Online Participation

Online Participation is a digital engagement method that enables people to take part in planning and decision-making processes through a website or online platform. Participants can access information, contribute ideas, comment on proposals, evaluate suggestions, or collaborate using interactive maps and discussion tools.
Participation can take place live during an event or asynchronously over a longer period, allowing people to contribute regardless of time or location. This makes it possible to reach a wide range of participants while offering greater flexibility than traditional in-person formats.

Participation Depth	Inform, Participate
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Exchange & Discourse
Format	Digital
Duration	1 Day - 1 Week, Several Weeks
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public
Group Size	Large Group from 30, As Many as Possible
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of Online Participation is to involve people in planning and decision-making processes regardless of where or when they participate. The method provides transparent access to information, enables the collection of ideas and opinions, and makes discussions and feedback publicly visible. It also reaches people who are unable or unwilling to participate in traditional face-to-face events.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Select the platform
Choose a digital platform or tool that best fits your participation process.

Consider:

- Which functions are needed?
- Should participants be able to comment, vote, or work with maps?
- Will participation be anonymous or require registration?
- Does the platform need to be mobile-friendly?

Important:

The platform should be intuitive, easy to use, and as accessible as possible.

2. Prepare the content
Present information in a clear and well-structured way.

This may include:

- project descriptions
- guiding questions
- maps and plans
- project timeline
- objectives of the participation process

Ensure that:

- texts are concise
- technical terminology is explained
- information is supported with visual elements

Important:

People are more likely to participate when they can quickly understand the topic.

3. Define the participation format
Decide:

- How can people participate?
- Will there be open questions or predefined discussion topics?
- How long will the platform remain open?

Also establish:

- communication guidelines
- procedures for dealing with conflicts or inappropriate contributions

4. Test the platform

Before launching the platform, test whether:

- all links work correctly
- the mobile version functions properly
- pages load quickly
- participants can submit contributions without difficulty
- the platform is accessible

It is helpful to ask several people to test the platform before it goes live.

5. Promote the participation process
Use a variety of communication channels, such as:

- social media
- newsletters
- the municipality's website
- local media
- community organisations and associations
- schools or youth organisations

Clearly explain:

- what the project is about
- why participation matters
- how people can participate
- how long the participation period will remain open

Execution

1. Provide an introduction
At the beginning of the online participation process, provide participants with clear information about:

- the topic
- the project objectives
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available participation options

- the timeline

Helpful supporting materials include:

- short introductory videos
- FAQs
- step-by-step guides

2. Collect contributions
Depending on the platform, participants may:

- post comments
- ask questions
- submit proposals
- evaluate ideas
- vote on suggestions
- mark locations on interactive maps

Important:

Participation should remain as simple and accessible as possible.

3. Facilitate the process
The facilitation team actively supports the online process throughout its duration.

Responsibilities include:

- answering questions
- explaining project information
- providing technical assistance
- ensuring respectful communication
- intervening when conflicts arise

Most importantly:

Participants should feel that their contributions are being noticed and valued.

4. Encourage discussion
The facilitation team can keep discussions active by:

- asking additional questions
- summarising ongoing discussions
- grouping similar topics
- highlighting interesting contributions

These activities help maintain engagement throughout the participation period.

5. Close the participation process
At the end of the consultation, communicate clearly:

- what happens next
- when the results will be published
- how contributions will be analysed

Transparent communication helps build trust in the process.

Evaluation

1. Analyse the contributions
Organise and analyse the collected input according to themes such as:

- frequently mentioned topics
- wishes and suggestions
- concerns and criticism
- conflicts
- priorities
- spatial observations

Ensure that:

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different perspectives remain visible

- the findings are summarised in a transparent and understandable way

2. Document the results
Present the outcomes in a clear and accessible format.

Examples include:

- summary reports
- visualisations
- maps
- charts
- written summaries

The results should be made publicly available whenever possible.

3. Share the outcomes
Inform participants about:

- the key findings
- which proposals will be taken forward
- the next steps in the process

Important:

Participants should be able to see how their contributions have influenced the project.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- a large number of people should be reached
- participation should be flexible in terms of time and location
- project information should be made publicly accessible
- complementing in-person participation activities
- collecting comments, conducting online voting, or using digital mapping tools

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- personal conversations or in-depth discussions are the primary objective
- target groups have limited access to digital technologies
- the participation process must be completed within a very short timeframe

TIPS

- Keep the platform simple, intuitive, and easy to navigate.
- Use clear language and concise texts.
- Allocate sufficient time for facilitation and participant support.
- Whenever possible, combine online participation with in-person participation methods.
- Visual content such as maps, images, and short videos can significantly improve engagement.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- confidential or highly sensitive conversations
- processes without sufficient facilitation or moderation
- target groups with limited digital access
- topics that require exclusively face-to-face discussion and interaction

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/online-beteiligung