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**Participatory Democracy’s Emerging Tools**

**What started as groupware in the business world is providing better ways for governments to collaborate with citizens.**

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As we explore the role of new technologies in changing how government makes policies and delivers services, one form of technology is emerging that has the potential to foster decision-making that's not only more effective but also more legitimate: platforms for organizing communication by groups across a distance.

Long known as groupware in the business world, such tools now are either being adapted or purpose-built to facilitate conversation and collaboration between government and citizens with the goal of enabling democracy that is more participatory and inclusive of diverse voices.

Whether the goal is setting an agenda, brainstorming solutions, choosing a path forward and implementing it, or collaborating to assess what works, here are some examples of new tools for participatory democracy:

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**Agenda-setting and brainstorming:** [Loomio](http://loomio.org/) is an open-source tool designed to make it easy for small to medium-sized groups to make decisions together. Participants can start a discussion on a given topic and invite people into a conversation. As the conversation progresses, anyone can put a proposal to a vote. It is specifically designed to enable consensus-based decision-making.

[Google Moderator](http://www.google.com/moderator/) is a service that uses crowdsourcing to rank user-submitted questions, suggestions and ideas. The tool manages feedback from a large number of people, any of whom who can submit a question or vote up or down on the top questions. The [DeLib Dialogue App](http://www.dialogue-app.com/info/) is a service from the United Kingdom that also allows participants to suggest ideas, refine them via comments and discussions, and rate them to bring the best ideas to the top. And [Your Priorities](https://yrpri.org/home/world) is a service that enables citizens to voice, debate and prioritize ideas.

**Voting:** [Democracy 2.1](http://www.democracy21.info/) and [OpaVote](https://www.opavote.org/) are tools that allow people to submit ideas, debate them and then vote on them. Democracy 2.1 offers voters the additional option of casting up to four equally weighted "plus votes" and two "minus votes." OpaVote is designed to enable elections where voters select a single candidate, employ [ranked-choice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instant-runoff_voting) or [approval](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Approval_voting) voting, or use any combination of voting methods.

**Drafting:** [DemocracyOS](http://democracyos.org/) was designed specifically to enable co-creation of legislation or policy proposals. With the tool, large numbers of users can build proposals, either from scratch or by branching off from existing drafts. Currently in use in several cities, it is designed to get citizen input into a process where final decision-making authority still rests with elected officials or civil servants. For drafting together, [Hypothes.is](http://hypothes.is/) is an annotation tool that can be used to collaboratively annotate documents.

**Discussion and Q&A:** [Stack Exchange](http://stackexchange.com/) enables a community to set up its own free question-and-answer board. It is optimal when a group has frequent, highly granular, factual questions that might be answered by others using the service. There are many tools on the market for wide-ranging discussion and deliberation, but a free, open-source platform is [Discourse](http://www.discourse.org/), which was created by one of the co-founders of Stack Exchange. Discourse is designed for asynchronous discussion. As a result, the features are optimized for producing civil and productive online conversation and building communities.

These are all examples of general-purpose engagement tools. There are also burgeoning numbers of platforms for specific kinds of participatory work, such as [Crowdcrafting](http://crowdcrafting.org/), which is custom-designed for citizen science projects.

Each of these tools has a strong community of users and developers more than happy to share their experiences with how the tools are being used for governing. (For interviews with several of the platforms' creators, check out the GovLab's [Democracy Demos](http://thegovlab.org/democracy-demos/) video series.) Regardless of the platform, however, for success it's essential to clearly define the problem to be tackled, know the audience whose engagement is being sought and have a clear idea of how openness would improve the process.

Participatory democracy can start small -- within a team or an agency or with the broader public. Thanks to the availability of these new tools, it can start today.

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