Citizens, make your voices heard!

Summary

New tools, methodologies, and practices can be introduced to support democratic participation and empower citizens to contribute to government. To achieve that, Volt advocates that the state shall involve citizens in policy making and the legislative process, as well as increase transparency exponentially. States should also provide the means to inform citizens according to their own needs. This can be done through public media - that is free of structural influence by the state's institutions and market influences detrimental to their informing mandate.

What would we do first? *Create a Glass State, where citizens can review its budget, chamber gatherings, and government priorities.*

Full proposal

What is going on?

Many citizens feel unrepresented and believe that they cannot influence political decisions. This is due to two major challenges. First many citizens do not feel *informed* about what is going on in parliaments: they feel detached from the realities of how political decisions are being taken, and lack basic access to monitor the interests and activities of their representatives. Despite modern technology, government information remains mostly inaccessible to citizens, which impedes effective control and participation. Second, citizens feel that their voice does not matter in politics. Depending on the voting system, the passive action of casting a vote only once in elections does not give citizens the feeling of being the true sovereign. Combined with a lack of trust in many politicians and parties, this leads to decreasing levels of democratic participation. Hence, calls for the use of direct democracy, especially direct referenda, have increased over the recent years.[1] In

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[1] Pew Research Center, Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy, available at
http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy

addition, digital technology is repeatedly mentioned as a perfect means to support more direct influence in politics by the citizens.

Yet, more simple direct referenda in politics pose problems. First, many citizens do not have the time needed to inform themselves on all matters up for decision. Second, opaque news sources and hidden agendas contribute to this. Targeted campaigns have been able to mislead citizens about facts and figures and trust in shared sources of information (e.g., traditional media) is falling.[2] Third, the question remains whether important public decisions should be taken, based on very small majorities (e.g., 52% vs. 48%). These decisions may risk to foster polarisation rather than democratic consent seeking in society. A warning example of almost every instant of the arguments above is Brexit.

What is our vision?

Citizens must be heard in politics, especially when it comes to important societal decisions. We want public discussion to include as many perspectives as possible and access to high quality, representative information for every citizen. We believe that citizens must be able to regularly bring their concerns and request to broader attention and influence government agenda even in between elections. Therefore, we will implement policies that help to steer political attention towards concrete issues directly voiced by citizens, that help foster democratic discussion and that support citizens in access to reliable information provided by reformed public media.

How do we get there?

1. *Create a Glass State, where citizens can review its budget, chamber gatherings, and government priorities.* How can we ensure that the state's resources and operations are in line with what we need? We want the state to become transparent to its citizens:
   - Pursue the example of the International Open Data Charter in order to make governments more transparent and accountable, while adding to

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[2] Edelman, 2018 Executive summary, available at http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_TrustBarometer_Executive_Summary_Jan.pdf

the charter a strong sense of privacy norms to protect citizens.[3] Publish an easy to grasp yearly program by the government showing key priorities and challenges across all ministries.

- ○ Publish a "user friendly" budget[4] report for all levels of government every 3 months. Make this understandable for all citizens and show where resources have been invested so far.
- ○ Broadcast live all gatherings of parliaments accompanied by public media coverage.

2. **Introduce Citizen Assemblies in every member state**. A Citizen Assembly is a way to initiate discussion and decisions that parties in parliament are reluctant to take. It is a temporary parliament like body consisting of citizens chosen representatively by lot from the state's society to deliberate about pressing issues of highest concern. Recent examples can be found in abortion reform in Ireland[5] and local policy in Gdansk, Poland.[6] It incorporates diverse direct citizen input, ensures that citizens are informed well fostering dialogue towards consent rather than polarisation.[7] To achieve this, Citizen Assemblies should be designed as follows:

- ○ A citizen initiative needs to reach a quorum of significant high support within a year to call in a Citizen Assembly.[8] If this quorum is reached, a Citizen Assembly must be called in.

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[3] Sciencedirect, Opening up government data for Big Data analysis and public benefit by Hardy, K. and Maurushat, A., available at
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S026736491630214X
[4] For an example of easy to access complex financial data. See Open Data Institute, Explore, available at http://smtm.labs.theodi.org/
[5] Citizen's assembly, The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, available at
https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/The-Eighth-Amendment-of-the-Constitution/
[6] Sitra, With meaningful conversations comes the true potential of participatory democracy, available at
https://www.sitra.fi/en/articles/meaningful-conversations-comes-true-potential-participatory-democracy
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[7] Sage Journals, When do deliberative citizens change their opinions? Evidence from the Irish Citizens' Assembly, by Suiter, J., Farrell, D.M. and O'Malley, E., available at
http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0192512114544068
[8] This is much higher than the threshold of approximately 1% for Switzerland. See The Federal Council, Chapter 2 Initiative and Referendum, available at
https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995395/index.html#id-ni11-ni13

- ○ Selection resembles that of jurors. Participation is voluntary and paid in an equal and fair manner.
- ○ It will aim to sit over a period of not more than one year and will primarily meet in weekend sessions.[9]
- ○ It will have a budget to consults experts and to gather submissions from the wider public. Furthermore, it will be vested with the power to collect information from state ministries and agencies.
- ○ Debates and information will be accessible to the public and accompanied by public media coverage designed to ensure information diffusion to the greater public.
- ○ The reports and proposals produced by the Citizen Assembly must become a compulsory part of the legislative process so that the legislature and executive cannot ignore the results.

3. **Create a European Public Broadcasting and Reform Public Media***.* To increase exchange between diverse European communities Volt will create a common European Broadcast. Its primary task will be to inform and educate citizens, impartially, of the political reality of the diverse member states. To leverage the budget of EU public media[10] the broadcast will work as a platform for content from each national service. Translated it will be available in every member state via television and the internet. The broadcast will test out new ways of involving citizens in the program selection and present information in an engaging and accessible way. Crowd-sourcing methods will be tested to partially decide the program of the broadcast, thus empowering citizens to directly influence what issues they want to be informed on. Lastly, Volt will initiate reforms in every member state to strengthen public media's structural independence from other state institutions to make it what it should be: a citizen controlled way of informing us all about the issue important to our lives in our societies.

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[9] Citizen's assembly, The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, available at
https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/The-Eighth-Amendment-of-the-Constitution/
[10] € 25 billion, see EBU, Funding of Public Service Media 2016, available at
http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0192512114544068

4. **Diminish threshold to file a European Citizens Initiative**. Since its inception only 4 European initiatives out of 42 where able to reach the threshold of at least one million EU citizens, from at least 7 member states.[11] Volt believes that the threshold is too high to make this tool actually matter in the life of Europeans and we advocate for it to be halved to 500.000.

5. **Introduce Digital platforms to communicate with administrations at hyper-local level.** We will develop state-run platforms at hyperlocal level (e.g., city/rural area administration). The platform will be opened for anyone to participate, and citizens will be able to call public attention on particular issues, propose new projects, and provide live feedback to public projects. Citizens must gather support around their initiative, and public officials will be monitoring the platform and interact directly with their communities on it. Once an issue receives enough support, the local politics will be informed and asked to act upon it.[12]

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[11] European Commission, The European Citizen's Initiative, available at
http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/basic-facts
[12] This is inspired by examples from New York City, Boston and Bologna. See Comune di Bologna, Comunità, available at http://comunita.comune.bologna.it/about-0