



ONLINE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN PARLIAMENTARY WORK

TAB-Fokus no.13 regarding report no. 173

March 2017

Summary

- › Online citizen participation can help to improve relations between citizens and the state as well as to strengthen confidence and legitimacy.
- › For more than ten years now, the German Bundestag has been testing different procedures of online citizen participation. The procedures contribute to the transparency of parliamentary work and are assessed positively both by observers and participants.
- › In most cases, participation shows a high level of quality, but falls behind expectations with regard to the figures. An exception to this is e-petitioning which achieves the highest level of popularity among the different participation procedures.
- › In order to consolidate and further develop online citizen participation, particularly consultative approaches have to be considered. Early stages of opinion formation have proven to be a good point in time for this purpose.
- › From a strategic point of view, a continued careful and successive development of online participation services as well as a stronger conceptual integration of these services into the parliamentary work are recommended.

What is involved

The term online citizen participation includes services offering citizens the possibility of **exerting influence on political decisions via the Internet**. Institutions both at the national and international level aim at strengthening citizen participation in order to improve not only legislation, but also relations between citizens and the state. In Germany, there is a consensus in society towards more participation of the public. There are many people who demand and expect the possibility of getting involved in processes of opinion formation and decision making even at the German Bundestag – regardless of whether they will really make use of this possibility.

For more than ten years already, the German Bundestag has been making use of the Internet to offer citizens the possi-

bility of participating in parliamentary work. Committees and commissions are testing different types of citizen participation ranging from **interactive communication in social media** and **debates in online forums** to **consultations and involvement in the drafting of documents**. Furthermore, with electronic petitions, a legally based procedure has been created and continuously further developed. For young people, a specific interactive online service is available.

Risks and opportunities

In public and scientific debates, the following expectations are associated with citizen participation: It shall **substantially improve political decisions** by providing additional information or through prior deliberations, instrumentally **strengthen the confidence in and legitimacy of decisions** and thus lead to a higher acceptance and enforceability of decisions and it is considered to be **normatively appropriate**, as the people affected by decisions should be involved in the decision-making process. This process also entails hopes that groups who are less represented in society will be stronger involved and strengthened with regard to their possibilities of making relevant decisions.

Though citizens are increasingly making use of the Internet, there has been **no broad mobilisation to participate**. Changes with regard to the participation behaviour are most likely to be observed for younger people. A low level of awareness regarding online citizen participation services bears **the risk that both initiators and the public will be disappointed in their expectations** resulting in a loss of legitimacy. Further risks such as a biased results or lacking follow-up possibilities in the parliamentary process significantly depend on the corresponding design of the procedures.

Client

Committee on Education, Research and
Technology Assessment
+49 30 227-32861
bildungundforschung@bundestag.de

Experience of the German Bundestag regarding implementation

According to the resolution that led to its establishment, the **Study Commission on the Internet and Digital Society** of the 17th German Bundestag had the mission of involving the public in its work to a particular degree. Right from the beginning, its sessions were held in public and broadcast on the Internet. The Study Commission provided daily updates on its work progress and put up working papers for discussion, even if those had not yet been adopted. The creation of a weblog, Twitter account and online forum as

a positive assessment of online citizen participation and stated that parliamentary work had become more transparent and comprehensible, but that participation had fallen behind expectations with regard to the figures involved. External observers gave a positive assessment as well: According to them, the Study Commission had succeeded in giving fresh impetus and in showing that the innovative approaches helped to achieve transparency and high-quality input.

The **Committee on the Digital Agenda** of the 18th German Bundestag has guidelines for online citizen participation. With an online forum set up as a pilot project, the public

has the possibility of getting involved in selected debates. So far, however, the forum has received only little public response. Though, discussions on the Committee's work are taking place on Twitter under the hashtag #btADA: By the end of 2015, almost 781 tweets have been sent, most of them by members of the Committee or by other experts. Even if the Committee has

implemented most of its guidelines, some of the people involved regret that no options for participation have been offered that go even further.

The **Commission on the Storage of High-Level Radioactive Waste** had to face the challenge of elaborating a respected basis for the repository site selection in a societal context characterised by fierce conflicts about this issue. As the Commission had its own financial resources, it could not only initiate an online forum, but also carry out two externally administered online consultations (which in this form were a novelty for the German Bundestag) as well as several on-site events. Here as well, there were some discussions on Twitter, though the Commission itself did not have its own

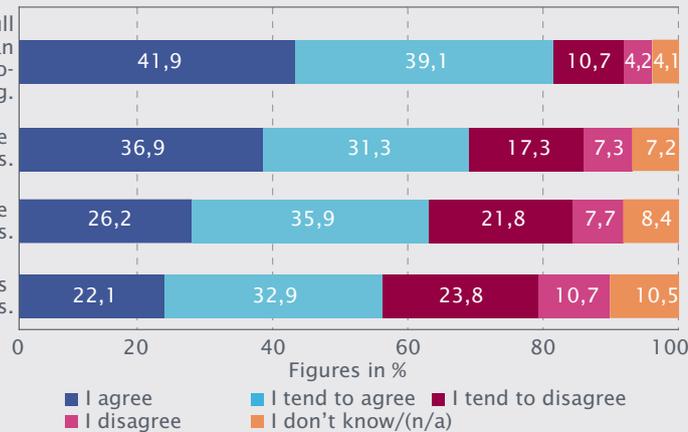
What are the benefits of online citizen participation for the German Bundestag from the stakeholders' point of view?

With online citizen participation, the full range of views among the population can be more strongly integrated into processes of parliamentary decision-making.

Online citizen participation promotes the transparency of parliamentary decisions.

Online citizen participation promotes the acceptance of parliamentary decisions.

Online citizen participation promotes confidence in parliamentary decisions.

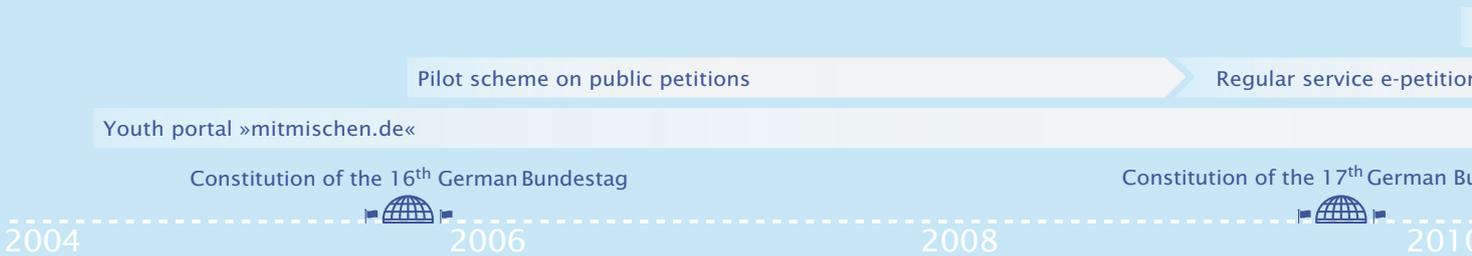


n = 1,107

Source: Online survey of the Stakeholder Panel TA in autumn 2015 (presented in extracts)

well as the platform »enquetebeteiligung.de« later on enabled the public to contribute their suggestions and positions to the Study Commission's work. Particularly the use of a participation platform based on the principle of »liquid democracy« which also supported collaboration in the drafting of documents represented a novelty for a body like the German Bundestag. Approximately 3,300 people registered for using the platform and almost 600 among them contributed texts and suggestions which have been integrated – partly without any modifications – into the recommendations of the Study Commission. The contributions and the participation process itself were characterised by a factual and constructive tone, specialist knowledge and a high level of cooperation. The members of the Study Commission gave

Offers of online citizen participation at the German Bundestag (chronological overview)



account. 42 people participated in the **online forum** with 304 discussion posts. However, the discussion was largely dominated by a few participants only. **Online consultations enabled the participants to assess reports section by section and to comment on them.** The first consultation directly addressed a specialist audience, 31 people got actively involved. A second consultation that was addressed to a broad public counted 111 people, among whom some participants were registered more than once. In principle, the technical platforms were clearly arranged, though they were not very well promoted.

The **youth portal »mitmischen.de«** informs young people about what is happening in parliament and offers an online forum for discussion. However, the discussions are not reflected in parliamentary processes. The forum has an appealing design and its content is adapted to the needs of the specific target group. With 12,000 people, the number of participants registered for the portal is very high. Over several years now, however, decreasing usage figures of the online forum have been observed. The portal is the only service of the German Bundestag that has its own **»fan page« on Facebook.** For its integration, provisions of data privacy have been strictly observed.

E-petitioning is the only legally regulated and also the best known online participation service of the German Bundestag. Moreover, it is the only offer for which **the initiative lies with the citizens.** The possibility of publishing and signing petitions represents a technical novelty, but particularly also a procedural innovation. First of all, the e-petitioning platform was tested in a pilot scheme and then became a regular service in 2008. Since then, it has undergone continuous further development. With more than 2 million registered participants, the platform **is one of the most widely used online services of the German Bundestag.** In 2015, 384 petitions were published and almost 500,000 electronic signings were registered. The discussion forum as well is frequently used. With regard to the success criteria of online citizen participation, the implementation of the e-petitioning platform is assessed as good. In international comparison, the service shows a considerable degree of modernisation. There are current challenges i. a. with regard to the adaptation for mobile devices as well as regarding the question of

how to cope with extra-parliamentary petitioning portals which are enjoying an increasing attention among the population.

Legal aspects

Today, social networks such as Facebook or Twitter are an integral part of peoples' everyday life. With regard to the question to what extent the German Bundestag can make use of them in the context of online participation services, the rights of the social media companies as well as those of the users of the participation service are to be observed. The state must not subject citizens to **unjustified restrictions of their right to informational self-determination,** e.g. by requiring data disclosure in social networks of citizens who want to use online citizen participation services. Even though social media are generally suited for being used for online citizen participation in parliamentary work, they should not serve as an exclusive, but rather as a complementary and supporting instrument for the implementation of corresponding procedures.

What kind of participation is aimed at?

In recent years, the German Bundestag and its members have gained experience with different kinds of online citizen participation. For further consolidation and development, it should be clarified **what kind of participation is generally aimed at and will be used by the citizens.** A particularly appropriate format for online citizen participation could be consultations, because they leave the decision-making power with the elected members of parliament, in accordance with the principles of representative democracy. In order to increase motivation to participate, formal arrangements (such as for e-petitions) or binding commitments can ensure that the results of participation activities will be taken into consideration. The participation of members of the German Bundestag in the procedures can also help to increase the motivation to participate. **Early stages of opinion formation and decision making** have proven to be a good point in time for participation procedures. Thanks to online citizen participation, specific target groups can be directly addressed and involved successfully. Moreover, online citizen participation could be used more intensely for facilitating initiatives from the population and integrating them into the parliamentary process.



Which principles shall guide implementation?

The implementation of online citizen participation by means of standard tools such as online forums and weblogs reaches its limits, if the objective is to achieve more than just a non-binding discussion. For using specialised participation platforms, **adequate financial and human resources, but also decision-making powers** have to be allocated to the corresponding bodies. Besides aspects regarding technology and design, a state-of-the-art implementation should also include protection against misuse and manipulation. Participation services should be as inclusive as possible and motivate the intended target group to participate. In order to **sustainably consolidate experiences at the German Bundestag**, but also to facilitate cooperation with service providers, a stronger bundling of competencies within the administration of the German Bundestag as well as the development of standards for citizen participation are recommended. Facilitators can help to **structure debates in the course of participation activities**. Linking discussions to existing documents (e. g. a draft law) can also have a structuring effect. In contrast, merely quantitative procedures such as votings among the participants bear the risk of being manipulated. To increase visibility of the services, they could be integrated into the portal of the German Bundestag at a central position. Cooperation with third-party providers and social media platforms could also help to reach and to motivate more people.

Practical implications

With regard to the practical implementation of online participation services, the consequence of these principles is i. a. that comprehensive **regulations with regard to technological and design aspects** should be defined – for the entire institution and regardless of tangible projects – which can be applied in the respective individual case. In view of the new tasks that will arise for the administrative staff of the German Bundestag in the long term, a greater exchange between the people involved in procedures of online citizen participation as well as corresponding opportunities for advanced training would be desirable in order to initiate **learning processes at the organisational level**. To ensure easy and convenient access to participation tools, the use of uniform authentication procedures is recommended as it would eliminate the need for

TAB report no. 173

Online-Bürgerbeteiligung an der Parlamentsarbeit

Britta Oertel, Carolin Kahlisch, Steffen Albrecht,
assisted by Jan Odenbach



Website of the project

www.tab-beim-bundestag.de/en/research/u10700.html

Project manager and contact

Britta Oertel

+49 30 803088-43

b.oertel@izt.de

multiple registration for different services. Moreover, online citizen participation services should be **continuously evaluated** and independent observers or a panel of citizens should be involved in this process. The adequacy of topics and formats for online citizen participation could be verified in advance by empirical tests with representatives of the corresponding target group in order to avoid later disappointments when it is used in practice.

Strategic aspects

From a strategic point of view, the German Bundestag has adopted an approach of carefully and successively developing its online participation services which includes **both experiments** (such as the working methods of the Study Commission on the Internet and Digital Society) **and the further development of established procedures** (such as e-petitioning). In this respect, it has to be made sure that the German Bundestag as an institution can learn from the experience gained and e. g. deal with the problem of personnel fluctuation by making institutional provisions. Moreover, online citizen participation should be **strategically integrated into parliamentary work** (though this still is very rare in other countries as well). Last but not least, there is a need to promote research regarding the opportunities and limits of online citizen participation.

The Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag (TAB) is an independent scientific institution which advises the German Bundestag and its committees on questions of scientific and technological change. TAB has been operated by the Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS) of the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) since 1990. It has been cooperating with the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ, the IZT – Institute for Futures Studies and Technology Assessment and VDI/VDE Innovation + Technik GmbH since September 2013. The Committee for Education, Research and Technology Assessment decides on TAB's work programme, which also includes subjects proposed by other parliamentary committees. The standing »TA Rapporteur Group« consists of one member from each of the parliamentary parties: Dr. Philipp Lengsfeld (CDU/CSU), René Röspel (SPD), Ralph Lenkert (Die Linke), and Harald Ebner (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) and the Chairwoman of the Committee, Praticia Lips (CDU/CSU).