CrossMark

ARTICLE

Crowdsourcing as new instrument in policy-making: making the democratic process more engaging

Maria Lastovka

Published online: 11 June 2015

Abstract This paper discusses crowdsourcing as a new instrument for engaging the public in policymaking. Technological advancements in digital communication tools are making it increasingly easy and inexpensive to receive input from the 'crowd', the citizens. Hence utilising crowdsourcing in the democratic process can offer both traditional political institutions and political parties an opportunity to engage citizens and increase legitimacy.

Introduction

Our society is living in turbulent, yet exciting times: an unprecedented political crisis on the European level is shaking up the political status quo, leaving no stone unturned. Europeans have begun to realise that they live in a more complex, interdependent and connected era than ever before.

Citizens are now questioning the current political situation and are not satisfied with the means of participation. Where European politics is concerned, many citizens do not feel sufficiently informed and are unable to get actively involved. According to the latest Eurobarometer results, more than 50 % of European citizens feel 'that their voice is not heard' on the EU level (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication 2014, 35).

M. Lastovka (✉)
Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Rue du Commerce 20, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: maria@thumbsofeurope.com

However, democratic processes, and policymaking tools especially, remain very traditional. Voting for representatives during elections is still the primary source of legitimacy in the law-making process—with only rare 'adventurous' participatory exceptions, for example in the Nordic countries.

The desire for more legitimacy in representative democracy, combined with the unprecedented technological possibilities available for realising greater citizen involvement, is exciting for citizens and political actors alike, as its achievement would offer a more encompassing assessment of society's sentiments. Existing digital communication tools that are readily available and just waiting to be exploited are expected to improve the quality of democracy through an increase in citizen participation. Most promisingly, digital methods can improve the dialogue between civil society on the one hand, and elected officials and political parties on the other (Loader and Mercea 2012).

This article will address crowdsourcing in democratic processes and especially how the process of crowdsourcing legislation can be implemented by political parties to augment democratic processes. One example of how legislation can be crowdsourced will be presented in greater detail, and the implications for the citizens who participate in the process will be discussed. The article will look at possible challenges to crowdsourcing activities and then conclude with recommendations on how political parties can use this new technology effectively.

What is crowdsourcing?

Dr. Tanja Aitamurto is the Deputy Director of the Brown Institute for Media Innovation at Stanford University and an adviser to the Finnish government on Open Government projects, including those involving crowdsourced legislation. She defines crowdsourcing as 'an open call for anybody to participate in a task open online, … where "the crowd" refers to an undefined group of people who participate' (Aitamurto 2012, 8). Basically, crowdsourcing aims to gather collective intelligence—based on the assumption that knowledge is most accurately formed when ideas from a diverse population are combined.

As technologies have improved, crowdsourcing has become a popular method for gathering and exploiting collective intelligence. Crowdsourcing offers unprecedented possibilities for traditional representative democracy: citizens are able to participate in brainstorming, reflecting upon and even implementing decisions that used to be the exclusive territory of political and expert elites (Aitamurto 2012, 5).

There are many fields in which crowdsourcing is used as a method and a tool: crowdmapping, innovation processes, creative work and entertainment, journalism, and providing funding, to name just a few. This paper will focus on crowdsourcing in the democratic process and how political parties can best embrace crowdsourcing tools for policymaking.

First, it is necessary to take a quick look at political parties and their characteristics and key roles in a democratic society. A political party is an

organised group of people that more or less shares the same goals and values, and has the aim of influencing public policy to its benefit. Among other tasks (such as nominating and supporting its candidates in electoral campaigns), a political party ideally acts as a negotiator or mediator between governmental institutions and civil society. It aims to educate its electorate about political processes, as well as to channel public opinion from citizens to government, consequently transforming these aggregated opinions into policy priorities and legislation (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network 2015).

Traditionally, political parties operate within their party boundaries, gathering opinions and formulating policy priorities. 'Even if inner-party democracy and formation of opinion function perfectly, not all party members will be able or willing to participate actively in all the important decisions of a party' (Hofmeister 2011, 34). However, with the many digital communication tools that exist today, political parties could be much more active in involving a larger share of their members or could even attract new members with the prospect of real participation in the policymaking process.

As crowdsourcing is one way to formulate and channel public opinion from the citizens to the government or from party members to the party leadership, an example of crowdsourcing is discussed below in more detail.

Crowdsourcing legislation in Finland: Openministry.org

Finland introduced a national citizens' initiative instrument into its constitution in 2012 which obliges the parliament to deal with any crowdsourced initiative that reaches 50,000 digital signatures. Open Ministry (Avoin ministeriö) is aiming to be the first Finnish civil society organisation to crowdsource legislation through citizen input (Openministry.org 2015). The project enables citizens to present legislative proposals to the parliament once they have reached the threshold of 50,000 signatures (Crowd Expedition 2014).

Open Ministry is made possible through the EU-funded Decentralised Citizens Engagement Technologies project (D-CENT 2015), which is currently in the pilot stage and is developing next-generation tools for online democracy in Helsinki, Barcelona and Reykjavik (Pekkanen 2014). Openministry.org provides a platform for the discussion of proposals for citizens' initiatives (Christensen et al. 2014). Volunteer lawyers then transcribe the citizens' ideas into actual legislative proposals which meet parliamentary standards.

So far, six initiatives have passed the threshold and have been handed over to the Finnish parliament. In November 2014, the largest initiative introduced through the Open Ministry platform became the first citizen initiative in Finnish history to be accepted by the parliament. Regarding the crowdsourced proposal, which gave gays and lesbians equal marriage rights with heterosexual couples, the Finnish Parliament voted 105 in favour and 92 against (Bria et al. 2014, 29).

Implications for participating citizens

Current research by Bria et al. (2014, 29) suggests that the success of the Finnish citizens' initiative has had a positive effect on those citizens who engaged with the project, as they experienced first-hand that their digital participation made a difference. Another research team found that 'taking part in crowdsourcing affects the attitudes of the participants' (Christensen et al. 2014) and could help to restore political legitimacy. The research by Christensen et al. (2014, 13) also suggests that when the democratic decision-making process is conceived as fair, transparent and ultimately legitimate by citizens, they are also satisfied with an output or result that does not match their preferences. This indicates that crowdsourcing can make a difference in creating a 'fairer and more trust-worthy decision-making process' and could be an innovative way for political parties to foster more citizen engagement.

Challenges for crowdsourcing legislation

When implementing crowdsourcing on a practical level there are also some challenges to take into account.

The digital divide, that is, between those who do not have access to the Internet or do not have the skills to use its infrastructure efficiently and those who do, is the most significant challenge to crowdsourcing. It is therefore of utmost importance to realise that the outcomes of crowdsourcing initiatives cannot be considered as equal with those of a national referendum. Currently there are still unconnected fringes of society that are not able to participate in such online initiatives and thus participants' opinions do not necessarily represent the majority opinion (Aitamurto 2012, 36). It is vital to understand that '[t]he most efficient networks are those that link to the broadest range of information, knowledge, and experience' (Howe 2006). Hence, the participation of a broad range of diverse population groups is desirable in crowdsourcing initiatives, and this should ideally also include the elderly, the less tech-savvy and the less affluent parts of society.

It is not recommended that experts be replaced with crowdsourcing alone. However, the use of crowdsourcing for legislation has the positive effect that these open participatory methods enable citizens to have their voices heard beyond the traditional activist, expert and lobbying groups, and bring new perspectives to the table.

When it comes to the cost of crowdsourcing, it is an advantage that the actual tools for crowdsourcing legislation online are available on an open-source basis and free to use. However, '[d]esigning the process and community management requires the most human resources in crowdsourcing' (Aitamurto 2012, 38). Effective community management and the mobilisation of a wide range of citizen groups are essential. As crowdsourcing presents a new participatory culture, the threshold for becoming acquainted with a new technology and actually participating in an initiative can be high if left unmanaged. Community management is also important for monitoring participation in order to remove off-topic comments and inappropriate behaviour online.

Recommendations for political parties

In order for political parties or political institutions to effectively make use of crowdsourcing as a tool in policymaking, there are some key points that need to be taken into consideration. These are as follows.

Crowdsourcing initiatives should be launched in conjunction with offline events. In autumn 2012, for instance, Finland hosted the international Open Knowledge Festival to discuss open access topics and present related advances from all around the world (Aitamurto 2012, 40). Offline events also foster the initiator–participant relationship and give participants the opportunity to give feedback on the process.

Political parties could, for example, integrate a crowdsourcing initiative in the run-up to their party convention, through which delegates or members could vote on policy priorities. Adding a crowdsourcing initiative as a way to enhance the opinion-forming process within a party could also attract new party members. According to Hofmeister (2011, 37), offering the clear prospect of participation is, among other factors, one attractive asset that a political party can provide to prospective members.

Additionally, effective communication and community management are needed to reach a wide range of citizens. In order for a crowdsourcing initiative to mirror diversity, it is necessary to reach out to potential participants by actively contacting groups from all facets of society (Aitamurto 2012, 34). In addition to the initial invitation to participate in crowdsourcing, the actual process needs a lot of attention as well. Fruitful crowdsourcing needs a strong and clear-cut online presence, and the organisers have to ensure this is provided. An online community requires continuous attention as conversations have to be curated, questions answered and inappropriate statements deleted, and ideas need to be sorted and categorised. All of this requires human resources, which are absolutely necessary if a crowdsourcing initiative is to be sustainable (Aitamurto 2012, 35). Furthermore, it is important to clearly communicate the time frame for the crowdsourcing initiative to ensure that citizens have the incentive to contribute.

Once the crowdsourcing initiative has closed and enough data has been gathered, the results of the process should be illustrated in a public report published online so that the citizens can see the effects of their input. Studies also recommend publishing the lessons learned and emphasising the role of crowdsourcing in the specific democratic process involved (Aitamurto 2012, 36). For political parties it could be beneficial if, during a party convention, a specific policy priority, which has been decided upon in the run-up to the convention using crowdsourcing, is presented alongside other policy priorities that have been voted on in the traditional way.

It is important to note that crowdsourcing and other participatory methods are tools to reach a goal, rather than ends in their own right. The goal is a more equal and democratic society, in which citizens have the ability and the aspiration to make their voices heard and in which they can influence policies directly, not just indirectly during elections.

Political window dressing actually reduces people's motivation to participate in the future, 'because the plausible promise of participation—impact, and being

heard—isn't realized' (Aitamurto 2012, 39). Therefore, political parties as well as political actors should only consider incorporating crowdsourcing activities into their policymaking process if they are able and willing to seriously consider and implement crowdsourced ideas. Equally, if political parties incorporate a crowdsourcing initiative in their agenda-setting process which ultimately outputs policy priorities for the party's programme, then it is vital that crowdsourcing is not treated as an inferior method of participation.

On a European level

That crowdsourcing is a widely debated topic in Europe right now is underlined by the fact that the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technologies has initiated a crowdsourcing initiative, the Digital Futures foresight project. Its purpose is to reflect upon information and communication technology-related policies beyond 2020. This initiative aims to gather stakeholder opinions on the challenges and opportunities for decision-making in 2050. 'Will a more politically active society work best through representative democracy, or will each individual's opinion on all topics count? What new roles will emerge in politics as the use of big data and machines (e.g. high-performance devices and software) to support decision-making becomes the norm?' (DG CONNECT 2014). These are important questions to raise now, as increased connectivity through the Internet will very likely generate a society that is better able to engage and might therefore be more politically interested as well.

Conclusion

An increasing legitimacy problem on the political level, combined with unprecedented digital opportunities and the societal desire for participation, has created the opportunity for traditional institutions to embrace more transparency and openness in policymaking by using participatory methods such as crowdsourcing. Empirical research into crowdsourcing legislation suggests that citizens are eager to engage online in new and participatory ways of having their voices heard. Crowdsourcing is a new tool which citizens can use to actively shape traditional political processes. For these new channels of participation to succeed and evolve, adventurous and progressive policymakers and political parties are needed who are willing to take the path less travelled. Crowdsourcing holds great potential for tapping into the wisdom of the 'crowd', the citizens, as well as increasing political legitimacy. It would be a lost opportunity if political parties did not embrace these new digital tools to enhance citizen engagement and ultimately increase trust in the democratic process.

References

ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. (2015). Roles and definition of political parties. http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/pc/pca/pca01/pca01a. Accessed 30 March 2015.

Aitamurto, T. (2012). *Crowdsourcing for democracy: A new era in policy-making*. Helsinki: Parliament of Finland. http://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Crowdsourcing_for_DemocracyF_www.pdf. Accessed 24 March 2015.

Bria, F., Halpin, H., Pekkanen, J., Korhonen, J., Toret Medina, J., Arana Catania, M., & Mancini, P. (2014). D 5.1 Pilot implementation of open social web for participatory democracy. D-CENT Project no. 610349. 30 November. http://dcentproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/D5.1-Pilot-Implementation-of-Open-Social-Web-for-Participatory-Democracy.pdf. Accessed 27 March 2015.

Christensen, H. S., Karjalainen, M., & Nurminen, L. (2014). What does crowdsourcing legislation entail for the participants? The Finnish case of Avoin Ministeriö. Paper presented at 'The Internet, Policy and Politics Conferences 2014: Crowdsourcing for Politics and Policy'. Oxford. 25–6 September. http://ipp.oii.ox.ac.uk/sites/ipp/files/documents/IPP2014_Christensen.pdf. Accessed 27 March 2015 .

Crowd Expedition. (2014). Crowd expedition talks to Joonas Pekkanen from Open Ministry at the Crowdsourcing Week Europe 2014. YouTube.com. Published 14 October 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMpUZfVt_pw&feature=youtube_gdata_player. Accessed 27 March 2015 .

D-CENT. (2015). *D-CENT* (website). http://dcentproject.eu/. Accessed 30 March 2015.

DG CONNECT. (2014). *Digital single market: Digital4EU*. https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en. Accessed 26 March 2015.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication. (2014). *Public opinion in the European Union. Standard Eurobarometer 82*. December. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_first_en.pdf. Accessed 24 March 2015.

Hofmeister, W. (2011). *Political parties: Functions and organisation in democratic societies*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7671-1442-2-30.pdf?120920114650. Accessed 9 April 2015.

Howe, J. (2006). The rise of crowdsourcing. *Wired.com*, June. http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html. Accessed 26 March 2015.

Loader, B. D., & Mercea, D. (2012). *Social media and democracy: Innovations in participatory politics*. London: Routledge.

Openministry.org. (2015). Open Ministry – Crowdsourcing legislation. http://openministry.info/?og=1. Accessed 27 March 2015.

Pekkanen, J. (2014). D-CENT piloting in Finland: Introducing online democracy into decision making. *D-CENT*. 9 December. http://dcentproject.eu/2014/12/d-cent-piloting-in-helsinki-introducing-online-democracy-into-decision-making/. Accessed 26 March 2015.

Maria Lastovka *is the Co-founder of Thumbs of Europe, an online platform on which citizens can vote on EU policies. She completed her Bachelor's degree in public management and governance at Zeppelin University, Germany, and her M.Sc. in EU politics at the London School of Economics.*