Citizen Participation and Inclusive AI Governance

Obvia's Briefing Outlook

DECEMBER 2025

Context

The enthusiasm surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) in Quebec's public services has continued in recent years, fueled by political, institutional, and academic initiatives within Quebec's AI ecosystem. Projects are multiplying due to the many promises associated with this technology: improved government efficiency, enhanced interactions with citizens, decision support, automation of repetitive tasks, cost savings in times of budgetary constraints, and more.

However, the initial wave of enthusiasm may soon reach its limits given the obstacles encountered during AI integration processes. Beyond technical difficulties and resource constraints that can hinder adoption, concerns are growing about the lack of spaces where citizens can express their fears, priorities, and expectations regarding the digital transformation of public administration.

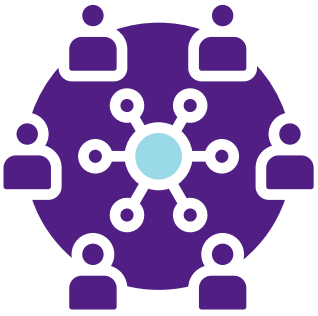
Yet the social acceptability of AI depends on the quality of dialogue between government and the public. To date, public consultations on the use of AI in government services remain infrequent, may lack representativeness, or are not sufficiently taken into account in final decision-making.

"This legitimacy deficit is particularly concerning given that several recent cases of AI-related failures in public administration have been documented, both in Quebec and internationally."[1]

This briefing note aims to highlight the importance of public participation in AI and digital projects and to propose solutions for achieving inclusive governance of emerging technologies through a series of recommendations directed at public sector stakeholders.

Key Quote

The issue is not simply whether AI should be integrated into public services, but under what conditions this integration can strengthen democracy and social justice rather than erode them."[2]



1 Gentelet, K., Peñalosa, R., Aigoin, M., Dion, M.-C., et Hajjsleiman, J. (2025). *Imaginer un dialogue citoyen sur l'IA dans les services publics: recommandations pour une gouvernance fondée sur la transparence et la confiance.* Obvia. https://doi.org/10.61737/LPLW5969, p.10

2 Gentelet, K. et al. (2025) *op.cit.*, p.8

Knowledge Overview

Why Include Citizens' Perspectives?

Including citizens' voices in AI integration processes and governance mechanisms is, above all, a **democratic imperative** grounded in the principles of transparency, trust, and accountability.

"Civic participation, which focuses on engagement with the public, can yield benefits for governments and citizens alike. It not only builds trust in government, but it also reinforces democracy by providing meaningful opportunities for citizens to have a say in how government designs and implements policies and services."[3]

Despite a willingness among decision-makers to consider citizens' perspectives, too few initiatives are implemented, and current methods do not adequately reflect the diversity of opinions within the population. Consultations organised thus far by the provincial government (forums, surveys or calls for contributions), as well as Canada's recent "30-day national sprint"[4], often have several limitations[5]:

1. They are often one-off exercises, non-deliberative, and weakly connected to transparent decision-making processes.
2. They mainly attract an already engaged audience, overrepresenting professionals and experts from the AI and digital sectors, which limits the representativity of expressed opinions and reproduces inequalities in access to deliberative spaces.
3. They rarely provide opportunities for participants to learn, discuss, debate, and co-create proposals.
4. Few include long-term monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms, which undermines trust and effectiveness.

The inclusion of citizens' perspectives also helps **strengthen trust** in AI systems used by public administration and, in turn, fosters public acceptance. The goal is to align technological innovation with real societal needs and to work proactively to mitigate potential harms before they occur. For example, in 2022, the City of Rennes established the Citizen Council for Responsible Digital Affairs, a permanent participatory democracy body composed of randomly selected citizens that has been supporting the city in the development of its digital policies for the past three years . A participatory approach that includes all stakeholders enables richer exchanges: on the one hand, those consulted can challenge projects and provide feedback; on the other hand, public officials can help them better understand how a system operates, the issues that must be considered, and the expected benefits.

"The co-production approach makes it possible to move from a technology-centered approach to one in which AI is developed and deployed according to the actual capacities and needs of stakeholders, particularly employees and citizens."[7]
- Geneviève Baril, Co-Director, Cité-ID Living Lab

Finally, three critical issues related to the integration of AI into public services justify strengthening citizen consultation methods: **the risks of bias, opacity, and loss of control**[8]. For the first issue, algorithmic biases linked to gender, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, or geographic location can cause harm when AI systems are used in decision-making. In 2021, the Dutch government was forced to resign en masse because of a discriminatory algorithm, which notably engaged in racial profiling and falsely accused thousands of families of tax fraud, depriving them of significant income for nearly a decade[9].

As for **opacity**, which refers to the lack of access to the algorithmic operations that may have been carried out by an AI system, individuals affected by an automated or AI-assisted decision often find it difficult to challenge the outcome or seek redress, thereby weakening their fundamental rights.

Finally, with regard to loss of control (legal, political, and operational), the growing dependence on private and foreign companies creates a grey area of accountability, particularly when the technological systems provided are opaque and difficult to audit. These three interrelated issues put to the test "the principles of transparency, fairness, and participation that are nevertheless fundamental to public services."[10]

3 OECD (2025). *Governing with Artificial Intelligence: The State of Play and Way Forward in Core Government Functions*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/6816434b-fr, p. 228
4 Government of Canada (2025). *The next chapter of Canada's AI leadership*. https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en/public-consultations/next-chapter-canadas-ai-leadership
5 Gentelet, K. et al. (2025) *op.cit.*, p.10.
6 Nantel, L. (2025). *Participation publique dans les projets d'IA et de numérique. Synthèse - Cycle de webinaires.* Obvia. https://doi.org/10.61737/KUZW4271, p.13
7 *Ibid.*, p.8
8 Gentelet, K. et al. (2025) *op.cit.*, p.8
9 CScience (2021, 27 octobre). *Des algorithmes biaisés à l'origine de la chute du gouvernement Néerlandais.* https://www.cscience.ca/des-algorithmes-biaises-ont-cause-le-tracas-du-gouvernement-neerlandais/
10 Gentelet, K. *et al.* (2025) *op.cit.*, p.9

"I realize that AI is far more widespread than I had thought. I also realize that I have no real understanding of its impact and that I do not understand how it is involved in public services. I believe there is a lack of transparency."
– Reaction from a participant in a workshop[11] on the Government of Quebec's Public Registry of Algorithms.

How Can Meaningful Citizen Participation Be Achieved?

Public sector organizations that wish to consult the public about an AI project are sometimes held back by the complexity of the subject and the perception that certain aspects are too difficult to discuss with citizens. However, this complexity should not be viewed as an insurmountable obstacle. Instead, it should encourage those responsible for consultation processes to use creative and adapted techniques to be successful. Breaking the participatory process into several stages can help participants better understand the issues involved and ensure that all relevant dimensions are addressed[12].

Among the promising practices to explore, **co-production** is a public management approach that actively involves stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of services[13]. This method enables citizen involvement at every stage of a project, from its inception to its long-term use: governance, formulation, design, implementation, evaluation, and institutionalization.

Another approach worth considering is **participatory foresight**, which has proven particularly effective for addressing complex issues with audiences that may have little prior knowledge of the subject.

"The participatory foresight method involves, among other things, fostering debate through scenarios designed to spark citizen discussions. This method encourages deliberation by inviting participants to explore and reflect on possible futures."[14]

Regardless of the citizen participation model chosen, it is essential to embed these initiatives within **decision-making processes from the very beginning of a project**, so that the perspectives expressed can have a tangible influence on the direction and parameters of AI integration[15]. A consultation process conducted on the margins of actual decision-making will have little meaningful impact and may, over time, undermine public confidence in the value and legitimacy of such consultation exercises. Furthermore, in order to engage a broad diversity of citizens and encourage their participation, it is important to rely on a **variety of participation formats.** Different approaches can help reach different segments of the population and foster more inclusive engagement.

The diversity of approaches (for example, **in-person meetings, digital participation tools, regional workshops, or more interactive and engaging formats**[16]) can increase the representativeness of participants and make it easier to reach groups that are less frequently heard in public consultations. Other success factors and common pitfalls are presented below:

Conditions for Success

- ✓ **Recognize the existence of power dynamics (institutional, social, political, cultural, etc.) and actively work to reduce their effects.**
- ✓ **Ensure clarity and transparency regarding objectives and expectations.**
- ✓ **Use participation mechanisms that are adapted to both the objectives and the target audiences.**
- ✓ **Value lived experience and practical knowledge (in addition to scientific expertise).**
- ✓ **Provide feedback to people who have taken part in the process.**
- ✓ **Demonstrate a capacity to listen and provide support for participatory initiatives on the part of public institutions.**
- ✓ **Reach out to all segments of the population, especially those who are the most distant or difficult to engage, in order to avoid amplifying voices that are already highly visible and influential.**

Common Pitfalls

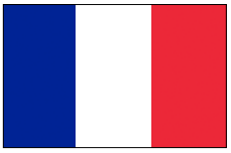
- ✗ **Ignoring consultation results when making decisions.**
- ✗ **Using public participation primarily as a communications or public-relations exercise.**
- ✗ **Waiting for perfect representativeness before launching a participatory process.**
- ✗ **Failing to adapt participation tools and methods to the complexity of the issue being discussed.**
- ✗ **Using the perceived complexity of AI as a pretext for avoiding citizen participation.**

11 *Ibid.*, p.21 [translation from French]
12 Nantel, L. (2025). *op. cit.*, p. 8
13 *Ibid.*, p.9
14 *Ibid.*, p.12 [translation from French]
15 Gentelet, K. *et al.* (2025) *op.cit.*, p. 28
16 *Ibid.*, p.27

Examples of Inclusive AI Governance Initiatives Around the World

In 2024, the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union commissioned a representative group of 60 Belgian citizens to discuss their vision of AI in Europe[17]. This citizens' panel met over the course of three weekends and was co-organized with the organizations Glassroots, Missions Publiques, and VO Citizen.

In the United Kingdom, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI) has conducted an annual public consultation effort since 2021 through the Public Attitudes to Data and AI (PADAI) Tracker Survey[18]. The UK government department responsible for artificial intelligence uses the survey findings to guide its AI-related policies and actions.



The City of Montpellier established a citizens' convention on AI, which resulted in concrete measures such as a Data and AI Strategy developed in collaboration with local stakeholders and the creation of an advisory ethics committee for sensitive AI projects[19].

In the United States, the ECAST (Expert & Citizen Assessment of Science & Technology) network organizes dialogue between experts and the general public in order to give citizens' views greater weight in government decisions related to science and technology[20].

17 Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2024). *A citizens' view of artificial intelligence within the EU.* https://glassroots.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Rapport-IA-EN.pdf
18 Gov.UK (2024). *Public attitudes to data and AI: Tracker survey (Wave 4) report.* Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-attitudes-to-data-and-ai-tracker-survey-wave-4/public-attitudes-to-data-and-ai-tracker-survey-wave-4-report
19 Nantel, L. (2025). *op. cit.*, p.14
20 OCDE (2025). *op. cit.*, p.166

Roles Public Actors Can Play

Strengthening the Democratic Legitimacy and Transparency of AI in Public Services

- **Establish accessible citizen dialogue mechanisms on a systematic basis** during the development of AI projects involving public services.
- **Provide citizens with a formal role in AI governance** and modify the governance structures of certain institutions to include citizen representation, for example within existing committees, thereby moving from occasional consultation to structured and ongoing participation.
- **Institutionalize mechanisms for monitoring citizen dialogues** and systematically publish consultation reports, ensuring that consultation outcomes are integrated into decision-making processes.

Ensuring the Local, Inclusive, and Equitable Grounding of AI Projects

- **Fund local deliberative initiatives** in partnership with municipalities or public consultation bodies, for example by creating a support program to finance local discussions on AI in public services.
- **Organize neighborhood-level consultations** on various AI-related issues and create facilitated forums within districts to discuss concrete topics related to AI deployment.
- **Collaborate with local organizations,** such as libraries and Fab Labs, to host participatory workshops or serve as venues where citizens can consult AI registries, educational resources, and related materials.

Strengthening Digital Literacy Among the Population

- **Develop accessible and easy-to-understand educational materials** explaining the use of AI in public services, how it works, its benefits, and its ethical risks.
- **Create multimedia resources** (videos, podcasts, and other formats) adapted to different literacy and education levels and translated into multiple languages.
- **Support community organizations that provide digital literacy training** and work with them to maximize the reach and impact of these activities.

Key Messages for Policy and Practice

1. **The adoption of AI in the public sector is being driven by a strong ecosystem and the benefits promised by this technology. However, there is a tension between the speed of integration, the pressure to deploy these technologies, and the lack of citizen participation within decision-making processes.**

2. **The ethical issues associated with AI in public services, as well as the risks that directly affect citizens, justify giving genuine consideration to their perspectives and enhancing public consultation methods in order to achieve this goal.**

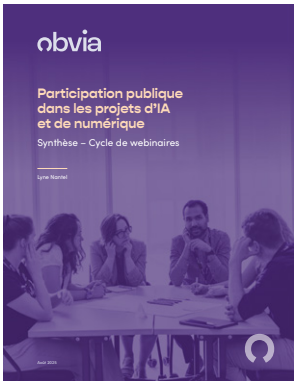
3. **Dialogue with civil society is essential to achieving democratic governance of AI, but also to fostering social acceptability, public buy-in, and trust in the technologies being deployed.**

4. **There are many methods for conducting successful citizen participation initiatives. However, they must be grounded in an inclusive approach from the outset and be designed to influence public policy, rather than remaining on the margins of decision-making processes.**

Further reading:

Read the report

Read the summary



Read the report

About Obvia

Obvia identifies the societal issues of AI and digital technology and contributes to solutions that place living beings and the biosphere at the center of development and use. Our research community produces open knowledge that strengthens individual and collective capacities, working with civil society, public-sector actors, industry, and developers.

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Scientific Direction for Collaboration with Civil Society
The Scientific Direction establishes scientific partnerships with civil society organizations in order to jointly identify relevant research topics and co-produce new knowledge and methodologies that incorporate field-based perspectives and practical experience.

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