



OPEN  
EUROPEAN  
DIALOGUE

# PARTICIPATORY PROCESS IN POLITICS

A guide to improve political conversations

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# INTRODUCTION

09.08.2021

Participatory Process in Politics

Participatory process has great potential for improving political conversations. It can help create more buy-in for your event, more cohesion between participants, new avenues for compromise, and makes activities more fun for both participants and organizers. Even though participatory process has been around for a long time, and in spite of its recognized benefits, applying it to policymakers is not very common. The Open European Dialogue (OED) has done so with a growing network of parliamentarians from all over Europe. This effort has received enthusiastic feedback from an audience that is notoriously oversolicited and hard to keep interested. The large majority of network members return to OED events and do so on their free time, on the weekend, for over two days at a time. This is why we would like to share insights from this project with other people who convene policymakers.

We would always recommend planning each process individually and never use ready-made solutions. The below overview only summarizes some general insights and arguments that might entice you apply more participatory process in your next event. If you have questions or would like our assistance in planning your activity, please feel free to reach out to us. We can also provide you with many more resources on process design and facilitation.



# STEPS TO A WELL-DESIGNED PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

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STEPS	EXPLANATIONS	ILLUSTRATIONS
Participatory process – what does it mean?	<p>Participatory process essentially means that communication goes several ways. If you just inform people about something in your activity, the degree of participation is zero. If participants freely set the agenda and decide on the goals and process of the activity, it is highly participatory. Of course, there are shades of participation, which can be applied according to what the purpose of your activity and the needs of your audience are. For instance, letting participants discuss among themselves, thus giving everyone a chance to get their point across, turns everyone into an active part of the process, even if they do not necessarily co-decide anything.</p> <p>Participatory processes are not just a quirky approach to event-planning. They have been shown to be highly successful tools of policymaking in projects across the globe and are commonly applied in policy areas as controversial as budgeting or urban planning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants are more active if they feel that they have a role to play in the process</li><li>• If participants are co-owners of the process, they also take responsibility for its success</li><li>• You are less likely to have “blind spots”, i.e. miss important arguments or risk someone feeling misrepresented, by involving more people</li><li>• By admitting that you are not a dispenser of truth but require the collaboration of the participants, you give them a chance to admit that they are not infallible either – for events with policymakers who often have to defend their actions against critics, this can be very helpful and bring out interesting insights.</li><li>• Participatory processes are transparent because information flows both ways. This helps avoid disappointments or misinterpretations</li></ul>



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## STEPS

## EXPLANATIONS

## ILLUSTRATIONS

What is the purpose of your activity?

A good activity is designed to serve a purpose. Ideally, every applied method, every speaker, every session serves this purpose. Otherwise, there might be disorientation or a lack of engagement. Before you start planning your activity and recruitment for the activity, you should be absolutely clear, beyond any doubt, what the purpose is.

Whom do you need to do what?

Once the purpose of your activity is clear, you can think about whom you need to achieve your purpose. What do they have to do for your project to be successful? Who can support you?

- When inviting people to your activity, we have found that they respond very positively to being asked what they expect from the event and how they see themselves in relation to the purpose of the activity.



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## STEPS

How can you help your participants do what you need them to do?

Kill your darlings

## EXPLANATIONS

In this step, it is important to be genuinely interested in what is missing. “Know your audience” is a very commonly used phrase, but it is key to genuinely think about (and asking) how you can help them achieve a shared goal. Instrumentalizing people for goals that are not shared or designing a process based on assumptions is not participatory and may prove unsustainable.

Although this sounds very basic, it is important to be willing to pick apart every bit of the planned activity. If it does not serve a purpose and you find yourself holding on to it for other reasons, you should be willing to let go of it.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Availability heuristic: we are inclined to default to answers that are readily available. It is thus possible that we think of certain arguments, formats, and speakers quickly but only because they are what we have recently seen elsewhere or are used to seeing. It is important to question whether we hold on to certain items only because they are easily available.



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## STEPS

People instead of representatives

## EXPLANATIONS

By focusing on the personal connections between policymakers before having them discuss topics, we try to create an environment where they are open to new arguments and ideas. It is also key to be aware of people's human needs if you would like them to be comfortable and active participants: did you plan sufficient breaks? Are people well-nourished? Do they have a chance to move occasionally? Is there a possibility to let them enjoy natural light?

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Hungry people are more likely to engage in non-productive behavior than peaceful dialogue. This is not just a common assumption.
- Affinity bias: the more alike the participants feel (humans, politicians, participants), the more likely they are to be biased towards each other, fostering more willingness to listen to each other's arguments.
- Representativeness heuristic: by stripping people of their titles, parties etc. and not circulating a participant list before, we try to diminish the human tendency to judge people by category or stereotypes. This helps reduce what is called "attribute substitution", i.e. the evaluation of a complex issue (such as a policy) through a "shortcut" based on biased heuristics.
- Finding a diverse set of participants may be important to have a diversity of opinions in the room. The purpose of this should however not be to have them in the room as representatives of a certain camp. Showing off diversity by pointing out people's position is counterproductive.



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STEPS	EXPLANATIONS	ILLUSTRATIONS
Find questions, not answers	By looking for good questions rather than answers, we allow for a conversation that is more open for cooperation and genuine exchange.	Confirmation bias: Humans seek out information that fits our understanding or view of things. By talking about open questions that no participant can answer definitively, we limit the effect of people only taking home what they want to hear. Essentially, they do not have as much of an opinion to confirm yet and are thus more open to cooperating with others to form one.
Get a license to experiment	By involving participants in an engaging process, the responsibility for successes and failures is shared (though unequally) between organizers and participants.	Self-serving bias: Given that people like to claim successes over failures, failed experiments with the format may be more easily forgiven if the participants feel ownership of the process.



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## STEPS

## EXPLANATIONS

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During the event

Allowing for participation can also mean that you have to change your process during the event to respond to changing demand or simply to people being tired.

Less is more

It is preferable to cover a selection of topic aspects in a process that lends them the required space rather than trying to fit too much content in a meeting. The same goes for facilitation: if you can think of a simpler method to achieve something, it is probably better.

Complex problems with an abundance of “unknown unknowns”, are a typical field for applying participatory processes. However, the exploration of the previously unknown requires a lot of time. Parsimonious topic and process choices can help make that time.

