Benefits of Using Polis

Introduction

Polis[1] is a powerful open-source platform for harnessing the wisdom of the crowd; this helps communities whether local, entire cities, states, or even countries find common ground on complex issues. It reveals hidden areas of agreement so decision-makers can find consensus and resolve tensions on divisive and complex issues.

Inclusive Participation

Polis is an interactive, simple to use online tool that helps groups of people have fair and inclusive conversations and make decisions together at scale and over extended periods[2]. Unlike standard polls, it involves people directly in the conversation by enabling them to contribute their own statements and ideas[5].

Extinction Rebellion UK hosts its own version of Polis on secure servers running on renewable energy in Switzerland.

What Makes Polis Special?

- Takes all voices into account equally.
- Allows for inclusion of anyone in deliberation on topics, wherever they are.
- Avoids arguments or trolls because there’s no back-and-forth arguing.
- Helps us see what a whole community thinks, not just the loudest voices.
- Enables continued exploration of issues collectively for extended periods to find consensus.
- Protects your privacy.

Video

Looking at Polis - a new tool hoping to reboot democracy and find common ground amongst even the most polarised views. 'Can Taiwan Reboot Democracy?' BBC Click [7mins 38secs]

Understanding Group Opinion at Scale

It is especially useful when you want to understand what a large group thinks about a certain topic[2]. Polis is particularly valuable when you need to understand who exactly believes what within a larger group; for instance, identifying opinion clusters among people with varying levels of experience or background[3].

Potential Outcomes

- Put fairness, inclusion and justice at the centre of decision-making.
- Better decisions are made together based on the wisdom of the crowd informed by experts.
- Enables us to work better together by finding common ground and next steps.
- Provides clear, actionable outcomes.
- Increased awareness and understanding of how people can be empowered to participate in a more democratic process.
- Enhance awareness and practice of citizens' assemblies which add legitimacy to the democratic process.
- Can be used for large-scale participation in decisions.
- Attract UK-wide media coverage (due to the novelty and potential scale of engagement).

Transparency and Statistical Rigour

Polis produces understandable statistical reports. As the analysis can be shared publicly at the end of a conversation, this process is transparent.[2]. The most powerful part is that it highlights statements that different groups agree on, and where they disagree. Finding where people's opinions align makes for more legitimate decision making that everyone has been involved in. This gives legitimacy and weight to any Polis deliberation process, supporting more willing adoption of its conclusions by organisations and institutions.

Policy and Community Applications

- It can be used as a stand-alone tool or in conjunction with community assemblies, strengthening those processes by "harvesting the wisdom of the crowd"[2].
- It has been applied to complex policy debates, such as data-driven political campaigning, where it allowed people to define key issues in their own words[4].
- It enables mapping of the values and motivations underlying people's beliefs, making it a useful tool for finding solutions to difficult policy issues[4].
- Tech upskilling makes system learners potentially more employable, which in turn, may make the democratic process attractive to a younger demographic.

Deeper Dive

Further info:

- Consensus Building in Taiwan, the Poster Child of Digital Democracy by Sebastian Cushing Rodriguez.
- A sophisticated conversation about misinformation via Polis by James Sweetland.

Polis: Gamified Consensus Finding

Polis has been central to the success of vTaiwan. A topic is put up for debate and anyone with an account can comment and downvote or upvote other people's comments. While this may appear similar to other participation tools or forums, there are several features that set Polis apart.

First is that Polis does not allow users to respond to other people's comments, drastically reducing the risk of trolls disrupting the debate. Second, it turns the upvote and downvote feature into one that clusters people who vote similarly. A visualisation emerges highlighting where there are like-minded viewpoints and division.

As the debate begins, Polis draws a map showing all the different knots of agreement and dissent as they emerge. As views are expressed in greater numbers, the platform gives visibility to statements that find consensus not just among people within the same ideological bubble, but with those outside as well.

Polis in essence gamifies the process of finding consensus. It encourages users to propose and refine viewpoints to win greater support from all sides of a discussion. The greater the consensus around a viewpoint, the greater attention it gets.

As the avatars of each user cluster around specific viewpoints, the platform's design hides divisive statements, provocation and trolling. The debates are spared the toxicity prevalent on other platforms, which so often fail to foster civil discourse.

Eventually, a group of consensual statements emerge. The final viewpoints may not appear like any of the ones made at the beginning of the discussion. The new consensus can then be turned into laws and regulations.

Why XR self-hosts Polis

As an activist organisation, data security is important to us, both to comply with General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR] and to protect our own rebels, in line with XR's Principles and Values. Because Polis is dealing with people's political views, that information potentially falls under 'special category data' in GDPR; this is potentially sensitive information. As a rule, we don't like to keep unnecessary data that can identify people, who may be XR rebels. We use our own Polis server so we can choose what data we keep on people.

We are not making a judgment on whether any particular commercial or free Polis service complies with GDPR (there are at least two reputable paid options), we are just saying that we need to be careful and prefer to host it ourselves, as with many other tools. For much the same reason, XR's Polis servers have always been hosted in on our secure servers in Switzerland, which are powered by renewable energy.

We've also made some other minor changes, for instance to improve accessibility.

AI policy issues and Polis 2.0

Polis 2.0 creates some more issues, because while it is just as easy to use for the people taking part in the poll, it has some new AI-based analysis tools. Automatic grouping of ideas by meaning, as well as grouping them by how people voted, may make analysis of a large conversation considerably easier, especially in handling duplicated ideas. As with all AI, it makes mistakes, but it still creates a useful first draft for our analysis team.

However, in line with our artificial intelligence policy, any use of large language models, and especially sending sensitive personal and political data to corporate servers, has to be carefully reviewed. Currently we enable grouping ideas by meaning, but not automatic generation of summary text, because that would require us to send data off-site to a major Large Language Model [LLM] vendor. For grouping ideas we use a small, energy-efficient self-hosted Llama instance. We appreciate that this is an open weights model and there may be ethical concerns with the training data; we would welcome any suggestions if you have successfully used more ethical models with Polis.

Summary

As a digital engagement platform, Polis offers a powerful framework for collective decision-making and community governance on a large scale.

Sources

1. Pol.is en.wikipedia.org
2. What is Polis? Rebel Toolkit
3. Polis: Why and How to Use it by brook, Chana Messinger
4. Polis and the Political Process by Harry Carr and Josh Smith in partnership with the Open Rights Group
5. How do we find consensus? YouTube (42secs)