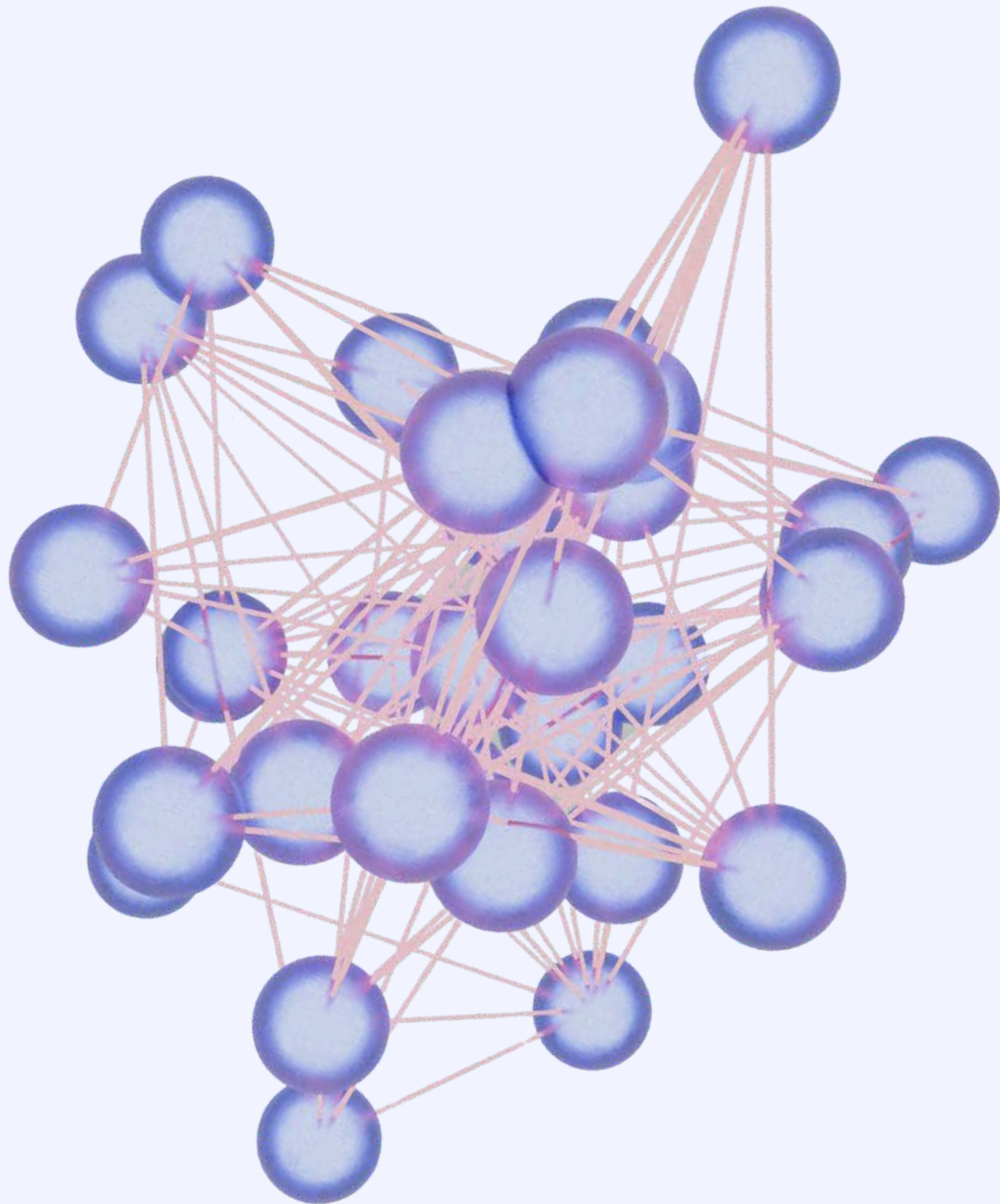


A VISION FOR THE DEMOCRACY DATA SPACE

SEPTEMBER 2025



**Open
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Politics



STARTIN' BLOX

About

The authors

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Open Source Politics

Open Source Politics is a social economy company offering innovative solutions for participatory democracy and civic engagement. Our expertise is based on two key elements that are essential for meaningful initiatives: consultancy support at every stage, from the design to the evaluation of participatory projects, including running workshops, mobilisation strategies and drafting summaries; and technical expertise in the deployment, hosting, maintenance and adaptation of open source software dedicated to digital democracy. In a decade, we have supported more than 200 organisations in 10 countries, from local authorities to the European Commission. Since 2017, we have been the main integrator of Decidim in France and Europe.

→ opensourcepolitics.eu



Startin'blox

The Startin'blox team brings together interoperability experts. Since 2018, they have helped 30 organisations in their transition to interoperable information systems. Among them, the European Media Data Space (TEMS / TAMIS), the European Space Agency (ESA) or the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). They have developed an open source Data Search Engine that customers can easily deploy on their servers to access and search data in their partners' databases. This search engine includes a catalogue of 28 plug-ins (directory, mapping, profile pages, etc.) that enable users to interact with their searches in an easy-to-use interface.

→ startinblox.com

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Summary

Why a Democracy Data Space?

Why a Democracy Data Space?

Across Europe and beyond, democratic institutions face growing challenges: declining trust, fragmented participation tools, and increasing disconnect between civic engagement and public decision-making. While citizens continue to seek meaningful ways to contribute — particularly through digital means — current platforms often remain isolated, poorly coordinated, and insufficiently linked to institutional processes. The result is a widespread sense of disempowerment and limited democratic impact.

A Co-Designed Vision

This vision paper is the result of a multi-stage co-creation process involving public institutions, civic tech developers, cooperative actors, researchers, and European networks. Through workshops, interviews, and early-stage experiments, the project identified key democratic challenges and produced:

- A shared diagnosis of fragmentation and inefficiencies;
- Concrete use cases and user profiles;
- Four foundational democratic design principles:
 - Autonomy with Accountability
 - Enabling Democratic Intelligence
 - Federated and Nested Architectures
 - Democracy as a Transversal Infrastructure

Data Spaces as a Structural Opportunity

Data spaces offer a promising response. By enabling interoperability, traceability, and shared governance standards, they can address critical flaws in today's digital democracy infrastructure.

A democracy data space would:

- Connect contributions across platforms, levels, and territories;
- Strengthen the visibility and influence of citizen input;
- Support a pluralistic, open, and collaborative civic tech ecosystem;
- Enhance transparency and accountability in democratic processes.

Next Step: A Collective Proof of Concept

The upcoming phase is to develop a dual proof of concept that demonstrates the practical benefits of interoperability in civic tech. On the one hand, a technical proof of concept will include interoperable and AI-enhanced citizen participation interfaces capable of supporting features such as automated synthesis of contributions, multilingual accessibility, or intelligent clustering of inputs. This will serve as a testing ground for the principles outlined in this paper and help identify technical bottlenecks and shared solutions. On the other hand, an organizational proof of concept will take the form of a steering committee composed of civic tech actors, democratic institutions, and civil society organizations, tasked with defining the foundations of governance. All interested stakeholders — public or private, institutional or grassroots — are invited to join this effort.

Towards a Shared Infrastructure for Democratic Resilience

This paper is not a final blueprint, but a call to action. It aims to lay the foundation for a broader ecosystem that enables democratic processes to be more connected, transparent, and responsive — using digital tools not to replace democracy, but to strengthen it.

Part 1

Why Building a Democracy Data Space

Democracy and civic tech

Across many democracies today, a profound sense of democratic fatigue has taken hold. While electoral systems remain formally intact, civic engagement is waning and public trust in institutions is declining. Participation in elections continues to fall, particularly among younger generations, while confidence in political parties, parliaments, and the media erodes. These symptoms reflect a broader crisis of representation and legitimacy, often referred to as the "post-democratic" condition, where the rituals of democracy persist but their transformative potential has diminished. In this landscape, digital consultations have emerged as a partial remedy, an attempt to renew public deliberation and foster more inclusive, transparent policymaking. Yet they remain fragile and frequently underutilized. Without institutional guarantees of follow-up, many citizens express frustration at contributing without ever seeing results, an issue epitomized by the fate of France's *cahiers de doléances*, where thousands of pages of citizen input remain largely inaccessible, unstudied, or ignored. Meanwhile, the information ecosystem in which democracy unfolds has grown increasingly unstable. Disinformation, surveillance, and the instrumental use of polling data now shape electoral behavior and media narratives, undermining the conditions for collective truth and reasoned debate.

Within this fraught environment, civic tech has emerged as a field of both promise and limitation. Over the past decade, dozens of platforms such as Decidim, Consul, GoVocal or Your Priorities have facilitated new forms of citizen engagement from participatory budgeting to online petitions and digital deliberation. Many of these platforms were created by or for local governments, civil society actors, or researchers, with the aim of scaling participatory democracy and increasing institutional responsiveness. However, the civic tech ecosystem remains fragmented and heterogeneous. Projects are often developed independently, with different standards, levels

of openness, and operational models. This has led to significant disparities in access, visibility and influence. Moreover, civic tech platforms frequently operate without clear links to formal policy-making chains or robust data governance frameworks. As a result, they often struggle to demonstrate the concrete impact of citizen participation, which in turn can further erode public trust and motivation to engage.

One core limitation lies in the absence of a shared data infrastructure. Today, civic tech platforms largely function in isolation, each managing its own user data, participation history and decision-making outputs. Without interoperability, the potential for aggregation, cross-platform learning and accountability mechanisms is severely constrained. For instance, a citizen participating in a municipal consultation on environmental planning may have no way to track whether their contribution informs regional or national policies. Similarly, a policymaker wishing to understand public opinion on a cross-cutting issue (e.g. AI regulation, healthcare reform) must navigate a patchwork of disconnected tools and datasets. In this context, data spaces offer a foundational opportunity: to enable secure, transparent, and modular collaboration among actors in the democratic ecosystem. They could provide the missing infrastructure to connect deliberative processes, enhance traceability, and empower stakeholders to operate on shared ethical and technical standards, thereby strengthening the credibility and coherence of democratic innovation.

Democracy and data spaces

As part of the European strategy for data¹, the European Commission (EC) announced its intention to support the emergence of Common European Data Spaces. Some of the early data spaces' experiments are notably aimed at public administrations, *"to enable innovative 'gov tech', 'reg tech' and 'legal tech' applications"*². Interestingly though, no explicit mention of democratic challenges can be found among strategic directions given by the EC. This is particularly striking as the data space strategy claims to be aligned with the Digital Services Act's (DSA) aim *"to increase democratic control [...] of online content"*³.

Empirical observations however demonstrate that democracy is an issue both central to data spaces, and that data spaces could offer – at least some – solutions to challenges met by current democratic structures.

1. <https://www.citethisforme.com>

2. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/second-staff-working-document-data-spaces>

3. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/second-staff-working-document-data-spaces>

Democratic governance within data spaces

Data spaces are defined by the EC as technical and governance infrastructures facilitating the access and reuse of data among stakeholders⁴. The focus on designing appropriate governance infrastructures is indeed key to mobilize organizations around a common collaborative infrastructure, as theorized and verified by long-standing and extensive academic literature⁵.

Democracy could arguably be a suitable model of governance for data spaces. In fact, democratic principles are already (implicitly) embedded in template documents offered to data space leaders, such as the Rulebook model for a Fair Data Economy: *“In the event that the Committee is not able to achieve a consensus, a proposal that is supported by at least a majority of 2/3 OR 1/2 of the Representatives present at the meeting will be adopted as the Steering Committee’s decision”*⁶.

Unfortunately, to our knowledge, democratic governance rules are yet to receive sufficient attention from data space support organizations and institutions, but also from the larger practitioner and academic community. We claim that such a gap may result in strategic and managerial inefficiencies which could seriously hamper the viability and credibility of data space projects⁷.

Prospective ideas include drawing experience from established inter-organizational frameworks of governance, or meta-organizations. Social economy federations and second-level cooperatives were identified as illustrative examples in this respect^{8,9}.

Data spaces for democratic governance

Not only can data spaces benefit from shaping their governance around democratic principles: they may also be relevant to help address democratic challenges at a societal level.

In March 2023, as part of its event series “The web post-platforms”, Cap

4. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/data-spaces>

5. See for instance: Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008), Berkowitz and al. (2022), Ostrom E. (1990), Ostrom V. and al. (1961)

6. <https://www.sitra.fi/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/rulebook-model-for-a-fair-data-economy-part-2-v3c.pdf>

7. https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Social-economy-definition-of-a-data-space_final.pdf

8. https://social-economy-gateway.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7df46bca-aa41-4e40-a11c-1c0a1485b988_en?filename=EU%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Data%20Sharing%20in%20the%20Social%20Economy.pdf

9. https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Envisioning-social-economy-data-spaces_final.pdf

Digital, Sharers&Workers and Startin'blox hosted a panel session to discuss how interoperable technologies could contribute to foster citizen engagement, support collective learning, and contribute to make governance frameworks more open and transparent¹⁰. In the same vein, academics have proposed research agendas to explore whether interoperable data infrastructures could help social economy organizations in addressing the apparent tension between active democratic governance, and scaling up economic models¹¹.

Some ongoing projects ambition to explore and operationalize the contribution of data spaces to addressing democratic challenges. For instance, the Trusted European Media Data Space's (TEMS) trial 1 focuses specifically on a B2B exchange platform for fact-checking, aiming to “*increase visibility and exchange of reliable news content*”¹², a much-needed approach at a time where the massive production and diffusion of fake-news have demonstrated its ability to disrupt the stability of national democratic processes¹³.

Such emerging initiatives are however yet to be consolidated around a common and explicit agenda. As a result, the contribution of data spaces to protect and revive democracy both within organization life and at a societal level, remain a theoretical proposal unfit to kick-start a structured multi-stakeholder mobilization.

Towards a democracy data space

This vision paper is grounded in the conviction that the digital transformation of democratic life must move beyond isolated tools and fragmented initiatives. It sets out to explore the foundational principles, design requirements, and potential use cases for a **data space dedicated to democracy**, an infrastructure capable of supporting, interconnecting, and safeguarding democratic processes across institutional levels, territories, and actors. The ambition is not merely technical: it is to create a trustworthy environment where citizen participation is more visible, traceable, and impactful; where diverse platforms can cooperate without sacrificing their autonomy; and where democratic deliberation is enhanced rather than undermined by digital technologies.

10. <https://www.maddynews.com/evenement/le-web-apres-les-plateformes-democratie-interoperabilite/>

11. Cousin (2022)

12. <https://tems-dataspace.eu/trials/>

13. [Farkas & Schou \(2019\)](#)

More specifically, this paper pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it seeks to clarify how interoperability, both technical and institutional, can help consolidate fragmented democratic practices into a more coherent and navigable ecosystem. Second, it aims to outline a set of design principles and governance models that ensure such a data space respects and reinforces democratic values such as inclusion, transparency, autonomy, and accountability. Third, it provides illustrative use cases and policy recommendations to inform future experimentation, stakeholder engagement, and standard-setting efforts at local, national, and European levels.

The concept of a democracy data space is still emerging. This paper does not aim to deliver a definitive blueprint, and deliberately leaves technical specifications out of scope, to be developed in subsequent work. Instead, it seeks to initiate a structured conversation among civic tech actors, public institutions, civil society, researchers and citizens. Drawing from co-design workshops, interviews and existing projects, it offers a preliminary framework for action, one that invites collective refinement, critical reflection, and long-term coalition-building. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to a broader European effort to strengthen democratic resilience in the face of growing complexity, disinformation, and political disengagement.

Part 2

Co-Creating the Vision: Process and Methodology

This vision paper is the result of a multi-stage co-design process that engaged a broad range of actors involved in democratic participation, digital infrastructure, and civic innovation. Rather than starting with a predefined blueprint, the methodology adopted here focused on iterative learning, grounded conversations, and the identification of real-world tensions and use cases — laying the groundwork for any future architectural or governance framework. The objective was to shape a shared understanding of what a data space for democracy could be — not only in terms of technical infrastructure, but also as a vehicle for institutional legitimacy, citizen empowerment, and collective intelligence.

The process unfolded across seven major stages:

1 - Event “The Web Post-Platforms” (March 2023)

As part of the event series “The Web Post-Platforms”, Cap Digital, Sharers&Workers, and Startin’blox co-organized a public session dedicated to the intersection of democracy and interoperability. The panel explored how decentralized and interoperable technologies could enhance citizen engagement, facilitate knowledge sharing, and foster more open and transparent governance frameworks. This early exchange helped surface key questions about infrastructure design and democratic accountability that would later shape the foundational assumptions of the project.

2 - Feasibility Study (December 2024)

Conducted in partnership with Bordeaux Métropole (France), this early-stage study explored the potential for interoperability between existing Decidim platforms operated by different municipalities. While the initial scope was framed as a technical and organizational inquiry into cross-instance synchronization, the study revealed deeper governance and infrastructure challenges. These included a lack of shared data models, unclear value propositions across actors, and the

absence of a common vision for democratic infrastructure. This work laid the groundwork for expanding the initiative beyond a local context, prompting the need for broader ecosystem-level reflection and ultimately triggering the next phases of this project.

3 - Co-Creation Workshops (February–March 2025)

Two online sessions brought together actors from local governments, civic tech companies, cooperative movements, and European networks.

- The first workshop focused on imagining a data space for democracy that would enhance **transparency, interoperability, and accessibility** across platforms and jurisdictions.
- The second workshop explored **trust, governance, and the articulation of democratic and economic data spaces**, identifying both technical standards and ethical guidelines as foundational.

4 - Framing Workshop (March 2025)

Hosted in-person in Strasbourg (France) with key stakeholders from digital democracy and interoperability networks, this workshop laid the groundwork by aligning terminologies and surfacing initial expectations regarding data reuse, legitimacy chains, and governance structures.

5 - One-on-One Interviews (April–May 2025)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners embedded in democratic systems, including municipal innovation officers, civil society leaders of participative decision-making processes, European-level policy-makers, a researcher, and employees of civic tech platforms. These conversations helped uncover operational challenges, such as political misalignment, lack of interoperability, and underused civic tech infrastructure — while also revealing a strong will to experiment with new forms of collaboration.

6 - Synthesis and Vision Drafting (May–June 2025)

Insights from workshops and interviews were consolidated into working documents. Several iterations of a shared vision were produced, incorporating user journeys, critical tensions (e.g., autonomy vs. standardization), and initial principles for structuring a democratic data space. This document is the latest iteration of that work. During the summer of 2025, it was submitted, in English or French, for review by the participants in the co-creation workshops and people we interviewed.

7 - Final Workshop (September 2025)

1. A concluding session was held to validate the proposed design principles and governance orientations, and to identify early

adopters, with a focus on concrete use cases and potential pilot pathways. This workshop also served to align on implementation scenarios and shared priorities.

We draw readers' attention to the fact that this methodology did not foresee a dedicated space for direct participation from individual citizens. Such a decision was not taken lightly, as it involved rich conversations among team members and stakeholders. It was driven by a structural concern: data spaces are typically conceived as collaborative infrastructures for data sharing among organizations. While we acknowledge that enabling citizens' direct involvement would represent a significant improvement, such an ambition faces the complexity of inter-organizational frameworks and the current lack of methodological support tailored to citizen participation. Our priority was therefore to create a safe entry point for organizations willing to join and, in time, to co-develop suitable formats for engaging citizens directly. We are aware, however, that this decision carried a risk — namely, the possibility of shaping a data space that merely confirms existing democratic practices instead of fostering disruptive innovation. To mitigate this risk, we actively invited and engaged civil society organizations working in the fields of democratic participation and representation, ensuring their perspectives would enrich and challenge the process.

Part 3

Structuring a Vision: Challenges and Assumptions

This section is the outcome of a collective design process carried out over several months, combining co-creation workshops, stakeholder interviews, and internal strategic reflection. As the first design phase unfolded, four key challenges emerged that a democracy data space should help address: fragmented participation, broken legitimacy chains, a disjointed civic tech ecosystem, and opaque infrastructure governance. For each of these challenges, we present our initial assumptions, the tensions and obstacles identified by participants, and a set of structured perspectives. These perspectives are organized across three temporal horizons — short, medium, and long term — a structure that directly emerged from our workshop sessions and proved useful to map both concrete entry points and longer-term ambitions.

A Shared European Conversation: Powering Democratic Dialogue Between Citizens, Stakeholders, and Institutions

1. The Current Challenge

Vibrant democracy comes with diversity

Democratic participation in Europe is alive and plural. It unfolds through a rich diversity of formats — from town halls to online forums, citizen assemblies to civic tech platforms — and operates across multiple levels, from local to continental. This heterogeneity reflects the very essence of democratic life: distributed, contextual, and multiform. It also spans different temporalities: some processes are synchronous and real-time, others rely on

asynchronous input or retrospective analysis. This diversity is a strength. It allows a wide range of actors to participate in way that suit their realities and constraints. For example, digital tools often provide more accessible formats for younger generations or time-constrained individuals. When physical participation is limited by geography or availability, online platforms can expand reach. Conversely, digital participation can complement and deepen in-person processes by increasing continuity and transparency.

Siloed democratic processes have adopted siloed technological solutions

This pluralism comes with a cost: fragmentation. Civil society actors, citizens, and institutions frequently operate in parallel, with limited visibility into each other's work. Territorial fragmentation is particularly salient: local consultations, thematic forums, and national debates unfold independently, rarely informing one another. Institutional and thematic silos further reinforce this disconnect, even when different actors work on closely related issues.

A key dimension of this fragmentation lies in the asymmetry of needs across levels. Informational and participatory expectations differ greatly depending on spatial and institutional positioning. Local actors typically focus on immediate concerns and may not seek inputs from other territories. By contrast, national or European policymakers often require a broader picture — one that aggregates perspectives across jurisdictions and themes. A city like Lisbon may not need to track local consultations in Helsinki, but a Commission officer may require insights from both to identify transnational patterns. This asymmetry complicates coordination efforts and exposes the absence of adaptive mechanisms to support differentiated yet interoperable use cases.

Unfortunately, the technological layer often mirrors this fragmentation. Participation platforms are typically designed for specific contexts or missions, with minimal capacity for interconnection. While this specialization addresses real needs for relevance and contextual filtering, it also hinders the circulation of knowledge and weakens the broader coherence of democratic engagement. Contributions tend to remain confined to their original environment, preventing collective learning and diminishing systemic impact.

Digital tools exacerbate the siloed nature of democratic processes

Paradoxically, the digitalization of democracy has often reinforced existing disconnections rather than resolving them. Instead of bridging democratic

spaces, digital tools have introduced new silos — both between formats and within platforms. Face-to-face deliberations, such as town halls or citizen assemblies, offer grounded, embodied forms of participation, but often remain disconnected from digital environments where documentation is stored, debates continue, or wider audiences can be reached. The result is a rupture in continuity: participation ends at the meeting room door, and valuable input too often remains confined to its original context.

This fragmentation is equally visible within digital environments themselves. Most platforms operate as self-contained ecosystems, relying on distinct data models, workflows, and identifiers. Contributions made on one platform are difficult to reuse elsewhere, and few mechanisms exist to link real-time engagement with retrospective synthesis. These technical and temporal silos obstruct circulation, reduce collective learning, and weaken the institutional impact of participation. Without interoperable pathways, democratic inputs risk remaining isolated, invisible, and ultimately ineffective — undermining both the coherence and the legitimacy of participatory processes.

2. Interoperability as a Solution

To overcome the fragmentation of democratic processes, interoperability must become the connective tissue of a more coherent ecosystem. The goal is not to impose uniformity or centralization, but to enable circulation, continuity, and mutual reinforcement across formats, levels, and media — both online and offline. Interoperability can support a distributed democratic infrastructure, where diverse actors remain autonomous while participating in a shared framework of norms and standards.

Deploying Nested Data Spaces

At the heart of this vision lies a federated architecture: a network of interconnected data spaces operating at different scales — local, regional, national, or sectoral. Each institution or territory could manage its own instance, adapted to its governance context and operational needs, while remaining interoperable with others through common protocols and democratic safeguards. For example, a municipality could operate a local data space designed to circulate citizen contributions within its community, while still connecting to national or European platforms where relevant.

This distributed model allows contributions to circulate fluidly across levels, to be aggregated when appropriate, and to inform deliberative processes without requiring central control. To support this, data spaces would align on

a shared foundation — a core set of principles and safeguards, including consent management, provenance metadata, and GDPR compliance. These mechanisms would ensure both the legal robustness and the technical modularity of the infrastructure. With this common layer in place, systems could interconnect easily, enabling each contribution to be reused across contexts — for public display, policy synthesis, or analytical processing — without duplication or distortion.

From cross-platform information-sharing to democratic intelligence

Interoperability can begin modestly, with simple coordination features that surface democratic activity across tools and platforms. Mapping existing initiatives, enabling shared calendars, federated search, or cross-platform notifications can already reduce redundancy and foster cooperation. Making citizen participation more visible — whether through local assemblies or digital forums — is a first step toward a more connected and intelligible ecosystem.

Beyond these initial bridges, more robust frameworks are needed to synchronize diverse initiatives without undermining their autonomy. Open standards for documenting contributions, identity federation systems, and shared metadata conventions can align fragmented efforts, enabling participants to move across platforms and processes with greater continuity. By increasing semantic and procedural compatibility, these tools build trust and recognition between actors while preserving contextual diversity.

Over time, interoperability also lays the foundation for shared analytical capacities. AI-supported tools could help aggregate civic input across geographies and formats into intelligible syntheses. Matchmaking services might connect actors working on similar issues — across sectors or territories — to foster data sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Far from centralizing control, these services would multiply connections and amplify the collective intelligence of democratic life.

3. Who Benefits & Why It Matters

Interoperability makes it possible for participation to unfold as a shared, cumulative process — one where contributions circulate, connect, and support more informed decisions across levels.

For a **participation officer in a metropolitan area**, a territorial data space

an infrastructure aligned with the reality of shared governance. In many territories, different administrative levels hold distinct competences — a metropolis may lead major policy programs, while municipalities remain the primary interface for citizens and local needs. Rather than multiplying disconnected platforms, a shared data space allows each level to play its role within an integrated system: municipalities can collect and surface local concerns, while the metropolis can coordinate broader consultations and policy responses. This means that local platforms no longer operate in isolation. A consultation launched at the metropolitan level — such as a participatory budget — can be made accessible through existing municipal portals. Conversely, feedback gathered locally can be aggregated and made visible at the metropolitan scale, without requiring citizens to switch interfaces or create new accounts. Participation becomes more fluid, better coordinated, and more attuned to the distributed nature of democratic responsibilities.

For a **national mutual executive**, interoperability unlocks institutional memory. A simple search reveals that a local branch in Occitanie ran a consultation on medical deserts two years earlier — and that a broader EU-level dialogue is currently underway. This layered view allows the executive to propose a new national consultation, grounded in past contributions and aligned with current agendas. The insights drawn from previous initiatives can feed both internal strategy and external advocacy — for example, in preparing a policy note to the European Commission.

For a **European policy officer**, this continuity is transformative. Instead of operating blind, they can access a comprehensive map of past and present consultations related to the right to health. They might discover that a local initiative supported by a municipality was scaled up through a mutual's national platform and is now being discussed at the European level. With clear provenance metadata and identified organizers, they can reach out to relevant stakeholders and invite them to contribute to an upcoming transnational consultation.

In each case, interoperability doesn't just make participation more efficient — it makes it more visible, more strategic, and ultimately more democratic.

Strengthening legitimacy: tracing the dialogue behind a policy

1. The Current Challenge

When civic voice disappears into a black box

Democracy requires more than participation — it requires legibility and traceability. For citizens, contributing to public consultations or deliberative processes is only meaningful if their input is traceable through the broader decision-making chain. Yet today, this visibility is largely absent.

In most cases, citizens may perceive that their civic contributions vanish after submission. Whether they take part in a local debate, sign a petition, or participate in a national consultation, contributors rarely know what becomes of their input: who reviewed it, what decisions it influenced, or even if it was acknowledged. This lack of transparency fosters a sense of futility — and over time, erodes the trust needed to sustain democratic engagement.

Several forms of disconnection explain this breakdown. Participatory tools often function as isolated channels, with no semantic or procedural links to institutional decision-making. Grassroots or civil society initiatives — even when rich in content — may be ignored by formal institutions. And even within official participatory mechanisms, citizens are seldom informed of how input is processed, by whom, or at what stage of the legislative cycle. The result is a fragmented democratic experience, where participation risks being perceived as symbolic rather than impactful.

2. Interoperability as a Solution

Rebuilding the chain of trust, one connection at a time

Interoperability offers a concrete path to reconnect civic input with political outcomes. The goal is not to centralize or automate decisions, but to **restore continuity** between citizens' voices and institutional processes — making their contribution **legible and traceable** across platforms, governance levels, and time.

A democracy data space can act as a **backbone infrastructure**, enabling each civic input — whether from a digital consultation or a physical assembly — to

carry structured metadata (origin, time, author, scope), so that it can circulate across systems, be picked up when relevant, and contribute to actual decision-making.

In the short term, small but impactful changes can already help dispel the sense of a democratic “black box.” Platforms could document the lifecycle of a contribution: when it was received, how it was processed, and by whom. Votes could be contextualized within legislative cycles, and civil society proposals flagged when they reach formal institutions. These first steps give citizens more than a voice — they provide a **clear trail of influence**.

In the medium term, semantic and procedural interoperability can unlock a more cohesive ecosystem. Shared vocabularies and modular APIs would allow citizen proposals to appear across multiple platforms — from local consultations to national portals to EU-level tools — without losing their context or integrity. Visualization interfaces could reveal where decisions are made and when public input is possible, while indicators assess the real uptake of participatory processes.

In the long term, this infrastructure could map the **full arc of democratic deliberation**, from agenda-setting to implementation. Contributions would be versioned, linked to institutional actors or deliberative phases, and made publicly auditable. Over time, this would enable new forms of democratic oversight — allowing citizens, journalists, and watchdogs to reconstruct how a policy was shaped, and potentially to **reopen debates** in light of new evidence or evolving conditions. In doing so, traceability becomes not just a technical feature, but a foundation for adaptive, accountable governance.

3. Who Benefits & Why It Matters

When contributions can be traced through the democratic process, every level of governance gains in clarity, credibility, and connection. Interoperability doesn’t only streamline participation — it makes legitimacy visible, verifiable, and collective.

For a participation officer in a metropolitan area, this means having the opportunity to clarify the reasoning behind local policy decisions — a growing necessity as elected officials face increasing pressure to demonstrate transparency and responsiveness. When the council decides to fund a new community health centre, the decision could be accompanied by clear references to earlier stages of civic input: transcripts from municipal debates, contributions submitted via a platform, or feedback from local associations.

Rather than being buried in annexes, these sources could be surfaced through intuitive interfaces, offering citizens a clear view of how their input shaped the outcome. A resident who once took part in a consultation on healthcare access could even be notified: “Your contribution was cited in the deliberation process.” In doing so, participation becomes not just symbolic but meaningful — woven into the visible chain of democratic decision-making.

At the national level, a mutual insurance federation preparing its policy agenda could similarly draw upon these local sources to demonstrate alignment between grassroots insights and institutional strategies. When the board of a mutual designs a new national program on medical deserts, it could point to consultations held by regional branches, citizen debates, and local initiatives. Rather than issuing policies from the top down, the mutual positions itself as an amplifier of distributed civic intelligence.

At the European level, regulatory texts could also be marked with references to such contributions. A directive on access to primary care might highlight how it builds upon public input gathered from diverse contexts — from a village in Brittany to a citizens’ assembly in Helsinki. This would not only reinforce the legitimacy of European policymaking, but also serve a pedagogical function: helping citizens understand that their voices can echo far beyond their initial point of expression, and that EU institutions are responsive to locally rooted, collectively articulated needs.

In each case, interoperability does more than connect data — it allows democratic actors to trace, acknowledge, and build upon civic dialogue. The result is a richer, more transparent chain of legitimacy: one where democratic decisions are no longer isolated events, but visible convergences of deliberation, across time and space.

Stronger Together: How Interoperability Turns Digital Democracy into a Collaborative Ecosystem

1. The Current Challenge

Democratic innovation through diversity and niche expertise

Across Europe, citizens now benefit from an unprecedented diversity of entry points into democratic life. From participatory budgeting platforms to digital petitions, from online assemblies to structured deliberation spaces, the

civic tech ecosystem has expanded rapidly — reflecting the vitality of a field where innovation is driven as much by grassroots engagement as by institutional ambition.

This **diversity also reflects a dynamic and competitive market**, where actors develop tools tailored to specific niches. Decidim, for example, focuses on digitizing institutional consultations; ResPublica builds digital complements to physical meetings, aiming to broaden participation; while platforms like OpenVote specialize in secure online voting. Each project brings its own philosophy and functionality — contributing to a pluralist, modular vision of digital democracy.

Yet this very richness can become a weakness when platforms operate in isolation.

The limits of data silos: structural inefficiencies

Without interoperability, the civic tech landscape risks becoming a patchwork of rigid silos — limiting the reach, relevance, and collective potential of otherwise powerful tools.

For citizens, this fragmentation introduces friction at every turn. Each new platform often means creating yet another account, navigating unfamiliar interfaces, and adapting to different modes of participation. Opportunities to engage may be missed simply because they are hosted in spaces the citizen doesn't know, or doesn't trust. This burden weighs particularly on newcomers and those less comfortable with digital tools, reinforcing inequalities in access to democratic life.

The same limitations affect those who build these platforms. Civic tech developers, in the absence of shared standards or common APIs, often find themselves reinventing the wheel — replicating features like identity management, notification systems, or feedback channels instead of focusing on what makes their platform unique. This duplication drains resources, hampers specialization, and slows down meaningful innovation.

Institutions and civil society organizations face similar constraints. A tool may be well-suited to one use case — a consultation or a petition, for example — but ill-equipped to support deliberation, budgeting, or cross-sector coordination. In the absence of modularity or connectivity, they are left navigating fragmented solutions that rarely match the full diversity of their democratic needs.

In the end, a vibrant civic tech ecosystem cannot thrive in isolation. Without the ability to interconnect, even the most innovative platforms remain locked in narrow roles. What's missing is not more tools — but better ways to make them **work together as part of a coherent, collaborative infrastructure**.

2. Interoperability as a Solution

From scattered tools to a federated, citizen-centric ecosystem

Interoperability offers a path forward: one that **respects diversity** while unlocking the benefits of connection. Rather than forcing unification, it allows platforms to **specialize, differentiate, and still collaborate** — creating a digital democratic infrastructure that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In the short term, small adjustments can already improve the user experience. **Shared vocabularies, cross-platform notifications, and searchable directories of participatory processes** can help citizens find and engage with consultations across platforms, without having to start from scratch each time. Interfaces could be redesigned around citizen needs — displaying upcoming votes or relevant debates based on interests or geography, regardless of who hosts them.

In the medium term, interoperability enables a **modular civic tech ecosystem**. One platform might focus on deliberation, another on voting, a third on agenda-setting — yet all would be connected through **common APIs, identity systems, and metadata standards**. Civic tech actors would no longer compete for users or data ownership, but **cooperate around shared protocols** while innovating on functionalities. Participation would shift from being tool-centric to **theme-centric**: a citizen interested in climate action could follow the same topic across local initiatives, national debates, and European consultations.

In the long term, this interconnected ecosystem becomes a **democratic digital commons**. Civic data is no longer locked into proprietary silos but treated as a shared, ethically governed resource. Citizens control their identity and contributions across platforms. Developers build interoperable features — like deliberation matchmaking or cross-platform dashboards — that reinforce relevance and inclusivity. **Interoperability transforms digital democracy from fragmented experimentation into systemic collaboration.**

3. Who Benefits & Why It Matters

When civic tech platforms can interoperate, each actor in the democratic ecosystem can focus on what they do best, without sacrificing reach, inclusion, or coherence. Interoperability doesn't just make technical sense — it enables a more resilient, participatory, and pluralistic democracy.

For a participation officer in a metropolitan area, this means being able to design a coherent participatory journey by combining the strengths of different tools rather than relying on a single platform. The process could begin with in-person workshops, where discussions are transcribed and analyzed using a tool like Dembrane to extract structured insights from free-form dialogue. These insights could then be published as formal contributions on a platform like Decidim, enabling citizens to browse, comment, and deepen the proposals — fostering deliberation and collective refinement. For the voting phase, the officer might embed Make.org's widget, which excels at quickly gathering large volumes of short, evaluative contributions, ideal for gauging public sentiment at scale. Finally, for retrospective analysis and synthesis, they could turn to PanoramicAI — a tool based on retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) that allows facilitators or citizens to query the entire corpus of contributions in a structured and intelligible way. Each tool plays its part, and together they form an integrated, user-centric and effective participatory experience.

A **mutual insurance organization**, by contrast, might focus its efforts on a specialized platform designed to engage its members around issues core to its mission — such as understanding the trade-offs involved in developing new benefit packages. With interoperability in place, the mutual would not be cut off from broader debates. It could easily integrate insights from other participatory spaces — whether hosted by municipalities, other mutuals, or national platforms — and feed its own outputs back into the wider ecosystem. **This balance between specialization and openness strengthens both institutional relevance and collective learning.**

At the **European level**, a policy officer at the Commission might stop trying to design top-down participatory processes that struggle to reach citizens meaningfully. Instead, they could focus on developing tools to **aggregate and analyze the wealth of civic input already collected at local, national, or sectoral levels** — using interoperable formats to identify common trends, policy signals, or emerging needs. In this model, **European institutions no longer need to control every participatory process**, but rather position themselves as interpreters, connectors, and amplifiers of civic intelligence across the continent.

Design Principles: Embedding Democracy into the Architecture of Data Spaces

1. Framing Democratic Design in the European Strategic Context

The idea of building a democracy data space emerges within a broader European digital strategy that places increasing emphasis on trust, fairness, and interoperability. Instruments such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the European Strategy for Data express a growing commitment to shape digital infrastructures according to shared values and rights.

In this context, the European Commission has launched the Common European Data Spaces initiative, a network of sectoral data ecosystems based on interoperable, modular, and sovereign infrastructures. These infrastructures are expected to enable innovation and collaboration across sectors — from health to mobility, from energy to agriculture.

However, democracy as such — both as a sector and as a governance model — remains underrepresented in these initiatives. While tools and platforms for democratic participation proliferate, the infrastructural dimension of democracy is often treated as a technical or administrative layer, rather than a domain requiring its own design logic.

This section seeks to address this gap, by first identifying the specific normative constraints and institutional features that characterize democratic life in the EU, and then by proposing a set of design principles tailored to the democratic context, building on but extending the foundational principles of existing European data space frameworks.

2. Foundations from the OPEN DEI Initiative

To guide the design of data spaces across sectors, the European OPEN DEI initiative has identified four cross-cutting design principles:

1. **Data Sovereignty:** ensuring that data providers retain full control over how their data is used and reused.
2. **Level Playing Field:** guaranteeing fair access and use conditions for all actors, especially smaller players.
3. **Decentralised, Technology-Neutral Interoperability:** promoting interconnection across systems without imposing specific technologies.

4. Inclusive Public-Private Governance: enabling co-creation and co-decision between institutions, companies, and civil society actors.

These principles form the technical and institutional backbone of the European data space strategy. However, in the context of democratic participation, they must be reinterpreted and extended. What does data sovereignty mean when the data is political speech? What does inclusion mean when legitimacy is at stake?

In the next section, we present a set of four adapted design principles, grounded in our workshops, interviews, and exploratory trials, that respond to these questions.

3. Four Democratic Design Principles

Building on the foundations laid by the OPEN DEI initiative, this section proposes four design principles tailored specifically to the democratic context. While existing frameworks emphasize sovereignty, fairness, and interoperability, democratic infrastructures require an additional layer of governance logic — one that reflects the political nature of participation, the diversity of institutional configurations, and the need for transparency and accountability across the decision-making chain. Each principle below is grounded in European normative frameworks and illustrated with practical examples from the co-design process.

Transparency and Trust: Deepening Data Sovereignty through Democratic Accountability

OPEN DEI alignment principle: Data Sovereignty

Normative anchor: General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

The principle of data sovereignty, as defined in the OPEN DEI initiative, emphasizes the right of organizations to retain control over the use and reuse of their data. In a democracy data space, this principle must be extended and deepened: citizens, not just institutions, are the primary data providers — and the data they share often reflects personal beliefs, political positions, and deliberative intentions.

In this context, GDPR offers a critical foundation. It enshrines the rights of individuals to informed consent, to access and correct their data, and to know how it is processed. But in participatory infrastructures, these rights

must be complemented by institutional transparency and civic trust. Citizens must not only control their data — they must be able to trust the organizations they engage with, and understand how their contributions are used in the broader decision-making process.

This principle calls for shared norms and mechanisms that make civic data flows visible, traceable, and accountable — not through centralized control, but through distributed transparency.

Example

In the short term, this principle could be embodied through low-threshold actions such as co-writing moderation policies across platforms, or defining shared documentation standards for how contributions are received, processed, and reused. These documents — if made public — would help users and institutions understand how decisions are made, and by whom. In the medium term, the roadmap could focus on integrating existing electronic identification and trust services, especially solutions compliant with eIDAS such as FranceConnect. This would allow participants in the data space to reinforce the reliability and security of their consultation processes, ensuring that contributions are both authenticated and trusted. In the long term, such integration could expand the role of these services — today mainly used for single sign-on — towards enabling citizens to access and manage all their personal data from a single, trusted interface.

Personalization and Accessibility: Building Collective Intelligence Through User-Centered Services

OPEN DEI alignment principle: Level Playing Field
Normative anchor: Digital Markets Act (DMA)

In today's digital ecosystem, many civic tech actors — like their private-sector counterparts — are structured around logics of audience capture and data acquisition. In a democracy data space, this paradigm must evolve. Instead of seeking exclusive access to civic data, actors should focus on personalizing services to the needs of specific communities, while contributing to a shared infrastructure that supports mutual recognition, semantic alignment, and ethical data flows.

The shift is both technical and cultural. Participation tools must become

more accessible, not only in the sense of complying with standards for disability inclusion, but by adapting to the real-life diversity of citizens — from literacy levels and languages to digital habits and thematic interests. At the same time, the data generated by these interactions must be interoperable, so that insights can circulate and contribute to a broader pool of collective intelligence.

In this model, value is not extracted from data silos, but created through alignment, contextualization, and reuse. Civic actors are encouraged to specialize — not by fencing off their user base, but by offering high-quality, tailored services that remain part of a common ecosystem.

Example

In the medium term, civic actors could collaboratively develop a shared dashboard that aggregates consultation results across platforms and formats. This tool could visualize where decisions are made, what civic input has been gathered, and what gaps remain. In the long term, retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) tools or AI-based policy matchmakers could allow citizens, journalists, or elected officials to query collective deliberation corpora across institutions — turning fragmented input into actionable insight.

Federated and Nested Architectures: From Institutional Silos to Democratic Alliances

OPEN DEI alignment principle: Decentralised, Technology-Neutral Interoperability

Normative anchor: Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), principle of subsidiarity

A democracy data space enables each actor — from municipalities to EU institutions — to deploy and govern their own participatory infrastructure, while remaining part of a shared ecosystem. These infrastructures can be adapted to local, sectoral, or temporal contexts, allowing each actor to choose tools, formats, and interfaces suited to their public and mission. Interoperability ensures that, despite their diversity, these systems can exchange data, align their semantics, and respect common governance protocols.

This modular architecture opens the way for a new political posture: actors no longer design participation solely for their own needs, but contribute to

a shared democratic intelligence. Local consultations feed into regional and national agendas, while higher-level institutions can strengthen grassroots initiatives rather than replace them. Each layer becomes both an anchor and a relay in a distributed democratic system.

Participation thus becomes a cooperative process, not a competitive one. Institutions contribute to common data infrastructures while developing services tailored to their context. They gain autonomy without isolation, and visibility without centralization — reinforcing both their own legitimacy and that of the broader ecosystem.

Example

In the long term, this logic supports the creation of a democratic infrastructure commons: a decentralized ecosystem combining interoperable services with collectively governed rulebooks. Rather than forcing harmonization, each actor or region could fork, adapt, or align modules (e.g. identity systems, notification layers, debate visualizations) to their own context — while remaining interoperable with others through agreed-upon standards. Such a model supports subsidiarity in practice — ensuring that Lisbon, Helsinki, and Occitanie can each operate differently, but still contribute to shared processes.

Democracy as a Transversal Infrastructure: Embedding Co-Governance at the Core

OPEN DEI alignment principle: Inclusive Public-Private Governance

Normative anchor: EU Code of Conduct for Data Sharing in the Social Economy

Too often, democratic participation is treated as a feature — layered on top of digital infrastructures whose design, governance, and ownership remain opaque. A democracy data space must go further: it must embed democratic principles within the infrastructure itself, ensuring that its development, maintenance, and evolution are collectively governed by those it is meant to serve.

This shared governance is not only a safeguard against capture or bias — it is a condition for leveraging the diversity of democratic traditions across Europe. Different institutional levels, legal systems, and organizational forms — including cooperatives, trade unions, citizen assemblies, or mutuals — bring complementary perspectives. Embedding them in the governance of data spaces strengthens legitimacy, resilience, and responsiveness to real-world needs.

To achieve this, new governance models may be required. Existing public bodies or civic platforms can play a role, but additional structures — such as data cooperatives, fiduciary algorithmic trusts, or civic intermediaries — will need to be designed, tested, and institutionalized. These entities would ensure that core components of the infrastructure (identifiers, metadata vocabularies, deliberation records) remain common goods, managed transparently and democratically.

Exemple

In the medium term, this could take the form of dedicated multistakeholder governance bodies, responsible for writing and revising the core rulebooks of the data space. Participation mechanisms — such as citizens' assemblies for digital infrastructure — could be created to oversee strategic orientations or to review ethical safeguards. In the long term, critical infrastructure modules (e.g. identity layers, deliberation logs, semantic ontologies) could be held in data or algorithmic trusts, ensuring they are not co-opted by dominant actors and remain aligned with public interest. Certification schemes and charters could reinforce these guarantees over time.

Part 4

Strategic Recommendations for the Democracy Data Space

The co-design process brought forward a variety of recommendations from participants, reflecting both strategic imperatives and contextual sensitivities. To help architects align the democracy data space with its intended values and purposes, we synthesize four key recommendations. Each one builds directly on the principles, challenges, and visions outlined in the preceding sections.

1. Establish clear governance principles from the outset

Democracy is political — and so is infrastructure. Governance of the democracy data space must be conceived not as a neutral protocol, but as a deliberative and contested space in its own right. In a context of institutional fragility and mistrust, clarity around who decides what, how, and with whom, must be established early on. This requires step-by-step development, transparent processes, and the inclusion of diverse voices in setting the rules. We recommend the creation of a steering committee bringing together civic tech actors, democratic institutions, and civil society to co-define governance rules in line with evolving objectives and technological developments. The committee may particularly explore governance models that ensure inclusive and balanced representation, drawing inspiration from social economy experiments such as data stewards or data cooperatives. This recommendation echoes the vision to *Turn Digital Democracy into a Collaborative Ecosystem*, and addresses the challenge of fragmented and opaque decision-making processes. It operationalizes the design principle of *Democracy* as a transversal infrastructure, by ensuring that democratic concerns are embedded from the beginning, not added later.

2. Apply commons-based principles to structure cooperation and competition

The democracy data space should not aim to eliminate competition between actors, but to reframe it within a logic of *coopetition* — where collaboration on shared resources strengthens, rather than undermines, individual innovation. This involves identifying and maintaining key components of the infrastructure (e.g., data standards, metadata formats, storage mechanisms, or intermediation services) as commons. These shared elements provide a stable and trustworthy foundation that reduces friction, enhances interoperability, and avoids wasteful duplication. At the same time, they allow diverse actors — public and private, institutional and civic — to build differentiated services on top. This approach addresses the challenge of fragmented civic tech ecosystems where competition over functionalities often overlaps with competition over access to data. It also entails iterative strategic conversations to define an economic model, balancing organizations' autonomy with the pooling and maintenance of shared resources to meet collective needs such as technological consistency and rule compliance. It supports the vision to *Turn Digital Democracy into a Collaborative Ecosystem*, while operationalizing the principle of *Personalization and Accessibility* through a collectively governed substrate.

3. Go beyond public institutions: experiment through diversity

Although public institutions are essential, they should not be the sole pillars of the data space. Mutuals, cooperatives, NGOs, citizen groups, and research institutions often engage in democratic practices outside traditional governmental frameworks, and to do so they have deployed and experimented with a patchwork of tools which, while uncoordinated, embed valuable organizational specificities. Including them from the outset fosters experimentation, opens new funding pathways, and allows for hybrid, cross-domain innovations — building upon existing technological infrastructures while ensuring alignment around common standards. A complementary avenue would be to envision certain components of the democracy data space as tools supporting the development of other data spaces, particularly by ensuring more transparent and open governance. In this perspective, designing modules that improve the readability of multi-layered decision-

making processes and facilitate stakeholder engagement could also benefit initiatives aiming to reinforce the participation of traditionally marginalized actors, such as SMEs. This recommendation addresses the challenge of fragmented democratic environments and aligns with the vision of *Strengthening Legitimacy*. It builds on the design principle of *Federated and Nested Architectures*, encouraging modular and plural configurations rather than uniform centralization.

4. Demonstrate value through a concrete, collective proof of concept

The success of the democracy data space depends on making its collective added value visible and tangible. A flagship use case should illustrate what becomes possible only through cooperation — in this case, an interface displaying ongoing citizen consultations across multiple organizations and institutions. Such a demonstrator will both highlight the diversity of current consultations and create new spaces for coherence-building: enabling AI-enhanced cross-analysis of results, clustering consultations by thematic focus, and fostering transversal processes that go beyond traditional geographic and institutional boundaries. Importantly, the demonstrator would not only focus on the resulting interface, but also on the co-design processes that enable its emergence. These processes may provide appropriate frameworks to address legal and ethical considerations such as data sovereignty, GDPR compliance, and the balance between traceability of contributions and protection of individual privacy. A steering committee (cf. Recommendation 1) could ensure that design principles presented above are respected, by clarifying which actors should be involved, which use cases addressed, and how impact is measured. This recommendation directly supports the vision of *Strengthening Legitimacy*, and responds to the challenge of mobilizing actors around shared infrastructures. It also reinforces the principle *Transparency and Trust*, by showing how distributed contributions can result in shared legitimacy when properly coordinated.

Conclusion

From Vision to Collective Action

As we finalize this vision paper, the urgency of rethinking the relationship between democracy and digital technologies is becoming ever more apparent. Across Europe, citizens are seizing online platforms to express their voices in unprecedented numbers — as illustrated by a petition on the French National Assembly’s website, which surpassed a record two millions signatures. This surge reflects both a growing appetite for civic expression in the digital age and the persistent difficulty for institutions to translate such engagement into meaningful decision-making processes.

In this evolving landscape, we believe our vision offers a path towards a democratic transformation powered by digital technologies. A democracy data space does not only provide a means to break down the silos that fragment democratic processes — enabling more fluid, transparent, and accountable participation — it also offers a structural response to the monopolistic and authoritarian tendencies shaping the digital public sphere. By embedding interoperability, traceability, and subsidiarity into the very fabric of our digital infrastructures, a democracy data space can help democratize the tools of democracy themselves.

The next step is a concrete one. We aim to develop a proof of concept that will demonstrate the real-world potential of interoperability for the civic tech ecosystem. This pilot will be an opportunity to test the principles outlined in this paper, identify the technical and organizational barriers that remain, and explore, together, how to overcome them. We welcome all stakeholders — from public institutions to civic technologists, mutuals, and citizen groups — interested in joining the steering committee and/or contributing to technological developments and testing to reach out and take part in this next phase.

This vision is only the beginning. With your help, we hope it becomes the first foundation stone in building a broader, more resilient, and genuinely democratic digital future.

13. <https://petitions.assemblee-nationale.fr/initiatives/i-3014>

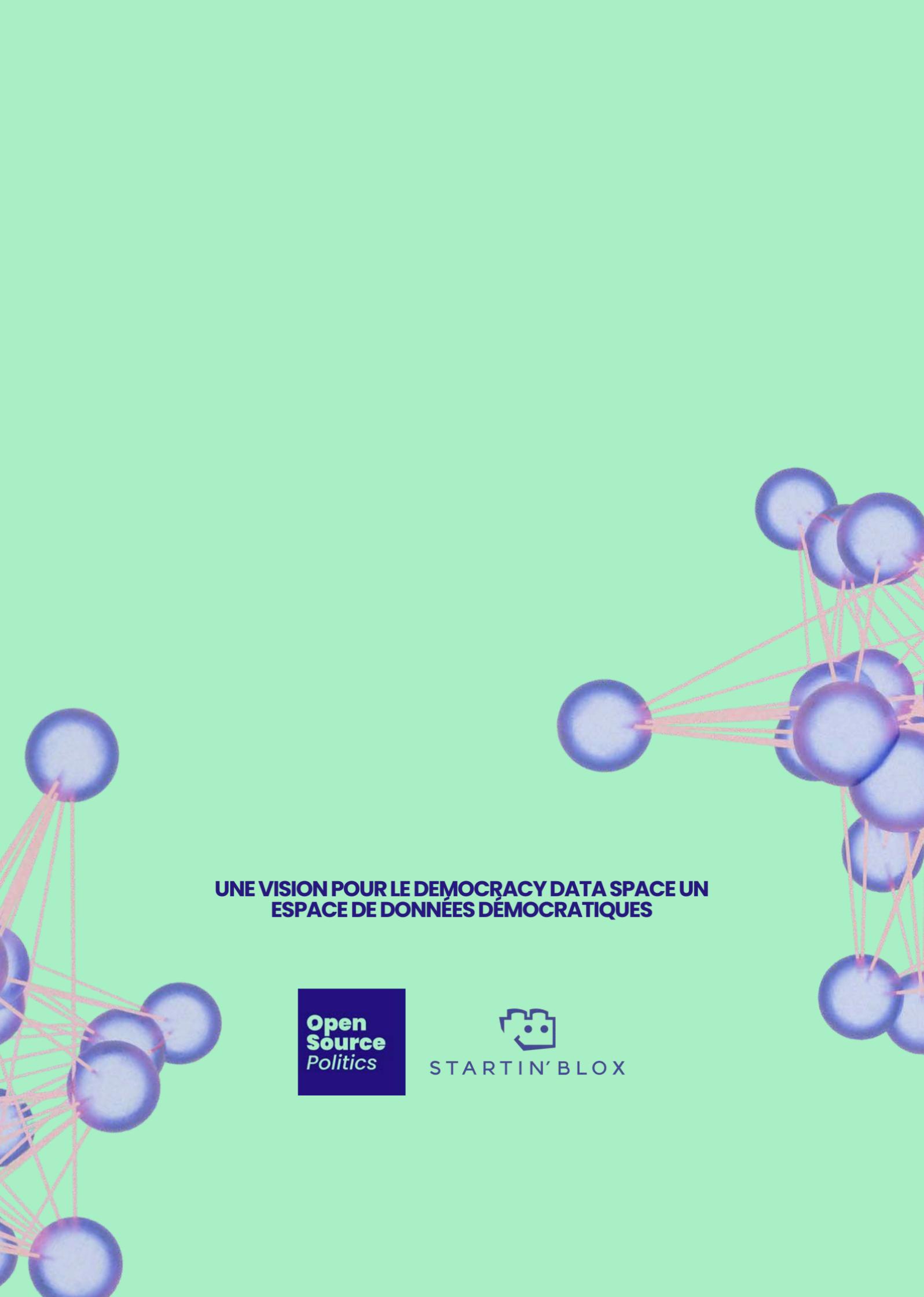
Annex

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