Voting within participatory processes:
a strategic ally on complex issues

POLICY
brief

Achieving the diverse goals outlined in the **European Green Deal** requires active involvement from citizens, civil society organizations, and local authorities. It also demands methods and tools that enhance their commitment throughout all stages of decision-making.

When dealing with complex issues such as environmental topics, it's crucial to **ensure that all voices are heard**. This entails tailoring participatory and deliberative practices to specific objectives. The **EU-funded PHOENIX project** aims to enhance the transformative potential of participatory processes, exploring how they can contribute to improving collective discussions and decision-making on environmental issues across diverse territories.

We acknowledge that, when discussing participatory and deliberative practices, the pivotal role of opening voting spaces is frequently undervalued and unexplored in academic research. Although voting is frequently considered a practice that limits and puts an end to open discussions, we deem that, if properly designed, **voting can turn out as a helpful ally** when tackling complex issues.

The objective of this Policy Brief is to assist individuals, authorities and organisations responsible for leading a participatory process in identifying **the right questions that need to be answered** to start planning a voting procedure.

KEY RESULTS

1 The European Green Deal necessitates active participation from citizens, civil society, and local authorities, requiring **tailored methods to ensure all voices are heard** in decision-making processes.

2 Voting, an essential aspect of citizen engagement, enhances democratic processes by **facilitating decision-making and fostering community empowerment** and trust in participatory procedures.

3 **Voting is crucial in various Democratic Innovations** by activating transformative decision-making spaces, shaping public decisions, and safeguarding democratic values.

4 To increase voter registration, turnout, and diversity, it's essential to consider factors like inclusivity, timing, voting subjects, voting locations, and voting procedures; translation of preferences into results. **Each context requires tailored approaches to voting design** to ensure meaningful participation and decision-making.

VOTING

The act of explicitly expressing an opinion or preference. Popularised as a method for choosing representatives, it is crucial in debating matters of public interest and creating collective solutions.

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS (DIS)

Innovative forms of participatory and deliberative practices aimed at increasing and deepening citizen participation in the political decision-making process.

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Voting as a tool to strengthen democracy

The act of "**choosing together**" is essential in various forms of citizen engagement, whether they are grassroots initiatives or organized by public institutions. In structured participatory mechanisms, this process can take place at different stages.

For example, voting can be part of deliberation phases, where alternative proposals are discussed, and positions are justified through shared arguments. It can also be the focal point of decision-making phases, where common decisions are made, reflecting the priorities of participants and highlighting the role of citizens as decision-makers. In this sense, **voting enhances and deepens democratic processes**.

During deliberative phases, specific spaces are often created for participants to vote on various issues such as rules, scenarios, topics of focus, representatives, detailed ideas, and urgent priorities. Expressing preferences and working towards consensus plays a vital role in **improving the quality of deliberation**.

Having multiple voting opportunities adds momentum to the process, fostering a **stronger sense of community**, empowerment, ownership, and trust in the participatory procedures and those implementing th em.

Connecting multiple benefits

Voting in participatory processes holds both **practical and symbolic meaning**, indicating a redistribution of powers and responsibilities among decision-makers.

Whether utilized for selecting representatives or ideas/projects, within Democratic Innovations voting **enriches processes and encourages new interaction dynamics**. It enables individuals to contribute to dialogues with institutions and stakeholders, fostering collective arenas for sharing knowledge and skills.

In this perspective, voting carries significant epistemic value, emphasizing common understandings and **fostering alliances, cooperative actions, solidarity, and community bonds** among participants.

Carefully crafting voting spaces supports better deliberation quality and strengthens the visible impacts of participatory processes.

WHY IS DEBATING ON ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION SO CHALLENGING?

Here are some factors contributing to the complexity of participatory processes on environmental issues, which voting can help address:

1. Complexity and interconnections of topics, dynamics, and policies.

2. Socioeconomic contexts with different cultures of participation and relations with nature.

3. Long-term timeframes, which are often less appealing to citizens.

4. Consideration of 'absent' actors such as nature and future generations.

5. Multiscale and multilevel governance perspectives.

6. Participant involvement not only in decision-making but also in changing habits, routines, production/consumption behaviours, and lifestyles.

The role of voting in Democratic Innovations (DIs)

Many see voting as the essence of representative democracy. But what role does it play in participatory and deliberative settings within Democratic Innovations (DIs)? It becomes crucial within DIs when:

→ It activates and consolidates spaces for transformative **decision-making**

→ It shapes public decisions through **collective crowdsourcing**, moving away from traditional decision-making solely based on the representation of a few delegated actors' interests

→ It helps safeguard key "**democratic goods**" such as inclusiveness, transparency, people power and control, and informed judgement

Different DIs incorporate voting in various ways.

For instance, in **Participatory Budgeting (PB)**, voting is a strategic asset held in the final phase, gaining central importance and wide visibility. PB's voting phase results in a prioritized list of proposals participants want to see implemented with public funds. *Discover more.*

In contrast, other **more deliberative DIs** use voting in intermediate phases to gradually shape scenarios, ideas, and proposals Here, voting serves as a tactical tool, often employing ranking methods to identify broadly acceptable options rather than just majority preferences. This approach fosters consensus and convergence among participants, sometimes even determining the exact wording of position statements or proposals. *Discover more.*

Lastly, **DIs like Citizens Initiative Reviews**, which bring together randomly selected citizens to assess ballot measures and give voters information they can trust) see voting as a structural element occurring after the participatory process ends. This may take the form of a referendum or plebiscite to broaden the audience affected by their conclusions. Nevertheless, throughout the process, micro-voting spaces are created to decide crucial questions for experts or to define the wording supporting their visions. *Discover more.*

CONCLUSIONS:

Participatory and deliberative processes benefit greatly from thoughtfully designed voting opportunities. Specifically, within Democratic Innovations, voting spaces foster connections with other interactive processes like **cooperation dynamics, respect for minority opinions**, and **solidarity with vulnerable groups**. This encourages shifts in voters' perspectives, reinforcing participants' commitment to contribute actively to transformative policies well beyond decision-making.

Generally, more complex voting methods have a greater capacity to **foster convergence** among diverse participants and viewpoints. However, they also come with broader sociocultural and organizational costs, including increased financial and technological resources or deeper preparation and skills among human resources. Conversely, simpler methods yield more basic results with reduced long-term impacts, but their **simplicity and transparency** make them more appealing.

While not all democratic innovations include a voting system, it remains a pivotal tool for **translating preferences into decisions**. It can be especially useful when tackling complex issues like the environment, but its design should account for all relevant dimensions of complexity. Nonetheless, **voting itself is a complex matter** that requires careful design and tailoring to specific needs.

Since there's **no one-size-fits-all** approach to identifying the best voting methods and adapting them to each context, our general recommendation is to **structure the voting procedure around the key questions** and sub-questions outlined below.

Respecting the specificities of each context is crucial for increasing voter registration, turnout, and diversity. To identify and adapt the voting procedure to suit the specific context, we recommend considering the following questions.

① Who can vote?

Determining "who" can vote is the first aspect to consider. It's not sufficient to only consider those who formally have the right to vote, debate, or express preferences. We must also reflect on **diversity, inclusion, equity, and equality of access**.

Do all citizens in a locality have voting rights or only registered ones? **Can immigrants participate?** Are people with full-time jobs able to take part? What about women and single parents? Do the elderly have a voice? Do IT tools facilitate or hinder participation? Is the ballot distributed geographically, considering marginalized neighbourhoods? **Are young people encouraged to vote?**

INSPIRING PRACTICES

⚑ **Leith/Edinburg (UK)**

The *Edinburgh Community Climate Fund (ECCF)* distributes £140,000 annually for climate-related projects through Participatory Budgeting. In Leith's harbour district, all residents over 8 years old, as well as those who work, study, or volunteer in the area, can participate.

Registration accepts various types of documents. Voters can cast two votes: one in-person at a voting event and one online. Each voter has 4 votes: 3 must be for different favourite projects, while the 4th is optional and supports an ethnic minority project.

② When does the vote occur?

When making collective decisions on complex issues, such as the environment, voting may not solely serve as a final means to aggregate preferences. Instead, it can trigger various levels of relations and interactions. Rather than being the primary goal, voting might function as a method to **foster consensus-building**.

Here are some additional questions that can help structure good answers: Is there a deliberation phase before voting? **Is voting the final step**, or does further action follow? Does it occur during meetings or separately? Are multiple voting methods used at different stages? Different answers impact the social goods being enhanced.

INSPIRING PRACTICES

⚑ **The Conference on the Future of Europe (COFoE)**

The *COFoE* (2022-2023) involved 800 randomly selected EU citizens discussing various issues, including environmental measures. Voting streamlined proposals in thematic working groups, requiring at least 75% support for acceptance. Similar mechanisms reduced proposal numbers and improved document ownership and efficacy.

⚑ **Messina (Italy)**

In the *Energy Solidarity Community of Messina*, participants voted to use a "Social Algorithm" to distribute benefits from shared clean energy facilities. This decision set the tone for consensus-building methods in subsequent phases, focusing on collective decision-making rather than individual preferences.

③ What are participants voting on?

This dimension pertains to what citizens can have a say about. Understanding the distributed power is crucial here. Are participants asked to **prioritize urgencies and preferences**? Can they influence the rules shaping the participatory setting? Are they voting on spokespersons or delegates who will play crucial roles later on? **Do they choose the final proposals**, or will experts and officials decide later based on consultations? Deciding on every aspect of a participatory process might be impractical, but voting shouldn't merely label representativeness. It should effectively **empower citizens** and make public consultation meaningful.

INSPIRING PRACTICES

⚑ **The "Demoscan" project (Switzerland)**

The "*Demoscan*" project supported several Citizens' Juries to discuss local and regional referendums between 2022 and 2023. In Bellinzona, participants deliberated on scenarios related to voting for or against a confirmative referendum on national environmental legislation aligned with the Paris Agreement.

They used various voting mechanisms to produce a shared report, to orient fellow citizens about the different positions on the referendum question: they were requested to choose on different issues, as the main questions to be posed collectively during meetings with experts and politicians, or the exact wording of the motivations exposed in the text.

WATCH OUT FOR THE DANGER OF NURTURING FALSE EXPECTATIONS!

Participants often perceive voting spaces as significant moments that grant them a central role. However, it's crucial to use them cautiously to **avoid breeding mistrust**. For instance, asking participants to vote on priority actions or urgent initiatives can be valuable, provided that the organizing institutions are committed to **respecting participants' decisions**.

Moreover, while voting can be a means of influencing an agenda and expressing citizens' views, it may not always lead to tangible outcomes. To prevent disappointment, it's important to establish **clear rules**, clarify from the outset **whether a consultation is binding or not** and avoid multiple rounds of non-binding voting phases.

④ Where is the vote being cast?

With technological advancements, the location of voting is a primary consideration. Are participants **voting remotely/digitally or only in person** with traditional ballot boxes? Are there mixed options available? Is voting constrained to specific places or flexible? How does one register to vote? The credibility of a Democratic Innovation is at stake here, as digital ballots can enhance user-friendliness but carry risks of cheating and double-voting.

Procedures should include diverse verification methods to mitigate these risks. However, complexity may hinder involvement for some individuals. This ties closely with question 1, as **location can influence who will vote** among those eligible. While IT tools are vital, efforts should mitigate digital exclusion, bias, and cheating.

INSPIRING PRACTICES

The "voting bus" of Lisbon Participatory Budgeting (Portugal)

Lisbon's participatory budgeting, one of the earliest to address environmental issues, initially featured online and face-to-face voting. Over time, the digital model became dominant. To enhance accessibility, the Town Hall introduced "voting buses," equipped with technology and staff to assist individuals in casting electronic votes. This approach, replicated in other capitals like Funchal, and Madeira, and scaled up by the National Participatory Budgeting of Portugal, increased turnout among elderly and digitally challenged demographics.

⑤ How do voting procedures translate preferences into results?

The voting method, determining how citizens' preferences translate into outcomes, is crucial. Are options ranked or chosen individually? How many voting rounds are there? Is negative voting allowed? Examples include **majority voting, binary voting**, and **ranking voting**, used in various phases of Democratic Innovations.

Some methods are simpler but may oversimplify results, while others foster collective intelligence and convergence but are complex. Voting can pose risks and frustrations when focused solely on winners and losers or overemphasizing competition over solidarity. Complex methods can obscure transparency, negatively impacting the participatory process. Each method presents **unique advantages and drawbacks**, shaping the decision-making process's nature.

INSPIRING PRACTICES

Paris (France)

In *Paris' participatory budgeting*, voters can allocate funds for local districts, the entire city, and social estates. To enhance diversity, the Town Hall lowered the voting age to 7 and introduced rewards for participants, to recognise their commitment and stimulate ongoing engagement.

Cuenca (Ecuador)

In Cuenca, within *the rural part of the municipality's participatory budgeting process*, a "distribution index" was voted on. This index considers environmental and social vulnerabilities in allocating public resources.

For a democratic
and participatory
green transition

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