26

CONSULCON

DAY 3 - 10:15 - Main Stage

Evaluating the Inclusiveness and Quality of Digital Participation Platforms

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Session recap

At a glance

Anna Mikhaylovskaya (postdoc, University of Groningen; political theory of digital democracy), Erica Celine Yu (postdoc, Tilburg University; political representation in deliberative democracy) and Nicolien Janssens (PhD candidate; democratic innovations and online participation platforms) brought an academic perspective to the conference. They reframed their session from 'evaluating' to 'enhancing' inclusiveness, because inclusion is something to design for rather than a fixed property to measure. Each presented a strand of research, and the session ended with an open discussion with practitioners on barriers to participation, reaching under-represented groups and political efficacy.

Key messages

- Inclusion is a core democratic value and also improves decision quality through cognitive diversity.
- External inclusion (who can access the process) is not enough. Internal inclusion (who actually has influence once inside) is just as important.
- The digital divide covers access and skills, and digital platforms risk reinforcing existing inequalities, although they can also lower barriers for shy or time-poor people.
- Even systems designed for inclusion, such as liquid democracy, do not guarantee it: passive delegation and power concentration can undermine it.
- There is a trade-off between maximising inclusion and the quality of deliberation. Representation, for example in hybrid processes combining large-scale polls with small deliberative groups, can reconcile the two.
- Citizens' assemblies could use online platforms for better consultations, and platforms could learn from assemblies by varying who sees which contributions ('exposure regimes').
- People participate when they believe it matters: relevant topics, visible follow-up and trusted intermediaries are key.

Facts, figures and references

- About 37 percent of citizens' assemblies in the OECD database are combined with a public consultation.
- LiquidFeedback, used notably by the German Pirate Party, as a liquid democracy platform.
- Method: latent class cluster analysis of polls plus LLM-based classification of deliberation statements, validated by human annotators.
- Examples mentioned in the discussion: a participatory budget in Quezon City (Philippines) working through civil society organisations, and a Japanese political party whose programme was co-created with supporters.

Takeaways for the community

- Practitioners should design for internal inclusion, for example by making less-visible proposals more prominent and varying which contributions people see.
- Combining online platforms with deliberative mini-publics, and aligning consultation formats with what the deliberative body needs, can increase both reach and quality.
- Follow-up, relevance of topics and partnerships with community organisations are as important as the technology for reaching beyond the usual participants.