iSE ED

Inclusive
Science and
European
Democracies

Policy Brief Series
Promoting Deliberative Participation in Europe
**IDENTIFYING CONSTRAINTS TO
ONLINE PARTICIPATION**

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iSEED

Inclusive Science and European Democracies

Innovation Targets

▶ Taking **Citizen Science initiat**ives, in all their diversity, as a **Methodological Toolbox** to improve participation and deliberation in Democracy.

▶ Taking the **role of science-based knowledge** in public policy and democratic decision-making – central to knowledge societies –to improve **Participatory and Deliberative Processes** and to complement **Representative Democracy.**

Consortium

UNIVE	Ca'Foscari University of Venice – Lead Partner	Italy
UNIPI	University of Pisa	Italy
UNIPA	University of Palermo	Italy
UNITN	University of Trento	Italy
Observa	Sciency and Society	Italy
MNHM	Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle Paris	France
ENS	L'École Normale Supérieure	France
UNIWAR	University of Warsaw	Poland
NTNU	Norwegian University of Science and Technology	Norway
IRMiR	Institute of Urban and Regional Development of Warsaw	Poland
DBT	Danish Board of Technology	Denmark
UCD	University College Dublin	Ireland
UPF	Pompeu Fabra University	Spain
ARC	ARC Research Fund Sofia	Bulgaria
MEC	Ministry of Education of Uruguay	Uruguay
UNEXE	University of Exeter	United Kingdom

Atlantic Ocean

Identifying Constraints to Online Participation

What are the preferred modes of public engagement when discussing scientific issues? What are perceived as the obstacles that make people reluctant to participate?

An online survey experiment collected data on citizen-science interactions, focusing on the issue of global warming and climate change.

The experiment compared two sources – a politician and a scientist – and two message types – rational and emotional. Respondents' views were elicited on modes of participation and barriers to online engagement in citizen-science-stakeholder dialogues.

OUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Public policy stakeholders should consider the following recommendations based on the findings:

1. **Enhance Face-to-Face Interaction:** recognize the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interactions in policy development. Encourage initiatives that facilitate personal dialogues, given their authenticity and depth, which digital tools struggle to replicate.

2. **Leverage Digital Scalability:** utilize digital platforms' global reach and scalability for information dissemination and large-scale engagement where logistical constraints limit in-person interactions.

3. **Promote Inclusivity Online:** address power imbalances in digital spaces. Policies should support the development of platforms that allow equal expression, ensuring quieter voices are heard alongside dominant ones.

4. **Value over Volume:** encourage the design of digital communication norms and algorithms that give priority to the value of contributions over their volume to combat the quieter and thoughtful voices being drowned out in a digital cacophony.

5. **Joint Effort for Democratic Spaces:** Foster partnerships between platform developers and online communities to create digital environments that reflect democratic ideals, where every participant has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Obstacle	Percentage of people who answered "Very reluctant"
Without checks, some people spread misinformation.	30.50%
Under the cloak of anonymity, some people behave badly.	27.48%
Some people may keep on repeating their extreme views.	22.44%
Quiet and thoughtful people may not get a chance to express their views.	21.04%
The people moderating the discussion may have a hidden agenda and impose their views.	17.70%

The most selected obstacles to online participation overall, N=4006.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A study using an online survey experiment collected data on citizen-science interactions, focusing on climate change's significance relative to other issues. It investigated preferences for message types, sources, participation modes, and barriers to online engagement in citizen-science-stakeholder dialogues.

METHODS

The survey experiment was conducted in 4 member states chosen to capture the diversity of different parts of the EU: Denmark, Spain, France and Poland. We constructed a representative sample stratified by gender, age and education of one thousand people in each country for a total of 4000 respondents. We selected the four EU member states of France, Poland, Denmark and Spain, based on two dimensions: first, the level of the perceived threat of climate change; second, geographical diversity within the European Union, with countries from the northern, western, eastern and southern parts of the EU.

RESULTS

In a four-country study on participation preferences between citizens, scientists, and stakeholders, face-to-face meetings at public events ranked highest in effectiveness. Permanent online forums were favoured as the second-best by Spanish and Polish participants, while Danish and French preferred stakeholder meetings. Regarding feasibility, Polish and Danish respondents saw online forums as the most realistic, with Spanish and French leaning towards face-to-face meetings. For the second option, the Spanish and French selected online forums, the Polish chose face-to-face, and the Danish saw face-to-face and stakeholder forums as equally viable. The main concerns in online forums included disinformation spread, the necessity to moderate participant interactions to prevent trolling, and ensuring impartial moderation.

DISCUSSION

In today's digital age, with many communication tools at our disposal, discerning the most impactful mediums for debate becomes paramount. The study's foray into this realm yielded telling results. When citizens were queried about the efficacy and feasibility of engaging ordinary individuals in climate change discussions with experts and politicians, a discernible preference for face-to-face interactions emerged. This predilection for personal, in-person dialogues was palpably evident across all four countries in the study. Yet, nuances surfaced. Spain and France displayed a markedly pronounced preference for face-to-face dialogues compared to Denmark and Poland, hinting at potential cultural, societal, or systemic variations as influencing the different valuing communication channels.

These findings, while seemingly straightforward, beckon deeper introspection. Despite the astronomical rise of digital tools, there's an enduring, almost timeless allure to face-to-face interactions. Perhaps it's the authenticity, the immediacy, or the depth of in-person dialogues that digital platforms find challenging to emulate. Conversely, while digital avenues might occasionally fall short in replicating

the intimacy of personal interactions, their unparalleled scalability and global reach remain undeniable. In an increasingly globalised world, the logistical challenges of orchestrating large-scale face-to-face interactions are formidable. Digital platforms, with their expansive reach, offer a pragmatic solution, albeit with their set of challenges.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY-MAKING

Public policy stakeholders should consider the following recommendations based on the findings:

- **Enhance Face-to-Face Interaction:** recognize the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interactions in policy designs. Encourage initiatives that facilitate personal dialogues, given their authenticity and depth, which digital tools struggle to replicate.

- **Leverage Digital Scalability:** utilize digital platforms' global reach and scalability for information dissemination and large-scale engagement where logistical constraints limit in-person interactions.

- **Promote Inclusivity Online:** address power imbalances in digital spaces. Policies should support the development of platforms that allow equal expression, ensuring quieter voices are heard alongside dominant ones.

- **Value over Volume:** encourage the design of digital communication norms and algorithms that prioritise the value of contributions over their volume to combat the issue of meaningful voices being drowned out by digital cacophony.

- **Joint Effort for Democratic Spaces:** foster partnerships between platform developers and online communities to create digital environments that reflect democratic ideals, where every participant has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

The recommendations aim to balance embracing technological advancements while preserving the essence of human interaction and democratic participation.

ISEED maps and explores how inclusive science can support European democracies.

For more information feel free to contact us at: communication@iseedeurope.eu

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Author: Giuseppe A. Veltri and George Gaskell

Series Editor: Sophia Efstathiou

Designer: Sarah Santos