Budget Talks:
Then, Now, Next

Special Report

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, the public sector is coming to grips with the realities of a networked society. People are demanding a greater say in policy decisions and are willing to work hard to have their voices heard. At the same time, policymakers are grappling with a host of interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges that require new tools and input from a larger pool of stakeholders. This landscape is at once both daunting and exhilarating, leaving public servants asking: How can technology bring citizens closer to the policymaking process?

This brief report, prepared by Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship (BII+E), examines one specific public policy innovation intended to integrate citizen input into the budget-making process in Ontario: Budget Talks. Officially launched by the Ontario government in February 2015 to inform the pre-budget consultation process, Budget Talks is a program centered on an online platform that allows the public to submit, vote on, and discuss policy ideas. Originally designed to perform the first of those three functions – idea generation – it has since evolved to incorporate elements of deliberative democracy by including an explicit link between citizen participation and government decision-making.

The following report examines the evolution of Budget Talks, identifies impacts to date, examines internal visions for the future of the program, and speculates on three plausible scenarios for the next iteration of the initiative. This analysis is rounded out by a series of recommendations and guiding design principles that internal stakeholders can use to inform strategic decision-making going forward. The insights arrived at in this report are informed by stakeholder interviews, a literature review, a co-creation workshop, and an analysis of internal documents.

KEY TAKEAWAYS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

+ **Public servants are longing to be part of something big:** As one participant put it, Budget Talks has the potential to become "a reminder of why we became public servants in the first place," providing a sense of pride stemming from bringing broad communities into the policymaking process. Such a shift may allow public servants to move from being gatekeepers and rule enforcers, to stewards and translators of the public interest.

+ **Budget Talks is an expression of the possibilities of civic participation:** Overwhelmingly, citizens and public servants see benefit in opening the policymaking process to wider participation. Budget Talks may have a role to play in renewing public interest in policymaking and civic engagement.

+ **Budget Talks has all of the ingredients needed to become a breakthrough digital engagement strategy:** Despite some internal disagreement about the direction of Budget Talks and the need for more resources to carry out the project, it has the required infrastructure (i.e., people, technology, public support, political buy-in, a culture of iteration) to become a best-in-class example of successful digital public engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The scope and scale of digital technology is shaping the way people access, consume and use products and services. People are no longer passive consumers; they are active contributors, producers, authors, activists, who are ready, willing and capable of contributing to their communities in meaningful ways.[1] In Canada this is reflected in a growing public desire to participate in policy decision making using digital tools. A poll conducted by EKOS research indicates 71 percent of Canadians believe that the "internet plays an important role in engaging citizens on important policy issues and problems," while in 2007, only 46 percent of Canadians held the same view.[2]

This shift in attitude suggests Canadians are becoming more trustful of internet-based forms of public engagement, opening space for governments to experiment with digital democracy tools. In response, some jurisdictions have opted to use technology to support budget simulations and online crowdsourcing, such as the City of Calgary's YYZ Innovation platform.[3] Other governments have experimented with more robust in-person deliberative processes, such as the City of Toronto's recent participatory budgeting pilot.[4] To help make sense of this shift towards open policymaking, Nesta has developed a "typology of digital democracy."[5] They have identified 10 types of digital democracy: (1) informing citizens; (2) issue framing; (3) citizens providing information; (4) citizens providing ideas; (5) citizens providing technical expertise; (6) deliberation; (7) citizens developing proposals; (8) citizens scrutinizing proposals; (9) citizens making decisions; and (10) citizens monitoring and assessing public actions and services.

For their part, the Government of Ontario has taken proactive steps to open up the black box of policy making. In 2013, the Province launched the Open Government initiative. Responsible for the three related priorities – "civic dialogue," "share government data," and provide Ontarians with "information they need to better understand how

their government works"[6] –the Open Government initiative has been working to strengthen practices of public engagement across government. One case example of this work is Budget Talks – a digital public engagement platform launched in February 2015 that was designed to involve Ontarians in the budget-making process. According to Nesta's typology of digital democracy, Budget Talks has increasingly incorporated more sophisticated methods (e.g., deliberation through in-person workshops and assessing and monitoring public actions through an online project tracker) to allow the public to play a more direct role in policy decision making. Since its inception, the public has submitted more than 3,000 ideas and 6,000 comments. Budget Talks is a novel case example of policy innovation, which provides an interesting opportunity to reflect on digital democracy and the role of public in shaping public policy.

SCOPE OF WORK

In fall 2017, the Ontario Digital Service (ODS) and Policy Innovation Hub (PIH) asked BII+E to examine the experimental impacts of Budget Talks and identify best practice examples of digital public engagement that could inform future iterations. This work is part of a broader effort to inspire and inform digital public engagement experiments elsewhere in government. By engaging BII+E to do this research through an open process, the ODS hopes to provide internal and external stakeholders with opportunities to continue to help shape the future of the program.

The following research questions were proposed to guide this work:

1. What have the impacts of Budget Talks been to date?

2. Are we happy with these results?

3. How do we achieve best outcomes?

This research draws from four sources of data:

+ Literature review: Twenty academic, industry, and public policy publications were reviewed to identify best practice examples of digital public engagement.

+ Semi-structured interviews: Fifteen internal stakeholder interviews were conducted to assess project team perceptions of Budget Talks.

+ Internal documents: Six internal documents were reviewed, including summary reports, press releases, and other public communications.

+ Learning lab: Twenty-two internal stakeholders took part in a half-day workshop with three objectives: (1) reflect on impacts of Budget Talks to date, (2) co-create a shared vision of the program for 2019, and (3) identify strategies to realize this vision.

HISTORY OF BUDGET TALKS

Budget Talks began February 2015 as a pilot program designed to address a public perception that the budget-making process lacked transparency. In response to these criticisms, the Government of Ontario looked to other jurisdictions and sectors to assess the potential of emerging public (particularly digital) engagement techniques that could be adopted to bring Ontarians closer to the budget process. Ultimately, a handful of public servants, with support from the Premier's Office, set out to test one of those techniques: crowdsourcing.

Now in its fourth year, Budget Talks has evolved from being simply a "website" aiming to encourage "new voices" to join the budget-making process, into being an "online consultation process" where

Ontarians can "develop policy ideas." This shift has placed new pressure both on internal stakeholders who administer the program, and on Ontarians who are now being asked to demonstrate a capacity for policy making. While important improvements have been made to the program, Budget Talks still lacks the resources (people, resources, and technology) required to more meaningfully influence the budget process.

In 2017, the process was amended to include in-person deliberation in four communities across Ontario: Sudbury, Ottawa, London, and Toronto (Figure 1). Twenty-eight Ontarians from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences worked collectively to select the top thirteen ideas for the final round of public voting. Other programmatic and technological enhancements have been made over the last four years in addition to such process improvements (Figure 2). These changes have been made in response to a call for greater transparency and a perceived need for a more focused and civil dialogue. These changes are summarized as follows:

+ Guidelines to support focused, informed and action-oriented conversations;

+ Representative in-person deliberation workshops across Ontario to select and prioritize ideas for final public voting;

+ Dedicated funds to implement these nominated ideas;

+ Online tools to help Ontarians and public servants track the progress of successful ideas; and

+ Internal training to assist moderators and policy experts to support idea generation.

Figure 1

	Five-phase process (as of 2018)
	Phase 1 – Idea submission: Citizens encouraged to submit ideas according to a set of predefined "challenge areas" and additional submission criteria.
	Phase 2 – Submission review: Policy and communication experts review ideas to see if they align with challenge areas and are feasible according to other government priorities and initiatives.
	Phase 3 – Live events (available for Budget Talks 2018): In-person workshops in Sudbury, Ottawa, London, and Toronto were used to select ideas for final voting. In total, 96 Ontarians took part, and 82 ideas were reviewed. Participants co-created evaluation criteria, reviewed proposals, and selected the top 13 for public voting.
	Phase 4 – Public voting: Thirteen ideas were made available for public voting.
	Phase 5 – Selection and implementation

Figure 2

$3 million in dedicated funding ($2.6 million spent) for up to 8 projects

$5 million in funding allocated for up to 5 projects

Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities handles deliberation

Deliberative in-person workshops introduced

Website set up to accept ideas

Discretionary process for selecting projects

$3M

$5M

2015 Budget

2016 Budget

2017 Budget

2018 Budget

Submission criteria introduced

Challenge areas more clearly defined

SOAPBOX

SUGGESTION BOX

FORUM

FACILITATED DIALOGUE

Figure 3

IDEAS

Year	Value
2015	464
2016	1,726
2017	472
2018	787

COMMENTS

Year	Value
2015	467
2016	4,340
2017	923
2018	697

VOTES

Year	Value
2015	165,796
2016	53,402
2017	19,229
2018	12,831

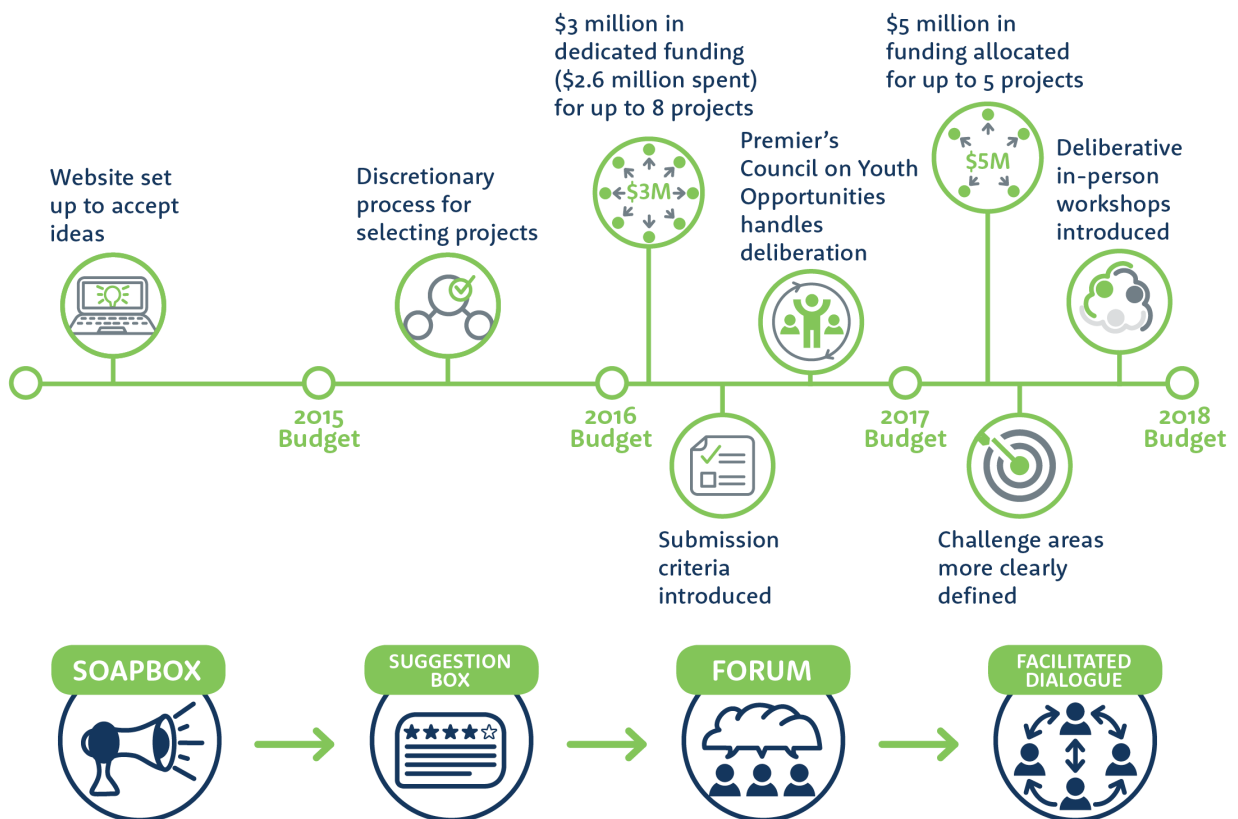## ASSESSING THE CURRENT STATE

Started as an experiment in digital public engagement, the Budget Talks project team has openly embraced the feedback provided by Ontarians where possible, stakeholders (internal and external) and made critical improvements to the platform and process. This is reflected in more focused conversations and citizen's desire to continue to be involved in the process after final voting has ended. Budget Talks has all of the essential ingredients for successful digital public engagement:

Support from decision-makers: The Budget Talks team had strong buy-in from key decision makers. There was political support from the Premier, who envisioned this as a "meaningful way to engage with people in the budget process." There is also clear buy-in at the senior management level from the ODS. This signals that people's contributions to Budget Talks will be taken seriously.

+ A growing and responsive team: There is a core Budget Talks team that is accountable for implementing the program. While Budget Talks may require more resources and alignment, incremental improvements to internal training and communications processes are beginning to show signs of a well-oiled machine.
Some internal stakeholders reported having additional autonomy to review and recommend submitted ideas.

+ A robust and efficient digital platform: Successive iterations of the Budget Talks

platform – particularly improvements to the user interface – have resulted in more focused online conversations. Additional features, such as the inclusion of clear submission guidelines, challenge areas, and a more streamlined process for submitting and commenting ideas, have all enhanced the experience.

+ Culture of iteration: The Budget Talks team is naturally inclined to listen to external and internal feedback (provided through an annual evaluation survey) and make improvements to the program, demonstrating a commitment to continuous learning. While Budget Talks still needs attention and improvement, this culture of iteration is a defining strength of the program, and one that should be drawn upon for any future adjustments.

There are also areas for potential improvement identified by internal stakeholders that can be best summarized as a need to realign resources (ingredients of success noted above) around a common vision of Budget Talks. In particular, there are competing visions of Budget Talks across and within ministries, which may stem from a shift in the intent of the program (from a website to online consultation) and changing demands placed on citizens (from being new voices to co-creating policy).

1. **Budget Talks is treated as an offshoot of the "official" budget process**

+ Not viewed as a priority: Some internal stakeholders report that they are brought into the process at a late stage. In some cases, they are brought in only days or weeks before launch without the necessary background and decision-making authority to influence process design. Others noted that they were unclear where Budget Talks fit within the broader budget and pre-consultation processes. Similarly, citizens reported frustration with a perceived lack of responsiveness from the public service.

+ Overlaps with existing work: Several interviewees reported that Budget Talks duplicates consultation processes already underway in line ministries that is not related to the budget-making process, including those both in terms of the ideas that emerged from these public dialogues and the specific community groups and Ontarians engaged. Policy ideas submitted by citizens may also be duplicating efforts from other jurisdictions. Internal stakeholders are unsure how Budget Talks fits within the broader pre-budget consultation process.

+ Ideas perceived as one-offs: Funded projects account for a small proportion of the budget and do not consider operating costs. This led several interviewees to conclude projects are "one-offs" with potentially low impact, lacking the operating funds needed to be sustainable in the long run. Citizens are only asked "to participate in a small part of the budget", a piece "too small of an engagement to be a priority-setting exercise to really inform the budget process."

2. **Set up to privilege clicking and doing (individual activities), not listening and learning (collective activities)**

+ Limited engagement due to the limitations of digital platforms: Internal stakeholders report that many ideas proposed lacked the clarity and specificity to be persuasive and engaging. This is supported by engagement metrics showing that, as of 2017, 69 percent of ideas receive only one or no comments and users spend an average of 1.8 minutes reviewing ideas. The 2017 follow-up survey, administered by the Budget Talks project team, suggests that participants are likely only reading headlines before voting – a practice consistent with other social media activity (e.g., sharing content on Twitter or Facebook).

+ Lacking the human contact typical of deliberative processes: As one participant

remarked, Budget Talks "lacks a sense of community." This is further evidenced in post-consultation survey results that show participants focused on and learned more about issues that affected them directly, as opposed to learning how government works or how the budget is made.

+ Positioned as competition: There are subtle cues that suggest Budget Talks is a competitive process, much like a pitch competition with winners and losers. This is reflected in the language used in public communications, statements made by interviewees that describe successful ideas as "winners", and in the process used to move "top ranked ideas" to the next round of voting. As one participant put it, Budget Talks has become a "popularity contest, where there are winners and losers." The process is missing compromise and consensus or, as one interviewee suggested, a move away from "hard no or yes."

3. Sending citizens mixed signals

+ The role of Ontarians could be more clearly defined: As one interviewee noted, it is "difficult to explain the budget process." As such, there is a lack of internal alignment on an appropriate level and role for citizen participation. Some suggested that proposals were not grounded in the realities of the policymaking process. While some internal stakeholders maintain that citizens do not need a deeper understanding of the issues or policymaking, others were adamant that subject matter expertise should be a prerequisite for participation. While ideas went through a rigorous vetting and assessment process, one interviewee stated that Budget Talks receives "A lot of proposals [that] are not feasible for the province to enact." The public education materials that are made available are rarely downloaded or read.

+ Aspects of the process may be made more transparent: While there have been major improvements to the process over the last four years, citizens still report a lack of information around the selection process used to eliminate ideas from the final stage of voting. Several citizens remarked that they are unclear as to how and when ideas are implemented.

+ Important voices are *still* missing: According to demographic surveys of users, only a small group of the population takes part in Budget Talks, mostly those who are wealthy and highly educated. This has led some stakeholders to question: "Do we want to hear from the same people over and over again, or reach a completely different set of people who do not engage because they do not think government cares?" Emphasis on digital participation is seen by some internal stakeholders as exacerbating the digital divide in Ontario, limiting access to the process for traditionally underrepresented communities.

CO-CREATING A RENEWED VISION

On March 2, 2018, BII+E hosted a workshop with stakeholders from across the Ontario Public Service (OPS) to reflect on the impacts of Budget Talks and co-create a shared vision of the program going forward. In total, 22 people took part. The half-day event featured three activities. First, preliminary research insights were presented to the group, giving attendees an opportunity to learn about internal perceptions of Budget Talks. Second, participants engaged in a hybrid empathy mapping activity in which they were asked to envision what success for Budget Talks might look like for Ontarians and the public service in 2019, and to identify mutual goals. This work was used to draft a high-level 2019 vision statement for Budget Talks. Third, using the vision statement as inspiration, participants collectively brainstormed tactics to realize their vision.

BII+E analyzed the outputs from the three activities and identified the following key themes that reflect workshop participants' future vision for Budget Talks. These are internal stakeholders' aspirations of what Budget Talks could become in the future.

+ **Clarified scope and mandate:** Workshop participants agreed Budget Talks should be optimized around a specific and realistic role for participants. Alternatively to allowing participants to submit ideas, Budget Talks could be an opportunity for the public to help "set priorities," "inform implementation" and "be active in making trade-offs." More than anything, Budget Talks should be rebranded as an ongoing dialogue with Ontarians about a range of important public policy issues with implications for the budget.

+ **Focused impact:** The outcomes of Budget Talks must be felt by Ontarians and should feed into the broader strategic priorities of the government. A one-off project approach is insufficient.

+ **Strengthened commitment to inclusion:** Workshop participants unanimously agreed that greater input from voices who are underrepresented in policymaking processes must be a central goal of Budget Talks moving forward.

+ **A dialogue based on trust and mutual understanding:** Most Ontarians have not been exposed to the realities of government decision-making (e.g. limited resources, heightened expectations, and constant trade-offs). Success will depend upon Ontarians and public servants making the effort to better understand each other's perspectives and lived experiences.

+ **A source of inspiration and place of pride:** Workshop participants remarked that they want to feel "invigorated," "energized" and "proud" of the project. They emphasize the importance of having their work respected and their voices heard. Improving the standing of Budget Talks among other ministries and departments should be a goal.

+ **Ontarians primed for civic action:** Budget Talks can be a step toward sustained civic participation in democratic life. Public participants can come to Budget Talks knowing nothing about government or how policies are made, and gain the basic knowledge needed to meaningfully participate in civic life in their local communities.

+ **From gatekeepers to translators:** For most participants, Budget Talks represents an opportunity to reconnect with the passion they had when they first joined the public service. Beyond simply enforcing rules and filtering through unpractical ideas submitted by Budget Talks participants, some public servants expressed interest in helping Ontarians translate their ideas into opportunities.

A crosscutting theme emerging from the workshop is that Budget Talks is more than just a technocratic process of budget making, despite what the name may imply. It is perhaps most importantly an expression of democratic life. Time and again, workshop participants remarked that Budget Talks should be transformed into a platform for mutual dialogue, where Ontarians can help government identify pressing public issues, work collectively to identify possible solutions, deliberate on the trade-offs required to implement policy, and continually reflect on the impacts of these efforts. No doubt this is a tall order, but it is a vision worth pursuing.

FUTURE SCENARIOS OF BUDGET TALKS

The current iteration of Budget Talks has all the essential ingredients to become a best-in-class example of digital public engagement. A renewed

vision and common purpose are needed to realize this goal. Based on the workshop, BII+E envisions three plausible futures for Budget Talks: incremental improvements to the existing program, or transformation to a shared digital infrastructure to identify, frame, and prioritize public issues with Ontarians.

It is important to note that these scenarios are based on feedback received from internal stakeholders who were able to participate in this process. They should be further refined, and be validated and/or co-created with Ontarians.

BUDGET TALKS+

Improvements to the current program to optimize for the best ideas possible.

Goals: Support, educate, and curate ideas submitted by Ontarians to receive funding to complement of the pre-budget consultation process.

What this could look like in practice:

+ Incremental improvements to Budget Talks based on suggestions from internal and external stakeholders;

+ Ministry partners are engaged earlier in the process, and contribute to defining policy priorities and challenge(s) for the next iteration;

+ The process starts with in-person public deliberations / discussions to inform the idea and selection phases organized in concert with the Ministry of Finance, optimizing use of engagement in person (best suited for depth, cooperation and deliberation) and online (best suited for reach and scale);

+ Higher quality and feasible ideas are submitted and seriously considered due to the in-person consultations;

+ Ideas selected for funding are shared; and

+ Engaging educational resources are provided for policy priorities and the budget process, ensuring more people have the information they need in order to contribute meaningfully.

Scenario 1

What this looks like for...

Ontarians

You check your social media and notice an ad for Budget Talks. Curious, you click on it and notice one of the policy area prioritized is one you care about. You have an idea. You click through the website to learn what the government is already doing in this area and to learn about the budget process. You revise the idea you were going to submit after considering this new information. You post your idea on Budget Talks and "follow your idea" to get notifications on it. You see someone comment on it and realize it is someone from the ministry. You read their suggestions and modify your idea accordingly. You see people voting for your contribution. While your idea was not selected, you feel like you learned about policymaking and made a positive contribution to the process.

The Public Service

Several months before the launch of the project, you receive a ministry-wide email asking you what themes Budget Talks should consider. There is a ministry-wide meeting you can attend to participate in the deliberations. Interested, you attend the meeting and notice that many public servants with different roles are present. You all agree that a particular policy issue should be a focus for Budget Talks, and you work internally with your ministry to support the project. When Budget Talks launches, you and your ministry colleagues encourage public discussion and consideration of ideas. At the end, you are part of a review committee where you recommend a shortlist of ideas. Once the ideas have been voted on, you work with your ministry to construct a plan to implement the chosen contribution.

Why we like this example

This case study highlights the importance of investing staff resources to support citizen participation in developing policy recommendations.

Description

This is an online portal in Brazil set up in 2009 aimed at adapting "the mechanism of virtual communities of practice to the formulation of laws to engage a broader segment of society in debates of national legislative issues." The platform is designed to host virtual communities.

Participation

Between 2009 and 2015, eDemocracia attracted 37,000 registered users with over 52 million views.

Methods

+ The website is organized along three areas: (1) virtual communities on thematic areas, (2) "free space" to submit ideas, and (3) Wikilegis to collaboratively draft legislation.
+ It reaches people through targeted emails and social media.
+ It employs a team of over 200 legislative consultants to prepare content, moderate discussion, and educate citizens.
+ Engagements lead to a final report on citizen feedback through online consultations that explains which ideas were used for legislation, as well as how and where the representatives responsible for the ideas agreed or disagreed with them.[7]

Outcomes The project has led to the co-creation of legislation, Brazil's Youth Statute Bill and the Internet Civil Rights Bill. Political representatives claim that it has exposed them to novel views and ideas, which has led to an improved quality of legislative debate and the legislation itself. One of the challenges remains ascertaining the demographics of participants.

HUB FOR DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Shared digital infrastructure to identify, frame, and prioritize public issues with Ontarians

Goals: Create a shared digital infrastructure for all Ministries to engage Ontarians in ongoing dialogue about important public policy issues.

What this could look like in practice:

+ The digital hub (formerly the Budget Talks platform) becomes a resource allowing multiple Ministries to support ongoing civic engagement;

+ Ministries seek out this resource to reach members of the public and discuss key policy decisions;

+ Ministries create a dedicated portfolio that is managed annually by a policy and communications representative;

+ The focus of deliberation moves away from idea generation, to setting and framing key policy priorities;

+ Stakeholders from other jurisdictions and sectors are invited to join the network; and

+ Educational resources are provided to enable an understanding of provincial governance processes.

Ontarians

You log into the new platform. The government is considering three different options for issue X and is seeking input from members of the public in order to influence the decision-making process. You contribute your thoughts on the most recent deliberation in the Ontario Government's "civic engagement hub." After finishing your session on the platform, you feel proud to live in a province where the government is engaging its constituents on important issues. You feel heard, and that you have heard other Ontarians. You feel confident that your contribution will make a difference after reading the examples of previous deliberations held on the platform.

The Public Service

Now that you have access to standardized digital infrastructure, you will save time when it comes to public engagement. You feel like you have a fresh perspective on the policy issue you're tackling. You have a better sense of the digital toolkit that is available for you to use when interacting with the public. You are able to choose the right digital tools to deliver on your public engagement goals. You feel invigorated and energized, and are excited to learn more about what the public has to say about your policy area.

VTAIWAN

Why we like this example
This online consultation process uses a phased approach with an emphasis on ensuring citizens are engaging in fact-finding together, thus equipping participants with the baseline knowledge to meaningfully contribute. It also encourages a deliberative approach of weighing priorities and reaching consensus.

Description
Established in 2014, vTaiwan is an online-based consultation process aimed at leveraging "citizen science" to convene a wide range of stakeholders through a mix of online and offline activities. It aims to encourage participants to deliberate on a policy issue and achieve a "rough consensus" on specific ideas.

Participation
Engages anywhere between 350 and 2,300 participants per issue.

Methods

+ There is a four-phased approach with an extensive fact-finding element built into the process, and embedded components to educate the public about the focus issue and the overall process of how ideas turn into concrete policies.[16]
+ Uses the Pol.is open source tool to facilitate online dialogue to encourage participants to reach a "rough consensus" on policy issues.
+ Public servants are encouraged to comment and give feedback to citizens on the platform.
+ vTaiwan also uses a number of digital tools like Slideshare and Hackpad to provide materials to educate citizens and document consultation progress.

Outcomes
Citizen deliberations through vTaiwan have led to legislative and regulatory changes on a variety of issues such as online alcohol sales, ride-sharing, and the "Closely Held Company Law." As deliberations involve multiple parties, it has been relatively easy to pass legislation where the vTaiwan process is used.
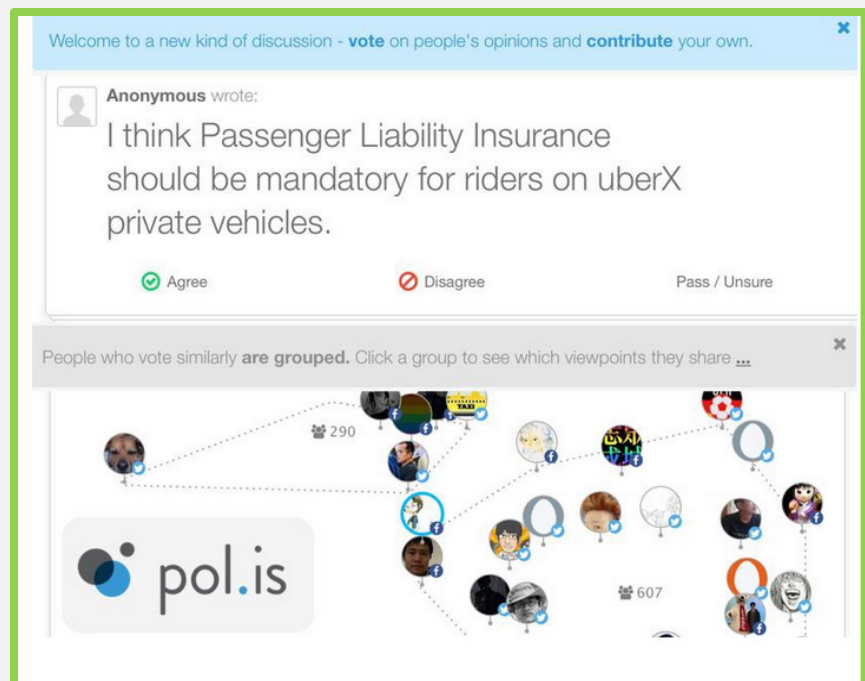
CONNECTING IRL FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Enhanced in-person and online engagements to include Ontarians not typically involved in the policy making process.

Goals: Reach and build capacity of traditionally underrepresented Ontarians in the policymaking process with enhanced in-person outreach and engagement sessions to complement online engagements.

What this could look like in practice:

+ Ministries invest significantly in localized outreach with dedicated, culturally-competent staff trained in engaging underrepresented groups;

+ There are significantly more in-person engagement sessions hosted in local community hubs aimed at educating people on the budget process and how they are able to contribute, both in-person and through a complementary digital platform;

+ A digital platform for online engagement exists to encourage conversation that also serves as a record to document in-person engagement;

+ Activating a community of practice in various local communities with linkages to the public service to engage underrepresented groups in the policymaking process;

+ The focus on including underrepresented voices in the policymaking process will necessitate citizens to play more of an agenda-setting role; and

+ Accessible, plain language educational resources are provided to help people understand their stake for participating in policymaking processes with tips on how to get involved.

Ontarians

You come from a community with relatively slow access to internet. You have not thought about engaging with government until you saw bright advertisements in your local library that promotes a local engagement workshop on public budgeting in your language. You decide to attend and are welcome by the library staff to attend the public budgeting 101 session for first-timers. This positive experience motivates you to tell your friends about it and thinking what other government public engagement processes are out there that you can involve yourself in. Furthermore, while you are still at the library, you go to a nearby computer workstation to check out the online platform the workshop was referring to about how you can continue to stay involved.

The Public Service

Now you understand that your job will require you to meet "outreach targets" for underrepresented groups throughout Ontario that will require you to go to different communities. You have a list of local stakeholders that you are able to draw upon to help you reach underrepresented groups to engage them in the policymaking process. You are trained to deliver in-person engagement sessions to educate and help underrepresented groups participate, both in-person and online. You feel inspired knowing that you are able to help many people engage with the policymaking process for the first time in their lives, and obtain fresh perspectives from stakeholders that you know the government has typically not received.

ESTONIAN'S PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY (RAHVAKOGU) AND RAHVAALAGATUS

Why we like this example
In spite of Estonia widely being considered the best in class for digital governance, this case demonstrates the need for an offline and in-person engagement strategy can complement a digital platform to ensure that underrepresented voices are able to contribute. Furthermore, it provides lessons with respect to mobilizing community-based stakeholders to do localized outreach.

Description
Estonia in 2012 launched a crowd-sourcing process called "Rahvakogu" or "The People's Assembly." In 2016, they launched the Rahvaalagatus out of the Rahvakogu process to co-create a platform with a non-governmental organization called "Let's Do it" to enable citizens to submit citizen-led proposals to be submitted to Parliament.

Participation
About 60, 000 participants visiting the site with over 2,000 registered users that initiated 2,000 proposals. From these proposals, 15 proposals were submitted to Parliament for consideration.

Methods
+ There is a five-phased approach to the rollout of the Rahvakogu process. The earlier phases are concerned with obtaining public input for ideas, having citizens scrutinize the proposals and stakeholder deliberations to select the best idea.
+ There was a strategy to collect information on a participant's pre-existing participation into the political process to test if they were representative of the general public.
+ There was iteration to deliberately engage underrepresented groups. This entailed a deliberate strategy to building relationships with civil society organizations and pre-existing networks to raise awareness about the platform to identified underrepresented groups.[8]
+ Enabled opportunities for citizens to co-own the process through features like a competition to name the platform and for participants to report on bugs on the platform.
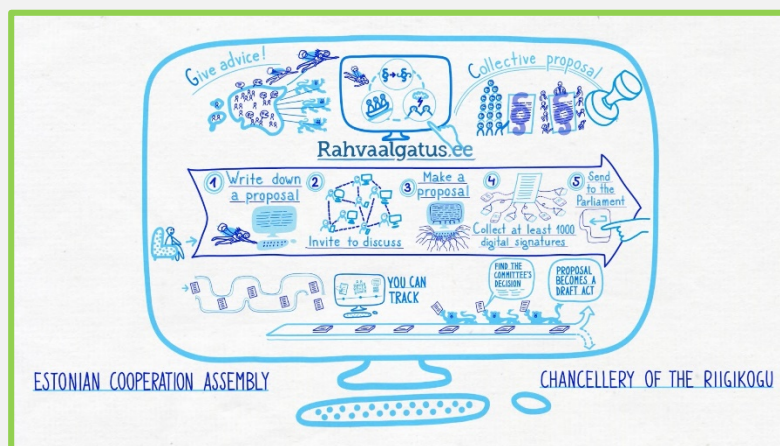
Outcomes
The Rahvakogu process has led to three new pieces of citizen-led legislation, including the creation of the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform. This also led a to a robust network of civil society organizations informed of mobilizing citizens around using the two platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regardless of which of the above three scenarios is selected, or others that might emerge, the following recommendations and set of design principles are offered to support the evolution of future iterations of Budget Talks. These recommendations are based both on feedback received from stakeholders and best practices.

+ **Give people the information they need to effectively participate:** Ontarians and public servants need access to more engaging and complete materials that explain policy priority areas, the budget process, and governance.

+ **Design an inclusive process which brings more voices to the table:** An inclusive consultation process should not present high barriers to participation, so that it does not exclude voices which are traditionally underrepresented in policymaking. Budget Talks should engage Ontarians in the channels which make most sense; namely online for reach and scale, and in-person for depth and deliberation.

+ **Engage ministry partners early and resource them appropriately:** Ministry partners want to meaningfully contribute to Budget Talks through planning, identifying priority areas, and using resources from both communications and policy-based teams. Digital engagement requires dedicated staff resources, even if it relies on volunteers.[18]

+ **Invest in marketing and branding Budget Talks to drive greater participation:** Interviewees argued for allocating more resources into marketing and branding Budget Talks so that the public immediately understands the importance and intended influence of the project.

+ **Publicly share feedback and evaluate:** Ontarians expect to see the outcomes of their contribution and the Budget Talks Project Tracker is a good start.[18] However, more can be done to explain how ideas become policy and how specific policies link back to government priorities.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

These design principle cards are intended to support strategic decision making related to Budget Talks. They are based on insights uncovered throughout the research project.

A SOURCE OF CIVIC PRIDE

Energize and excite public servants through the use of modern digital tools to meaningfully engage broader communities.

PRIME FOR ACTION

Ensure the platform meaningfully impacts government decision-making and leads to action that can be felt, measured, and implemented. This includes being transparent about what happens with decisions and sharing progress.

INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE BASED ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Enable deeper dialogue between the public and public servants based on a mutual understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by both groups in their everyday lives. Include all voices, especially typically underrepresented ones, to truly reflect all Ontarians.

FROM GATEKEEPING TO TRANSLATING

Enable public servants to transition from being gatekeepers, imposing rules and processes, to being translators, energized by the prospect of transforming raw ideas into opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Ontario has an opportunity to leverage the inspiration, excitement, collaboration, and hope felt at the end of the workshop and transform Budget Talks. It can become a respected resource within the provincial government, enabling Ontarians to collaborate with the public service on key policy issues. There are a number of existing characteristics within the ODS that indicate such a transformation would prove successful, including: (1) a culture of iteration and design, (2) an existing digital platform for public engagement, (3) connections with internal and external stakeholders, and (4) the public expectation of and demand for digital engagement.

We hope that this report spurs thinking and continued dialogue around the future of the Budget Talks. As well, we hope it provides useful insights and public value to other organizations which are experimenting with new digitally-enabled approaches to public engagement and open policymaking. Within a few years, we hope that Budget Talks has become an inspiring example of digital democracy in practice, and a respected model for other jurisdictions.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS

1. Tell me about your involvement with Budget Talks. What was your specific role in the process?

2. From your perspective, what was the intended goal of Budget Talks? Do you think it was successful in meeting that intended goal? Why?

3. How did citizen input influence how you implemented budget talks, if at all?

4. How would you change Budget Talks in the future? For example, would you scrap it, make minor changes, or give it a massive overhaul?

5. What more could the OPS be doing to engage citizens through the Budget process? Is the budget process the best timing to do major engagements?

APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWEES

The 15 stakeholders we interviewed consisted of:

+ 5 public servants working for the ODS
+ 2 public servants working for the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
+ 2 public servants working for the Ministry of Education
+ 1 political staff working for the Office of the Premier
+ 1 public servant working for the Ministry of Economic Development and Growth
+ 1 public servant working for the Ministry of Finance
+ 1 public servant working for the Ministry of Senior Affairs
+ 1 public servant working for the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport
+ 1 representative from the Ontario Library Association

APPENDIX C: DETAILED LEARNING LAB AGENDA

March 2, 2018 — 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.
Budget Talks: Getting Into Formation

Time	Duration	Activity
8:30 a.m.	15 minutes	Set-Up
8:45 a.m.	15 minutes	Coffee / Networking / Registration
9:00 a.m.	5 minutes	Event Kick-Off and Welcome
9:05 a.m.	5 minutes	Welcome — Context setting and Objectives

Time	Duration	Activity
9:10 a.m.	5 minutes	Agenda Review and Tone Setting
9:15 a.m.	20 minutes	Introductions and Warm-Up + Select an object from the table (small toys, gadgets, tools, etc.) + Introduce yourself (name and role) + Share how this object might represent the current or future state of Budget Talks + Those with current state speak first, then go around the room again for future state
9:35 a.m.	15 minutes	Research Read-Out + Present preliminary findings from internal stakeholder reviews + Refer to one-page summary on tables + Q+A
9:50 a.m.	20 minutes	Reflection (conversations in groups of 2-3) + What do you take away from the research findings? + What is most surprising to you? + Where do you see the greatest opportunity?
10:10 a.m.	15 minutes	Break
10:25 a.m.	35 minutes	Visioning + Empathy mapping + Co-creating a vision statement
11:00 a.m.	30 minutes	Ideation + Clustering and identifying themes + Brainstorming tactics to realize the vision
11:30 a.m.	20 minutes	Share-back + Groups present vision statements and ideas
11:50 a.m.	10 minutes	Wrap-Up
12:00 p.m.	10 minutes	Lunch

APPENDIX D: LEARNING LAB EVALUATION FEEDBACK

Each area is ranked from 1 to 5, with the mean scores presented below.

Clear Workshop Goals: 4.3
Achieved Workshop Goals: 4.4
Organization: 4.9
Facilitation: 4.8
Good Use of Time: 4.5

How was this workshop different from other workshops?
Welcoming and collaborative; group activities were productive; facilitation and organization

What was the most valuable?
Safe space for dialogue; representation from line ministries and different functional areas; research insights and framing; identifying real opportunities

What was the least valuable?
Up-front framing as positive; warm-up activity; some random, unfeasible ideas

What would you improve?
Move around the room; circulate agenda or pre-reads in advance; reinforce the rules of safe space; consider failures

General Comments
Interested in final report; would have liked more discussion

ENDNOTES

[1] Ritzer, G., and Jurgenson, N., 2010.

[2] EKOS Research, 2018

[3] Civic Innovation YYC, 2017

[4] City of Toronto, 2017

[5] Simon, J., et al., 2017, p. 8

[6] Treasury Board Secretariat, 2017

[7] Simon, J., et. al., 2017, p. 29-33

[8] Simon, J., et. al., 2017, p. 78

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