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Foreword

By Kyle Redman

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There is now growing recognition across the democratic innovation field that citizens' assemblies (and similar deliberative processes) and large-scale digital participation should not be understood as competing models. Each addresses different public legitimacy needs. Citizens' assemblies offer depth, deliberation, and the possibility of considered public judgment. Mass participation offers scale, visibility, and a way for much broader publics to contribute to public decisions. The challenge is not choosing between them, but understanding how to combine them well.

That challenge is more significant than it first appears. Bringing mini- and maxi-publics together is not just a matter of adding an online platform to an assembly or creating more opportunities for people to contribute. It requires careful choices about what wider participation is meant to do, how it relates to deliberation, and how different forms of input are structured, ordered, and used. Done well, this can strengthen democratic processes. Done poorly, it can simply recreate the flaws of dated approaches to community engagement.

That is what makes this framework valuable. It treats the linkage between mini- and maxi-publics as a design space and asks the right questions: for what purpose, through which mechanisms, and with what trade-offs? Different purposes call for different methods, questions, and timelines. Without that clarity, digital tools risk being used because they are available rather than because they are well matched to the task.

This is especially important at a time when the options for digital participation are expanding rapidly, including through AI-enabled tools that make it much easier to gather, sort, and synthesise input at scale. These developments create incredible opportunities. They will help widen access, lower costs, and make it easier to connect broader publics to more intensive deliberative processes. But they also carry the same risks: superficial engagement, poor links between layers of participation, skewed self-selection, or insufficient forms of analysis.

As the field continues to experiment with ways of combining deliberative depth and participatory scale, evaluation and measurement need to keep pace. It is not enough to count the number of people involved or rely on participants' reflections on the experience. The more important question is whether the combination worked. Did it improve the quality of judgment, broaden inclusion in a meaningful way, strengthen legitimacy, increase public understanding, or improve the connection between participation and decision-making? And where it did not, what should be changed next time? There is lots of work to do here, and it's important to be honest about what does and doesn't work.

For practitioners, public institutions, researchers, and civic technologists, this paper offers a useful introductory map of the terrain and, hopefully, encourages more intentional and effective ways of connecting mini- and maxi-publics.

1

Introduction

Citizen panels are increasingly being integrated into decision-making processes. While they rarely operate as stand-alone institutions, they are more and more frequently used by public authorities as an **additional democratic channel for participation**. At their core lies the idea of so-called mini-publics: randomly or representatively selected citizens brought together in a panel, assembly or alike to deliberate on a specific issue. No elections, no campaigns – just the **real-life perspectives** and lived experiences of everyday people. Typically, these panels provide advisory input to elected representatives.

The growing popularity of citizen panels can be attributed to several factors. One key reason is the set of **challenges modern democracies** are facing and the search for new ways to meaningfully engage citizens in public life. Although often seen as innovative, the idea itself is far from new; it has deep historical roots dating back to ancient Greece.

However, different from representative democracies and universal voting rights, mini-publics face one limitation: **their deliberations involve only a relatively small group of citizens**. They lack broader options for mass participation – the involvement of the **maxi-public**. Often, mini-publics are not largely covered in the public discourse: who knows about it and follows it actively?

Addressing these challenges is not a matter of simply scaling up participation, but a series of design choices about **how, when, and to what extent mini- and maxi-publics should be connected**. In response, actors in the digital democracy ecosystem have begun to develop a range of tools and approaches that link offline citizen panels with online spaces for broader participation. These initiatives differ significantly in their goals, modes of interaction, and underlying assumptions, revealing a diverse landscape of options, trade-offs, and unresolved challenges when designing processes that connect mini- and maxi-publics. This framework aims to **map out the various avenues of discussion** and serve as a comprehensive record of the current state of the debate.

In this paper, we distinguish between **mini-publics** and **maxi-publics**, two **complementary but distinct forms of democratic engagement**. Mini-publics typically refer to small, often randomly selected groups that deliberate in depth after receiving structured information. Maxi-publics, by contrast, involve large-scale participation open to a broader and more diverse population, often engaging with lower initial levels of information or context.

These distinctions are sometimes described in the literature as public judgement versus public opinion, or high-information versus low-context participation. While mini-publics generate informed and reasoned recommendations, maxi-publics play a crucial role in broadening inclusion and strengthening legitimacy. The challenge is **not to oppose these models**, but to articulate them in ways that allow each to **reinforce the democratic value** of the other.

The power of

online participation

While mini- and maxi-publics each have distinct strengths, linking them offers a more encompassing and inclusive approach to democratic participation. This connection can be strengthened by the use of digital technology. Mini-publics are typically limited in size and visibility, since only a small and selected group can participate, which can restrict public awareness and, as some argue, broader legitimacy. Maxi-publics, on the other hand, allow for large-scale, open participation but often at the cost of depth, as engagement can be brief, asynchronous with less interaction between participants, and less deliberative. This creates a tension between discursive complexity and scale, leaving democratic processes either highly deliberative but narrow, or broad but lightweight.

Civic tech participation platforms offer a way to bridge this gap. By integrating digital tools into these processes, we believe it is possible to **bridge the gap between inclusiveness and depth**. Technology enables massive participation while maintaining meaningful dialogue, connecting online and offline formats, and fostering “open assemblies” that extend the deliberative spirit of mini-publics to wider audiences.

Online participation enables **engagement at scale**, reaching a **broader and more diverse population** than mini-publics alone. This scale strengthens **representativeness**, as conclusions reflect the priorities of a significant share of society. Greater representativeness enhances **legitimacy**, making outcomes harder to dismiss and more authoritative in public debate. As more people see themselves reflected in the process, **trust increases**, and the results are more likely to be accepted as fair and consensual.

Greater representativeness, in turn, **reinforces the legitimacy of the process and its outcomes**. When conclusions are grounded in the expressed priorities of tens or hundreds of thousands of participants, they become difficult for stakeholders to ignore and more compelling in the public debate.

Large-scale participation also makes it **possible to map collective priorities with statistical robustness**, something mini-publics, by their very nature, cannot fully achieve. While mini-publics provide depth and deliberative quality, they cannot alone demonstrate that a set of conclusions reflects **widely shared societal consensus**.

By ensuring that a substantial portion of the population is heard and reflected in the results, large-scale participation **increases both trust in the process and acceptance of its outcomes**. Decisions or recommendations perceived as broadly representative are more likely to be considered fair, consensual, and therefore legitimate by the wider public.

In the following section, we explore the key benefits of using digital tools to link mini- and maxi-publics and how they can make engagement more representative, inclusive, and impactful.

Benefits

Linking **mini-** and **maxi-publics** through **digital tools** offers a range of **practical benefits** for both participants and decision-makers. For **offline participants** (3.a), seeing that a wider public cares about the issue and (potentially) their ideas enhances motivation and legitimacy, demonstrating that their deliberations resonate beyond the small group. **Persistent opportunities to engage** (3.b), whether through multiple workshops, follow-up surveys, or iterative online phases, help sustain involvement and reinforce the connection between individual reflection and broader societal input.

The **use of meso-publics** (peer researchers or citizen ambassadors) further amplifies reach by connecting deliberative insights to wider networks (3.c). **Partnerships with civil society organisations and community groups** (3.d) allow mini-publics to be communicated effectively, translating complex deliberations into accessible narratives for the broader public and groups who experience marginalisation or other barriers to participation. **Digital platforms** support sense-making, highlighting consensus and capturing key messages, while engagement in spaces where people already interact (3.e), such as WhatsApp, Chatico, or local forums, ensures that participation meets citizens where they are, making democratic engagement **more inclusive, visible, and actionable**.

Infobox: Benefits

- Offline participants saw that wider public care about issue (3.a)
- Series of opportunities to participate – persistence (3.b)
- Meso-public – peer researchers/ ambassadors to reach more widely (3.c)
- Partnering with civil society and other organisations to tell the story of mini public to broader public (3.d) - Digital tools that do good sense making and tell good story
- Go where people are = use whatsapp (chatico, talk to the city etc) (3.e)

Having said that, this framework does not seek to elaborate further on *why* linking mini-and max-publics is valuable; rather, it takes this as a shared premise. Within the democratic innovation community, there is ongoing debate about the purpose and added value of such linkages: whether and how they enhance legitimacy, inclusiveness, or policy impact.

Instead, the benefits outlined above should be read as illustrative examples of the kinds of effects that different design choices may enable, rather than as a set of best practices. The framework's purpose is to compile and structure the range of available options for connecting mini- and maxi-publics, drawing attention to the diverse mechanisms through which such connections can be organised and the practical challenges they raise. Thus, the analytical focus shifts from *why* linking these publics matters to *how* it can be done in different ways, under different conditions, and with different implications for participation, visibility, and sense-making.

Not a single route

To effectively link mini- and maxi-publics, a variety of methodological options can be deployed, each suited to different contexts, goals, and levels of ambition. Once the decision to create such a link is made, the next step involves selecting the most appropriate design choices depending on factors such as timing, scope, participants, and desired impact. These choices are explored in greater detail in Chapter 7. The framework does not suggest that one approach is inherently better than another; rather, it highlights that different configurations can work effectively depending on the context and purpose of the process.

One element that process designers should consider is (4.a) **synchronisation**: do people online work together at the same time, or independent from each other? Another point is the (4.b) **timing** of online and offline sessions: does it move from online to offline and back again, or operate only in one direction? Participation in the maxi-public can occur before, during, or after the offline assembly, or even run in parallel. A third element to consider is the actual (4.c) **transfer of knowledge** or progress between online and offline spaces: how are the Links between the two facilitated? It could be through presentations, reports, live dashboards, a combination of these or something completely novel.

Besides, a key question is also how the (4.d) **analysis** of contributions can be carried out by humans, machines, or both. There are also design choices on the (4.e) **digital infrastructure** of the online platforms that may require a browser, an app, a login, or partial access without login, depending on accessibility needs. Similarly, the (4.f) **purpose** of the methodology can vary: it may aim to strongly connect online and offline deliberation step by step or provide ongoing engagement opportunities on a given matter.

This flexibility demonstrates that there is no single formula for linking mini- and maxi-publics. Instead, a rich range of approaches can be adapted to the goals, participants, and resources of each process, proving that effective integration can be achieved in multiple, context-sensitive ways.

Infobox: Different Elements

- Synchronisation: synchronous or asynchronous (4.a)
- Timing: from online to offline and back to online, or just in one direction (4.b)
- Knowledge transfer: presentations, reports, live dashboards,... (4.c)
- Analysis of contributions: human, machine, or both (4.e)
- Digital infrastructure design: browser, app, login,... (4.f)
- Purpose: connect online and offline or ongoing engagement (4.d)

Challenges

Deliberative processes are carefully designed methodologies with a great deal of debate in the research, activist and practitioner community on how exactly it should be done. Hence, it is only logical that the linkage between mini- and maxi-publics is not straightforward. Several challenges may arise when attempting to connect these two arenas of democratic engagement, including the following:

(5.a) Translating scale into substance

When engaging large numbers of people online, the challenge is to make vast amounts of input meaningful for smaller and deliberative settings. Online participation often produces fragmented or superficial data that must be synthesised without losing nuance.

Proposed solution: A solid analysis team and clear methodological framework are key to bridging this gap. It must be deployed both upstream and downstream of mass participation. Expert input in shaping, framing, and presenting the questions is essential to foster broad engagement while ensuring that contributions remain substantive and deliberative. At the same time, engaging people with lived experience in shaping questions and framing may further enhance the accessibility to a wide range of people. Combining qualitative and quantitative analysis methods ensures that digital input is distilled without losing nuance. This enables offline participants to work with structured insights that reflect the diversity and depth of the wider public's views, turning large-scale engagement into meaningful deliberation.

Challenges

(5.b) Achieving legitimacy through reach and representation

The question of how many maxi-public participants are “enough” for legitimacy still remains. Large numbers alone do not guarantee representativeness or trust. Projects must balance inclusivity with equity, ensuring participation reflects demographic and social diversity while avoiding biases linked to self-selection or over-representation of the most vocal groups.

Proposed solution: Given that legitimacy is very sensitive and strongly depends on the given context, it should be defined on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the scope, audience, and political ambition of each process. Rather than relying on fixed participation targets, projects should balance diversity with impartiality, ensuring participation reflects demographic and social constellations. Such a process must allow those involved and affected to be seen as well as heard. This tailored approach allows organisers to determine what “enough” looks like for their specific context, ensuring both meaningful reach and genuine representation.

(5.c) Sustaining quality in participation and deliberation

Scaling participation may come at the cost of substance. Maintaining the quality of discussion and reflection, especially when the topics discussed are complex, requires thoughtful facilitation, accessible materials, and time for learning. Without these conditions, there is a risk of shallow engagement that fails to generate informed or constructive input.

Proposed solution: To preserve quality while expanding reach, organisers should apply robust digital systems that enable meaningful exchange while allowing for scale. Platforms designed to guide deliberation, structure dialogue, and visualise emerging consensus can, if done well, support participants in engaging deeply even at large scale. The mini-to-maxi participation process must account for the time and learning required for a broader, low-context audience to contribute quality input. On top of that, digital tools can also help to better understand complex issues that are discussed in the deliberative online space.

Challenges

(5.d) Designing for impact and accountability

Maxi-public participants need to see how their contributions influence decisions. Ensuring that distributed and hybrid engagement processes “link back to impact” is a persistent challenge. Without a clear pathway from participation to decision (or even policy), engagement risks being perceived as symbolic rather than substantive, which weakens trust and long-term legitimacy.

Proposed solution: To strengthen accountability, engagement processes should implement solid follow-up mechanisms that clearly show how citizen input shapes final outcomes. This can include transparent reporting, public dashboards, and even traceability tools that allow participants to see how their ideas evolved or were incorporated into policy recommendations. This way, the feedback loop can be closed.

(5.e) Balancing scope, duration and feasibility

Different formats are suited to different ambitions: not every topic or phase of policymaking requires the same scale or intensity of participation. Understanding what can realistically be achieved at different sizes and durations helps align expectations. Overambitious processes can stretch resources thin and reduce impact.

Proposed solution: To achieve balance, processes should be carefully designed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the specific context, policy goals, available resources, and participants’ needs. A thoughtful design phase allows organisers to match ambition with capacity, selecting the right format, duration, and scale for each issue.

(5.f) Building and sustaining engagement over time

From attention spans on mobile devices to motivation over months-long processes, maintaining momentum is difficult. Participants in mini-publics may lose energy once the formal process ends, and those in maxi-publics may disengage quickly. The timescales of policy making may not reflect the timescales of communities, who are balancing participation with other demands on their time and attention.

Proposed solution: Strategies for continuity, recognition, and feedback loops are essential to keep both groups engaged and connected to the process. This can include periodic updates, acknowledgment of participants' contributions, and opportunities for re-engagement at later stages. Creating a sense of shared ownership and progression (where participants see their input evolve and matter over time) helps sustain motivation, strengthens solidarity, and builds a lasting community around the process.

(5.g) Infrastructure, integration and resources

Effective linkage between mini- and maxi-publics requires interoperable platforms, consistent data standards, and sufficient funding. Fragmented digital tools or isolated processes limit continuity and reuse of engagement outcomes. Financial constraints often dictate the scale and sustainability of participation, challenging the ambition to make democratic innovation mainstream.

Proposed solution: To ensure durability and impact, projects should prioritise solid, reliable options and prioritise what is most important. This means investing in robust, adaptable systems that can integrate with others, rather than spreading resources thin across fragmented tools. By doing so, organisations can build processes that are both functional in the short term and scalable and reusable over time.

Translating scale into substance (5.a)

- **Challenge:** Large-scale input risks being fragmented or shallow.
- **Solution:** Use a strong and inclusive analysis team and clear methods to synthesise digital input into meaningful insights for deliberation.

Achieving legitimacy through reach and representation (5.b)

- **Challenge:** Numbers alone don't ensure fairness or trust.
- **Solution:** Define legitimacy case by case, balancing scale with demographic and social diversity.

Sustaining quality in participation and deliberation (5.c)

- **Challenge:** Scaling up often weakens depth and reflection.
- **Solution:** Apply robust digital systems that support meaningful exchange while allowing for scale.

Designing for impact and accountability (5.d)

- **Challenge:** Participation without visible impact erodes trust.
- **Solution:** Ensure clear follow-up and traceability so participants can see how their input shapes outcomes.

Balancing scope, duration, and feasibility (5.e)

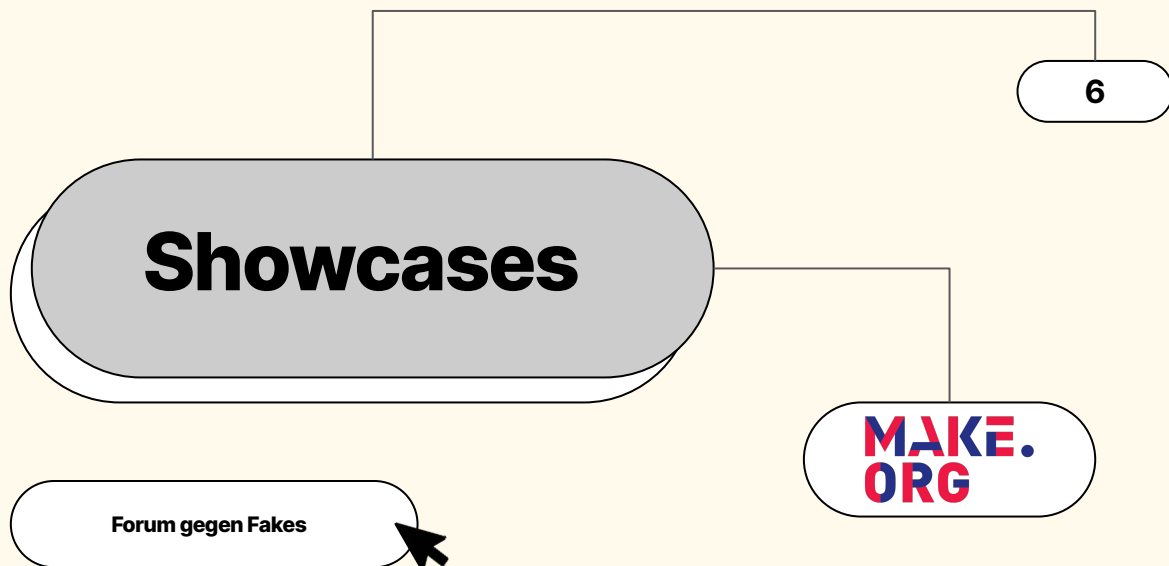
- **Challenge:** Overambitious processes stretch resources and reduce impact.
- **Solution:** Design each process based on its specific context, goals, and capacity.

Building and sustaining engagement over time (5.f)

- **Challenge:** Maintaining motivation over time is difficult.
- **Solution:** Use feedback loops, recognition, and re-engagement to keep participants connected and motivated.

Infrastructure, integration and resources (5.g)

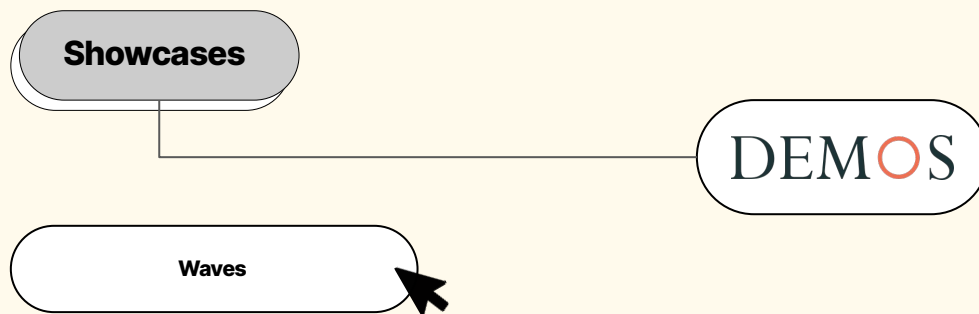
- **Challenge:** Fragmented tools and limited funding hinder continuity.
- **Solution:** Prioritise solid, interoperable systems and focus resources on what matters most.



Forum gegen Fakes (Make.org) is a large-scale, multi-phase public consultation aimed at co-creating practical solutions to tackle misinformation in Germany, led by the Bertelsmann Foundation. Designed to combine *mass participation* with *structured deliberation*, the project brought together thousands of citizens to explore how society can better respond to the challenges of fake news and digital manipulation. Its framework rests on three key pillars: **inclusive citizen participation, structured deliberation and dialogue**, and **iterative feedback and recommendation building**, ensuring that citizens' insights evolve through meaningful discussion, reflection, and refinement.

The process was deliberately **multi-phased** to balance scale and depth. It began with a nationwide online consultation that collected ideas from over 197,000 participants, followed by focused deliberations, both online and through in-person assemblies in Berlin. Participants engaged in small and large group discussions, supported by expert and stakeholder input, to test ideas and develop preliminary recommendations. In later phases, citizens reviewed and voted on refined proposals, ensuring that the most broadly supported and well-reasoned ideas rose to the top.

By integrating **digital participation** with **in-person dialogue**, the Forum ensured that citizens' voices were not only heard but meaningfully incorporated into policymaking. The process culminated in a **citizen report** presenting concrete recommendations to the Federal Ministry of the Interior and other governmental bodies. This innovative model demonstrates how large-scale digital engagement can be combined with deliberative formats to produce legitimate, informed, and actionable policy input on complex societal challenges such as misinformation.



Waves (DEMOS) is a pioneering initiative in digital democracy, designed to combine large-scale participation with meaningful deliberation to rebuild trust between citizens and local government. Grounded in the principle of *digital deliberation*, the project explores how technology, in particular AI, can make public participation easier, faster, and more affordable compared to traditional models such as citizen panels or assemblies. Its framework aims to bridge the persistent gap between councils (or their authorities) and their communities by creating opportunities for inclusive, informed, and impactful engagement.

The Waves process is structured around three core elements. First, **inclusive participation at scale** invites thousands of residents to take part in discussions on local issues, ensuring accessibility and diversity of voices. Second, **deliberation and consensus-building** are supported through digital platforms such as *PSi* and *Remesh*, where participants exchange views, explore trade-offs, and identify shared priorities. AI plays a key role in synthesising inputs, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement to support constructive dialogue. Finally, **direct policy impact** ensures that insights generated by participants feed directly into decision-making, providing local authorities with clear evidence of community perspectives and enhancing the legitimacy of resulting policies.

Each phase of Waves follows a deliberate sequence: defining and framing a local policy challenge, engaging residents through accessible digital participation, facilitating structured deliberation, and applying AI-assisted synthesis to produce actionable insights. These are then integrated into policymaking, helping councils design solutions that reflect the priorities of their communities. Ultimately, Waves demonstrates how digital tools can make participatory democracy both practical and scalable, allowing local governments to engage more citizens, at lower cost, and with greater depth than ever before.

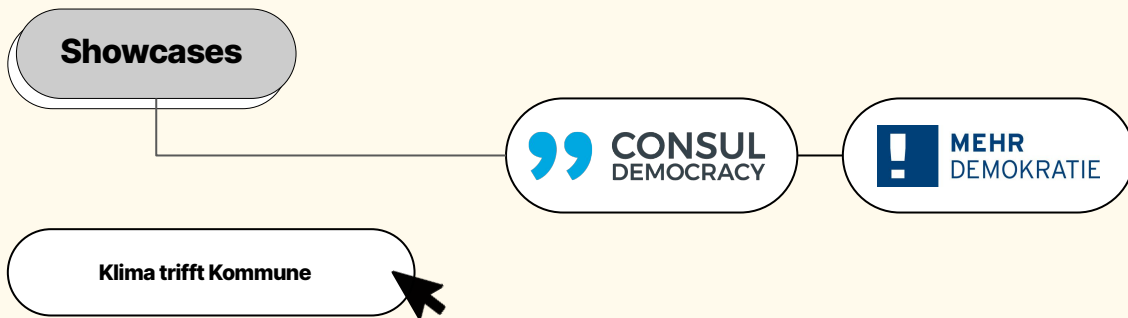


Change NHS (Go Vocal + Thinks Insight and Strategy) was designed to make the development of England's 10-Year Health Plan a genuinely participatory process, ensuring that patients, staff, and partner organisations all had a meaningful voice in shaping the future of healthcare. Built around the principle of *inclusive engagement*, the project sought to bring together those who use, deliver, and manage health services to co-create a shared vision for change. Its framework rests on three complementary pillars: **public engagement**, **workforce engagement**, and **partner and health system engagement**, each contributing unique perspectives and forms of expertise to the planning process.

The project ran as a blended, parallel process, combining online and face-to-face elements to maximise both reach and depth. The Change NHS platform launched in October 2024 and remained open until March 2025, acting as a wide net that gathered ideas and feedback from over a quarter of a million people. Running alongside it from November 2024, regional in-person events provided deliberative spaces for more detailed, nuanced discussion — exploring the same core questions as the portal while allowing for interactive debate between staff and the public.

The **public engagement** strand placed everyday users of the NHS at the centre, creating spaces, both online and in-person, for citizens from diverse backgrounds to share lived experiences, identify priorities, and discuss the future of care. **Workforce engagement** recognised that staff insights are essential for ensuring that proposed reforms are practical and grounded in reality; online and in-person sessions designed around the realities of healthcare work patterns enabled staff from across the system to explore how policy ideas might translate into daily practice. Meanwhile, **community and system engagement** invited written and workshop-based contributions from organisations that are already deeply engaged with marginalised communities, drawing on strategic, operational and lived expertise to ensure that the plan reflected both grassroots and institutional perspectives.

Across these strands, the process was designed to foster **deliberation and synthesis**. Facilitated discussions allowed participants to exchange views and explore trade-offs, while the combination of citizen, staff, and partner input ensured that the final recommendations were both inclusive and actionable. Insights from these three layers were integrated to identify shared priorities and tensions, providing policymakers with clear evidence on what matters most to those at the heart of the NHS. The result was a participatory framework that brought legitimacy, diversity, and practical wisdom to long-term health planning.



Klima trifft Kommune (Consul Democracy) is an innovative participatory governance model in Germany that combines **small-scale deliberative citizen assemblies** with **binding referendums**, as well as **digital participation platforms** based on CONSUL Democracy in order to develop democratically legitimate solutions for local climate issues. Led by Mehr Demokratie and BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz and recognised with the “Bewährt vor Ort” innovation award, the participation project explores how different democratic instruments can be systematically linked to strengthen democracy as well as impact.

The process is designed to connect mini- and maxi-publics in a sequential and institutionalised way. First structured deliberation through randomly selected **mini-citizens’ assemblies**, then **large-scale public engagement** and eventually binding decision-making through **popular votes**. Throughout the process, local participation platforms based on CONSUL Democracy, create opportunities for **broader public engagement**, by enabling citizens to follow the development of the process, access relevant materials, and engage with the topic, thereby extending participation beyond in-depth deliberation in a small, representative group to large-scale democratic decision-making by the wider maxi public.

In Flensburg, for example, around 30 randomly selected residents participate in a **citizens’ assembly** on the local mobility transition, where they deliberate on policy options, engage with **expert input**, and develop concrete recommendations. This deliberative mini-public provides a space for **informed, reflective, and inclusive discussion** on complex climate-related challenges. The recommendations developed within the citizens’ assembly are not only shared with local decision-makers, but are also partially submitted to **a city-wide referendum**, allowing the entire population to vote on selected proposals through the digital participation platform, flensburg-mitmachen.de, the cities own, local version of CONSUL Democracy.

By combining mini-publics, with digital participation platforms and binding democratic instruments, *Klima trifft Kommune* demonstrates how participatory processes can move beyond consultation towards real political impact. The experiences of different German model-cities suggest that bridging offline and online mini deliberation, and mass participation in a coherent process enhances legitimacy, trust, transparency, inclusiveness, engagement, and effectiveness in local climate governance.

Design choices

All of this raises important questions and highlights key design choices. There is no single correct model or universal solution - many nuances and approaches can be applied depending on context and goals.

However, based on the experiences described above and insights gathered during peer-feedback from experts, we developed the following matrix to help guide the design of connections between mini- and maxi-publics. It serves as a practical tool for considering how to meaningfully link citizen panels with broader, open forms of participation.

Timing

When is the maxi public activated?

Before Assembly

During Assembly

After Assembly

Regarding timing, it is important to reflect on when exactly the link between mini- and maxi-public should be established, coming with decisions on when the online part is launched, (preliminary) analysed and shared with the mini-public.

Entry Barrier

Do you set up a login online?

Yes

Partially

No

When drawing a process that links mini- and maxi-publics, the user journey online is key. One has to choose whether or not a login should be implemented or not. It increases authentication of citizens but most likely lowers engagement rates significantly.

Design choices

Digital Infrastructure

Where does the online part take place?

App

Browser

App & Browser

When building digital engagement tools decisions must be taken on how users engage with it: in an app or in a browser - or both. Apps have the advantages that recurring use might be more likely - however entry barriers are very high.

Information Transfer

How are offline and online linked?

Presentation

Report

Dashboard

Having good and solid results from the online engagement is one thing. Making it impactful for the members of the mini-public is another. Therefore, the process of information transfer between those two elements is key and must provide clear and understandable content to the mini-public.

Back and forth

Is there a rebound?

Online - Offline

Offline - Online

Online - Offline - Online

The chronology of the process is important while there is no one-size fits all approach. Whenever transitions from online to offline (or vice versa) are foreseen, the question of how such back and forth is designed (and why) is relevant to answer carefully. This transition must also consider the hierarchy of decision-making structures (if any) and the potential risk that broader participation could undermine or delegitimise the outcomes of the mini-public.

Design choices

Final Text

Who ratifies the final output(s)?

Offline panel

Online Vote

Online
Preferendum

Analysis team

After (almost) every engagement process stands a final result, report or text. Given the multiple arenas in which those processes are set to happen, the question of which one makes the final call is relevant: the people in the room or the people on the platform? Or even the analysts that write the report about the online engagement?

Analysis

How are online contributions analysed?

Dashboard
only

Human
Analysis

Human-Machine
Analysis

Machine
Analysis

Online contributions, such as votes, quantification, rankings, written input, are the basis of any process on an engagement platform. The data that comes with them has to be made accessible and understandable however. Therefore the question arises of who is running the analysis (and when).

Recipient

Who should read the online analysis?

Mini-Public

Decision Makers

Broader Public

When analysing the results from the online engagement a key question is to whom it is directed. Depending on the recipient, different framings may apply. This point is strongly linked with the element on timing of course - when the online part intervenes.

Conclusions

As highlighted in this framework concept, **linking mini- and maxi-publics is a complex design challenge shaped by context, ambition, resources, and democratic purpose.** In this sense, digital tools offer powerful opportunities to bridge the tension between deliberative depth and participatory scale, but they also raise new questions around legitimacy, quality, accountability, and feasibility. The benefits, challenges, and cases discussed here show that connections between mini- and maxi-publics can take many forms, allowing for different kinds of participation and impact. This framework does not come up with a linear model ready to be replicated, but rather a **diverse mapping of practices that reflect varied interpretations** of what meaningful democratic engagement could achieve.

Against this backdrop, the framework and design guidance explored aim to support **more intentional and transparent process designs.** Instead of simply promoting best practices, key dimensions, choices, and trade-offs that practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers must navigate when linking mini- and maxi-publics are identified. By shifting **the focus to how these connections can be designed** under different conditions, this contribution seeks to strengthen reflective practice in democratic innovation. Lastly, the effectiveness of these processes depends on the tools, but also on the clarity of their purpose, **the care invested in their design, and the willingness to adapt methods to the democratic needs they seek to serve.**

Origins of

this Framework

This framework is rooted in the conceptualisation, organisation, and implementation of a collaborative workshop that brought together Make.org, Mehr Demokratie, DEMOS, and Thinks/CitizenLab to explore how technology can better connect mini- and maxi-publics. Within this context, the framework presented here emerged as a continuation of that session, synthesising the insights, tools, and approaches shared by these civic-tech and democracy innovation actors. The workshop was held during the 2025 Democracy R&D annual conference in Brussels. The Democracy R&D network brings together organizations exploring new ways to strengthen democracy, particularly through deliberative and participatory innovations such as citizens' assemblies and related formats. The bespoke workshop reflects a collective effort to bridge practical experience with conceptual clarity, building on ongoing work within the Democracy R&D network to make democratic participation more inclusive, scalable, and impactful.

The logo for Make.org, featuring the word "MAKE." in blue and "ORG" in red, both in a bold, sans-serif font.

Make.org



Make.org is a neutral, independent civic tech organisation focused on building technology for democratic purposes. Their goal is to engage people in the positive transformation of society. Through innovative digital participation tools and participatory methodologies, Make.org enables millions to collaborate on public decision-making, build societal consensus, and prioritize civic issues in public debate, combining input from both the general public and key stakeholders.

Contact

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Origins of this Framework



Go Vocal

Go Vocal is a B Corp certified company dedicated to making democracy more inclusive, participatory, and responsive through its community engagement platform. Guided by the Sustainable Development Goals, Go Vocal partners with organizations to deliver a world-class platform and active support for public decision-making initiatives, ensuring meaningful impact across all engagement efforts.

DEMOS

DEMOS

Demos works to upgrade democracy in the UK by building systems rooted in trust, information, and technology. Focusing on Everyday Democracy, Public Service Reform, the Citizen Economy, and Resilient Information Ecosystems, Demos combines research, policy expertise, and participatory methods to deliver evidence-based solutions and practical guidance for decision-makers across government, business, and civil society.

Thinks
— Insight & Strategy —

Thinks Insight and Strategy

Thinks brings citizens, stakeholders, and customers into organisational decision-making through participatory, deliberative, and digital engagement. Specialising in dialogue that is inclusive and tailored to specific challenges, the team facilitates assemblies, co-design sprints, and public consultations across sectors - from transport to health - ensuring diverse voices shape the outcomes that matter most.



Mehr Demokratie

Mehr Demokratie e.V. is a non-profit organisation dedicated to strengthening direct democracy, citizen participation, and electoral reform in Germany and the EU. For over 30 years, the organisation has promoted fair voting systems, transparent decision-making, and participatory formats like randomly selected citizens' councils, while defending democratic rights and identifying weaknesses in political structures. Committed to inclusive, rights-based democracy, Mehr Demokratie fosters public engagement on issues from climate policy to digitalization, connecting citizens locally, nationally, and internationally, and creating spaces where people can influence decisions, exercise their rights, and contribute to a resilient, participatory society.