

eParticipation for Lurkers and Stand-by Citizens?

Evaluating a Norwegian Rapid Feedback eParticipation Solution

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Abstract— This paper presents an evaluation of an eParticipation solution for rapid feedback and dialogue between citizens and politicians. The solution consists of a mobile application with survey-like functionality and a methodology for politicians' use of the app. We report the findings from our evaluation of a pilot study involving five Norwegian municipalities. Our findings clearly show that this type of solution has the potential to engage so-called lurkers and standby citizens to provide feedback on politicians' concrete issues. Further, the solution's complexity level places it between existing solutions for open/unstructured debate and more complex solutions. Both politicians and participating citizens report that they were happy with the pilot results and would like to continue using the solution. A test of an extended version of the solution is planned in 2021.

Keywords - eParticipation; implementation; survey; pilot study; implicit participation; evaluation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many technological systems have been, and are being, developed to further democracy. In the 1990s, open discussion forums were popular, but had limited success [1]. In later years, we have seen several complex and advanced systems designed top-down for decision-makers to receive input on concrete issues. The Seventh Framework Program (FP7) of the European Union had calls for the development of participation systems, and in the early to mid-2010s, many different tools were presented in academic journals and conferences (See, i.e., [2][3]), along with evaluations of pilot projects [4]. The evaluations seem to conclude that such systems provide excellent feedback but are also complex and time-consuming and struggle to attract enough participants. In social media, participation threshold is lower and more people discuss politics [5][6]. Still, the quality of communication is lacking, and it is difficult to extract meaningful information and handle the conversation [7][8].

Arguably, there is a need for a middle ground between complex tailored systems and social media's anarchy. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue for what they call "stealth democracy" [9], claiming that most people want to be heard but are not interested in taking the time to read up on and understand complex issues. Instead, they argue that a good

approach to participation is to ask simple questions about issues where citizens can form an opinion without reading hundreds of pages of documentation. While stealth democracy is an idea situated in a different context from the European and Norwegian democratic tradition, it nonetheless provides a starting point for discussing the merits of lightweight systems as a bridge between traditional deliberation and involvement and the sarcastic comments found in social media and news – a middle ground in terms of complexity and democratic outcome.

Amnå and Ekman [10] call for research on how we can involve citizens with low motivation for time-consuming activities. In this paper, we respond to this call by presenting findings from an evaluation of a Norwegian eParticipation system based on lightweight or stealth democracy ideas. The question is if this is a good and effective form of eParticipation, engaging otherwise passive citizens.

This paper's remainder is structured as follows: Section II presents related research on democracy models and implicit participation. Section III presents our research collection and analysis approach, while Section IV summarizes our evaluation findings. In Section V, we present the next steps of the project and outline some future research avenues.

II. RELATED RESEARCH

Signs are indicating that liberal democracy is struggling. Since 2015, Europe has experienced a major refugee crisis. Populists have been elected for president or prime minister positions, the yellow vests movement emerged in France, and Eastern Europe has seen an increase of "illiberal democracy." The Norwegian paper *Morgenbladet* created a map of authoritarian changes in the legal systems of European nations, which shows that several countries, including Western European ones, are moving away from liberal ideals [11]. This trend is aided by social media polarization, fake news, bots spreading propaganda, and an increasing number of activist websites positioning themselves as alternatives to mainstream media [12][13]. The so-called alt-right (alternative right) find each other in online fora, such as *4chan.org*, *tumblr.com*, and *8kun.top* to coordinate campaigns against political opponents. Disinformation is an issue high on

the European Union agenda [14]. Hence, finding ways of engaging citizens is perhaps more important than ever.

In Norway, most of us still report high trust levels in the political system and institutions, but a significant minority is less trusting and chooses not to vote in elections [15]. Voter turnout is lower among the young, and few are actively trying to influence policy. Those who do tend to be in the high income/higher education demographic, which typically would be labeled as elites [16]. Earlier research shows several reasons for non-participation. eParticipation systems need a clear purpose and form [17], the concretization of the outcomes of participation [18], and feedback mechanisms allowing citizens to see the impact of participation [19], and failing in these has proven to alienate citizens from using the system.

A. Models of participation and democracy

eParticipation is defined as a range of actors conducting different activities with varying outcomes and effects, targeting different democratic ideal-types [20]. Fig. 1 shows the relationship between the actors, activities, and outcomes. This means that researchers should be clear about the type of democracy the system supports when discussing specific systems and applications.



Figure 1. eParticipation actors, activities, and outcomes. Based on [20].

The activities and outcomes of participation can also be seen as a stage model. Arnstein [21] has shown how we can rate participation from low (voting, information) to high (direct democracy). The purpose of participation, according to Arnstein, is to reach as high as possible on what she calls the "ladder of participation" to empower citizens as much as possible.

Democracies should involve citizens through elections, political parties [22][23], and citizen/politician dialogue in various channels and media within the frames of representative democracy [24]. There are several models of democracy, with different normative criteria for participation. One example, proposed by Ferree and colleagues [25], describes four different models of democracy; *representative liberal*, *participatory liberal*, *discursive*, and *constructionist*. The models outline the amount of citizen participation, based on "who should speak, the content of the process (what), style of speech preferred (how), and the relationship between discourse and decision-making (outcomes) that is sought (or feared)." While some countries focus only on voting, others, such as Norway, see it as a democratic value that citizens engage in dialogue and are involved in decision-making between elections (participatory liberal model). Participation in the public debate is seen as a value in and of itself

(Habermasian discursive model). The Norwegian constitution (§100, part 6) states that "government is required to facilitate open and rational public discourse." Even so, membership in political parties is in decline, with only 7 percent of the adult population being members of a political party [26]. Thus, there is a need to find new ways of communicating between politicians and citizens. We believe the system presented in this paper can support the participatory liberal model of democracy if politicians wish to do so.

B. Stealth democracy, lurking or standby citizens

In their book *Stealth Democracy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse [9] found that many American citizens were tired of politics and political debates as they play out in the media. Citizens report being tired of conflict, constant debates, and difficult-to-understand political compromise. They have little interest in how democracy works in practice and do not wish to become too involved. At the same time, citizens want to express their opinion and be heard, but without having to spend time reading long policy documents or become too involved. They are happy to participate in surveys or contribute in other ways, such as through FixMyStreet-type services related to their areas of interest [27].

Other researchers also look into the phenomenon of passive or observing citizens from a European perspective. Edelman applies the concept of "lurking" – being a passive observer, or someone who only participates occasionally but is still interested enough to follow the conversation [28]. Amnå and Ekman [10] similarly define what they call "standby citizens": citizens with high political efficacy and interest, but rarely choose to participate actively in political discourse. This group chooses not to participate but can become active if the situation calls for it. In the Nordic countries, youth have both knowledge and skills. Still, they report a weaker sense of "participatory attitudes," in other words, typical standby or lurking behavior. In less stable and wealthy democracies, people report a higher level of motivation for engagement [29], perhaps because they see participation as a way of improving their living conditions.

Amnå and Ekman call for research on encouraging the standby citizen to become a more active participant [10]. Based on the survey of PostLocal, and previous research by Cruikshank, Smith, and Edelman on how other low-complexity systems can transition citizens from standby to active [30], we believe the system presented in this paper can contribute to activating standby/lurking/stealthy citizens. It is designed as a low complexity/low time demand tool for consultation, where politicians ask questions, and the citizens answer them. The outcome is increased civic engagement and general democratic effects, depending on how the politicians decide to use the system. The findings we present below indicate that it could be seen as part of a participatory liberal model, as citizens are asked their opinion on matters being addressed by city councils.

III. RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper aims to present the initial findings from our evaluation of a system for lightweight participation. In addressing this, we applied a case study mixed-methods approach grounded in interpretivism. Our theoretical lens is that of stealth democracy and democracy models, and the case is the start-up PostLocal and their system for lightweight participation.

Data collection: The data collection period lasted approximately twelve months in 2018-19, covering development, implementation, and pilot testing. For the development and implementation phases, data is mainly qualitative in the form of participant observation [31] in project meetings and workshops with municipal, volunteer- and private sector stakeholders. Twelve mayors and fifty politicians were present in these workshops. We also conducted email interviews with politicians in the pilot municipalities and informal talks with colleagues researching media, democracy, and digitalization. In this process, we had an active role in the shaping of the system. For the pilot study, we distributed a survey to the pilot participants (N=389), receiving 189 answers. We had colleagues in the department verify the survey and tested it on five random users before distribution.

Data analysis: The analysis was based on stealth democracy and the system creators' idea of reaching those who do not normally participate in political processes. Field notes and interview questions were structured and coded accordingly. For the survey, we relied on literature discussing acceptance of technology. We were inspired by the constructs in the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) [32], adding trust and demographic variables as these have shown to be relevant for technology acceptance [33]. Finally, we were curious if gamification, found to be an effective incentive in similar applications [34], was important.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Presentation of case and system

In January 2018, we were approached by a small start-up who wanted to discuss the possibilities of a system for lightweight democracy. As their ideas corresponded well with our previous research, we agreed to provide input based on prior research and evaluate the pilot project. PostLocal consists of people with a broad background in business, the voluntary sector (youth sports), and the media industry. They used a local UX (User eXperience)/web company to build the app and ecosystem. They focused their efforts on their wide network of possible partners. They were extremely active in building a network of business-, government-, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), and political partners, who stated their support for the system. This has likely been an important factor in the process, from idea to realization.

PostLocal's objectives for the system were as follows:

- Create a system that would ensure the "silent majority" could easily participate in political

processes. The silent majority was defined as those not represented via organizations and rarely raised their hand in public meetings. Young citizens were targeted as being especially important.

- Develop an app where the mayor can consult with citizens on current issues (*In practice, it is not the mayor that decides on questions, it is more the executive council, but citizens relate to the mayor*).
- Citizens should spend no more than two-three minutes on each round of questions.
- So quick and easy to use that it can be done in the checkout queue at the supermarket.

Fig. 2 shows the system architecture, consisting of a common database, a back-end system for generating questions and analyzing responses, and a mobile app dialogue tool. Privacy is built-in, and external consultants have verified the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) compliance of the system.

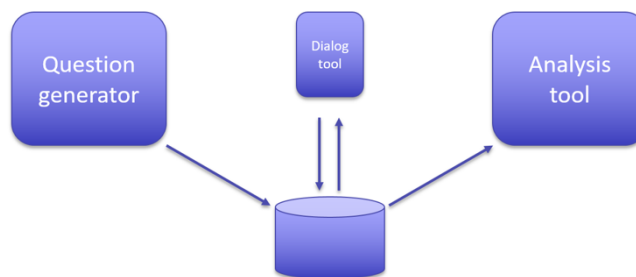


Figure 2. System architecture.

When logging in to the app, users choose their municipality and are greeted by a short video from the mayor, informing about the app's intentions and how to use it. Users can register to participate in all surveys or surveys on areas of interest. Participation is in the form of a simple survey with a few questions and the opportunity to reply more in-depth at the end. When the survey is completed, users get a "thank you" note and an option to contact the mayor with their concerns through the app. PostLocal is currently developing this part of the system (messages from citizens to politicians), but at the time of testing it was just implemented as a simple form.

Finally, users can see the responses of others. This was an important part of the app, as seeing others' opinions can aid mutual understanding [35]. After completing a set of questions, users get feedback from the mayor on how the results are being used (an option in the system, not mandatory but highly recommended). The methodology under development includes 1) ideas on how the municipality can apply this input, and 2) guidelines and functionality for using the system in physical public meetings. This was not ready for the pilot but is part of the ongoing work with creating a methodology and ecosystem for municipal participation, which is the project's ultimate goal. Fig. 3 presents screenshots from the app.

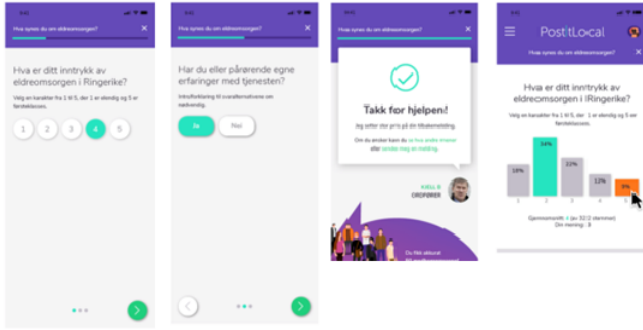


Figure 3. Screenshot from the survey.

B. Qualitative data from workshops

The workshops we observed revealed that the general issue of participation and democracy needs to be discussed more often. Several politicians stated that the workshop's most interesting part was that it gave them a space to discuss normative and fundamental democratic issues. These are often left out of hectic day-to-day politics. Besides, participants raised the following issues:

The need for improved communication: Almost all of the participants agreed that there is a need to reach out to a broader range of citizens, especially the young citizens and those who are not members of the organizations typically invited to hand in formal statements to policy processes. A small group of often older citizens tends to contact their local politicians, raise their hands in public meetings, etc. Several politicians say they have tried social media, but the tone and style of communication are not fostering a civil and rational debate. There was a general agreement that more needs to be done to reach the young and the silent, and politicians welcomed initiatives, such as PostLocal.

Ownership and organization: A lot of the discussion was related to practical issues, such as ownership, financing, and organization. Specifically, participants raised the following issues: *Who should be invited to participate?* Should there be a representative panel, or should everyone be invited to answer every survey? Ensuring representative and valid answers was also an issue. *Who should be in control of the system and act as the figurehead?* This raised heavy debate on the pros and cons of having the mayor act as front and controlling the questions being asked. This was discussed over several workshops, and the consensus seemed to be that mayors should front the app, as a human face tends to work better than a municipal logo. The internal organization should be up to a committee of politicians from the parties represented in the municipal government to avoid party politics coloring the questions and topics being addressed via the app.

Formulation of questions: Anyone who has attempted to create a survey from scratch knows how difficult it is to get the questions right. This was also a major area of concern among the workshop participants. The consensus was that simple questions about what [do you think about...] and how [should we handle...] acting as a temperature gauge on issues being discussed in the municipal government was the correct

approach. Several politicians added they wanted to prioritize issues high on the agenda in local news and local social media groups. Issues of a more ideological nature should be avoided, as simple survey questions are less suited to address this type of debate.

Criticism: While most workshop participants were positive, some NGOs raised concerns about the democratic outcomes of PostLocal's system. They asked what kind of democracy this would facilitate. They discussed being heard vs. affecting policy outcomes, if the app was any different from a regular survey, and if this type of system manages to involve those who are not participating and the young.

As for the type of democracy, the workshops and previous research would put this in the "consultation" category. PostLocal is not designed to be a deliberative system for the reasons mentioned in the theory section. The difference between an app and using a polling agency is mostly related to costs and time. The system allows for a quick and easy round of temperature gauging related to current issues while using a polling agency would be more costly and more time-consuming. The expected outcome of participation and public interest is discussed further in the next section.

C. Survey – feedback from citizen test users

Background and demographic variables: Gender distribution is equal, with 47% female, 53% male respondents. When it comes to age distribution, there is a decent spread: 35 respondents are between 15-24 years old. 56 between 25 and 39, 56 between 40 and 54, and 36 are 55 years or older. Crosstab-analysis of age shows that age has little impact on the recorded responses. Young citizens are somewhat more active social media users and more positive towards gamification, while the older groups are more likely to sign a petition. Young adults (25-39) are the least politically active. When implementing the pilot, we found that youth in high school were the ones most positive towards the app, as they started out with little interest in both the app and politics, but in the end, was the group who was most positive – contacting the mayor and PostLocal to have more questions pushed out more frequently.

Our sample has a somewhat higher education level compared to the total Norwegian population [38], especially for the master's level (sample: 29%, population in 2019: 10.3%).

The respondents are also somewhat more politically active than the general population. 5% of the general population have written a political letter to the newspaper, vs. 13% of the respondents. 6% have attended a demonstration, vs. 8% of the respondents. 12% of the general population and 25% of our respondents say they have directly contacted a politician. Our questions differ from those of Statistics Norway, as we wanted a more detailed overview of political activity. However, the comparison still indicates that our respondents are somewhat more educated and politically active compared to the Norwegian population. Even so, most of our respondents are in the silent majority category, as they claim not to be politically active.

Gamification as a motivational factor: Gamification was discussed in both workshops and project meetings.

Existing studies of gamification show varying results but lean towards a positive direction (see, e.g., [34][36]). Our data do not provide a definite answer, as 34% are positive towards gamification, 37% are neutral, and 30% claim they do not see gamification as a motivational factor. However, age plays a role here, with 58% of the youngest respondents agreeing (somewhat or fully) that gamification is a motivational factor. At the same time, the 40+ group is neutral to negative and 55+ leaning even more towards negative. Fig. 4 shows the distribution of answers for the different age groups.

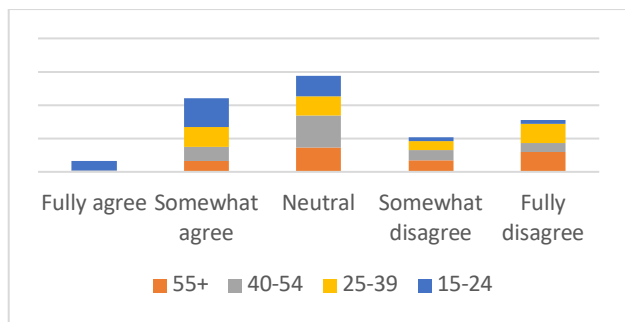


Figure 4. Age and gamification as a motivational factor.

Attitudes to personalization: Another important element that emerged from the workshop discussions was using the mayor as the front of the app vs. using the municipality logo. This was heavily debated, with politicians having strong opinions for and against. We chose to have the mayor present the app for the pilot, as there is a general trend towards politics becoming more person-oriented [37]. 70% of the respondents saw it as positive that the mayor's face was the first thing to greet them in the app. 65% also respond positively to the statement: "the mayor is a unifying force in my municipality." In Norway, mayors are expected to be mayor first and party member second; this seems to be the case in the five pilot municipalities.

Expectations towards outcome: As previous research has shown [18], being clear about the outcome of participation is important. As this was a pilot test, we were more concerned about mapping citizens' expectations in later full-scale use. 65% of the respondents reported that they expect the app outcome as "being heard and taken into account as part of the formal hearing process in policymaking," with only 6% expecting their input to have a direct consequence. 29% had no expectations whatsoever or were unsure what to expect.

Trust and intention to use: Trust, or a lack of trust, is one possible explanation for the current wave of populism and anti-elitist sentiment [15]. Our respondents are in line with the general population and show high levels of trust in local politicians and information from local government. Trust is positively correlated with respondents' intention to continue using the system. When asked if they intend to continue using the app if it becomes available after the pilot, 70% somewhat or fully agree that they would like this, while 25% are neutral/unsure. While there is some uncertainty about how this translates to the general population, this is still a good number, which shows a need and a market for this type of system.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we have presented a selection of the findings from evaluating a system for lightweight participation. Our findings indicate that the test users were mostly happy with the system and have moderate expectations about how their input should be used (in line with representative democratic ideals). A majority are clear that they would like to use the system if it becomes available. Section IV B illustrates the complexity of eParticipation, even for a lightweight tool, such as this. Expectations, outcome, organization, and use are important factors that each municipality needs to define.

The literature review indicates that there is a link between system complexity and outcome. Systems with high complexity and time demands from the user have potentially valuable outcomes but few users. Systems that are easy to use have more users. Still, the democratic outcome is "lower" on a scale ranging from voting (requires little of the user) to deliberation and active participation (requires much of the user). Table 1, using Arnstein's "ladder of participation" [21] as a measure, illustrates this relationship.

TABLE I. PARTICIPATION LEVEL IN RELATION TO SYSTEM COMPLEXITY

	Participation level	
	Low: Voting	High: Deliberation
System complexity	Low complexity/time	High complexity/time

We argue that the system presented here has the potential to be a missing link between the open and unstructured debate found in social media and the more tailored and complex systems for participation. This acts as a middle-ground on the participation level/system complexity scale presented above. This supports a participatory liberal model where citizens are involved between elections [25].

Lightweight, "stealth" participation in the form of surveys, data analysis through sensors or apps, such as FixMyStreet, allow citizens to participate in a way that gives valuable insights to decision-makers without having to spend too much time and effort. Over the past few years, we have participated in several studies examining how lightweight participation can contribute to democracy. While this does not contribute directly to a discursive type of democracy [25], we still argue that this form of participation has a place in democratic practice. The workshops we attended indicate that we should rather see this as one important part of a broader set of tools for local democracy and perhaps as a way of activating the standby/lurking citizen.

The project will continue in its second phase, starting fall 2020. In future work, we will have to work harder to reach a sample in line with the general population to ensure validity and verify the pilot's results. Further, we intend to dig deeper into personalization and gamification as motivational factors

through workshops and possibly track use in gamified vs. non-gamified situations. The extent to which the system manages to activate standby citizens and act as a bridge towards more discourse-based participation given the right methodology, is a further avenue for future research. We expect to build on the experiences from the pilot to create a methodology and framework for use by municipalities and to examine the extent to which this type of tool has an impact on local policymaking.

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