! The private sector needs to be innovative to secure business models or come up with new ones, and it is often easier for private companies to afford new talents and start new projects and experiments. The public sector has a different responsibility and faces the challenge to be innovative in strict, long time established, hierarchical systems. Yet at the same time, the

public sector made the high-risk investments that made many innovations possible in the first place! The private sector often only finds the courage to invest after a government funded the research and groundwork. We need to join forces and combine the different strengths from inside and outside government to come up with groundbreaking innovation!”

C - “In 2017, you created Wepublic, an app for the German general election. Do you find users on this type of platform moderate themselves, or should the people who create the technology create barriers and guidelines?”

AG - “Wepublic was created with a clear use-case and a clear benefit: users wanted to have clear and comparable direct information straight from parties. There was no moderation - the crowd was trusted to vote for the most interesting questions. People used the app to ask questions that were important to them about education changes, subsidies for single parents, sustainability in agriculture... That logic gave people a reason to be straight to the point, and therefore helped prevent hate speech or trolling. We found that issue-based communication works better than when you make it about multiple parties or groups of people. Online deliberation spaces that have no clear use case and that focus on a single issue or party can be more prone to trolling.”

“Democracy isn’t about who is the loudest or the sharpest.”

C - “Do you think that the current algorithms which give more traction to people who are the loudest are a threat to modern democracy?”

AG - “The platforms that we use for online communication are marketing platforms. They work brilliantly for marketing logic, but democracy isn’t about who’s the loudest or who’s the sharpest, so there’s a fundamental inadequacy there. Although I’m hesitant to say of much of an impact it has on the individual level, I do think it is a threat because

it allows manipulation on a way bigger scale, in a more specific and more personal way than we’ve ever seen before. Populist movements and disinformation have always existed alongside democracy, but we’d never had tools to make these as efficient as they are today - and this is where the problem lies. We don’t need marketing platforms that have been designed to sell products - we need to come up with tools that allow us to form informed opinions and engage in meaningful conversations.”

C - “What trends would you like to see in Public Interest Tech in the coming years?”

AG - “I personally hope to see more open technology about respectful data collection - tools which give users better ownership of their data and allow them to choose what they disclose.

There’s also currently a lot of talk about sovereignty or sustainability, and about a European way of internet. I would like to see a counter-model to the Silicon Valley or surveillance models we see coming from other parts of the world. I think we need a more clear-cut vision of what the internet should be, and we should be ready to invest in open source, open standards and open data.”

Going **further...**

A definition of Public Interest Technology, New America

“Why universities need Public Interest Technology courses”, Susan Crawford on Wired

Learn more about **The Prototype Fund** and **Wepublic**

“Representative and participatory democracy must reinforce each other.”



Boudewijn Steur talks about strengthening local democracy

Boudewijn Steur works as programme manager Strengthening Democracy and Governance at the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. He played a major role in setting up the national cooperation programme "Democratie in Actie" [Democracy in Action] that helps governments strengthen local democracy by supporting projects and organizing events. His years of experience as a strategic advisor and project manager at the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations are informing his current commitment to further develop the Democracy in Action programme.

CitizenLab - “How do you make the objective of strengthening local democracy tangible in your work?”

Boudewijn Steur - “The current cabinet aims to strengthen local democracy. This is not because there’s a crisis, but because Dutch local governments are faced with all kinds of new challenges, such as the energy transition, the upcoming Omgevingswet [*Environment and Planning Act*] and the decentralizations in the social domain. These changes lead to two major challenges. For representative democracy it means that councillors become involved in many domains: the amount of work thus increases, while working hours remain the same. For participatory democracy, we see that citizens themselves want to have a say in these decisions as they have a direct impact on everyday life. Many citizens, for example, understand the need for the energy transition, but want to have an influence on the process. Representative democracy must thus be supplemented with participatory forms. Our Democracy in Action programme tries to better connect the two - and at the same time strengthen both. It helps us ensure together that local democracies are prepared for all the challenges that are coming their way.”

C - “What do you consider to be the biggest contribution of the Democracy in Action programme?”

BS - “I’m specifically proud of our contribution in the municipality of Groningen. This local democracy is under extra pressure due to the earthquakes and its consequences, such as strengthening and repairing damaged homes. Municipal councils have to make tough decisions here, in addition to all their other tasks, and I think it’s essential that we can support them with, among other things, budget. Furthermore, I see it as a great success that many municipalities started to develop the Right to Challenge. This right gives citizens the opportunity to take over tasks from the local governments in their immediate surroundings. Implementation of this right doesn’t happen by itself, so the program supports municipalities by offering expertise and by including this right into the legislation.”

C - “How did the Right to Challenge (R2C) become one of the programme’s spearheads?”

BS - “The term Right to Challenge came up in England in 2010, after which Dutch citizens approached the government to request whether this was also possible here. The “Spoorpark” [*Rail park*] in Tilburg illustrates this well as citizens took on the redesign of the park. The funny thing is that R2C is actually a practice we’ve always known here. Especially in small villages on the countryside, citizens have often taken over affairs from the government, such as community centers. When we come to “introduce” the Right to Challenge in these municipalities, we often receive the reply that it has existed for decades. In essence, this Dutch form also fits much better than the form we wanted to import from England. Sometimes you can learn more from looking closely at your own past than simply copying something that works abroad!”

“We’ve actually always known the
Right to Challenge.”

C - “Speaking of the Netherlands, citizen participation is increasingly mentioned in national legislation. How can governments practically implement this?”

BS - “In practice, we see that citizen participation has already emerged from society in small, mostly rural, municipalities. Clear examples are the Dutch municipalities of Raalte and de Wolden, where citizen participation is already much more embedded than in most large cities. What we - the national government and municipalities - need to realise is that we need to practice a lot. We needed 150 years to make representative democracy function properly and this process is still not finished. We have only worked on citizen participation for decades, so we must keep practicing and dare to make mistakes so that we can learn from them. We also need to learn more from

each other, and from the experiences we have already gained. Our objective with Democracy in Action is to further promote mutual discussion and collaboration as too many municipalities are still trying to invent the wheel themselves.”

“I’m in favour of a wider interpretation of participation, also online.”

C - “You also advocate that local authorities should rethink participation. What exactly do you mean by this?”

BS - “There’s often a tendency to interpret participation from the government’s point of view. We decide when and how citizens are allowed to have a say, but as soon as they make a contribution outside the - by us - created form, we suddenly no longer perceive it as participation. Protests and demonstrations, even those that get a little out of hand, are participation just as good. That’s why I’m in favour of a broader interpretation of participation, also online. It’s good to create digital forums for citizen participation, but participation on social media is essentially not better or worse than the forms constructed by the government. Citizens may increasingly choose their own ways of participating and we shouldn’t see that as something negative. It is - and remains - a good thing when a person is involved and committed to the public cause, even if this is in a different way than we had envisioned. I see it as the government’s task to sufficiently move along with the way citizens want to participate.”

C - “What developments in digital democracy are you hoping to witness or contribute to in the coming years?”

BS - “I don’t think that participatory democracy is going to completely replace representative democracy, but that we’re able to make both forms

complimentary, even in the digital domain. That’s still a big challenge, but in the end it’ll give us a democracy that will function much better. Some people prefer to elect a representative over participating actively. That should also be possible. That’s why participatory and representative democracy must both continue to develop.

For the field of digital democracy, I do hope that we’ll develop forms that enable everyone to participate in a much more inclusive and accessible way. The digital domain offers many opportunities to truly involve all groups in society. Many people would like to participate, but most are less willing to make a structural contribution. Online participation makes participation on an ad hoc basis possible and therefore offers a good way for governments to adapt to how citizens want to participate.”

Going further...

Learn more about the **“Democratie in Actie”** programme (In Dutch)

England’s community Right to Challenge,
Center for Public Impact

Citizen Participation in the Netherlands

“Citizens become more central in the decision-making process.”



Dirk Verstichele on smart cities and the digital government

Dirk Verstichele is CEO of Cipal Schaubroeck, a Belgian company offering HR and IT services specifically for the public sector. Cipal Schaubroeck was founded in October 2016 as a joint venture between two former competitors (Cipal nv and Schaubroeck nv). Dirk Verstichele has been working for the Schaubroeck group since 1990 and has contributed to the development of specific services and innovation of HR and IT services for local, public administrations since the beginning of his career.

CitizenLab - “How does Cival Schaubroeck contribute to the development of digital innovation within the government?”

Dirk Verstichele - “Cival Schaubroeck is a prominent partner in the digital transformation of local governments in Belgium. The initial companies have different origins, but both had a clear focus on the public sector from the beginning, which facilitated our recent alliance. By working together and joining forces, we hope to contribute to building the governments of the future. In addition to consolidating the usual software and associated services that we offer, we want to play a key role in the digital transformation of local governments. To this end, Cival Schaubroeck has invested intensively in spin-off companies and new technology in recent years. Our ambition is to create more sustainable and liveable communities by developing smart technologies and working hand in hand with our partners.”

C - “What digital transformations are worth investing in within the sector?”

DV - “In traditional domains of administration, the focus is still mainly on offering tools to digitize processes and optimize employee tasks. There has also been an important cultural change in the way citizens experience and interact with the municipality. Digital transformation is reinventing interactions between local governments and citizens, helping citizens become more central in the decision-making process. This can be seen, for example, in digital citizen participation platforms, the Smart Counters, but also through Smart City developments and incentive tools that stimulate desired behaviour among citizens.

Another important transformation: by aggregating and analysing real-time data, it’s becoming possible to generate new data flows and predictions. With all the possibilities this offers, it remains essential not to lose sight of our ultimate goal, which is increasing quality of life. We reach this objective by placing the citizen first, and by investing data processing technologies. In Flanders, for example, a number of areas are very sensitive to flood risk. Instead of waiting for the calamity to occur, measurements can

predict with high probability when - and which - districts will be flooded. Local governments can then put this on the preventive agenda. Water management, such as the emptying of locks, can be measured and regulated in real time. This kind of technological development will play an increasingly important role in keeping our cities and towns livable.”

“Smart cities will come about through a chain of small initiatives.”

C - “What are the main stumbling blocks for local authorities trying to innovate?”

DV - “I’d say it’s an opportunity rather than a challenge, but we have to ensure that these innovations are implemented on a large enough scale. If progress is to be made, it’s imperative that local authorities work better together.

Another challenge is to collect data in a structured way to meaningfully interrogate datasets from different areas of the administration and allow for new solutions to emerge. The technology is there and it’s a solution rather than a stumbling block. It’s therefore not so much a matter of first choosing the technology and then identifying which problem it can solve, but rather of starting from a clear problem definition and choosing the appropriate technology. We’re also convinced that the smart city will not come about through a digital big bang, but through a chain of small, smart initiatives.”

C - “In terms of digital development, is there a difference within the (Flemish) market, for example, between big cities and municipalities?”

DV - “The capacity to innovate obviously, but by no means exclusively, has to do with resources. Large cities, by definition, have more resources and means than small or medium-sized municipalities. Large cities are therefore often forerunners - but that’s not always the case! Cival Schaubroeck, for example,

*“The capacity to innovate primarily lies in **our own creativity.**”*

has collaborated on a project called Buck-e in which children are encouraged to come to school by bicycle. RFID tags [*Radio frequency identification tags*] are placed in the bicycle, the helmet or their safety vest. When children cycle along the school gate, this is then registered by sensors. In this way, the children collect crypto coins, which can be handed in for a discount at the local retailer, the local library or at the fair. Initiatives of this kind have come primarily from smaller, local authorities and show that technology is supportive. The capacity to innovate therefore lies primarily in our own creativity with which we offer solutions to various problems in society, such as mobility and the environment.”

C - “What is important for the digital government of the future?”

DV - “We know that within give or take 20 years up to 65% of the population will live in cities. This will lead to congestion, pollution and cohabitation problems. By defining the potential problems in a timely manner and using smart technologies for the solutions, it should be possible to achieve sustainable, safe and connected local governments.

Nudge tools and technologies [*subtle indicators to encourage certain behaviours, like reducing litter or develop orderly queing*] combined with reward and gratification systems could help improve civic behaviour. However, governments must never lose sight of the ethical component. Development of our future digital governments shouldn't be placed in the hands of large, unregulated private giants. In Europe, governments and local businesses, must regulate digital innovation. Improvements in quality of life, security, mobility and so on, must always be assessed against the necessity for privacy.”

Going **further...**

Learn more about **Cipal Schaubroeck**

“Smart cities: The Future of Urban Development”, Forbes

“Smart city: the state of development of smart cities in Belgium: a first statistical report”, the Smart City Initiative of the University of Liège

“What is ‘Nudge Theory’ and why should we care? Explaining Richard Thaler’s Nobel economics prize winning concept”, Independent

“Positive or negative, emotions are an essential part of politics.”



Stephen Boucher
*talks about creativity
in politics*

Stephen Boucher is the founder of Dreamocracy, a think-and-do tank and consulting agency. He teaches political science at Sciences Po Paris, at the Solvay Management School in Brussels, at the Collective Intelligence School and at the Institute of European Studies of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Prior to founding Dreamocracy, Stephen headed the EURACTIV foundation and the consoGlobe.com website focusing on responsible consumption. He has also worked at the European Climate Foundation, the Jacques Delors Institute and was advisor to the Minister for European Affairs in Guy Verhofstadt's government. Stephen is the author of several books, including 'The Little Handbook of Political Creativity' and 'Think-tanks, Brains of the War of Ideas'.

C - “How does the current appetite for citizen participation fit in with the ongoing institutional crisis and decreasing trust levels?”

SB - “As explained by Jeremy Heimans in ‘Old power, New power’, our relationship to power has changed, the traditional power mechanisms have changed, and new, more flexible and collaborative forms of power are emerging. The protests we are seeing today (from Gilets Jaunes [Yellow vests] to climate marches) and the emergence of new political movements show that there’s a belief in political action despite a dissatisfaction with traditional forms of political involvement. The current distrust for the traditional political systems should not be mistaken for a lack of faith in political action. There might be a negative view of political actors, but there is still willingness to take collective action. In short, there is a strong demand for a new form of citizen involvement.”

C - “In your opinion, where does this negative perception of political actors come from?”

SB - “An essential part of this issue is that traditional political stakeholders have failed in the eyes of the citizens. One of the first elements of trust is ‘output legitimacy’, legitimacy through results. After years of promising great things but failing to deliver these results, elected officials have disappointed citizens and cultivated scepticism.

Another issue which could explain dissatisfaction with politics is citizens’ desire to be listened to and involved in a different way. Citizens feel that elected representatives and political institutions don’t have a good understanding of their needs, and would like to be involved in decision-making - they have an expert understanding of the issues they’re facing, and would like to contribute solutions. The political process would gain legitimacy by opening up decision-making beyond the closed circle of politicians and lobbies.

Finally, while trust and legitimacy are obvious answers to this legitimacy crisis, we often forget a third, essential aspect: the expression of emotions. Whether they are positive (aspirations, hope, the desire to show solidarity...) or negative (then playing

“Our relationship to power has changed, traditional power mechanisms have changed.”

into the hands of populist parties that instrumentalize fears or frustrations), emotions are essential in politics. The private sector has clearly understood this, and plays on emotions by injecting meaning into consumerism. This quest for meaning, vision and values is one of the main reasons for the success of the Gilets Jaunes movement. During the protests, people gathering in the streets and on the roundabouts created social ties and recognised shared desires. In another sphere, the growing involvement of citizens in local actions or NGOs also shows a search for meaning and motivation.”

C - “What can governments do to inject meaning back into political life?”

SB - “Politicians and governments should pay attention to technocratic ideas and issues, but also to emotions. In France, Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche movement was very good at opening up and listening to emotions during the presidential campaign, but lost this momentum once in power. The capacity for listening greatly diminished, giving way to an impression of detachment, distance, and sometimes snobbery. It’s important to maintain this listening and to give room for emotions, which are otherwise instrumentalised by populists.”

C - “You often talk about creativity in politics. How do we make governments more creative, more emotionally responsive?”

SB - “The first thing governments should develop is inclusive, diverse collective intelligence. Opening the decision-making process to a wide audience and allowing for the confrontation of diverse opinions would bring new perspectives and more effective solutions can be brought to the public debate. This process also helps unleash our “collective audacity”, which is what many of the new

digital democracy tools like CitizenLab or Dreamocracy are striving for.”

C - "Citizens' assemblies are making the news all over Europe. Are these a fad, or are they the beginning of a new way to do politics?"

SB - “I’d say it’s a bit of both. They’re partly a fad in the sense that many political actors have been quick to embrace them without really understanding what the process implies. However, citizen assemblies are more than a passing fad: once implemented, citizen consultation is a process that can only move forward and there is no turning back once the movement is launched. Take the city of Paris: citizen consultation started on a small scale with open forums and suggestion boxes, before moving on larger and more meaningful participation processes such as participatory budgets and the funding of crowd-sourced citizen projects. This forward dynamic is inherent to the promise of consultation.”

*“We are in an era of
‘Democracy R&D’.”*

C - “Is it possible to ensure that governments follow the recommendations coming from citizen consultations to avoid distrust and disappointment?”

SB - “There are two things at play here. First of all, it’s important to remember that not all consultation mechanisms are intended to lead to action. They’re not here to relieve politicians of their responsibilities, and it’s not up to citizens to decide everything. When launching a consultation, it is important to be very clear about its purpose: is it aiming to gather opinions, to guide a choice, to define priorities? There is a range of possible deliverables, and setting a clear moral contract from the start helps limit frustrations.

Secondly, even though some citizen consultations are clearly lacking seriousness or real political implications, it’s important to not condemn them too quickly. It’s important to remember that this is just the beginning of the process: citizens’

assemblies may have been inspired by the methods of ancient Greeks, but they’re still new for our modern representative democracies. We must accept that the process will take time, and it isn’t because a consultation isn’t perfect from a methodological point of view that its results must be entirely abandoned. I think we’re currently in an era of “Democracy R&D”, - no one has found the perfect tool to save democracy, and research and development processes should be encouraged as much as possible. The actors who are building new tools (such as CitizenLab or Dreamocracy) should stay humble, whilst advising and guiding public actors on the path to innovation.”

C - “Is there a place for citizen participation at the national and international level?”

SB - “Of course there is! Consultations at the European level can help create a European public space (currently missing today), and allow us to address the complexity of European issues. Why not introduce a participatory budget share in the European budget, or carry out a deliberative poll before the President of the Commission’s annual speech to co-create the directions? The European institutions are currently reflecting on these mechanisms, and there are a host of resolutions being negotiated within the institutions as we speak.”

Going **further...**

Learn more about **Dreamocracy**

“Understanding New Power”, Harvard Business Review

“Can Europe be a catalyst for democratic innovation?”, Carnegie Europe

“Executive summary: Little Manual of political creativity”, Steven Boucher

“The power of citizen initiatives is that they work at all levels.”



Elisa Lironi on digital participation in the EU

Elisa Lironi is the Senior Manager European Democracy, working at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) since 2015. She develops and leads ECAS' European Democracy focus area by implementing EU projects and research studies related to Digital Democracy, Online Disinformation and Populism. She is currently part of the team working with Secretariat-General of the European Commission on developing and implementing the European Citizens' Initiative Forum. Her most recent publication is "Harnessing Digital Tools to Revitalize European Democracy" for Carnegie Europe (2018).

CitizenLab - “What is the biggest achievement of European Citizens’ Initiatives (ECI)?”

Elisa Lironi - “The ECI is the first transnational tool of its kind. The mechanism is officially institutionalized via the Lisbon treaty and through the implementation of the ECI regulation. Moreover, it allows citizens from different member states to collaborate on a policy they have at heart and gives them a tool to put something on the agenda of the European Commission. The focus is on giving citizens a voice and influence on EU policy-making, which is a big achievement. It’s good to realize that getting to this point is the result of a lot of work by civil society organizations. The fact that the Commission and other EU institutions even reached an agreement on the creation of the tool is actually already an achievement in itself.”

C - “Are citizen initiatives effective in setting the agenda?”

EL - “Until now, around six European Citizens’ Initiatives have reached the threshold [*officially 4 ECIs were recognised by European Commission until now*], which is established at a minimum of 1 million signatures from at least 7 different countries. Unfortunately, the truth is that, even after all these years, the European Commission has never initiated legislative procedure on any of these ECIs. However, this does not mean at all that the ECIs have no impact whatsoever. We’ve seen parts of initiatives being used to revise EU directives or some have had an impact on national or local policies. A clear example of this was the Right to Water initiative, which resulted in a lot of debate in Italy about the privatization of water.

I believe the power of citizens’ initiatives is that it’s one of the participatory mechanisms that you see working at all levels - transnational, national and local. They’re different from basic e-petitioning platforms as governments have agreed to the legislative framework that surrounds them. In Latvia and Finland, for instance, national citizens’ initiatives that reach the set threshold have to be debated in parliament. It’s not that straightforward on the EU level, where initiatives have to pass the Commission before being sent to Parliament. Moreover,

initiatives need to take into account the cultural sensitivities of all member states and making inclusive translations can be difficult. But, at the end of the day, the framework does work and we have even seen a new record of registered ECIs in 2019! Most of these initiatives were climate-focused. Despite its complexity, people haven’t stopped using this tool. The increasing number of initiatives actually shows that citizens see the value of policy collaboration at the transnational level.”

C - “How should the ECI still improve?”

EL - “2020 will be a turning point as it’s the year where the new ECI regulation will be implemented. Since the tool was launched, this is the first time the regulation has been completely revisited and revised. The changes mark a new era as the tool will be made much more user-friendly, and both the website and ECI forum are getting a revamp. For the past two years, the ECI forum was solely a pilot project but the new regulation installs it as a formal platform to support organizers in running initiatives.”

“Despite its complexity, people haven’t stopped using this tool.”

C - “What are the current challenges for digital citizen participation?”

EL - “One of the main hurdles for digital citizen participation is definitely the digital divide. Although more and more generations in Europe are familiar with technology, it’s good to keep digital tools complimentary to offline methods as some are still more comfortable with these channels. There are also other serious challenges that digitizing participation brings about, like the way people get their information and or the gradual polarization of opinions and discussions. When people rely on digital channels for information, there is the risk of them ending up in echo-chambers. The only way to ensure people are immune to opinion filters is to increase knowledge about the way social and online media are structured. ECAS [*European Citizen*

Action Service] has been strongly supporting more digital education in schools to help younger generations understand not only democracy and participation, but also social media algorithms. It's important citizens understand that these algorithms filter information, which means they're not always reflective of reality. I think civil society can also play a role in raising awareness of certain issues by being active in representing citizens with different viewpoints.”

“MEPs are representatives and should be open about the work they’re doing for citizens.”

C - “What digital innovations should be harnessed more in the European Union in the future to further improve the democratic processes?”

EL - “Once the new ECI regulation is implemented, we'll have to re-assess the user-friendliness and impact of the ECIs. The ECI is only one way in which we can have participatory democracy and e-participation in the EU. To go towards more participatory democracy, we need to increase the use of digital channels.

In a report I wrote for the European Parliament, I interviewed several Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who used e-platforms and e-participation to communicate more transparently with their constituents. They posted their draft European Parliament reports online, allowing their constituents to openly amend the text or vote on sentences with which they agreed. I thought this was very interesting - at the end of the day, MEPs are the representatives of the citizens who elect them, and should therefore be open and transparent about the work they’re doing for these citizens. Technology allows them to reach out to their constituents who aren’t in Brussels but at home.”

What also could be harnessed more are crowdsourcing mechanisms at different phases in the policy process. Citizens can currently contribute to online public consultations, but most of these are highly technical - and only involve citizens almost at the end of the legislative procedure. At ECAS we have been striving to also install crowdsourcing at the beginning of the process so that citizens can contribute broader opinions before matters get too complicated. This type of crowdsourcing works in parallel with more technical online public consultations that specifically made for stakeholders.

What’s certain is that none of the three current EU formal channels in place - the European Citizens’ Initiative, the online public consultation, and e-petitions - truly allow citizens to co-create legislation with policymakers. Crowdsourcing is definitely one of the future mechanisms that should be implemented at some point, but opening up legislative processes and increasing collaboration with citizens is going to take a lot of political will.”

Going further...

Learn more about **ECAS**

“Six ideas for rejuvenating European Democracy”, Carnegie Europe

“Updated rules on the European Citizens’ initiative adopted”, the European Council

“Harnessing digital tools to revitalize European Democracy”, Carnegie Europe

“EU Public Consultations in the digital age: Enhancing the role of the EESC and civil society organisations”, European Economic and Social Committee

**“What’s damaged
is our relationship
with democracy.”**



Quentin Jardon talks
*about trust, government
and the media*

Quentin Jardon is a journalist. He is the co-founder of Wilfried, a Belgian magazine that tells the story of Belgian politics through its political prism, with large portraits, long stories and interviews. He was previously editor-in-chief of 24h01 magazine. Quentin Jardon has recently published "Alexandria", a book about a Belgian internet pioneer forgotten by history.

C - “The article you recently wrote about the Kayoux movement [a citizen movement from a Belgian town] is entitled ‘Repairing Democracy’. Is democracy broken?”

Quentin Jardon: “According to Churchill, democracy is the worst form of government... except for all the others. As a system, it still works: it’s neither deviated nor perverted. I would say what’s damaged is our relationship with democracy, and the way it’s perceived today. In some way, this can be a good thing: this little wave of revolt is here to remind us that it is an imperfect system and that it can always be improved. One of the fundamental issues with democracy today is the fact that it’s intermittent: citizens are called upon to vote every 4, 5 or 6 years; between these occasions, there’s sometimes a feeling - perhaps a little simplistic - that elected officials don’t respect the mandate they’ve been given. This leads to support for more frequent citizen interventions, and a desire to control the work of elected officials.

The second issue we’re facing today is the feeling of disconnection between the political world and civil society. This feeling is partly cultivated by social networks, as politicians are under intense scrutiny in their behaviour and attitudes. This comes in addition to a bad economic climate, which has led to movements like the Gilets Jaunes [*Yellow vests movement*] in France. In this context, many feel the need to find a culprit, and the designated culprit is often the government. It has also led to the rise of populist desires or calls to wipe out what is a centuries-old system.

“The fate of major issues shouldn’t be in the hands of leaders alone.”

Lastly, the huge and pressing challenges - like global warming - that we are currently facing have highlighted the need for a more flexible system capable of responding quickly and bringing innovative solutions. It seems necessary that the fate of these major issues should not be in the hands of

leaders alone: the current system, which calls citizens to the polls every 5 or 6 years, partly creates a feeling of powerlessness. Citizens may have the impression that the urgency of these fundamental issues is not understood by governments. Out of this frustration comes a desire to change the way our democracy works.”

C - “From the ‘Grand Débat’ to the implementation of a citizens’ assembly in Belgium, 2019 was a decisive year for participatory democracy. Do you think the future is bright for citizen participation in Belgium?”

QJ - “It’s of course impossible to read behind political speeches, but I believe that there is a sincere intention from elected officials to develop citizen participation. Many elected representatives are increasingly in favour of including citizens in decision-making. They still believe in representative democracy, but they’ve come to realize that one-off elections just aren’t enough.

Traditional parties in Flanders and Wallonia [*Belgium’s two main regions*] are being challenged, and political leaders are very sensitive to these changes. Many are aware that political parties must be reinvented to become more flexible, more inclusive, and more horizontal. There is a growing desire to include civil society in the political world and to strengthen the link between citizens and their elected representatives. Political movements like the young strikers for the climate, the Gilets Jaunes, and more traditional parties like Ecolo [*Belgium’s green party*] are making participatory democracy part of their DNA, which clearly indicates that participatory democracy has a bright future.”

C - “What are the main obstacles to citizen participation in the Belgian political system today? Is it a lack of suitable tools, or is it mistrust from citizens?”

QJ - “It’s often said that the Belgian political system is quite complex and confusing. Compared to the American, Italian or French systems where politics can sometimes look like a show (with the excesses that this implies), the Belgian model seems a little disembodied. In

disembodied. In countries like France, with a very direct political system, a lot of media attention, and large televised political debates, it's easier for citizens to pick up an interest in politics and to follow political life. Belgium has a proportional system and many different levels of power, which makes it a less attractive system. This is precisely the challenge Wilfried Magazine is trying to address: we're trying to make Belgian politics sexier and more attractive. We wanted to create a narrative universe to highlight the career paths, personalities and trials of elected representatives in order to bring citizens closer to the political world and to re-interest them in politics."

C - "Trust in politics and in the media is eroding. In a context where the expert's word is increasingly disregarded, what can be done to create conditions for a peaceful debate online?"

QJ - "Rather than the quality of the press, I'd say that it's the way we consume information that has changed. Social networks are becoming the primary source of news for an increasing number of people. Traditional media outlets have complied to these platforms for a number of years and have had to adapt to their algorithms, which as a result led to an increase in impulsive, click-bait articles. Suspicions of cronyism between the media and the political world has also damaged the credibility of the press, particularly so in France. The accusations aren't always fair, but it's very difficult to go back once they've taken root.

*"Just like elected officials, the media have a responsibility to **become more inclusive and participatory.**"*

Since citizens use new channels to get to the news, the media must think about new ways to reach their audience and reinvent their models to stay relevant. It's difficult to compete with the appeal of social networks, which are seductive and easy to access: a print magazine coming out once a quarter requires a greater effort on the part of the reader. It's however part of what's needed to recreate a strong bond of trust between reader and media. Journalists must not give up long term reporting, and must continue to reach out to their subjects and readers. We must return to thorough, on the ground and rigorous journalism. Unfortunately, this is expensive - and elected representatives have a role to play in helping fund this press.

Just like elected officials and political parties, the media also has a responsibility to become more inclusive and participatory. Newspapers can, for example, organize themselves in the form of a cooperative. This is what we do at Wilfried Magazine, and other newspapers like l'Avenir are also experimenting with such a model. It is also possible to regain readers' trust by including them in the newspaper's major strategic decisions, by consulting them regularly and by ensuring their voice is heard. The media also have to prove their transparency and strengthen the bond with their audience."

Going **further...**

Learn more about the **Wilfried Magazine**

"Belgium's Democratic Experiment",
Politico.eu

"Tiny democracy - A Belgian experiment that Aristotle would have approved of", The Economist

“The goal isn’t having our plan succeed, but having our citizens decide.”



Vincent Van Quickenborne on digital citizen participation

Vincent van Quickenborne is mayor of the Flemish city of Kortrijk. He has held this office since 2013, and in 2019 he initiated the first digital referendum in Belgium. The mayor is also active as a Belgian Member of Parliament and has previously served as Minister of Economy and Reform, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Pensions. In 2010, he was selected as Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum on the basis of his contributions to administrative simplification and the international promotion of Belgium as an investment country.

CitizenLab - "How did you create a participatory culture within your administration in your role as mayor?"

Vincent Van Quickenborne - "I think this participatory culture has basically been around for a long time. At the start of our coalition in 2013, we immediately asked for citizen input on our governance plans. We incorporated the numerous suggestions, which often concerned basic matters like traffic speed or safety on the streets, into our governance policy. This was essentially the first phase as the ideas were still collected both online and on paper, for example by going door-to-door or to the community centres. In phase two, we again went door-to-door, first with paper and later with tablets, but now to ask residents about the situation in the neighbourhood. Last year we started a third phase by launching a digital participation platform including 5 statements on which citizens could give their opinion. We also effectively succeeded in following up the results of this platform; for example by introducing GAS [administrative] fines on cigarette butts. Finally, last October we organised the first digital referendum in Belgium. The question concerned a monthly car-free Sunday in the city centre and within one week almost 10,000 people voted."

C: "What was the main lesson learned from the first digital referendum?"

VVQ - "The biggest issue with a referendum lies with most politicians. A 'Yes-vote' is seen as a vote for the government and a 'No-vote' as a vote against. But that's wrong, because it isn't about the current government, it's about a concrete question. So a 'No' shouldn't be seen as a sign of failure - and a 'Yes' shouldn't be seen as a victory. You see this attitude especially among politicians, but not necessarily among citizens. It therefore turns out to be a question of letting go and daring to take risks. Switzerland already has this culture: there the question of a referendum is really separate from the government that may be in power. This is something we have yet to learn. Perhaps it would be even better if political parties didn't express an opinion on the question at the time of a referendum, no matter how difficult it may be. I'm overall, by the way,

very satisfied with the digital referendum, especially with the ease with which we organised it. It leaves us wanting more and hopefully we'll even be able to organise our elections digitally in the future. In Estonia, for example, there's already a very digital culture, citizens can choose between online and offline voting, but that's still a distant future in our country. Many politicians still look at this with suspicion."

*"A 'No' shouldn't be seen as a **failure** and a 'Yes' shouldn't be seen as a **victory.**"*

C - "You have announced that Kortrijk from now on hold will organize an annual digital referendum. What's the main added value of implementing this?"

VVQ - "The added value is the debate people have beforehand and the fact that people engaged with topics that aren't immediately in their sphere of interest. With the last referendum everyone discussed the car-free Sundays with family or in the cafe. The direct consultation gives people the feeling that they're respected and that their voice really counts. This is only possible thanks to technology. Imagine organising such a referendum with classic voting booths... Not only would that cost a lot of money, I also expect that few people would be willing to go to the ballot box during that day. Now you give people the chance - and time - to vote all week long, which also ensures that people who have voted can prompt people around them to do the same. I think we're the preview of what'll happen nationwide in the long run; we'll get input effectively from more people, more often. I believe that the combination of individualization and technology introduces a new era for politics - and that we're the first to really experiment with it."

“Individualization and technology together introduce a new era for politics.”

C - "What advice do you have for mayors to involve residents with online participation projects?"

VVQ - "I think it's a matter of daring as a government to be vulnerable and show that you don't have all the answers. The referendum didn't just happen, there was a lot that preceded it. We organized it because many people used to feel that they had little to say in the city, that there was a distance between them and us. I think it'd be different if you were to ask this question today, although there, of course, always remain people dissatisfied. Still, the result of the first referendum was 'No' with 57% of the votes - as a result we adopted our policy. The fact that we listened creates a positive culture. Internally, some people were disappointed that the referendum didn't result in a monthly car-free Sunday, but the goal wasn't having our plan succeed, the goal was having the citizens decide. I'm not saying that governments should put all decisions in the hands of the people. You can't have a referendum every minute of the day, citizens would get annoyed. Although it might well be that in time the political class will be replaced by online referendums and artificial intelligence."

C - "Do you think that's utopian or dystopian?"

VVQ - "As long as technology is at the service of the people, I think that's a very good thing. There's a lot of loss of time and efficiency in politics, and artificial intelligence can lead to politically simpler processes."

C - "What is your vision for the future of digital local democracy?"

VVQ - "We're now going to hold a digital referendum once a year, but we still have difficult issues in between, like the redesign of roads, to name just one thing. Then I wonder: isn't it possible to only make the people vote that actually live in that specific area, for example, on a one-way street? But we're not there yet."

We do have a soundboard group that decides on these kind of questions, but that's only representation of all citizens. I'd rather give the whole neighbourhood a chance to help decide. This raises other issues though, because can you demarcate an area? It may also affect people who drive through the streets every day but live somewhere else... Still, I think we're moving more and more towards the ad hoc use of digital decision-making to improve policies. A mayor can still choose to propose three well thought-out cases, models or solutions, but the citizen decides."

Going further....

“Kortrijk votes against monthly car free sunday in country's first digital referendum”, VRT

“Case study: 10,000 citizens take part in Kortrijk's digital referendum”, the CitizenLab blog



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