



# SOLUTION IDENTIFICATION





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Lawmakers must devise effective and workable solutions to problems. Parlement & Citoyens in France enables citizens to submit solutions to a problem posed by a representative. Public participation in developing solutions enhances innovation in lawmaking.



# CASE STUDY

## MyGov India: Poll, Discuss, Do

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### Introduction

MyGov India ([mygov.in](http://mygov.in)) is an online crowdsourcing and “crowdsourcing” platform that allows citizens multiple opportunities to engage with India’s Government, including commenting on discussion topics, leaving feedback on polls and surveys, and participating in contests. These contests may involve a range of tasks, from drafting policy suggestions, to competing in knowledge-based quizzes, to participating in content creation competitions (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017). MyGov India is an example of a 360° CrowdLaw project, where participation happens through a combination of online discussions and offline tasks (GovLab, 2018). MyGov India indicates that in the Solution Identification phase of lawmaking, governments can draw participants in by providing multiple channels for participation that offer real-world incentives. online polling can be used for public consultation on future programs and for feedback on existing initiatives. However, none of this will necessarily result in meaningful or impactful engagement if the proper institutional mechanisms for the Government to respond to feedback are not in place.

### Background

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched MyGov on 26 July 2014, 60 days into his tenure as prime minister. The stated intent of the program is to “contribute to the social and economic transformation of India” by creating “an interface for healthy exchange of ideas and views involving the common citizen and experts” which would “bring...the government closer to the common man”. In Modi’s words, the intent of the program was to transform “‘Swaraj’ (self-rule) into ‘Surajya’ (good rule)” (MyGov India, n.d.-a).

Modi’s Government created MyGov to combat perceived systemic corruption in India’s government. Under the rule of the United Progressive Alliance from 2004 to 2014, the increase of access to 24-hour news and talk shows, which fixated on a series of corruption scandals involving the members of the ruling party, “made exposure of high level corruption a dai-

ly national sport” (Nayar, 2015). Coalgate<sup>1</sup> and the 2G Telecommunications Scam<sup>2</sup>, two of the most prominent scandals, coincided with a culture of normalized corruption, everyday bribery, and political patronage. These corruption problems, along with stagnating economic growth and a decline in the perceived legitimacy in the United Progressive Alliance government, set the stage for the “high-tech populism” (Jaffrelot, 2015) of Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Modi capitalized on the proliferation of access to visual media technologies during his 2014 campaign to cultivate his image as a powerful, technologically-advanced, and universally-beloved nationalist leader (Jaffrelot, 2015). The BJP furthered this effort with the publication of its 2014 Election Manifesto, which promised to reduce corruption, in part by creating an e-Governance platform to complement its transparent, policy-driven government. BJP intended the “Easy, Efficient, and Effective” e-Governance platform not only as an antidote to corruption, but as part of a broader Open Government goal which would include the digitization of public records, the further development of India’s information technology infrastructure and economy, and public participation in policy-making (BJP, 2014).

Numerous disparate e-Governance initiatives existed in India at various levels prior to MyGov. In response to these “islands of e-Governance initiatives in the country at the National, State, district and even block level” (Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 2008, p.106), the Department of Information Technology and the Department of Administrative Reforms & Public Grievances created the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP), which the Government of India approved in May of 2006. To execute the plan, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) created the National e-Governance Division as an independent division of Media Lab Asia<sup>3</sup> to manage the project. NeGD organized e-Governance initiatives into 27 Mission Mode Projects (MMP) --which had expanded to 44 by 2018. Under the plan, NeGD also created numerous brick-and-mortar facilities, called “Common Service Centers”, across India where citizens without internet access could go to access e-Services

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1. In this 2012 scandal, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) exposed a practice in which the Indian Government allocated coal mining contracts at its own discretion rather than through a bidding process, which CAG estimates resulted in a Rs. 1.86 trillion gain by the private parties involved. (Gupta, Sultan et al. 2017).
  2. In this 2007 scandal, Telecom Minister A. Raja illegally manipulated the selection process for the allocation of 2G spectrum licenses to companies in his favor, again resulting in a Rs. 1.8 trillion loss by the Indian Government.
  3. MeitY later restructured this division in the Digital India Corporation in 2017 (MeitY, 2017).

(Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 2008).

In July 2015, PM Modi announced the creation of the Digital India campaign (Ray, 2018). Digital India is an umbrella program which combines initiatives created by Modi's Government (such as MyGov India) with updated version of existing programs. For instance, NeGP was overhauled as "e-Kranti", receiving an additional 13 MMPs with a new focus on mobile, Cloud, and geographic information systems technologies (Kumar, 2018). Digital India takes a nine-pillared approach. of which e-Governance is one. Under this framework, MyGov was created as the crowdsourcing, communications, and social media engagement platform, while e-Kranti was assumed responsibility for e-Service delivery.

The MyGov platform launched on 26 July, 2014, and is on-going. The Government of India created the platform via the National Informatics Center (NIC), the public organization in charge of India's information and communication technologies services, overseen by MeitY. In March of 2015, the NIC released an updated version of the site, dubbed "MyGov 2.0", which includes polling and survey features, better navigation and layout, and improved data analytics tools (Alawadhi, 2015). The platform is built on open-source software (Alawadhi, 2015), as per the Government of India's **2015 Policy on Adoption of Open Source Software for Government of India**. MyGov launched a **mobile app** in 2017.

## Project Description

MyGov India offers a range of curated participation opportunities, which fall into three cat-

### 4. The nine pillars are:

1. Broadband Highways through national optical fibre network
2. Universal access to mobile: connectivity in all 44,000 villages in the country.
3. IT teaching skills for youth job skills training:
4. Electronics Manufacturing of items such as smart cards, smart energy meters, micro ATMs, mobile, set-top boxes, consumer and medical electronics.
5. Public access to Internet by renovating post offices to be e-Service delivery center
6. E- Governance: delivery of services, publicly-visible government workflow automation, and public grievance redress through online platforms.
7. E - Kranti: delivery of electronic services to people which deals with health, education, farming, justice ,rights, security, financial inclusion and many more services
8. Global Information: Hosting data online, engaging social media platforms and facilitating two-way communication through the creation of the MyGov website
9. Early Harvest Programmes: increasing usage of internet and e-books in universities and promoting email as a method of communication.

(Kumar, 2018)

egories: Do, Discuss, and Poll. The “Do” section consists of mix of CrowdLaw tasks, some of which are used to create content for the Government of India and some of which serve to identify solutions to problems identified by the Government. Users can join communities called Groups (e.g. Clean Ganga, Sporty India, Tribal Development), which are led by public agencies (e.g. Department of Biotechnology, Department of

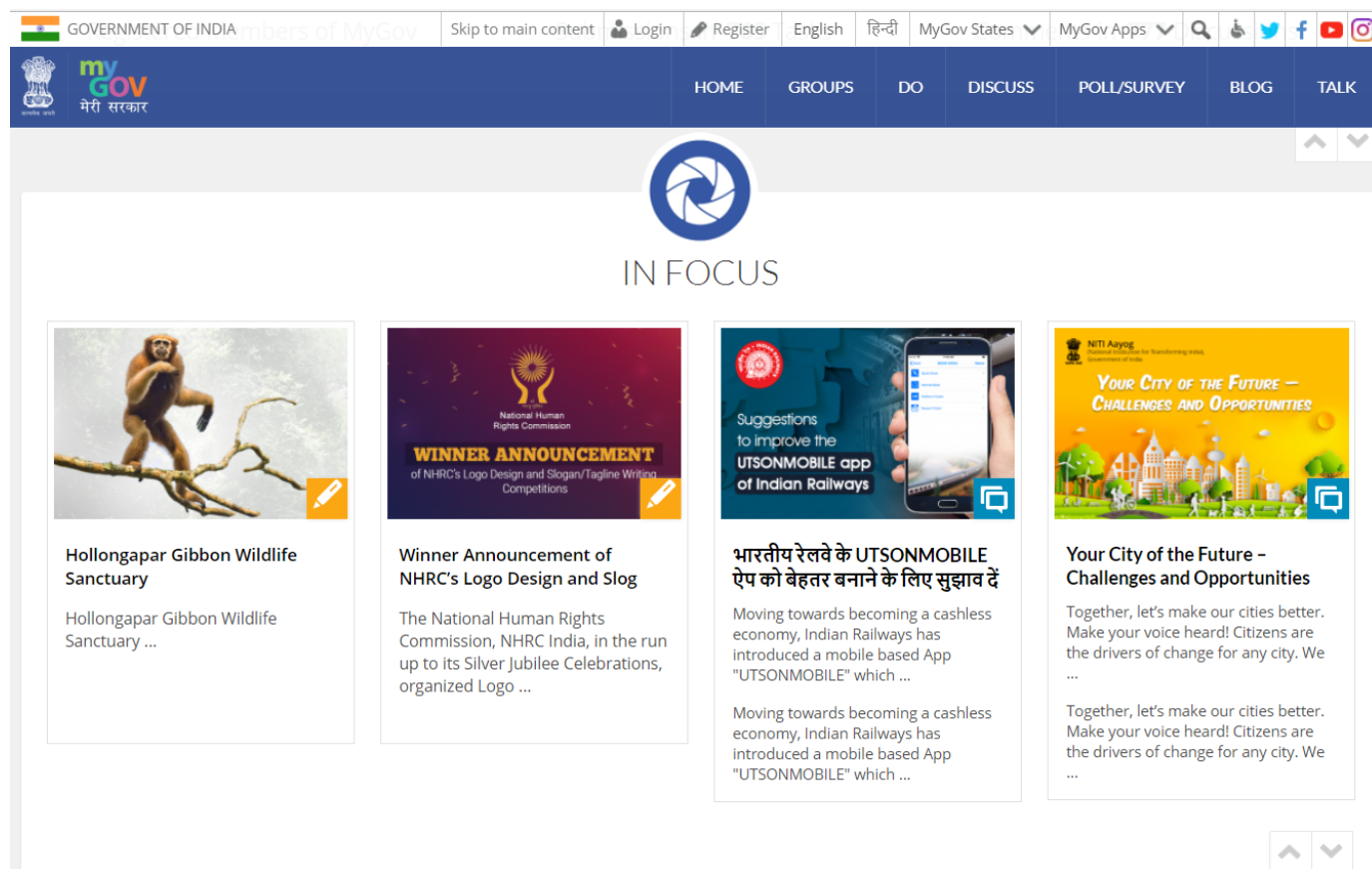


Figure 1: MyGov India Home Page Source: mygov.in

Telecom, Department of Finance) to engage users on policy proposals, social issues, and other initiatives related to the Ministry’s work. Most activities on the site are categorized by Group, while some are published to the whole site. Users can belong to a maximum of four groups at a time (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017).

The Discuss section functions as a curated forum, where users respond to prompts or questions posed by Ministries or by the central Government of India. Various Groups have asked users to provide suggestions about topics ranging from the Reduction of Corruption

Through Technology, the Celebration of the 150th Birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, and the Development of Parks in Varanasi City. Additionally, in the lead up to each Mann Ki Baat (Prime Minister Modi's monthly national radio address), users are asked to submit topics and key themes about important issues. Users can post responses to discussion topics, along with file attachments, which other users can reply to by "crowdsourcing" with up/down votes, or by leaving comments of their own (GovLab, 2018). The Discuss section is the primary CrowdLaw component of the MyGov platform, as it allows citizens to Identify Solutions to the problems identified by the Government of India, solutions which ministries take into account when formulating policies. This is in addition to the section's role as a general feedback/suggestions forum for various government programs.

In the Poll/Survey Section, Groups can post opinion polls and surveys about topics ranging from the naming of government programs, to the design of government apps, websites, and logos. Many polls are also used for priority-setting tasks around "Smart Cities" initiatives and area-based development. For instance, one **poll** allowed residents to vote for which area of the city of Ghaziabad should be selected for area-based development as a Smart City. For the duration of the polling period (determined by the creator of the poll), registered users can vote in the poll or survey; the platform shows users the results of the poll after they have cast their vote. This is an additional CrowdLaw component, though one where users have markedly less freedom. While polling only allows users to select from a predefined list of options, and is not the focus of MyGov, it does allow citizens to express their opinions on policy initiatives. In the Blog section, MyGov staff, Senior Government Officials, Union Ministers, and invited guests post editorials relating to MyGov initiatives, relay general updates about the platform, and announce contest winners (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017). Groups also use the Blog to disseminate e-Books, which are largely long-form reports of "success stories" from past initiatives. Likewise, the Talks section hosts and archives a variety of live streamed events, panel discussions, webinars, and lectures organized by members of India's government. Together, these two sections function as a media outlet for the Government rather than as a CrowdLaw platform.

The Do section includes online and offline tasks that further the objectives of the Group or the Indian Government. Users can view the task, its description, and its duration as determined by the creator, and then accept the task by selecting "Do this task now". Users then can complete their task by uploading a document containing their submission. The organizer of the task announces the winner(s) on the Blog section. By successfully completing tasks,

users can earn “activity points” and accumulate “hours” of participation, which are displayed on their profile to track their engagement on the site (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017).



GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Skip to Main content | Login | Register | A- | A | A+ | A | A

Full White Paper | Guidelines for submission of Comments | Part-I | Part-II | Part-III | Part-IV | Summary and list of Questions (Part - V)

## White Paper of the Committee of Experts on Data Protection Framework for India

The Government of India has set up our Committee of Experts to study various issues relating to data protection in India, make specific suggestions on principles underlying a data protection bill and draft such a bill. The objective is to "ensure growth of the digital economy while keeping personal data of citizens secure and protected."

The issue of data protection is important both intrinsically and instrumentally. Intrinsically, a regime for data protection is synonymous with protection of informational privacy. As the Supreme Court observed in Puttaswamy,

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[Click to view full White Paper](#) | [Guidelines for submission of Comments](#) | [Summary and list of Questions \(Part - V\)](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Delhi Public Consultation](#) | [Bengaluru Public Consultation](#) | [Hyderabad Public Consultation](#) | [Mumbai Public Consultation](#)

Choose the 'Part' where you wish to submit inputs

**Part II: Scope and Exemptions**

**Part III: Grounds of Processing, Obligation on Entities and Individual Rights**

Figure 2: Public Commenting Process for Data Protection Whitepaper. Source: mygov.in

The Do section offers a mix of CrowdLaw tasks. In one example of a public consultation task, the Ministry of Telecommunications invited the public to leave comments on specific chapters of the 2018 Draft National Digital Communications Policy through a portal on the MyGov site. The same process was used by MeitY to garner input on a White Paper of the Committee of Experts on Data Protection Framework for India, a precursor to a draft bill on data



protection in India. These tasks solicit feedback on sections of draft legislation, in an effort to resolve specific issues, rather than to identify general solutions to problems, as is done in the Discuss section. Other tasks are framed as contests (or “Innovation Challenges”), where Ministries ask users to submit proposals for **how to raise money for India’s railways** or **how to bring urban services to rural villages**; the submission requirements, prizes, timelines, etc. vary from contest to contest. While some of these contests and other tasks are related to policy-making (grouped under the **innovate.mygov.in** module), many others are creative tasks (grouped under the “**Creative Corner**” section) such as photography, letter-writing, logo design, sloganeering, and film contests. These contests are used to produce content for the Indian Government and its many schemes.

## Participation

There is some opportunity for citizen participation in each section of the MyGov platform. For the most part, participation is self-selected; anyone with an email or phone number is able to participate in discussions and polls, while some contests with prizes are only open to Indian citizens. To participate, users must register for an account either using an email address or phone number and birthday, along with their full name, which is visible to other users. Users with “@nic.in” or “@gov.in” email addresses can directly login to the system using their government credentials without registering. Anonymous users may view the various tasks and discussions, but may not participate (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017). Only members of government, MyGov employees, and select invited guests are allowed to post “Blog” or “Talk” content.

The MyGov portal tracks the participation of individual users (MyGov, NIC, & MeitY, 2017), and publishes real-time metadata on a **dashboard** called “Highlights”. As of July 2018, the dashboard boasted 6.3 million registered users on the platform, with 222,000 submissions across 773 tasks, and 3.8 million comments across 780 discussions since the platform’s creation.

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According to MyGov, actual engagement stretches to over 200 million citizens, including the less digitally or lingually literate who participate by voice. The platform has also hosted 64 Groups, 180 Talks, and 244 Polls. MyGov also hosts “[#TransformingIndia](#)” (See Figure 3), a performance dashboard for progress updates of the Modi Government’s various schemes. A related dashboard, “[48 Months Transforming India](#)”, celebrates the accomplishments of Modi’s first four years in office.

MyGov provides multiple channels for participation, as part of Digital India’s 360° Approach. Users can partake in some MyGov tasks and discussions even if they are not able to access the desktop site. For instance, through the [#FridaysAtMyGov](#) program, Ministries hold meetups between experts and ministers in a particular field, which MyGov users can register to attend in person, or can call in to through a WhatsApp phone line. Similarly, users can submit ideas for the Prime Minister’s Mann Ki Baat address, and can record responses for some polls, by calling a toll-free phone number. Users can also participate in polls, discussions, and tasks, and consume talks and blog posts, through the MyGov Mobile app. Users can also make submissions using the site’s text-to-speech function (Basu & Lin, 2018). These channels provide the opportunity for millions of Indians to participate in MyGov: while India has 462 million internet users, it has nearly three times as many (1.21 billion) mobile phone connections, 40% of which are smartphones (GovLab, 2018).

However, those who participate tend to be pro-Modi supporters. There is no technical barrier to diverse engagement yet there is little, if any, interaction across the aisle or from vocal critics of the Government (Pugalia, Interview with the author, 2018). Also while the platform has attracted 6.3 million registered users, this is a drop in the bucket (less than 0.5%) of India’s total 1.3 billion population.

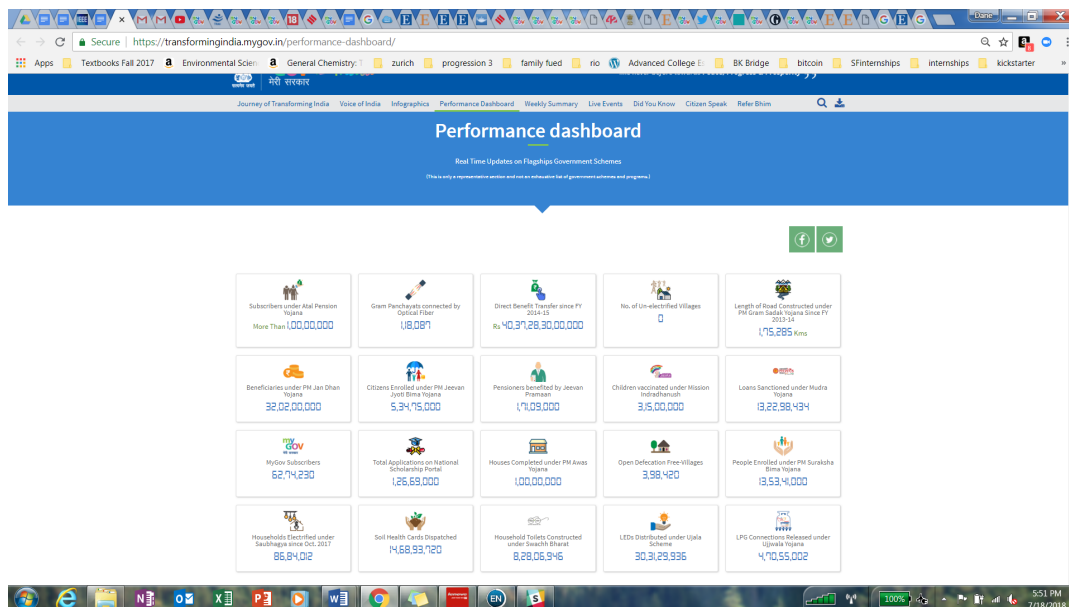


Figure 3: #TransformingIndia Performance Dashboard. Source: mygov.in

These relatively low numbers may be attributed, in part, to the fact that the only real incentive offered to discussion participants is the ability “to take part in various initiatives towards public good” and “to voice your opinion on the policy initiatives of the Government” (MyGov India, n.d.-b). In other words, the value of the user participating is the participation itself. While users accumulate credit points by participating, the only mention of how these points can be used is on the site’s **FAQ page**, which simply states that “Incentives based on credit points will be announced in the future” (MyGov India, n.d.-b). Some incentives, such as cash prizes, electronic devices, and certificates of achievement, are offered to the winners of contests.

## 360 Degree Engagement

Interaction Design



Figure 4: MyGov India’s Interaction Procedure. Source: MyGov India

At the institutional level, a team of MyGov staff members collect and process submissions through a five-step mechanism (See Figure 4). First, MyGov works with a relevant Ministry to identify an idea for the engagement initiative. Next, MyGov, the Ministry, and any other involved groups create the task (a discussion topic, contest, poll, etc) with input both ends. Once MyGov and the relevant division has approved the activity, it is published on the platform. MyGov users are then able to discuss, vote, or create content for the contest for the duration of the task.

At the end of the task, MyGov staff receive the submissions and process them using listening tools, open-source software to translate and transcribe the country's diverse languages (GovLab, 2018), and algorithms used to analyze and prioritize comments (Basu & Lin, 2018). Going forward, MyGov plans to further explore the use of voice-to-text conversion, as voice is a primary mode of access and communication for people in India. This will also include support for regional languages (MyGov, personal communication, 2018). Subject experts also analyze the submissions before referring them to a relevant Ministry. The opinions and feedback of all individuals are then presented to the relevant divisions so that the Ministries can make educated policy and governance decisions. How the submissions are processed after MyGov has turned them over differs from division to division. Each Ministry has a team that is responsible for ensure participative governance. If the Ministry implements a user's idea, they must inform MyGov, who in turn informs the user. MyGov employs a team of approximately 50 staff members, overseen by CEO Arvind Gupta. These team members are spread across several verticals including Research, Content, and Technology, according to the strengths of each employee. Employees receive training in both "soft" and technical skills, making use of subscriptions to technical tools to upgrade work-related skills (MyGov, personal communication, 2018).

For the 2016-2017 financial year, the MyGov division of the Digital India Corporation reported a total expenditure of Rs. 1,066,194,458 (\$14,480,499 USD). MyGov is funded in full by a yearly grant-in-aid from India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. Nearly 90% of this budget --Rs. 938,544,82-- was spent on administrative expenses. The vast majority (over 96%) of the administrative expenditures went towards promoting the MyGov platform through advertising and conferences; only Rs. 6,033,936 --or 0.6% of MyGov's total budget-- was spent on direct maintenance and data storage related to the website (Digital India Corporation, 2017).

The Government of India has communicated the existence of the MyGov platform to citizens through a targeted campaign involving social media, online articles, radio broadcasts, and live events. The platform operates a Facebook account, Instagram page, YouTube channel, and most notably a Twitter feed (@mygovindia) with over 1.4 million followers and 11,000 tweets. The platform and its initiatives have been covered in online and print media outlets including *The Economic Times*, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, and *Hindustan Times*. The Prime Minister's monthly Mann Ki Baat radio address is broadcast on the public radio station All India Radio. Each of these outlets is in addition to the MyGov platform, whose "Talk" and "Blog" sections function as a media outlet for the Modi Government. The MyGov website, as with most of its publications and related media, is available in English and Hindi. Unlike other crowdlaw processes, MyGov India is not supported by a formal legislative framework or defined legal process. Though there are opportunities for citizens to provide input on government initiatives, there is no guaranteed way for user-submitted policy ideas to become codified in law through MyGov India. While various government organizations may solicit suggestions or feedback regarding policy proposals or draft legislation, it is at the discretion of the ministry involved to determine what to post for public input and to what degree the suggestions will implemented, if at all. There is no mandatory feedback requirement.

## Impacts

By holding discussions on MyGov, the Government of India and the Ministries that are active on the platform benefit from a curated list of suggestions that is "crowdscored", or rated by other users on the forum, and ranked by relevance using MyGov's algorithms, which can give the ministers an idea of which proposals are most worth considering and make the data consumption process easier (Basu & Lin, 2018). As Ministries must post a discussion topic before users can respond, the ministers can control the flow of proposals by determining how often they post a forum. This allows the institutions to avoid being overloaded by information. Ministries benefit from a diversity of ideas, experiences, and opinions. Holding discussions on MyGov also allows ministers to create policies that are more in line with what the beliefs and values of the people of India, as seen with the debate around India's Net

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5. "Net Neutrality" is the principle that Internet service providers (ISPs) cannot discriminate based on the source or type of Internet data with regard to their service. For instance, an ISP cannot "throttle" access to a rival ISP's website by slowing down data speeds to that site.

Neutrality<sup>5</sup> policy in 2015 (GovLab, 2018).

**Holding discussions on MyGov also allows ministers to create policies that are more in line with what the beliefs and values of the people of India, as seen with the debate around India's Net Neutrality policy in 2015.**

Prior to 2015, India had no official policy regarding net neutrality. In response to the rapid growth in traffic on web platforms like Google, Yahoo, and Facebook, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) tasked the country's Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRAI) with drafting a series of recommendations for the regulation of India's internet service providers. In March, these recommendations were made public in the form of a rambling, hundred-plus page **Consultation Paper**<sup>6</sup> on TRAI's website. Many saw the TRAI report as favoring differential pricing, zero-rating<sup>7</sup>, and other controversial practices much to the chagrin of net neutrality supporters. The backlash from supporters of net neutrality was immediate, with the TRAI receiving over 1 million emails about the report between in the the four months that followed (Soni, 2016). In July, DoT moved the **discussion** to MyGov, where it had garnered over 70,000 responses --the vast majority of which opposed TRAI's recommendations-- before the topic closed on August 20, 2015. This feedback was reflected in TRAI's **revised set of recommendations** published in November of 2017, a complete reversal of the agency's prior position. The revised recommendations sought to "prohibit Internet service providers (ISPs) from engaging in 'any form of discrimination or interference' in the treatment of on-line content" (The Wire Staff, 2018). In July of 2018, the DoT's Telecom Commission adopted these recommendations, with a few exceptions for providers of "special services" (The Wire Staff, 2018). For the institution, the MyGov platform provided a centralized repository for ministers to receive and process comments in a crowdscored thread, in contrast to the millions of individual emails that comprised the only channel for feedback prior to MyGov.

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6. Differential pricing is a practice where a provider charges different prices to access multiple websites, even if the same amount of data is transmitted to each site.

7. Zero-rating is a practice where a provider allows users free access to a website or network of websites, usually one(s) with which the provider is affiliated. Backlash against Facebook's plan to bring "**Free Basics**", scheme to provide zero-rated access to Facebook and affiliated sites to India, sparked the country's larger discussion about net neutrality policy.





Figure 5: The idea for SWAYAM, incorporated into the 2017 Union Budget, originated on MyGov

By hosting contests on MyGov, these institutions benefit from a content creation system, crowdsourced by users through a gamified approach, that can be more convenient and less expensive than the mechanisms that are traditionally used to design content for the government. For instance, MyGov India CEO Arvind Gupta recounts a 2014 project where MyGov was used to crowdsource the logo for Swachh Bharat ("Clean India"), a campaign to build community-owned sewerage infrastructure. Rather than outsourcing the creation of the logo through a conventional request for proposals (RFP) process, the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation held a **logo design contest** on MyGov, where users could submit their designs for the chance to win a Rs. 50,000 prize. The task amassed over 1,600 submissions, which users could then "like", and share on social media. This crowdsourcing process was

taken into consideration by the Selection Committee in determining the winner. The entire crowdsourcing process accrued a total cost of only \$1,500 USD, approximately 1% of what the cost would have been using the RFP process (GovLab, 2018).

Similarly, in 2015, the Prime Minister's Office and Google co-hosted a **contest** on MyGov for the design of Prime Minister Modi's mobile application. The contest was held in three phases: Idea Submission, Wireframe Development, and App Development. Users were first asked to submit ideas for the app's content and function, with the best ideas (as decided by a MyGov Screening Committee) included in a "blueprint". In the second phase, teams of users consulted the idea blueprints to design wireframes of the app's functional layout. The Screening Committee shortlisted the top ten wireframe designs and invited their team members to present their work for a MyGov jury consisting of eminent professionals and government representatives. This jury then selected five of the wireframe design teams to participate in the third phase, where each team received mentorship from Google to develop their app. The jury then evaluated each app and selected a winning team, who won a sponsored trip to meet for six weeks with a team of engineers and developers at Google's Headquarters in Silicon Valley (MyGov India, n.d.-c). Through this contest, the Government of India was able to crowdsource the development of the application at minimal financial and labor cost; none of the participants in the contest received any financial compensation, and Google assumed the heavy lifting duties involved in developing the app. The Government also retained ownership over the app and its source code (MyGov India, n.d.-c).

Numerous suggestions made by users of the platform have also had real-world impacts. The ideas for SWAYAM (a Massive Open Online Course platform run by the Government of India) and the India Post Payments Bank (a system in which certain third-parties can offer some financial services usually provided by banks) **originated from users on MyGov India** (Baru & Lin, 2018). Several other ideas from MyGov users have made it into proposals for Union and Railroad budgets of **2015**, **2016**, and **2017**. Among others, these included the installation of digital display networks in train passenger cars; collaboration with startups to support innovation in the railway system; and making Rs. 2,000 the maximum cash donation a political party could receive from a single person.



## Challenges and Risks

Several scholars have identified ongoing challenges faced by the Digital India project, many of which are also more narrowly applicable to MyGov India. Of the 1.326 billion people who live in India, approximately 67.6% live in rural areas, which tend to suffer from reduced access to the internet; it is estimated that 864–950 million Indians lack internet access (Kumar, 2018; Ray, 2018). One survey found that only 1 in 5 households in Indian cities owns a computer, while only 9.8% have a computer with internet access in their home (Praharaj, Han et al. 2017). Many rural villages that are connected to the internet suffer from slow internet speed. While the Digital India plan seeks to solve this problem by further building out India's broadband internet infrastructure and by providing citizens internet access via Common Service Centers, the country's vast size makes this an ongoing challenge.

Linguistic diversity is another challenge, as over 1,600 languages and dialects and 15 official languages are spoken across India (CIA, 2018). Although English is an official language that is used by government officials and often learned as a secondary language, less than 1% of India's population speaks it as a first language and less than 5% are considered fluent. Although 41% of Indians speak Hindi (CIA, 2018), this still leaves at least half of India's population unable to fluently navigate the MyGov site without the use of outside software. Likewise, processing these many languages on the backend of MyGov is an additional ongoing challenge, and one that will compound as the platform continues to expand (Basu & Lin, 2018).

In analyzing Digital India, Kumar (2018) notes that “with cybercrime on the rise, the idea of putting information of about a billion citizens online seems like a risky move”. While cybersecurity is a growing problem worldwide, India is especially prone to this problem due to its rapidly growing population of internet users and lack of institutional capacity to deal with cyber threats. In particular, the country lacks human capital of cyber security professionals, technologically savvy law enforcement officers, and cyber security R&D personnel. This problem is compounded by underreporting of crimes and low convictions rates for cyber criminals (Kshetri, 2016).

## Reactions

MyGov has faced several technical hurdles, including those associated with the website's

design. Rather than having one central engagement opportunity that draws in users and then directs them to other features, the site's overload of features spreads engagement out across the various sections of the site, causing it to feel empty. While the site's modular design allows for new Ministries or states to easily be added, the generally poor design can also cause the site to be sluggish and prone to OTP (One Time Password) and other login issues. (Pugalia, Interview with the author, 2018).

MyGov has also been subject to controversies caused by the rapidly changing digital landscape in India, in which technologies and citizens' needs advance at a pace that leaves government institutions struggling to keep up. Recent controversies such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal (involving the collection and misuse of Facebook users' personal data) and **data security issues** related to Aadhar --India's digital identification card system-- have brought data privacy concerns into the public consciousness. In particular, some have questioned MyGov's request for Ministries to share users' data with them in order to improve engagement on the platform (Sharma, 2018). In response to these concerns, MyGov CEO Arvind Gupta defended the platform's data usage as following "best practices", and argued that the tracking of users' engagement is crucial so that users "are not bombarded with unnecessary information and get communication from government which is relevant to them" (qtd. in Sharma, 2018). Others have raised the issue of public access to data. While MyGov is a government platform with publicly available data, PM Modi's app, which draws upon many of the same resources and is often used interchangeably with MyGov, is privately owned by the Prime Minister, and as such, its data is not publicly available (Pugalia, Interview with the author, 2018). While some of these issues may be addressed with the forthcoming **data protection bill**, as of now, India's data best practices, and by extent MyGov's own data conventions, remain unclear.

The platform's role as a facilitator of public debates has also been subject to criticism. Although the platform was used in India's Net Neutrality debate, its role in this discussion was controversial, as some saw the move from email submission as an attempt to move the discussion behind a sign-in wall. MyGov CEO Arvind Gupta **stated** that this was not "a one-way mechanism of seeking feedback", since "India announced the net neutrality policy shortly after the discussion was closed" for which "the bulk of the comments were sourced from [MyGov India]" (qtd. in GovLab, 2018). On the other hand, **The Guardian** reported that many net neutrality campaigners "...suspected the move was designed to discourage people from

participating in the debate because the site made it harder to leave comments” (Soni, 2016). While users posted 70,000 comments on MyGov’s discussion forum, this pales in comparison to the over 1 million emails submitted before the debate was moved. The net neutrality example calls into question the role that MyGov has played in facilitating public debates, and also raises the larger issue of whether this platform is the proper feedback mechanism for holding a meaningful conversation between people and the government.

A related issue that has arisen in the last few years is the desire for a channel by which to organize and express resistance to established policies of the Indian Government. This want is illustrated by the widespread citizen involvement in debates around net neutrality, data privacy, and other socioeconomic issues related to caste. The Government of India had thus far lacked the institutional capacity to deal with these changes through traditional feedback mechanisms like email and online forms (Pugalia, Interview with the author, 2018). While MyGov was largely created to address these challenges, the site’s discussion tools serve simply as an update to their appearance that does not solve the underlying issues with the older feedback mechanisms. As such, the engagement opportunities available on the platform have come short of delivering the much-needed two-way conversation between the people and their government.

Another shortcoming has been the inability to attract and engage citizens and government members at the local level. Praharaj, Han et al. (2017) examined the intensity of participation on MyGov India discussion pages across 100 cities and found that participation on the platform varied substantially based on geography. Medium-sized cities, such as Bhopal and Indore (with populations under 2 million), and small cities like Udaipur and Jabalpur (under 1.3 million), drew higher rates of citizen engagement than did larger cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Chennai. To explain these differences, the authors also studied the intensity of participation in relation demographic characteristics, and found a statistically significant negative correlation between participation and internet access ( $r = -.221$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), mobile phone access ( $r = -.253$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and literacy rate ( $r = -.243$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that while internet access, device ownership, and literacy may be prerequisites for participation on the platform, increasing these characteristics will not necessarily lead to greater engagement on MyGov. As MyGov “..is being managed by the central government” the platform’s “lack [of] local level engagement... could be identified as a key reason for low level of participation in majority of cities and even the ones having [a] considerable share of population” (Praharaj, Han et al., 2017, p.1431). This, combined with the overall low participation rates on local-level

pages, indicates that rather than focusing solely on improving the country's wireless infrastructure, the Indian government should pursue strategies to increase engagement at the local level.<sup>8</sup>

MyGov CEO Arvind Gupta contends that one successful aspect of MyGov's 360° approach has been the blending of online and offline features. In particular, the combination of online submissions with offline prizes has attracted a high level of engagement on the platform, as seen in the example of the 2018 Padma Awards. In contrast to past years, where only Ministers were able to nominate recipients for these annual civil service awards, nominations for the “#PeoplesPadma Awards” in 2018 were open to anyone. Users could make nominations through an open submission process on the [padmaawards.gov.in](http://padmaawards.gov.in) website, beginning in Fall of 2017 (Express Web Desk, 2017). In the lead up to the awards ceremony in Spring of 2018, a quiz was held on the MyGov site where users were asked knowledge-based questions about the lives and accomplishments of Padma nominees. The top scorers were entered into a lottery for a chance to attend the Padma Awards in person at the President of India's residence (Express Web Desk, 2018). This example is typical of MyGov's gamified approach, wherein a user competes in online activities for the chance to win real-life experiences as prizes. These rewards bring users personal gratification, which is important for achieving high-quality engagement on the platform (GovLab, 2018).

Another strength has been the Government of India's role in sponsoring the site, as this has helped MyGov India to develop a strong brand (Pugalia, Interview with the author, 2018).

## Key Learnings

The platform's most consistently successful features, where it has garnered the most engagement and had the most real-world impacts, has been in its content creation tasks and competitions rather than in its lawmaking function. Similar platforms can succeed in attracting users by blending online and offline engagement opportunities, and by providing

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8. So far local-level pages exist for the states of Haryana, Maharashtra, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, and Chhattisgarh.. Participation varies among these local pages, both in scale and in activity. While Maharashtra has attracted over 78,000 participants, its users have submitted only 1,700 comments. This is less than half the number of comments submitted on the Madhya Pradesh page, which has only 23,500 members. Haryana, a state with a population of over 25 million, has only 12,000 registered users who have left a little over 100 comments.

real-world prizes to participants. Likewise, institutions can reduce their workloads involved in soliciting feedback on initiatives by creating a centralized repository where citizens' comments are collected, crowdscored, and priority-ranked using an online forum.

The key shortcoming for MyGov is its lack of a formal lawmaking mechanic or even a simple grievance redressal system by which citizens' submissions could have some direct bearing on government policy; even though discussions are held on MyGov, Ministries are not compelled to respond. To this end, while MyGov may be a more convenient and more aesthetically-pleasing replacement of the prior modes of feedback done via email and ministry websites, it has not truly improved or updated their function as a "one-way" conversation between the Government and the common man. Participation on MyGov is lacking at the local level, among critics of the government, and among those lacking reliable internet access, leaving out large swaths of India's population. Future projects must address the underlying issues in their systems of engagement such that they can provide a "two-way" conversation between people and their government that is accessible to their whole population. While the provision of offline participation channels is a step in the right direction, this must be combined with meaningful engagement opportunities that draw users in and then allow them the opportunity to truly impact the way their country is governed.

## Decide: Madrid's Direct Democracy Experiment

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### Introduction

The City Council created the **Decide Madrid** civic technology platform in 2015 in response to the growing political disenchantment in Spain. Protests had begun years earlier when the Indignados (“outraged”) took to the streets of Madrid to demand better democracy, protest welfare cuts, corruption, and more. In the years following the massive protests, the champions behind the movement began to find their way into positions of power. Pablo Soto Bravo, a computer programmer turned City Council member led the development of the Consul software to create a way for ordinary people to participate in politics.<sup>1</sup> In use in over 70 cities, the Madrid version known as *Decide* enables a variety of forms of engagement, including participatory budgeting for which the city appropriates €100 million. Its consultations feature has been used to foster public discussion on 38 issues. The platform also includes a *Propuestas* (proposals) feature, which enables anyone to propose legislation. Decide enables a registered user to create a “citizen proposal” and a verified resident of Madrid to sign onto and support proposals for new regulations, policies or actions the submitter wishes the City Council to undertake. Proposals that receive enough signatures by residents must be considered by the City Council. There is, however, no obligation on the part of the Council to enact a proposal.

Decide is a mixed success. On the one hand, it offers an efficient mechanism for any member of the public to engage in democratic life. Nearly 400,000 people are signed up and have submitted over 21,000 proposals. On the other hand, the legal requirement to obtain one percent of the population's signatures before a proposal can move forward, combined with a number of design flaws, have resulted in thousands of proposals being submitted but none enacted since the platform's inception.<sup>2</sup> The City of Madrid is seeking to test ways to increase

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1. De Sousa, Ana Naomi. “Hacking Madrid,” Al Jazeera, Dec. 13 2015.

2. One proposal was “Billete único para el transporte público,” which called for citizens to be able to purchase one universal ticket to access every form of public transportation. The other proposal was “Madrid -- 100% Sostenible,” a self-proclaimed manifesto which demanded the implementation of 14 points related to sustainability.

the number of signatures on citizen-submitted proposals while simultaneously improving their quality.

## Propuestas Workflow

The goal of the proposals feature is to create a direct democratic process where citizens can submit, and subsequently support and vote on, one another's ideas for new regulations, policies, and actions, for the City Council of Madrid's consideration.



Figure 1: Screenshot from the “Propuestas” page. Source: decide.madrid.es

When creating a proposal, people can access “[Kit.Decide](#)” and a [blog post](#) via the Decide Madrid website, both of which offer guidelines and keys for creating a successful proposal.



[Go back](#)

## Create new proposal

[How do citizen proposals work?](#)

### Proposal title

Proposal title

### Proposal summary

(maximum 200 characters)

Proposal summary

### Proposal text



### Link to external video

You may add a link to YouTube or Vimeo

Link to external video

### Link to additional documentation

Link to additional documentation

### Descriptive image

You can upload one image of following content types: jpeg, jpg, up to 2 MB.

Add image

## Recommendations for creating a proposal

✓ Do not use capital letters for the proposal title or for whole sentences. On the internet, this is considered shouting. And nobody likes being shouted at.

✓ Any proposal or comment suggesting illegal action will be deleted, as well as those intending to sabotage the debate spaces. Anything else is allowed.

✓ Enjoy this space and the voices that fill it. It belongs to you too.

### Documents

You can upload up to a maximum of 3 documents of following content types: pdf, up to 3 MB per file.

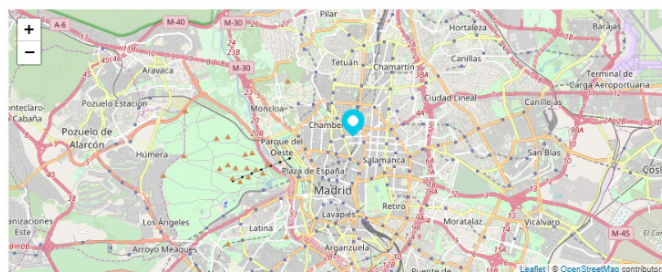
Add new document

### Scope of operation

All city

### Map location

Navigate the map to the location and place the marker.



Remove map marker

☐ This proposal doesn't have a concrete location or I'm not aware of it.

### Tags

Tag this proposal. You can choose from proposed categories or add your own

Asociaciones Cultura Deportes Derechos Sociales Distritos Economía Empleo Equidad Medio Ambiente Medios  
Movilidad Participación Salud Seguridad y Emergencias Sostenibilidad Transparencia Urbanismo

Enter the tags you would like to use, separated by commas (",")

### Full name of the person submitting the proposal

(individually or as representative of a collective; will not be displayed publicly)

Full name of the person submitting the proposal

☐ I agree to the Privacy Policy and the Terms and conditions of use

Create proposal

Figure 2: Screenshot from the "Propuestas" page. Source: decide.madrid.es



Registered users<sup>3</sup> can propose an idea by simply clicking the “Create a Proposal” button. To register only requires providing an email address. There is no residency requirement to make a proposal, and they can also be submitted by mail or in person. A proposal is comprised of:

- Title
- Summary (max 200 characters)
- Proposal text (no limit)
- Link to external video
- Link to additional documentation
- Descriptive image
- Additional documents (max of 3, must be PDFs)
- Scope of operation (select a neighborhood or entire city)
- Place marker on map to represent scope (if applicable)
- Tags
- Full name of person submitting proposal (not displayed publicly)

**Over 21,000 proposals have been submitted and are available to view on the site, sorted by “most active,” “highest rated,” “newest,” and “archived” (can no longer receive support), or by tags such as culture, mobility, and social rights.** Once a proposal<sup>4</sup> is submitted, anyone with verified accounts can click a button expressing their support for said proposal. Each proposal is given twelve months to gather requisite support (signatures) to advance in the process. Some examples of active proposals with a high number of signatures include a protest against a trash incinerator and a moratorium on tourism in the Madrid town center, with 5,225 and 2,427 signatures, respectively. To move forward for consideration, a proposal must receive the requisite support, represented by signatures from “1% of registered citizens in Madrid over 16 years of age” which is currently ~27,000 people (**Decide Madrid**).<sup>5</sup> If a proposal does not reach this threshold, it is moved to the “archived” section after 12 months.

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**3.** There are three levels of authentication for the site. Registered users provide a username, email address, and password but do not verify residence, so people can do this from anywhere in the world. Basic verified users verify residence online by entering their residence data, then receive a confirmation code via mobile phone. Users who wish to become completely verified will receive a letter containing a security code and instructions to carry out the verification, which they must send back to a Citizen Assistance Office.

**4.** Note: in order to maximize citizen participation and accommodate those without internet access, most actions that take place on the website (including registration and verification) can also be done in one of Madrid’s 26 Citizen Assistance Offices with the help of trained staff.

**5.** While it is not clear whether there is a legal reasoning behind the 1% threshold, it is possible that it may stem from Article 187, Section 2 in “Ley Orgánica 5/1985, de 19 de junio, del Régimen Electoral General,” which explains the scale for the required number of signatures to present candidacy according to the size of the given Spanish municipality.

If a proposal receives the required number of signatures, this triggers a 45-day period of deliberation and discussion by the public on the website, where they can get informed about the topic of the proposal. Afterward begins a seven-day period (final voting phase) when verified users over 16 years of age can again vote to accept or reject the proposal. A majority vote in this process decides whether the proposal is brought to the City Council for consideration. There is no minimum requirement for consideration at this stage.

The City Council must review any proposal that wins majority favor in the final voting phase within 30 days. It should be noted that winning proposals are not automatically implemented, as the Spanish Constitution does not permit such binding referenda. During these 30 days, the Council evaluates the proposal based on its legality, feasibility, competence, and economic cost, all of which are highlighted in a subsequent report that is openly published. If the report is positive, then a plan of action will be written and published to carry out the proposal. If the report is negative, the City Council may either propose an alternative action or publish the reasons that prevent the proposal's execution.

## Participation

The Decide Madrid website provides a general overview of user statistics, but the information provided is not available in one centralized and easily accessible location. Rather, it is scattered across the website on different pages. However, the site does provide a link to the Madrid City Council's "**Open Data**" portal, where one can find a substantial amount of data on Decide Madrid through a downloadable **application programming interface**.<sup>6</sup> Site traffic and user participation are the areas where the platform has found great success, demonstrated by the below statistics provided by ParticipaLab.<sup>7</sup>

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6. "Portal de datos abiertos del Ayuntamiento de Madrid." *Ayuntamiento de Madrid*.

7. Yago Bermejo Abati, Director - Laboratorio Inteligencia colectiva para la Democracia (ParticipaLab) personal communication, May 04, 2018.

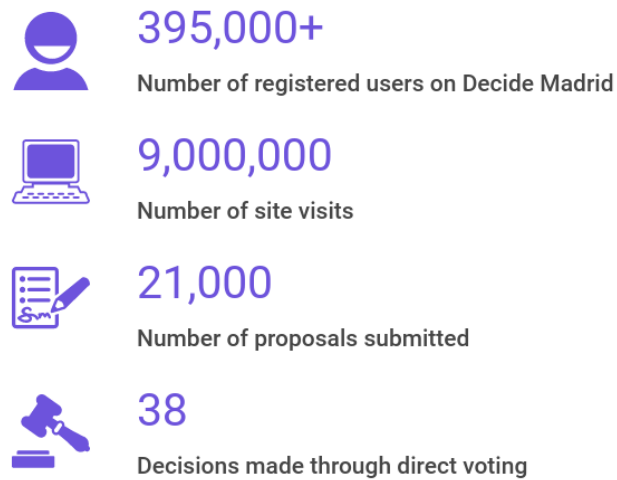


Figure 3: User data as of May 04, 2018. Source: Yago Abati, Director - Laboratorio Inteligencia colectiva para la Democracia (ParticipaLab)

Unfortunately, the site does not provide more specific data on user behavior and activity, such as the amount of time the average user spends on the site, the number of frequent users, the number of votes cast or proposals submitted by the average user, location, occupation, etc. While some of that information is likely protected by privacy laws, more data and a deeper understanding of the platform's users would help Decide Madrid administrators, and those who wish to replicate the process, identify challenges with using such a tool and potential solutions. However, some of this information could be found with some searching on ParticipaLab's now defunct "Data Analysis for Citizen Participation" [site](#), though it required significant manual effort. In addition, the website does offer an **extensive overview of data** from one week in February 2017, when the City Council combined the opportunity to vote on two citizen proposals and several "processes." If such data were collected pertaining to the entire site, it would be highly valuable.

## February 2017 Voting

Due to a coincidence in how the timing unfolded, the City Council combined the opportunity to vote on two citizen proposals and several "processes", into one week in February, 2017 where citizens could vote on all of these different items. This "first citizen vote" provides the richest set of user data available on the site, thus the following figures and statistics all pertain to that vote. Of particular note is the number of people participating via mail, rather than

the web.

- Number of users who voted: 217,076
- Number of votes cast: 963,887
- Participation by Gender:
  - Men: 105,298 (49.23%)
  - Women: 108,591 (50.77%)
- Participation by Channel:
  - Web: 76,481 (35.73%)
  - Ballet box: 23,654 (11.05%)
  - Mail: 117,388 (54.83%)

Below is a graphic representing votes by age group. For more detailed information about participation broken down by geography and subjects of the votes, please visit [\*\*First Citizen Vote \(February 2017\)\*\*](#):

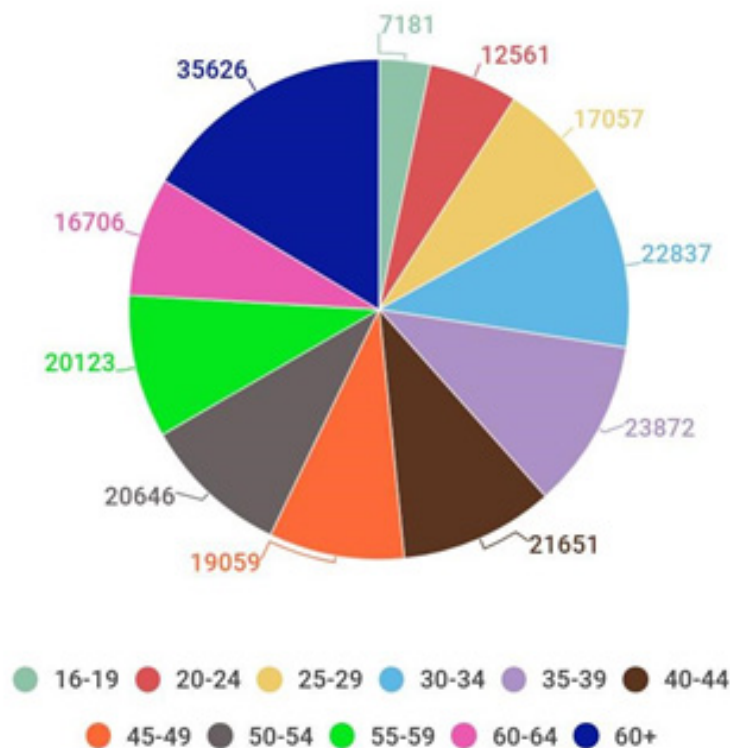


Figure 4: Votes by age group. Source: [First Citizen Vote \(February 2017\)](#)

## Challenges

Undoubtedly, the most obstinate challenge faced by Decide Madrid is advancing citizen proposals through the process to be passed into legislation because of the signature threshold. Despite impressive participation numbers with nearly 400,000 registered users and over 21,000 submitted proposals, since the platform's inception in 2015, only two of these proposals have reached the threshold of signatures required for them to be put to a vote for consideration by the Council. Notably, both of these proposals were submitted on the day the platform was launched, and in the subsequent months not one single proposal has reached even half of the support threshold.<sup>8</sup>

**Equally problematical, however, is the quality of proposals. Many submissions are poorly informed and designed in such a way that prevents their implementation because the City government is not permitted to respond to or give feedback on proposals.** Thus, many are not relevant to the jurisdiction of the City or they duplicate another law that already exists. In other words, many proposals with credible ideas that offer practical solutions to real problems are drowned out by the volume of ineffectual proposals.

This poses a delicate issue. One of the goals of such participatory democracy tools is to enable wider participation. In doing so, however, Decide Madrid has attracted a surfeit of contributions that are proving ineffective to the initiative's broader vision of improving the city's democracy and the lives of its citizens. Additionally, if its users' contributions continuously fail to produce outcomes, then they may get discouraged. Thus, administrators must discover a way to invite more useful proposals and mitigate 'noise' without limiting overall engagement.

## Impact

Overall, Decide Madrid has been very successful on some fronts but has fallen short of producing substantial tangible impacts in other areas. Madrid's City Council has succeeded in creating an open, transparent platform where citizens can collaborate with one another on

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8. Pablo Aragon, Yago Bermejo, Vicenc Gomez, and Andreas Kaltenbrunner. "**Interactive Discovery System for Direct Democracy**." 2018 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM). IEEE, 2018

a range of issues. Placing every part of the process in full view of the public and providing a link to an **open data** repository has helped meet the goal of promoting transparency within the government. Engaging hundreds of thousands of citizens, Decide Madrid has moved over 500 participatory budgeting projects into the process of being implemented and crowd-sourced opinions to make nearly 40 decisions through the “process” section.

Unfortunately, the extremely low impact of the propuestas (proposals) feature--the aspect that has the most direct influence on the solution identification stage of the lawmaking process--is cause for relative concern. Furthermore, the political climate in Spain remains turbulent as trust in government continues to decline and there is a real concern that a lack of outcomes will lead to further frustration.

## Learnings

Decide Madrid provides several learnings for governments and institutions that look to emulate its CrowdLaw processes. Giving the public the opportunity to influence law and policymaking directly is responding to a deeply felt need as evidenced by the huge number of participants and submissions.

**Giving the public the opportunity to influence law and policymaking directly is responding to a deeply felt need as evidenced by the huge number of participants and submissions.**

However, the failure by the government -- a failure created by legal compliance -- to participate actively in and respond to public proposals is depressing the quality of submissions,

Finally, the case of Decide Madrid highlights the importance of technology in these processes. Above all, using open source software is a core value when designing a digital democracy platform. When asked about the Consul software, Miguel Arana, Director of Citizen Participation for the City Council of Madrid, remarked, “This is the tool we imagined when we started doing digital democracy practices in the squares and streets of 15M.”<sup>9</sup> He continued to explain how he believes that, “free software is always a gift to the world.” The influence of free

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9. Tarancón, Sara Calvo. “La hacker de Carmena.” Público, Jan. 14 2018.

software is well-supported,<sup>10</sup> and Decide Madrid's co-founders are proud that their vision was able to be reimaged in the many instances that followed.

## Conclusion and Future Direction

Whether Decide Madrid has enabled citizens to directly influence the City's policies and leverage citizen participation for solution identification currently lies in a grey area. While the platform has granted citizens with the ability to identify and propose alternative solutions to public problems directly to the City Council, their capacity to prompt real change remains questionable as long as citizen proposals continue to produce very few substantive results. On a positive note, the organizers have been mapping and tracking user data and participation, and are eagerly working on improving the process to help accomplish its goal. They have set the foundation for their government to work collaboratively with the public and civil societies, and have done so in a way that is replicable for other institutions.

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10. "What is free software," Free Software Foundation.

## Better Reykjavik: Municipal Open Innovation

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### Introduction

Betri Reykjavik, or Better Reykjavik, is the City of Reykjavik's online engagement platform using the Your Priorities software developed by the Icelandic Citizens Foundation. The website gives residents of Reykjavik the opportunity to submit original ideas and solutions to municipal-level issues within the city. Citizens of Reykjavik are given the opportunity "to submit, debate, and prioritize policy proposals and ideas" (Lackaff, 2015). Moreover, it allows residents to vocalize, debate, and amend a variety of ideas which they believe are crucial, and "gives the voters a direct influence on decision making" ("Better Reykjavik", 2010). Better Reykjavik has also allotted a section of its website to a project named "My District", where Reykjavik residents and the city administration collaborate to determine the amount of capital allocated for future construction and maintenance projects within the ten main neighborhoods of the city ("Betri Reykjavik...", 2016). These two projects involve different tasks, however, both have the same primary objective: to increase the capacity of consultation and influence of citizens on the decision making processes of the city ("Betri Reykjavik...", 2016). Above all, City Hall is directly involved in and committed to the implementation of ideas emerging from both processes.

As a CrowdLaw process, Betri Reykjavik has potential to be a model for many others since it is an example of a digitally-enabled open innovation platform with uniquely high levels of ongoing participation, progress, and engagement. It is also unique in that it (1) is "developed and maintained by a grassroots nonprofit organization, and not by a government, (2) rapidly achieved significant buy-in from citizens, policy-makers, and public administrators, (3) has been normalized as an ongoing channel for citizen-government interaction" (Lackaff, 2015), and (4) uses the input from the public to identify and implement solutions to real urban challenges.



## Background

The financial collapse of Iceland and the resulting decline of trust in Iceland's institutions created the impetus for Better Reykjavik. In October 2008, the global financial crisis caused Iceland's banks to go bankrupt, leading to the bankruptcy of almost every business within the country (Amadeo, 2018). Iceland's top three banks—Kaupthing Bank, Landsbanki, and Glitnir Bank—had \$62 billion of foreign debt, and their bankruptcy led to a 50% decline of the Icelandic Króna within a week. The Icelandic Stock Exchange also plunged 95%. This caused Iceland's government to collapse in January 2009, leading to a deficit of trust between the citizens and political administration (Amadeo, 2018). Recognizing the need to provide citizens with a voice within the government, avoid a similar collapse in the future, and “[develop] new models for more open institutions and infrastructures” (Lackaff, 2015), Better Reykjavik was proposed by mayor Jón Gnarr on June 16, 2010, and officially launched by the city council in October 2011, with My District following suit a month later (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). The platform's mission statement is:

“We believe that citizens need a strong voice in policymaking, formal participation in the political process with a persistent and binding influence on the big issues” (CitizensFNDN, 2014).

## From Campaigning to Governing

Better Reykjavik evolved from an earlier online platform known as Skuggabord, or “Shadow City”, which opened May 25, 2010, before the Reykjavik municipal elections. Many differing grassroots activists, hackers, and entrepreneurs originally formed and supported the idea, but Róbert Bjarnason and Gunnar Grímsson, who were part of self-employment agency Íbúar, were the developers who made it a reality (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). Shadow City provided “branded” sections for each of the eight competing political parties for the simple purpose of connecting them with potential voters. However, “While most of the parties utilized [Shadow City] little or not at all, supporters of “anarcho-surrealist” comedian Jón Gnarr's... Best Party were encouraged to help set their party's agenda and platform by using the site, and approximately 1,400 citizens joined in this process” (Lackaff, 2015). After analyzing and incorporating the desires of citizens on Shadow City into their campaign, the Best Party successfully defeated the Independence Party, taking over the city council. This success led leaders of the Best Party to ask the Shadow City developers to create an exten-

sion of the platform for the purpose of collecting opinions and ideas of citizens on the city council and community. This new section was named “Better Reykjavik”, and “coalition partners encouraged citizens to use the site to share their priorities for the new government” (Lackaff, 2015). In September 2011, the Mayor committed to implementing the top five ideas on Better Reykjavik each month (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). Though the platform has evolved into a tool for participatory governing rather than campaigning and the Best Party is no longer in office, the purpose remains the same and Icelanders still use it today.

## Mechanics of Better Reykjavik

The City has established a multi-step process for obtaining implementable solutions from residents. To facilitate participation, the platform allows people to log in with their Facebook, Twitter, or email accounts. This integration with social media allows for easier diffusion of ideas and helps promote Better Reykjavik. However, when it comes time to vote, an electronic ID or a password delivered through the voter’s online bank is required for participation. In addition, advanced security measures are utilized to protect user and website information (Andruzzi and Spada, 2018).

After registration is complete, users can navigate to the proposal section of the website called “Your Voice at the City Council” to introduce their proposal. Before writing a proposal, however, residents label their submission with one of thirteen predefined categories of urban life and services. Proposals comprise a title and short summary with the option to insert photos or select a specific location where their idea should be implemented. The terms of service make clear that:

When a user presents an idea on the Better Reykjavik forum, it is automatically considered the public property of the residents of Reykjavik in order to enable deliberation of and amendment to the original proposal and grant the City of Reykjavik the right to use the ideas.

Submitted proposals are then open to upvotes, downvotes, or debates, where users can publicly discuss the pros and cons of each issue. Proposal ideas vary greatly from building a new basketball court in Hlíðaskóli, to providing a care station for the homeless in the central area of Reykjavik. Many suggestions revolve around the common urban themes of transpor-

tation, construction, and environmental issues. Occasionally, people will address reforming different aspects of the education system or improving maternity leave.

At 12 noon of the last working day of each month, the five top rated ideas as upvoted by registered participants, as well as the top ideas in each category, are collected by a project manager in the project management team at the mayor's office (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018). To qualify, these ideas must not only have the highest votes, but they must also have a minimum requirement of 25 or more "likes" than their total amount of "dislikes."

The project managers familiarize themselves with the proposal, what has been done before concerning that issue and determine whether the city has jurisdiction. If they qualify, the ideas are then transferred to the appropriate standing committee (categories for the committees include tourism, operations, recreation and leisure, sports, human rights, art and culture, education, transportation, planning, administration, environment and planning, welfare and elders). Once this is complete, the project manager changes the idea's status to "In Progress", and depending on the final result, it will either be changed to "Success" or "Failure" (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018).

The committee conducts feasibility analysis. To make the entire process transparent, "every stage of the assessment... is posted on the website - [and] sometimes professional teams call creators of the idea in for further details and further customization of the idea ("Betri Reykjavik...", 2016). This all occurs in the span of 3-6 months, and the final result is sent by email to all participants involved with the original idea (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018). If an idea has been rejected, the author will receive an explanation by email, and if they are still unsatisfied, the author is invited to hold meetings with city officials to discuss the issue further (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018).

## **Mechanics of My District**

In 2012, the city added a participatory budgeting initiative called Better Neighborhoods ("Betri Hverfi") to the Better Reykjavik platform and later changed its name to My Neighborhoods and, recently renamed again, as My District. This 450 million ISK (4.2 million USD, 3.6 million EUR) participatory budgeting initiative enables the public to spend approximately

0.35% of the city's estimated total expenditures. The process for My District takes about a year. During a three-week span between February and March, the ideas from all 10 neighborhoods are collected, and from the end of the "idea collection" period to May, the ideas are processed by both the project management team and the political district committees to decide which ones are reasonable and implementable. If the idea is too expensive, not on government-owned land, already being constructed, or the organizational process will require more than 18 months, they are automatically disqualified (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018). In the end, 250 ideas (25 per district) are then finalized, and during the summer months, PDFs called 'preliminary designs' are generated for each idea by the planning office, including work by an architect and a cartographer. These experts help determine the budget, location, and logistics of the final product. Finally, from the 10th to the 25th of October, the voting process commences.

To vote, users must be 15 or older to be eligible. Voters choose the neighborhood in which they want to cast their vote by simply clicking on it on a map of Reykjavik. Voters vote on projects until they have reached the amount of money the neighborhood has to spend. Next, the voter will get a confirmation that the vote has been cast. People can change their vote as many times as they want, but only the last vote is valid. Beginning recently, the platform also includes the option to add in one heart or a star for an idea, which will count as two votes. After the election, the votes are counted and the projects are decided—it is a binding vote, so the results are immediately announced and the city has a year to proceed with the implementation (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018).

Both the Better Reykjavik and the Better Neighborhoods processes culminate involvement of professionals who aid with turning proposals into implementable policies. Better Reykjavik operates throughout the year and returns issues to the city council monthly for ratification. My District, on the other hand, works during different time intervals throughout the year, returns yearly results, and requires an online election. Government officials are required to be more involved with this process early on to formulate proper solutions and ideas.

## Participation

"Over 70,000 people [have] participated out of a population of 120,000 since the site

opened [and] 20,000 registered users [have] submitted over 6,800 ideas and 15,000 points for and against” (“Better Reykjavik”, 2010). Participation was highest in the age group 35 - 39 years at 19.5% with 40 - 44 years measuring 18.5%. This unfortunately meant that young and older people were underrepresented (Andruzzi and Spada, 2018).

With “450,000 unique visitors since 2008, [and] over 230,000 in 2013” (CitizensFNDN, 2014), participation is highest in the most populous district of the city, Breiðholt, where the proportion of foreign people is among the highest in the city. (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). When analyzing the demographic of users, there seems to be only a small difference between the numbers of female and male participants. Furthermore, households with children have been found to be more active than those without. University students and high income earners are also much more active in terms of prioritizing ideas and voting for proposals compared to those with less education and lower income. It should be noted, however, that the Better Reykjavik platform itself only requires an email and a name/pseudonym and does not collect much demographic data. These numbers are compiled by researchers from Google Analytics and social media sites such as Facebook (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018).

## Advertisement Campaigns

The government of Reykjavik heavily promoted Better Reykjavik as the bridge between citizens and government officials. When the website originally launched in October 2011, they began the promotional campaign with an opening ceremony in Gerðubergi, the city’s main library and cultural center, then proceeded to place posters throughout the city on billboards. The City issued multiple press releases (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). The main focus of their current promotional campaign is introducing the annual participatory budgeting competition. To make sure all citizens know about the website, the Citizens Foundation and the government of Reykjavik promote Better Reykjavik through social media (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Better Reykjavik, News Outlets), TV Commercials (Mayor Jon Gnarr utilized comedy for attention), political campaigns, awards (European Award in the E-Democracy Awards in 2011). Given the small size of the city, word of mouth also works. A list of the campaign efforts by the city of Reykjavik in spreading awareness of My District elections during 2012 - 2015 is shown in Figure 1.

The possibility of having one's own bill or policy passed and the ability to see changes were strong incentives to participate, especially given the earlier rampant distrust of government.

**Table 5. Presentation of District Elections Bh 2012-2015**

year	Actions
2012	- Brochure distributed in each house with a list of all projects
	- Plates hung up widely
	- Conventional magazine ads and collective radio ads every day all the election aviation
	- Produced cheap videos with Jón Gnarr Mayor who became "viral" facebook
	- Media interviews with project staff
2013	- Traditional press releases at the beginning and end of the project.
	- Citizens' Meetings in all neighborhoods where the plan was Better Neighborhood
	- Advertised in neighborhoods and in the neighborhoods with posters
	- Traditional distribution of daily newspapers, radio
	- Distribution with concept list for each district distributed to home
2014	- Media interviews with project staff
	- Press Releases Shipped
	- The web site of Reykjavík.is.
	- Start using Facebook
	- Videos by Jón Gnarr Mayor (from the previous year) on facebook.
2015	- Traditional advertising in newspapers and radio, distribution to home.
	- Facebook used purposefully and purchased costly impressions on facebook.
	- Media interviews with project staff
	- The web site of Reykjavik.is
	- Markedly advertised on facebook and started before the election began
2016	- Advertised with web sites in DV, Mbl.is, Más, Karninn og Vísi
	- Mails sent through service centers, district councils, and parent companies school
	- Plates hung on multicolored sites in neighborhoods and articles and ads in all rotor blades.
	- Media interviews with project staff
	- Notification sent to all registered users BR
2017	- Distribution to all houses in Reykjavík
	- Videos with the story of Gardin and Steineyju on social media
	- The web site of Reykjavik.is

Figure 1: Advertisement Campaigns during 2012-2015. Source: ("Betri Reykjavik...", 2016)

**The possibility of having one's own bill or policy passed and the ability to see changes were strong incentives to participate, especially given the earlier rampant distrust of government.**

## Costs

Many people are involved in the project. Beyond the programming team at the Citizens Foundation and members of the Mayor's Project Management team, the Mayor, members of the City Council, planning directors in different departments and city council committees all have a role to play in this far-reaching engagement program that has become a way of life for the city.

The Project Management Team consists of 4 people—the two project managers (who work with PR, evaluate incoming ideas, and maintain communication between the citizens and the government, a communications representative (who works with the news), and a project coordinator (who oversees the execution of all projects and works in the Environmental and Planning department.. There are around 4 to 7 people in each of the 13 Individual Councils and Committees. Usually there are enough members to handle the work as part of their job, but the Environment and Planning committee has recently received most of the ideas, making it necessary to expand staffing (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018).

The cost of Better Reykjavik and My District from 2011 to 2015 was almost 1.3 billion ISK (\$12 million USD, €10 million) - this includes the participatory budgeting outlay, costs such as the salaries of project managers, advertising and promotional costs, and the €2,500 service agreement with the Citizens Foundation, who operates the Better Reykjavik website ("Betrí Reykjavik...", 2016). However, this figure fails to measure the savings from the innovative proposals or the time of the citizens invested in making them.

## Risks and Challenges

When analyzing the impact and accomplishments of Better Reykjavik, it becomes immediately clear that the platform achieved its initial goal—giving citizens a voice within the policymaking process and the power to influence the outcome of big issues—and is still currently accomplishing its goals. This is especially evident in 2018, when 76 My District projects were voted on by 11,113 participating voters. The Better Reykjavik website also



receives around 1,000 ideas annually, with around 25,000–35,000 visitors and 5,000–6,000 directly participating (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018).

In an audit conducted by the University of Iceland, just over 40% of Reykjavik residents reported that they are pleased with Better Reykjavik and My District; 55% of respondents among elected officials and 47% among administrative staff also agreed that the implementation of My District was a success (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). Interestingly, although the youngest people participate the least, those who do are the most satisfied with the experience, perhaps reflecting the demand among young people for more direct forms of democratic engagement.

Better Reykjavik faces many challenges in areas including participation, cost, accessibility, consultation, and productivity. Though the platform was popular when first introduced, the levels of participation have been declining in the past few years. Participation levels in My District voting were initially 8.1% but now have declined to 7.3% (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). According to surveys conducted by the University of Iceland, there were many reasons behind the decline of participation: lack of knowledge of the platform, lack of time, lack of interest, and issues with the accessibility of the platform (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). The city must determine if the ratio of people aware of Better Reykjavik and My District is acceptable, or if they must put in more effort in increasing the current amount. Since the promotional budget has also been kept to a minimum, the city administration must also propose effective ways of promoting the projects to serve their purpose and to get the maximum amount of participation (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016). While participatory budgeting is a major feature of My District, fewer than 10% of residents participate in the annual process. City authorities must consider “a) Are budgets determined by less than 10% of the population legitimate? b) Would it be normal to set a benchmark for the minimum participation in My [District] constituencies? c) Is the cost of My [District] justified based on the participation” (“Betri Reykjavik...”, 2016)?

The developers at the Citizens Foundation have put a lot of effort into enhancing the accessibility of Better Reykjavik, however, there are several issues that still need to be addressed. Google Translate is incorporated to make the website accessible to non-Icelandic speakers, but it is questionable whether it is sufficient enough to ensure access for immigrants. There are also no resources available for people with special needs and disabilities. Although most households in Iceland are connected to the Internet, accessibility and training must always



be taken into account. The University of Iceland found that many citizens are struggling to distinguish the difference between Better Reykjavik and My District (2016).

Some have also raised concerns about the long-term sustainability and limitations of the website. Since the final decision of policymaking rests on government officials of Reykjavik, some have called it “Advocacy Democracy” instead of “Direct Democracy” (Andruzzi and Spada, 2018), and there is still a very obvious barrier between citizen influence and government procedure. This is also apparent when analyzing the type of proposals suggested by Reykjavik Citizens, as “citizens have developed policies to improve the quality of their everyday lives involving school field trips, pedestrian park and homeless shelters; they are largely precluded from taking on greater political and economic matters since those are usually managed by the specialists and experts in contemporary society” (Andruzzi and Spada, 2018). It is clear that citizens have little influence when the matter consists of governmental or economic matters, which raises questions of whether it is necessary for the Better Reykjavik platform to be further improved. However, it could also be unnecessary, as it is also a possibility that Better Reykjavik will lose momentum as the Icelandic economy and political climate stabilizes or continues to improve. These examples show that there are several pitfalls that could potentially appear in the future.

## Future Plans

Though Better Reykjavik is facing many challenges, the team behind it has many future plans in place to continue evolving the project and the process. One effort is to attract more citizens from the younger generation, looking into options such as creating an Instagram account for My District to more efficiently showcase the ‘Before’ and ‘After’ of every successful project, or creating a Snapchat account to more easily connect and inform young people of available opportunities to participate (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018). The project management team has already started conducting interviews to capture the success stories of Better Reykjavik, and are planning to post them on social media to further inform the public of the potential impact they can make. The Better Reykjavik platform is making changes to its rules as well, lowering the voting age from 16 to 15 to “strengthen democratic thinking within the younger generation, and to get a broader spectrum of ideas” (Másdóttir, Interview with the author, 2018).

Other ideas focus on enhancing the platform itself, such as the Citizens Foundation’s plan

to remodel the entire user interface to accommodate the quickly rising number of mobile users (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018). They are also weighing the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning, not only to sift out relevant information for a better user experience, but also to build a proposal assistance system which would improve the quality of submitted ideas by advising people on how to craft their submissions (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018). With many different ideas such as further incorporating Google Translate, using sentiment analysis, and adding Facebook-style news feeds, the platform will most likely evolve in the upcoming years (Bjarnason, Interview with the author, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Better Reykjavik is not the only open innovation website for brainstorming solutions to urban challenges. But having attracted the participation from half the population of the City makes this experiment unprecedented in its scale and scope. Though it is not implementing direct democracy within the Icelandic city of Reykjavik, it is still a very large step towards a more transparent, cooperative government and society.

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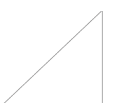
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