DIGITAL DEMOCRACY PILOT IN FINGAL, IRELAND

FULLER DEMOCRACY

WHO
Irish Independent politician, Roslyn Fuller

WHAT
Determining national and local political priorities

GOAL
Allow constituents to decide how to allocate political resources on a peer-to-peer basis

OUTCOME
A clear conversation and action plan on future political priorities in the area

Roslyn Fuller, an independent political candidate in Dublin-Fingal, wanted to ensure that her positions aligned with her constituents' wishes. Ethelo provided a platform where ordinary citizens could discuss and decide on political matters ranging from taxation and finance to the environment and social justice. In an area comprising 175 square miles and nearly 300 000 residents, comprehensive face-to-face consultation would have been impossible.

PEER-TO-PEER DECISION-MAKING THAT PUTS PEOPLE BACK IN THE CENTRE OF DEMOCRACY

Roslyn Fuller is an aspiring Independent politician in Dublin Fingal, Ireland. She made a pledge to her voters to always be governed by their wishes, and needed a way to accurately determine what those wishes were, as well as to introduce constituents to peer-to-peer decision-making.

Roslyn used Ethelo to run a pilot of digital democracy in the constituency to demonstrate the concept to interested voters. The project was not intended as a survey or to produce a clinical picture of 'pure' public opinion. It was also not intended as a mere consultation, in which participants give input that is run through another filter. It was rather about allowing participants to reach decisions together in awareness of other' views and in awareness of how the community in general was voting. The two key challenges were thus convincing voters to take part and finding resources to raise awareness.

APPROACH

Using feedback from canvassing as a rough guide to voter interests, Roslyn formulated several decision points on topics from taxation to the environment to foreign policy and presented them in rating/social dialogue boxes. When participants logged into the system, they were first given a three-question optional survey on their age and location, followed by a selection of policy categories ordered in random order, e.g. 'Taxation and Finance', 'Environment', etc. There was no requirement that a participant respond to each statement or that they respond to statements in any particular order. Participants were free to return to the software for multiple sittings to add to or revise their votes. They could also view how the general public was voting on any statement at any time during the process. In total 31 statements were posed (all statements and results can be viewed at: www.fullerdemocracy.com):
- 6 on Taxation and Finance
- 6 on Law and Foreign Policy
- 3 on the Environment
- 8 on Social Justice and Labour
- 5 on Health and Education
- 3 on Local Priorities

Statements were phrased as purporting what Ireland 'should' do, e.g. 'Ireland should increase its efforts to reunite with the North', 'Ireland should prohibit growing genetically modified crops on its territory', etc.

NUANCED 9-POINT SCALE AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Each participant rated their level of support for each statement on a 9-point scale, added commentary and replied to or liked other participants' contributions. Where possible, each statement was accompanied by links to informative articles and budgetary costs. Participants were encouraged to add their own links and information. In addition, participants could weight the importance of each category using a sliding scale.

In the future, discussion might be gamified by allowing participants to vote on the person who provides the most helpful comments and to reward this person with a prize. This could potentially drive participation.

Figure 1. Rating and commenting panel

RESPECT & PRIVACY

Despite engaging the wider public without gatekeeping mechanisms, including on hot-button issues such as abortion and immigration, no bullying or abuse occurred, and hence there was no need for moderation. "Rather than materializing fears around public participation," said Fuller, " participants opted for humane and progressive solutions for vulnerable people, such as refugees, the disabled, or those in need of mental health services."

All but one participant (who remained non-active) chose to give their names while signing up to Fuller Democracy, although this was non-obligatory. In general, concerns about privacy seem to be fairly minimal, possibly because those most likely to be politically active have grown accustomed to commenting on social media and news sites and do not, at this point, feel themselves in danger of repercussions.

The only person who received/experienced any animosity during the pilot was the facilitator, however this did not go beyond the general criticism directed at people with a public profile. Engagement between participants was courteous at all times. Should a situation have arisen requiring moderation, Ethelo allows for a participant's comments to be flagged, deleted, and their profile to be removed.

This should, however, not detract from the point that the vast majority of participants never engaged in abusive behaviour, nor should it be used to legitimize the view that expressing anger, disappointment, disapproval or criticism automatically constitutes abuse.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHICS & PARTICIPATION RATES

In total the pilot attracted 62 users, 7 of whom were observers from Ethelo or interested public parties from other countries, and who thus did not actively participate. The active participation rate among Fingal residents who signed up to Ethelo was 92%. Seventy-seven percent of Fingal participants completed more than 90% of all decision points. Two-thirds of active participants thus responded to at least 90% of all statements posted.

Every decision point (100%) received comments, with an average number of three comments being received per decision-point. Participants also provided numerous pieces of generalized feedback in the way of alternative policies and programme enhancements.
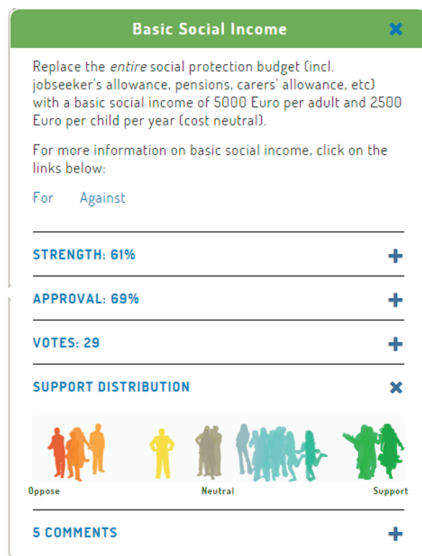

Figure 2: Results panel publicly displaying the support distribution for one of the 31 statements
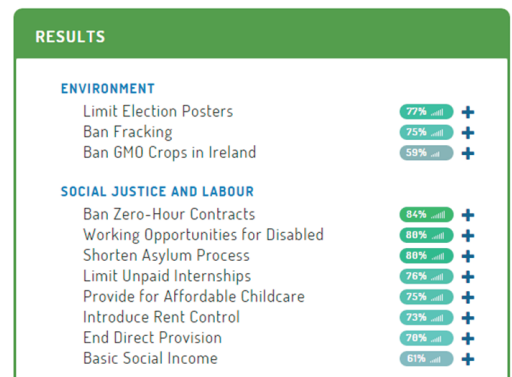

Figure 3: Results panel publicly displaying the support distribution for each of the 31 statements

MAKING INFORMED DECISIONS

Using Ethelo's general commentary side-bar, a repeated point of concern to participants was that they desired to base their decisions on good information, but did not feel adequately provided with all of the information they needed to do so.

Direct democracy depends on citizens informing themselves from a number of sources rather than accepting information provided by a central source, such as the facilitator. However, in this pilot only links to basic information was provided on the various policies. Ethelo, however, could have provided a comprehensive reading list on each topic.

Fuller observes, "Participants are comfortable with being consulted and voting, but not yet with a fully-fledged beginning-to-end democracy, such as existed in ancient Athens." While it would have been possible for participants to read and share any number of articles on these topics to build their own picture of the facts, they proved largely unwilling to do so. This is likely at
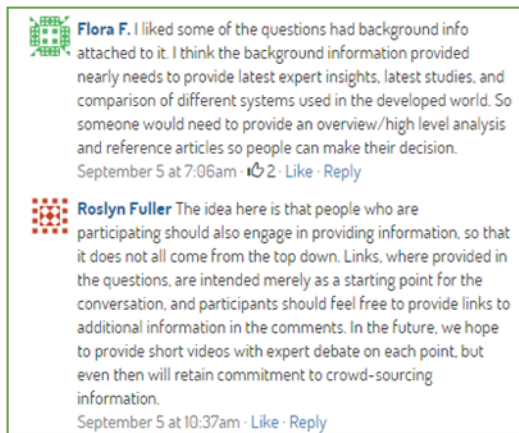
Figure 4: Feedback panel publicly displaying dialogue between Fuller and Constituent

Figure 5: Weighting panel for each participant to set their priorities

least partially due to the fact that this was a proof of concept not linked to any levers of political power. This will change if move is made towards direct democracy.

FINDING CONSENSUAL PRIORITIES ACROSS TIME AND LOCATION

The project allowed constituents to interact on a peer-to-peer basis that would normally have been impossible over such distances. It has given Ms. Fuller a clear, unmediated idea of what her constituents want, and allowed a detailed action plan to be formulated going forward. This was possible using two of Ethelo's key metrics:

  a.   Fairness measures support distribution, and accords a higher fairness rating to policies that achieve a high degree of consensus than to measures that are highly divisive

  b.   The strength of a policy. Policies with the highest strength rating enjoy the highest levels of support and consensus and take account of how strongly each participant felt about the matter at hand.

Some of the highlights included:
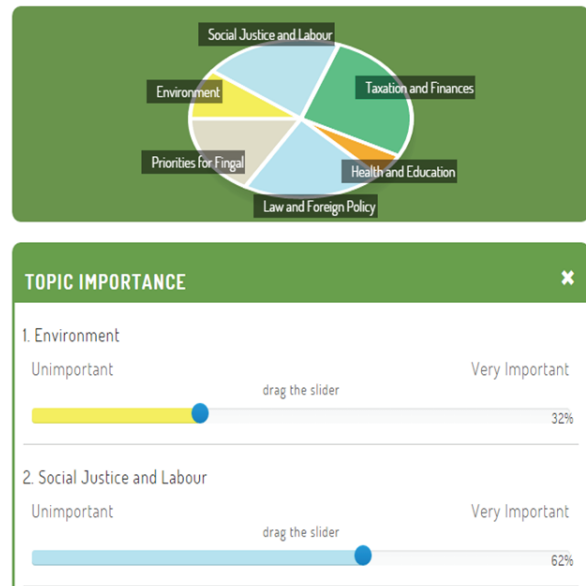-   Setting aside specific places for the display of election posters and banning them from other sites
-   Improving mental health services
-   Banning zero-hour contracts
-   Increasing the number of income tax bands to differentiate more fairly between different income levels

Participants were only strongly against two options presented: ratifying TTIP and privatizing healthcare. These initiatives received virtually no support.

Results like these confirm voter tendencies in similar participatory budgeting exercises.[6] Although the sample was small, the fact that the national rate in favour of holding a referendum on abortion on Fuller Democracy was very similar to an external poll on the topic, indicates some accuracy

Roslyn Fuller plans to run further projects with greater numbers of participants, and potentially to implement some measures – pay, gamification – to drive deeper participation. However, the usual fears – abuse, hacking, a reckless population – did not manifest themselves during this pilot.

"It's time to stop forcing people to stew in silence between elections and start opening up politics to continuous participation. I have been researching democracy for over a decade and my ultimate goal is the introduction of full direct digital democracy. Online participation software can provide a reflective and accurate snapshot of voter preferences and Ethelo is the most sophisticated solution I have come across."

Roslyn Fuller, Independent Candidate

Fuller's campaign is now moving on to implementing the preferences expressed by participants, to the extent that this is possible without holding office. It is hoped that by showing participants the link between their input and factual outcomes, more participation will be encouraged in future.

News report available here

Go to www.ethelo.com