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OPEN LETTER

Citizens, Political Organisations and Digital Technologies: Disconnection or/and Reconnection? Sharing Best Practices on the Use of Digital Tools to Engage Hard-to-Reach Groups

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

This Open Letter argues that meaningful digital participation requires a fundamental rethinking of how political organisations active in the field of politics design, deploy, and sustain the tools intended to (re)engage hard-to-reach groups in society. It does so by drawing on insights that emerged from a roundtable held during the Relink[2] & Brussels Institute for Advanced Studies (BrIAS) workshop titled "Citizens, Political Organisations and Digital Technologies: Disconnection or/and Reconnection?". This workshop brought together practitioners from organisations that deal with citizen rights, digital campaign support, youth internet governance, as well as civic participation platforms. Following the exchange, the organising committee commissioned a policy brief from the Policy Lab. The current letter summarises its key insights. Overall, practitioners that took part in the roundtable converged on the view that accessibility, trust, and institutional commitment act as primary obstacles to effective engagement. Digital participation tools often fail to accommodate linguistic, generational, socio-economic, and/or ability-related differences. At the same time, fragmented regulatory environments and widespread scepticism toward digital platforms further erode confidence. Political and administrative bodies frequently treat participation as an experimental add-on rather than a core democratic function, resulting in short-lived initiatives and weak—if not absent—feedback loops. Consequently, the letter calls for a shift toward technical innovation grounded in people's lived experiences and communication habits, which inevitably requires

Open Peer Review

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1. **Lashkr Aliakbar Hadaya**, Salahaddin University, Erbi, Iraq

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long-term institutionalisation, diversified outreach strategies, and hybrid online–offline approaches that meet citizens where they are. Finally, the letter identifies key priorities for future research, including on ethics surrounding the use of AI for civic engagement, on the role of political and digital literacy, on the governance of digital platforms, and on the institutional conditions that enable durable civic participation. Ultimately, the letter seeks to contribute to the broader debate on how democratic institutions can reconnect with citizens in an increasingly digital public sphere.

Keywords
Political participation, digital inclusion, digital democracy, political trust, internet governance

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Context of the workshop

The content of this letter builds on the discussions held during a roundtable that took place during the Relink[2] & Brussels Institute for Advanced Studies (BrIAS) workshop titled "Citizens, Political Organisations and Digital Technologies: Disconnection or/and Reconnection?". The workshop was convened in Brussels between 1 and 2 October 2025, and brought together academics, practitioners, as well as civil society and political actors. The event explored the opportunities and challenges that digital technologies create for democratic participation and citizen engagement. The recommendations presented here are informed by the ideas and opinions exchanged during one of two roundtable discussions, which reflected on ways to improve the inclusion of groups that are difficult to engage, even using digital tools.

Main challenges in using digital tools to engage Hard-to-reach groups

The first and most fundamental challenge to engage hard-to-reach groups that emerged from the exchange concerns **accessibility and inclusion**. Designing digital participation tools that can be used by all types of citizens—young or elderly, urban or rural, digitally literate or not—remains a major difficulty in practice. Language barriers, disabilities, and limited connectivity all hinder participation. Even when access exists, participation often depends on how relevant or meaningful the issues appear to each group. A closely related challenge is to find the right language for the people or group that a given organisation seeks to reach. One speaker highlighted the issue of self-identification, which can lead certain groups to exclude themselves from specific programmes. The concept of "young people" is a telling example: definitions vary greatly across institutions—some define it as 13–26 years old, others 16–24 or 18–30. This lack of a common definition creates confusion around youth identity; many young people are unsure whether they still belong to this group. As a result, some misidentify and exclude themselves from programmes or spaces for participation intended for them. It is often difficult to find the right way to communicate, the right vocabulary, but also (and importantly) the right framing. Beyond adopting appropriate language, it is also difficult to clearly explain what citizens can gain from participating via digital tools and how it benefits them. Each individual or social group perceives the value of participation differently.

A second major issue is **trust**. Both citizens and organisations may show scepticism toward digital tools. Civil society groups and trade unions, for instance, often fear surveillance, data misuse, or manipulative technologies. At the same time, citizens increasingly distrust digital platforms due to privacy concerns and the feeling of being monitored or tracked. This broader crisis of trust in digital tools and environments makes mobilisation much harder. Additionally, the fragmentation of audiences and the attention economy further complicate outreach. The dominance of a few major social media platforms in constant competition for users' attention means that organisations cannot assume that simply "being online" guarantees visibility.

There is also an **institutional challenge**: political and administrative bodies often lack the willingness or resources to fully invest in participatory tools. Digital participation is sometimes seen as an experimental project rather than an integral part of the governance of organisations. Without institutional buy-in, initiatives remain fragmented and short-lived. Funding is another structural problem: reaching specific subgroups or developing accessible, multilingual tools requires sustained investment, which many organisations struggle to secure. In other words, to get to hard-to-reach groups—both online and offline— organisations need sufficient and often scarce financial resources. A related challenge is ensuring that official participation mechanisms are operationally effective—that is, through the establishment of a feedback loop where citizens can see that their contributions are genuinely heard, respected, and used in a meaningful way.

Finally, the complexity of **governance and regulation** adds another layer of difficulty. While harmonising legislation may be desirable, the key question remains: who decides, and at what level? Today, multiple actors (UNESCO, OECD, UN, EU, nation states) are each developing their own AI governance frameworks, which can be unaligned or even contradictory. This multiplicity creates uncertainty about competences, consistency, and the practical implementation of rules. The problem extends beyond AI to a broader crisis in internet governance. The lack of clarity about who has the power to regulate and enforce decisions makes harmonisation difficult and hinders effective regulation on a global scale. Furthermore, regulation will become even more complex in the face of grey areas, such as those surrounding the use of AI. One speaker pointed out that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is AI-assisted and what is not. In the future, we will increasingly face these blurred boundaries where it becomes less obvious whether something should be classified as AI-supported or not—and therefore, whether it should be regulated.

Practical pathways forward

To overcome these obstacles, practitioners converged on one central principle: **digital participation must start from people's needs**. Participation tools should connect directly to the priorities and lived experiences of target groups. Whether addressing mobility rights, working conditions, or community issues, linking participation opportunities to what citizens care about most is key to motivating engagement. One way of doing this is to remove existing barriers by adopting the public's own perspective on participation and seeking to understand how people perceive their place in society, their levers for action, and the obstacles that hinder their engagement. Institutions must seek to align their objectives with the ways in which different audiences—such as young people—are willing to contribute, by adapting tools, formats, and languages to their realities. By integrating this approach, participation becomes not an institutional performance but a process of mutual learning and co-construction, which helps secure young people's long-term involvement in democratic life. The temporal aspect is particularly important here. Participation should also be envisioned from a long-term perspective, rather than as a series of one-off actions. Too often, participation is treated as a moment in time—an election, a consultation—without mechanisms to encourage citizens to return and stay involved. To ensure continuity, it is crucial to establish a strong institutional feedback loop so that contributions—regardless of how they are expressed—are acknowledged, integrated, and visibly reflected in policy decisions. Such visibility is key to strengthening trust, particularly in the European context.

When it comes to the (digital) tools themselves, it is important to **complement official mechanisms with informal, hybrid, and flexible tools** that make participation easier and more responsive. Digital tools should not follow a one-size-fits-all model but should be carefully targeted and use the language of the public they aim to reach. ECAS's transnational crowdsourcing model and platform—allowing citizens to co-design deliberative solutions online—are one example. These tools can complement formal EU or national platforms by offering more accessible and user-friendly entry points for participation. Furthermore, AI-based tools can also be valuable for improving participation. Artificial intelligence presents both a challenge and an opportunity for organisations seeking to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of participation. Beyond generative applications such as image or text creation, AI offers powerful capabilities for data processing, analysis, and information access. For instance, ECAS's "Eric" assistant helps citizens understand their EU rights—particularly in the areas of work and mobility. Make.org has developed an AI-powered tool used during this year's German elections to help citizens engage more easily with political content. The tool integrated all party manifestos, allowing users to, for example, compare the Christian Democrats and the Greens, and instantly receive a summarised answer with direct links to the original party documents for full transparency. It was also used in deliberative processes, where participants could employ an AI assistant to refine and strengthen their written contributions.

These examples illustrate how AI can strengthen the link between institutions and citizens, making policy processes more intelligible and participatory. However, **transparency** remains crucial: users must know when and how AI is being used. Building and maintaining public trust therefore depends not only on innovation but also on clear communication and ethical design that position AI as a supportive—not substitutive—tool for participation. Closely related to this issue of transparency, building trust and digital literacy is equally essential. Citizens need to understand not only how to use technology but also how to do so ethically and safely. Training programmes, transparency about data use, and human oversight all help restore confidence. Speakers also stressed the importance of combining digital and offline approaches. A digital-only strategy rarely succeeds in reaching marginalised communities. Partnerships with grassroots organisations, local radio stations, schools and journalists can help to bridge the gap between online and offline spaces.

One speaker emphasised the need for a **holistic institutionalisation** of citizen participation. Citizen involvement often remains a symbolic or occasional exercise rather than an integral part of institutional practice. To strengthen democratic legitimacy, participation must become a habitual and systemic element of policymaking—supported by political commitment, adequate funding, and administrative routines that make engagement a natural part of public governance. Institutionalising participation in this way would move it from the margins to the mainstream, transforming it into a regular and expected practice rather than an exceptional one.

At the same time, participation must rely on diverse engagement channels that reflect the variety of audiences and communication habits that exist. Beyond traditional platforms like Twitter (X) or Facebook, outreach should include TikTok, gaming communities, Discord, or Reddit to engage younger publics, and community radio or local meetings to reach older or rural populations, the key goal being to **meet citizens where they are and communicate in ways that feel relevant to them**. Another speaker highlighted that, beyond diversifying engagement and communication channels, it is equally important to ensure diversity among the actors shaping digital participation. A genuinely multi-stakeholder approach offers the most promising path forward. While many governments refer to "multi-stakeholderism", few apply it in practice. True inclusivity means involving not only governments, the private sector, and civil society but also the

technical community, academia, and end users—whose perspectives help ensure that digital governance reflects a balance of ethical, social, and technical considerations.

Finally, **safe and inclusive digital spaces** are essential for sustainable participation, particularly for groups that are harder to reach or often left behind. Regulation plays a key role in making these spaces habitable, user-friendly, and trustworthy—not as a constraint on freedom, but as its safeguard. Well-designed regulation can help protect users from harassment, disinformation, and manipulation, ensuring that everyone, including vulnerable or marginalised groups, feels confident to engage. An example that illustrates the importance of safe digital spaces comes from the United States, with the Online to Offline (O2O) Collective. The group successfully mobilised workers who had been injured in Amazon warehouses—many of them migrants or people who had become disabled as a result of their injuries—by recreating online the sense of community traditionally found in grassroots or trade union organising. After identifying and reaching out to affected individuals, O2O built a trusted digital space where participants could share experiences, support one another, and find solidarity. This example demonstrates how safe and trust-based online environments can empower individuals, foster genuine engagement, and turn isolated experiences into collective action. Nevertheless, asking politicians to regulate their own playground remains a major challenge in many countries, as it requires balancing political interests with the public good. At the same time, a balanced approach is needed: while public institutions must adhere to strict accountability standards, civil society initiatives should retain the flexibility to innovate and experiment.

Directions for future research

Several promising avenues for future research emerged from the discussion.

First, there is a strong need to **explore how AI and data-driven technologies can be used ethically to support large-scale civic engagement**. Research should assess where AI adds value—such as synthesising complex information—and where it risks undermining trust or excluding less technically skilled participants.

Second, research on digital inclusion should examine **how to make participation accessible across language, class, gender, and generational lines**. This includes identifying effective hybrid models that combine online engagement with local, offline initiatives, and analysing how digital tools can empower marginalised groups.

Third, political and **digital literacy education** is crucial. As highlighted by a speaker, involving educators in research and case studies can help integrate digital citizenship training into schools and community programmes. Studies could investigate how to build long-term participation habits among young people and how to ensure that educational initiatives include underrepresented or non-academic youth.

Fourth, the **governance of digital participation and AI regulation** require sustained academic attention. Comparative studies could analyse how different regulatory frameworks affect participation, transparency, and safety online. Multi-stakeholder approaches—bringing together governments, civil society, the private sector, and academia—deserve deeper exploration as potential models for inclusive digital participation and internet governance.

Fifth, the question of **trust and visibility of public communication in the digital sphere** warrants closer examination. Research could explore how the perceived source of a message—whether governmental or not—the communication channel, and the framing of content influence citizens' engagement and trust. While transparency remains key to legitimacy, evidence suggests that people may engage more readily with messages that do not appear to originate directly from government sources. Understanding this dynamic could help design communication strategies that preserve transparency and accountability while fostering greater trust between citizens and public institutions.

Finally, researchers should analyse **how funding structures and institutional design affect the sustainability of participation**. Exploring how resource allocation, project evaluation, and institutional incentives shape engagement can help policymakers move beyond short-term initiatives and build more durable, inclusive forms of digital democracy.

Speakers' background

Giulia Sandri is a Research and Development Manager at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), a Brussels-based NGO that empowers citizens to exercise their rights and participate in EU decision-making. Her work spans two main areas: EU citizens' rights—particularly mobile citizens' rights and labour rights—and democracy, with a strong focus on digital democracy. ECAS develops several projects, actions, and research initiatives in these fields. Before joining ECAS, she spent twelve years as a university professor in France and remains affiliated with the Université libre de Bruxelles as an associate researcher.

Beatrice White is a Communications Specialist at the European Centre for Digital Action, an organisation that provides mentorship, training, resources, and strategic expertise to progressive organisations and individuals across Europe. Anyone can access these tools and resources. Her work focuses on empowering organisations—not by doing the organising for them, but by helping them adopt digital tools and practices so they can use available technologies and platforms that are both ethical and effective. She also helps them address issues such as misinformation and disinformation. Her background spans academia, journalism, and communications for a political foundation in Brussels. She now focuses on how digital technologies and campaigning science can mobilise people at scale through well-designed narratives and platforms.

Nadia Tjahja coordinates the Youth Dialogue on Internet Governance, which brings together stakeholders from all walks of life to discuss developments on the internet—covering a wide range of topics related to security, crime, media, content, innovation, and infrastructure. This initiative also invites citizens who wish to raise specific issues for discussion. With representatives from government, civil society, the private sector and the technical community, they organise an annual European event to engage in open discussions on these often complex and sensitive topics. Nadia is also a postdoctoral researcher at ULB. Her research focuses on digital sovereignty and multistakeholder internet governance. Through her role, she works with the European Digital Media Observatory Belux, which brings together fact-checkers, media organisations, and media literacy practitioners to address disinformation issues. Her work in the Youth Dialogue on Internet Governance includes preparing young people to participate in policy processes, organising training programmes on digital literacy and governance, and ensuring that youth voices reach decision-making spaces at the European and international levels.

Hendrik Nahr is Head of European Affairs at Make.org, a civic-tech organisation that builds participatory technologies for democratic purposes. His team develops online platforms that enable large-scale citizen engagement for public administrations and institutions across Europe. Make.org operates at the intersection of democracy and technology, combining research and engineering expertise to design participatory tools, explore the role of AI in democracy, and strengthen connections between institutions and citizens.

The exchange lasted for an hour and a half, and was chaired by Caroline Close, Professor of political science at the Université libre de Bruxelles and Work Package leader at BrIAS on Technology, Misinformation, and AI.

Ethics and consent

This Open Letter reports on discussions that took place during public roundtable events open to the general public. It does not involve direct research activities with human participants, animal subjects or sensitive data, and the presented findings are based on the informed consent of the discussion participants. Prior to the event, participants were informed that recordings or notes of the discussions could be used for a research project and that the conclusions would be disseminated. The draft version of this Open Letter was also shared with participants to ensure that the content accurately reflected the discussions and remained consistent with the consent provided for the use of roundtable contributions. In accordance with institutional requirements, formal review and approval by a research ethics committee were not required because the activity consisted of public stakeholder discussions and did not constitute human-subjects research. The work was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data availability

The content of this Open Letter is based on notes taken during public roundtables held as part of the workshop. These notes contain contributions from participants, who consented to the use of the roundtable content for research and publication purposes, but did not consent to the public release of the underlying discussion notes. To respect the scope of the consent provided, the underlying notes are not publicly available. As no formal ethics review was required for this activity, restrictions on data sharing derive solely from the participant consent conditions and applicable data protection obligations. Researchers wishing to request access to the data may contact the lead author, Justine Brunet, by email at justine.brunet@ulb.be. Access will be considered on a case-by-case basis where the requested use is consistent with the consent provided by participants.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to all participants and discussants attending a joint workshop on "Citizens, Political Organisations and Digital Technologies: Disconnection or/and Reconnection?" which was held on October 1–2, 2025, at the USquare campus in Brussels and was organised by the BrIAS (Brussels Institute for Advanced Studies) and COST Action RELINK[2]. The extensive comments and contributions to the discussion facilitated an exploration of the impact of digital tools and innovations on democratic engagement, and their potential to engage with hard-to-reach groups. GPT-5 (OpenAI) was used for grammar, spelling, and syntax checks.

Open Peer Review

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Reviewer Report 09 September 2026

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Reviewer Report
Title: Citizens, Political Organizations and Digital Technologies: Disconnection or/and Reconnection? Sharing best practices on the use of digital tools to engage hard-to-reach groups.
Reviewer Recommendation: Approved with Reservations
General Assessment:
This Open Letter offers a timely reflection on the outcomes of the Relink2 & BrIAS workshop, addressing one of the most persistent challenges in contemporary digital democracy: the engagement of marginalized or "hard-to-reach" populations. The strength of this contribution lies in its grounding in practitioner experience rather than purely theoretical speculation. By synthesizing insights from civic tech experts and political scientists, the authors provide a realistic overview of why technical solutions often fail to translate into meaningful democratic participation.
The emphasis on moving beyond "experimental" digital projects toward long-term institutionalization is particularly salient. However, for this letter to serve as a robust roadmap for future research and policy, there are a few areas where the conceptual depth could be strengthened.
Specific Comments and Points for Revision:

1. **Conceptualizing "Hard-to-Reach":** While the letter identifies various groups (youth, rural, low-literacy), the narrative would benefit from acknowledging the intersectional nature of these barriers. The term "hard-to-reach" is often criticized for placing the burden on the citizens themselves; it might be worth mentioning that these groups are often "hard-to-engage" due to institutional design flaws rather than just their own socio-economic characteristics.
2. **The AI Paradox:** The section on AI-driven tools like "Erik" and Make.org is fascinating, but it feels a bit optimistic. As a reviewer, I would like to see a brief mention of the "black box" nature of these technologies. If democratic institutions are to use AI to bridge the gap with citizens, how do we ensure that these tools don't inadvertently mirror the biases of the data they were trained on? A sentence or two on algorithmic accountability would add significant

weight to this section.

3. Digital Fatigue and Trust: The authors rightly point out that trust is a major obstacle. However, there is an emerging phenomenon of “digital fatigue” among citizens who feel over-consulted but under-heard. I suggest the authors emphasize that “reconnection” requires not just more tools, but more visible impact. The “feedback loop” mentioned in the text is the most critical part of this equation—without it, digital tools can actually increase cynicism.
4. Governance and Regulatory Fragmentation: The letter mentions the “multiplicity of actors” (EU, UN, OECD) creating a fragmented regulatory environment. While this is true, the letter could more clearly state what this means for the practitioner. Does this fragmentation lead to a “chilling effect” where organizations avoid innovation for fear of future non-compliance? This link between regulation and practitioner hesitation is a crucial point that deserves a bit more clarity.

Conclusion:
Overall, this is a well-argued and necessary intervention in the field of digital politics. It successfully bridges the gap between high-level policy debate and on-the-ground implementation. By addressing the points above—particularly regarding the nuances of AI ethics and the structural nature of “hard-to-reach” labels—the authors can further enhance the scholarly and practical utility of this Open Letter.

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Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)

Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?

Partly

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)

Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Sociology, Digital Citizenship, Political Culture, and Political Alienation, with a specific research focus on the Kurdistan Region and the Middle East. My expertise includes digital democracy, social inclusion, and the impact of technology on civic engagement..

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.