

Solonian Democracy Institute



Citizen-Led Digital Democracy: Current State of Tools on the Market



Strengths of Currently Available Digital Democracy Tools

Our analysis of citizen-led digital democracy tools shows a market that while still developing, exhibits several key strengths.

Clear Structure

The realization of mass participatory democracy requires a clear, strong structure to organize information and facilitate decision-making. The tools we have analysed provide this well. They have avoided the pitfalls of facilitating amorphous ‘consultations’ and ‘dialogues’, instead focussing on clearly delineated workflows that allow cooperation to occur without the need for an external authority to control the process. The core, and most difficult component, of participatory digital democracy has thus already been developed (and developed in myriad ways). The quality of effort that has been put into thinking through the way these solutions work from beginning to end is very high. This means that this sector stands on a basis of firm, proven technology and well-considered processes and this greatly lowers the risk of failure.

Security

Digital democracy developers possess an unusually high-level of technical expertise and are at the forefront of developments around security, including blockchain. This is a testament not only to their abilities, but also their good judgement, as security is often a key concern for clients, and certainly a concern at scale. Blockchain is particularly useful when it comes to mass participation, and the ability of vendors in this space to incorporate this into their offerings bespeaks their extremely high skill-set, as well as their ability to be on the cutting-edge of developments.

User Experience

We observe a significantly improved user experience in many of the tools we are monitoring. The tendency among developers is often to create a highly functional programme that lacks the frills that make it enjoyable for a non-expert to use. While there is still some room for improvement in this area, the resources that developers are committing to user experience has certainly shown results and should help to increase adoption.

Participatory Budgeting/Market Sensitivity

Participatory budgeting is probably one the most popular forms of meaningful participation among government officials and many of the major providers have created modules to cater to this sector, showing a large degree of market responsiveness. They are thus well-positioned to take advantage of growth in this sector. Revenue from this sector could help to finance further development of offerings.

Weaknesses of Currently Available Digital Democracy Tools

There are still some challenges that digital democracy tools need to overcome.

Straddling Conflict between Public Goods and Private Business

Many vendors in this field are small socially-oriented enterprises.

Civil society organizations often expect that democracy-related innovation be a purely selfless, non-profit social enterprise and harshly judge companies that are profit-maximizing or that raise funds through 'non-pure' means. Partly due to this and partly due to the transformative nature of the enterprise, the sales and commercial side of some vendors is underdeveloped.

As a result, companies like Zoom and MSTeams that have a long track-record with commercial companies and large sales teams have been better positioned to do business with governments during the Covid-19 pandemic and may be able to outflank smaller, more transformative vendors in future.

This is the single biggest difficulty for many small vendors, and several once promising applications like PlaceAVote, Postwaves and iServU are, apparently, no longer in operation.

Those vendors who are able to split a profit-making part of their enterprise from the transformative mission and use one to fund the other will likely be best-positioned to survive over the long-term, while increasing their legitimacy with possible clients.

Investing in Continuously Improving User Experience

Although much has been achieved on user experience, there is still room for improvement. This is particularly the case when one thinks of handling large numbers of comments. There are many different approaches here, including upvoting/downvoting comments that are displayed accordingly.

In the long run, however, most participants will likely respond more warmly to a form of interaction that more closely mimics real life. Integrating video interaction into these tools will be key for some of the more advanced vendors. This could enable small group deliberation in randomly-assigned groups prior to a vote.

In the further future, virtual reality may also be an option.

Balancing a Multitude of Interests

A key difficulty in the citizen-led democracy movement is to stay true to the core mission of increasing meaningful citizen participation in democracy in the face of cross-cutting demands from both governments (who generally desire shallower forms of citizen participation that do not require government commitment to outcomes) and civil society organizations (who often focus on excessive idealism and exaggerated demands for ‘fairness’). Most providers have managed to avoid these traps, creating products that vastly improve citizen-participation without attempting to change the cultural beliefs of participants to align with pre-determined values or fix the process to ensure ‘better’ outcomes.

Those who wish to forward the cause of citizen-led democracy should avoid becoming officially entangled with any political ideology as this risks the credibility of the enterprise with other participants. There should be a sharp differentiation between personal views on the issues of the day and the process of democracy.

Awareness

Those working in the citizen-democracy space tend to be doers, rather than talkers, and moreover, independent doers with little contact with each other. This has many advantages – a lack of groupthink, avoidance of political intrigue, and a tendency to under-promise and over-deliver.

At the same time, however, while many ‘democracy innovators’ are *all talk*, digital citizen-led democracy can tend to be *no talk*, which is just as bad. Any movement needs its advocates and theorists, people who present ideas at public lectures and network with interested parties. The purpose of the Solonian Democracy Institute is to remedy this imbalance, by providing high-quality information about citizen-led democracy to the public. However, this is an undertaking that also depends on the efforts of everyone else in this community. While we will always by nature be a fragmented community (since most participants are non-authoritarian), we still need a hub to allow the exchange of ideas and experience and to pursue our common goals.

Recommendations for Future Development

Keep a Broad View of Potential Users

Providers often face the difficulty of finding a continuous community of users, as governments often use tools in fits and starts rather than continuously. The example of g0v.tw in Taiwan is instructive here. In that case, developers set up websites paralleling the Taiwanese government’s site gov.tw as g0v.tw, attracting many users during protests and eventually finding use with the new government.

Another possibility that is often overlooked is conservative, libertarian and centre-right political movements. These are often shunned by other sectors of the civic tech space, who tend to adhere to centre-left values. However, there is significant common ground between the political right and citizen-led democracy – both value goods like freedom, individuality and accountability.

Providers should also think about marketing towards non-governmental organizations that require mass decision-making processes, e.g. unions, schools, professional organizations, and co-operatives. Such organizations are often subject to less red tape than government processes are and may open up new avenues for citizen-led decision-making.

Improve Functionality

Vendors should experiment with integrating functionality with each other and other useful programmes, particularly visualization tools and data management tools so that the user can move seamlessly in one environment.

Integrating video into the participants experience will likely be an important mid-term improvement.

Don't Hesitate to Think Big

Citizen-led democracy will take off when participants feel that the process is genuinely changing their life circumstances and allowing them to pursue their interests on important matters.

Thus, while vendors should not hesitate to participate in local projects, they should never stop aiming big. They should also certainly never fail to impress on clients the importance of following-through on citizen feedback. The more a vendor is embedded with the client and able to ensure the process is accompanied by clear outcomes, the higher the success rate will be.

Conclusion

While citizen-led democracy is certainly a very challenging space, the technical development of solutions is impressive, with the complexity and functionality of 'supply' tending to outstrip 'demand'. While some technical challenges remain, the biggest obstacles to citizen-led democracy are 'soft-side' issues, such as raising awareness about technical possibilities, procuring enough resources to implement projects and encouraging leaders and the wider public to make use of them.