Developing a Deliberative Democracy Methodology to Support Meaningful Civil Society Participation: A Case Study of vTaiwan

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of public participation through digital governance offers new opportunities for achieving a more inclusive and accountable government. One of the most notable innovations in this field is vTaiwan, a technology based deliberative platform designed to bridge dialogue between the government and the public in the Republic of China (Taiwan). However, participation generated through vTaiwan remains limited and has not yet reached the level of meaningful engagement as defined within the framework of substantive deliberative democracy. This study aims to analyze the characteristics, effectiveness, and challenges of vTaiwan as a new media in shaping political decision-making legitimacy through expanded citizen involvement in policy making processes. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: the top-down nature of issue selection, the lack of emotional engagement from citizens in the deliberative process, and critiques of structural and conceptual limitations embedded within the platform's design. Theoretical frameworks employed in this research include deliberative democracy theory and Arnstein's ladder of participation. By utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach through literature review and in-depth case analysis, this study finds that the success of a deliberative platform is highly influenced by its ability to foster psychologically and emotionally meaningful participation. Therefore, it recommends the development of deliberative methodologies that are not only procedurally open, but also capable of creating emotional resonance and psychological relevance for platform users.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Digital Platforms, Public Participation

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have created fundamental changes in the way countries formulate, implement, and monitor public policy (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2022). These changes have also shaped new patterns of relations between governments and society, which are now increasingly mediated by digital technology. Digital governance can be understood as a form of governance that utilizes digital technology not only for administrative efficiency, but also to strengthen transparency, expand public participation, and enhance accountability in implementation (AW, 2024). In this framework, technology serves to foster more open, responsive, and collaborative relationships between the state and its citizens, so that governance practices are no longer solely oriented towards internal bureaucracy but prioritize meaningful public involvement in decision-making processes (Ombudsman RI, 2025). This shift emphasizes

that the success of digital governance is not determined by technology alone, but by the extent to which digital systems provide space for the public to participate in the overseeing and evaluating public services. Shabihah, Ryanindityo, and Nurkumalawati (2025) explain that transparency and accountability can only be achieved if the public is not only positioned as recipients of policies, but as active subjects involved in the process of monitoring and evaluating the performance of the digitally based government.

This makes digital governance increasingly important in the context of modern governance, as it serves as a strategic instrument in expanding the accessibility of public services while strengthening the principles of good governance (Isma et al., 2025). Digitalization enables the bureaucracy to operate more efficiently, accelerates service delivery, and provides transparency mechanisms that can be monitored directly by the public. In their study, Shabihah et al. (2025) show that the implementation of digital governance through initiatives such as Helo Ciamis, JAKI, and Open Data Jakarta not only improves the efficiency of public services but also encourages information disclosure and strengthens public participation in monitoring government performance. More than just efficiency, digital governance opens broader public participation, so that citizens are not only positioned as recipients of policy but also play a role as actors who influence the direction of policy and assess the quality of government performance. In fact, with the availability of digital channels, democratic practices have become more inclusive, as the public can express their aspirations and participate in the deliberation process anytime and anywhere without having to be physically present at a forum. This condition confirms that the digitization of public services is not only a key pillar in realizing responsive, transparent, and public-oriented governance, but also opens space for digital democracy practices that demand more substantial public involvement. It is this space that makes deliberative democracy relevant in ensuring that public participation is equal and meaningful (Rizky et al., 2025).

Furthermore, within the framework of digital democracy, it is important to emphasize that the success of participatory governance is not only determined by the presence of technological infrastructure, but also by the quality of public engagement in it. This is where the concept of deliberative democracy becomes relevant. Jurgen Habermas, in his book Between Facts and Norms (1996), emphasizes the importance of an equal public sphere, where citizens can exchange ideas, critique policies, and build a common understanding based on rational considerations. The legitimacy of public policy does not only rest on representative mechanisms or voting, but also on an open deliberative process that involves the public as partners in deliberation. Thus, deliberative democracy provides a normative framework for the creation of inclusive and responsive governance (Nino, 2024).

However, this normative framework can only function substantively if it is accompanied by meaningful civil engagement. Muller (2012) explains that meaningful participation is not only measured by the level of public involvement, but also by the extent to which they can contribute substantively to the deliberation process, influence policy direction, and see the real impact of their involvement, namely in the form of policy outcomes.

Thus, these two concepts are closely related. Deliberative democracy provides a platform for dialogue on equal terms, while meaningful civil engagement ensures that this platform is filled with lively and substantial participation. As stated by Mathews (2025), digital democracy is not enough to provide an interactive platform alone but must be able to foster a sense of emotional connection and meaningful participation so that deliberation does not end up as a mere formality. Without meaningful participation, deliberative democracy will remain at the procedural or formal level. Conversely, meaningful engagement cannot be achieved without a deliberative democratic design that opens access to dialogue, values public reasoning, and provides real space for the public to influence policy.

The close interconnection between deliberative democracy and meaningful participation can be better understood through real practice. In Taiwan, there is a public consultation platform called vTaiwan, established in 2014 in the aftermath of the Sunflower Movement, when the public demanded that the government open up a more transparent and inclusive space for dialogue (Ho, 2022). This initiative began with a civic tech community called g0v, which then collaborated with the government and Audrey Tang, who acted as a mediator between civil society and state institutions. Tang played an important role in designing a digital deliberation mechanism using a technology called Pol.is, which is used to map public opinion and identify areas of consensus among diverse views. After being appointed as Minister without Portfolio, Audrey Tang expanded the role of vTaiwan by promoting its integration into the formal policy process and strengthening the principle of open data in digital government (O'Flaherty, 2018). Through a deliberative approach involving various stakeholders, ranging from the community, academics, to the private sector, vTaiwan demonstrates how digital governance practices can increase transparency while encouraging inclusive public participation, thereby strengthening policy legitimacy (Ho, 2022). The presence of vTaiwan is important because it not only presents technological innovation in governance but also shows how the principles of deliberative democracy can be operationalized in the public policy process. This position makes vTaiwan relevant as a reference for understanding how digital governance practices can strengthen the legitimacy of modern governance.

Based on this description, this study will examine the appropriate deliberative democracy method to support meaningful participation by looking at vTaiwan as a case study. This research question will be answered using deliberative democracy theory and Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, reinforced by the concept of meaningful participation. Deliberative democracy is understood as a normative framework that emphasizes the importance of equal spaces for discussion to build policy legitimacy (Habermas, 1996). This can be seen in the vTaiwan case study, which shows how equal discussion can be implemented through digital mechanisms. This platform not only opens up a more inclusive and transparent space for participation but also proves that public dialogue can have a real influence on the policy process. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation used in this paper shows that vTaiwan as a case study is already at the sixth level of citizen power, namely partnership, which has surpassed the stages of non-participation and tokenism. This shows that the digital deliberation mechanism

developed through this platform can position the public as influential actors in the decision-making process. In digital democracy, meaningful participation plays an important role in ensuring that community involvement is not merely a formality but truly influences the substance of policy. Nugraha et al (2024) emphasize that meaningful participation is necessary so that the resulting policies have strong legitimacy and are in line with public needs.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth description of a phenomenon systematically in accordance with its social context (Leksono, 2021). This approach was used because it is suitable for examining deliberative democracy practices and meaningful public participation through the vTaiwan case study, which represents a form of digital governance innovation. The research data are obtained through secondary literature in the form of academic journals, reports, articles, and official documents relevant to the topic of discussion. All the data are then analyzed descriptively to explore the relationship between deliberative democracy, meaningful participation, and digital governance practices in the vTaiwan case study. Based on this method, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how a deliberative democracy approach can support more inclusive and substantive public participation in the era of digital democracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Deliberative Democracy as a Tool of Strengthen Civil Society

Deliberative democracy is a normative framework that provides a different approach towards democracy, which emphasizes public participation. Jürgen Habermas (1996) introduced the concept of the public sphere, which should not be understood merely as a forum for policy discussion but as a social condition that allows citizens to articulate their interests and form a common opinion as the basis for political legitimacy. The idea of the public sphere is inseparable from the concept of communicative reason, namely the effort to create consensus. Habermas views communicative action as the only viable way to unite modern societies grounded in rationalism, namely by harmonizing interactions between subjects. Effective communication is communication that prioritizes rationality or what Habermas refers to as a faith in reason (Muttaqien & Ramdan, 2023).

Deliberative democracy contributes to enhancing the capacity of civil society in terms of strengthening critical thinking and creating collaborative solutions to complex socio-political issues (Arifin & Koesoema, 2023). Civil society is formed both as a watchdog and an agenda setter, bringing values of social justice into the policy-making process. In practice, civil society organizations that adopt a deliberate approach generally build horizontal structures that are open to cross-sector interactions and capable of integrating tensions among groups (Erfain, 2025). Harlembang and Saputra (2023) in their research entitled "Civil Society and Deliberative Democracy: From Watchdog to

Agenda Setter" emphasize that this approach can encourage civil society to expand their advocacy space, which is not only limited to human rights issues but also includes local governance, environmental policy, and strengthening citizens' political literacy.

Muttaqien and Ramdan (2023) explain the three main principles of deliberative democracy in their article entitled "Jurgen Habermas' Concept of Communication in the Idea of Deliberative Democracy and Communicative Action." These three principles serve as conditions that ensure society can genuinely play an equal role alongside the state. First, the principle of deliberation, referring to an in-depth consideration before decision-making that involves all relevant parties. This encourages civil society to discuss and express their aspirations, so that the final decision can reflect common needs. Second, the principle of reasonableness, meaning the willingness to mutually understand each other in joint deliberation. This principle encourages civil society to adapt to the logic of deliberation and to foster constructive dialogue. Third, the principle of freedom, which refers to equal opportunities to express ideas. This principle affirms that civil society is equal in the political process, thus encouraging civil society to be more empowered, critical, and to serve as a counterbalance to state power.

vTaiwan as a Digital Deliberative Platform

In an effort to examine the relevance of deliberative democracy principles in practice, this paper reviews a case study of vTaiwan, a digital deliberation platform that implements most of Habermas' ideas. The deliberation process on the vTaiwan platform consists of four main stages: Proposal Stage, Opinion Stage, Reflection Stage, and Legislation Stage (Hsiao et al., 2018). In the Proposal Stage, the public can propose issues that they consider important to be discussed. However, the continuity of the deliberation process depends on the willingness of the relevant ministries or institutions to become competent government authorities, namely the party responsible for processing the outcomes of deliberation into policy materials (CrowdLaw, 2018). The Opinion Stage gathers public views through online discussions using Pol.is and Discourse. Pol.is is a public opinion mapping platform that clusters citizens' statements based on patterns of consensus through unsupervised machine learning. The next stage, the Reflection Stage, brings together citizens, academics, ministry officials, and industry representatives in a hybrid discussion space (both online and offline). The entire process is livestreamed and openly documented to ensure transparency. Citizens who are not physically present can still participate through moderated live chats, thereby expanding opportunities for participation both spatially and technologically (Hsiao et al., 2018). The final stage is the Legislation Stage, where the results of deliberation are compiled into a report and submitted to the relevant ministry or agency for follow-up. At this point, digital deliberation intersects with formal bureaucracy.

In general, vTaiwan has demonstrated effectiveness in providing a space for public deliberation and applying it in policy formulation. Through Pol.is technology, vTaiwan provides an opportunity for citizens to express their opinions and map public positions on an issue based on algorithms (Hsiao et al., 2018). This is in line with Habermas' idea that political legitimacy can be built through rational discourse carried out collectively

by citizens. Technologies such as Pol.is are not used to measure majority support, but to map opinions based on closeness of values and identify common ground. In this practice, technology not only functions as a facilitative platform, but also as a means to activate rational communication, which is the basis for establishing policy legitimacy. However, this success cannot be generalized to all deliberative processes in terms of demonstrating its effectiveness. Hsiao et al. (2018) state that vTaiwan also depends on the political commitment of state institutions in terms of adopting or following up on consultation results.

A critical analysis of civil society's bargaining position in public policy finds a strong foothold in Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation framework. Referring to the eight levels in this concept, vTaiwan shows that public participation can go far beyond the tokenism often found in policy practice. Nusa and Annisa (2025) assert that pseudo-participation only places civil society in a passive position, limited to receiving information or acting as consultants without any real influence on decisions. In contrast, vTaiwan's deliberative mechanism demonstrates substantive participation by placing civil society as a key actor in partnerships or the fourth rung of the Ladder of Citizen Participation framework. At this stage, the Taiwanese government provides opportunities for the community to contribute to solving socio-political problems, while involving them in the policy formulation process. Through this mechanism, a reciprocal relationship is formed in which the community can convey their aspirations and influence policy, while the government gains legitimacy and public trust.

One case study that successfully illustrates the relevance of this approach is the UberX issue in 2015, which was included as the 12th topic with 925 participants giving their opinions on 145 questions with a total of more than 31,100 votes (Hsiao et al., 2018). As a resolution, this issue resulted in a new policy that was not only based on majority vote, but also on discussion and critical thinking. These findings are in line with the analysis by Nusa and Anissa (2025), who found that meaningful participation must be inclusive, dialogical, and responsive to the aspirations of the community. In other words, vTaiwan can be positioned as an example of successful citizen power practices because it places citizens on an equal footing in the public deliberation process. Through Arnstein's framework, the vTaiwan case study shows how deliberative democracy can bring about participation that is not merely procedural, but substantive and has a real impact on policy formation.

Comparative Study of Deliberative Democracy Platforms

The vTaiwan case study, which was initially born out of the g0v digital community initiative and later adopted by the Taiwanese government, shows that the power of civil society can encourage the institutionalization of deliberative practices. However, public deliberation platforms do not always emerge from civil society movements alone. In Indonesia, for example, there is a digital deliberative democracy platform called Ruang Runding, which is the result of academic collaboration between the Swasaba Research Initiative (SRI) and the Center for Southeast Asian Social Studies at Gadjah Mada University (PSSAT UGM) since 2019. Ruang Runding functions as a space for policy

communication, science communication, and public communication. Through this function, the government can open discussions on the policies it has made, experts can provide knowledge-based input, and the public has a space to convey their aspirations and complaints (SRI, 2023). In an effort to support this process, the platform provides several key features, such as discussion forums, consultations, libraries, and surveys. Its implementation can be seen from the first user of Ruang Runding, namely Bappeda Kutai Kartanegara, which utilized the role of this platform in drafting the initial RPJPD 2025-2045, demonstrating the role of Ruang Runding as a means of collaboration between the government, academics, and the community in regional development planning. However, unlike vTaiwan, which has a strong character as a platform for civil society aspirations, Ruang Runding still tends to depend on the initiative of government institutions that choose to use it.

Unlike vTaiwan and Ruang Runding, which were established out of the drive of the digital community and academic collaboration, Decide Madrid was designed from the outset as an official initiative of the Madrid City Government in 2015. This platform allows civil society to propose policies, vote, and help determine public budget priorities through participatory mechanisms integrated into the city government system (OECD-OPSI, 2023). Unlike the Ruang Runding platform, which depends on the willingness of local governments to adopt it, Decide Madrid is permanent and institutionalized in city governance. Since its launch, this deliberative platform has successfully facilitated nearly 20,000 proposals, some of which have been adopted as official city government policies, demonstrating high public participation.

A Methodological Framework for Digital Deliberation in Democratic Governance

Digital deliberation has emerged as a transformative approach to strengthening democratic governance. Deliberative democracy advances public participation through rational, inclusive, and consensus-oriented dialogue. Digital platforms that facilitate community debates on public issues are expected to generate more legitimate and higher-quality outcomes than conventional democratic processes. By incorporating diverse perspectives, digital participation models strengthen policymaking and connect wider publics with democratic institutions (Gastil, 2021). These platforms also provide a means to examine how deliberation links citizen engagement with institutional legitimacy (Gastil, 2021). Features such as online forums, open government data, and e-petitioning further support deliberative approaches in the design and practice of e-democracy (Moss & Coleman, 2013).

Participation in platforms such as vTaiwan, the Negotiating Room, and Pol.is illustrates the application of digital literacy, openness, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Yet, meaningful engagement requires interventions that enhance citizens' capacity to participate effectively in democratic processes. These interventions can be structured within a methodological framework linking civic leadership to democratic practice. The first stage is **public agenda setting**, where citizens identify priority issues through voting, focus group discussions, or digital channels. Digital platforms are vital in this process, as they expand accessibility, streamline participation,

and foster more inclusive civic engagement (Bi, 2024). This stage also necessitates government provision of policy briefs and supporting information to ensure that discussions are balanced and data-driven.

The second stage involves **knowledge interventions**, which transform citizens from passive policy recipients into active participants in socio-political processes. Without adequate knowledge support, public engagement risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Knowledge interventions supply participants with the necessary resources, instruments, and guidance to comprehend complex issues, critically assess information, and engage. This not only strengthens decision-making by embedding community needs into policy (Scutariu & Mangelovschi, 2022) but also mitigates the risk of unproductive participation due to lack of expertise (Bychkova, 2014). By facilitating knowledge flow among citizens, governments, and experts, these interventions foster trust, raise awareness, and advance public welfare (Tan et al., 2024). Crucially, they also narrow the information gap between political elites and citizens, enabling dialogue on more equal terms, while simultaneously reinforcing civic leadership and collective organization. Governments play a central role in delivering such interventions through public education and participatory planning, while educational institutions and NGOs can complement these efforts with training, workshops, and advocacy. The third stage is **facilitating digital deliberation**; whereby online platforms create spaces for citizens to discuss issues and make collective decisions. Well-designed platforms can enhance diversity of perspectives and employ artificial intelligence to structure large-scale discussions, maintain civility, and support moderators.

Together, these three stages, public agenda setting, knowledge intervention, and digital deliberation form a coherent methodological pathway that enables the integration of citizen input into formal policymaking, thereby enhancing institutional legitimacy and strengthening democratic governance. Once these three elements are fulfilled, integration with the formal policy process becomes attainable. Such integration requires a mechanism that effectively channels the outcomes of deliberation into governmental decision-making. This mechanism can be aligned with the broader policymaking process as conceptualized in David Easton's system's theory, which frames policymaking as a dynamic system of inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops. The model emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the political context and policy outcomes, conceptualizing policymaking as a continual process of adjustment and response. Applied within a deliberative framework, this approach not only strengthens policy legitimacy through citizen engagement but also fosters trust between government and society, cultivates a culture of digital deliberation, and offers an adaptive model that can be replicated across democratic contexts.
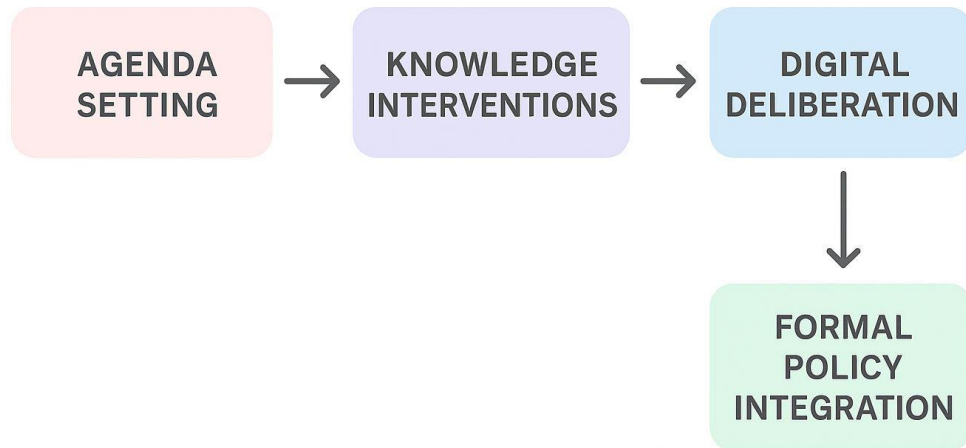
AGENDA SETTING → KNOWLEDGE INTERVENTIONS → DIGITAL DELIBERATION → FORMAL POLICY INTEGRATION

Figure 1. A Methodological Framework for Digital Deliberation in Democratic Governance

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms that the integration of digital governance with the principles of deliberative democracy and meaningful participation is crucial for strengthening the legitimacy and responsiveness of policymaking. The vTaiwan case illustrates how digital platforms can elevate citizens from passive recipients to equal partners in decision making. Through Arnstein's framework, the vTaiwan case demonstrates that deliberative democracy enables participation beyond procedural formality, making it substantive and consequential for policy making outcomes. Meanwhile, comparative insight from Ruang Runding in Indonesia and Decide Madrid in Spain show that the real measure of effectiveness lies in embedding citizen input into formal processes rather than relying solely on technology. As its main contribution, this research proposes a methodological framework consisting of three stages that are public agenda setting, knowledge interventions, and digital deliberations situated within Easton's system theory. This approach ensures that citizen voices are translated into legitimate inputs, processed into outputs, and reinforced through feedback loops that build institutional trust. In this way, digital deliberation functions not merely as a technological platform but as a democratic design that institutionalizes openness, accountability, and collaboration in governance.

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