## Digital Democracy

# What Europe can learn from Taiwan

On September 7 2020, Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan, joined an online conversation hosted by Open Society Foundations, King Baudouin Foundation, European Movement International and Bertelsmann Stiftung. She discussed the digital innovations Taiwan had implemented in the recent past to strengthen both its democracy at large and its response to the Covid-19 crisis. Audrey Tang is not your usual minister and Taiwan is not your usual democracy. Through approaching her job with the mindset of a coder and a prodigy that thinks outside of the box, Audrey Tang helped to make Taiwan's democracy both extremely open and extremely digital. The success of innovations such as presidential hackathons and large amounts of citizens that participate through various digital means in policy making have proven her right. In the following we want to present some of the innovations that make Audrey Tang and Taiwan's approach so exceptional and show what Europe can learn from them. The full discussion with her and other experts can be found here.

## Background:
## Digital Democracy in Taiwan

Taiwan has emerged as a model case in containing COVID19. Also due to the participation of citizens and the civic tech community in the development of containment strategies. In fact, digital tools have become a fundamental part of Taiwan's democracy, continuously strengthening the voice of citizens. Taiwan was not always an innovative democracy. Only in 1987 martial law was lifted and Taiwan began its transition towards democracy. The first presidential elections took place in 1996, the same time as the internet was taking off. Already back then, Taiwan's civil society was strong, with community organisations finding new solutions

through "collaborative action". But it was only in 2012 with a group of politically minded "civic hackers", among them Audrey Tang, that digital solutions became the heart and soul of Taiwan's democratic advancement. This community created the gØv ("gov-zero") movement and started to develop radically new approaches to civic participation, such as a citizens' audit system on the governments' central budget. As a result of the growing influence and success of the civic tech community in Taiwan, the government decided to name Audrey Tang their first digital minister in 2016. What was seen as a bold step at the time, turned out to become fundamental to Taiwan's democratic advancement and a key in Taiwan's highly successful response to the Covid-19 crisis.

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Website of the Citizens' audit system on the governments' central budget, Taiwan

## What Europe can learn from Taiwan: Insights & Challenges

### 1. No perfect offerings: politics is part of an ever-changing (learning) system

One may look at Taiwan as the perfect model for a digital democracy of our time. But Audrey Tang would certainly disagree. When asked what Taiwan has to offer to other countries, particularly in Europe, Tang replied that Taiwan has "no perfect offering". All the mechanisms Taiwan uses and advances are constantly scrutinized and adapted. Taiwan, according to Tang, is not a model to be copied but rather an idea that new and better approaches, developed collectively, should constantly replace old approaches that outlived their purpose.

Taiwan's approach got rid of the idea of a strict differentiation between government, administration, civil society and citizens. It rather aims to bring all these actors together to co-create innovative polices. This is why Audrey Tang introduced participation officers into each national ministry. These officers act as a link between citizens and the public sector. They allow the demands and ideas from citizens to be heard by the government and administration in an effective and timely manner. This creates a system that is highly transparent and responsive to the demands of the public.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: Taiwan has understood that not one actor, be it government, civil society or citizens, has the perfect answer for solving societies' problems. Only if all those actors can come together effectively, new and innovative solutions emerge. Taiwan has created a system that actively supports digital participation and the effective interaction of all societal actors. Hardly any country in Europe has reached that point yet. All can learn from Taiwan.

### 2. More than just a tool: Internet access as a human right

Taiwan's government understood from early on that the internet is a vital tool towards advancing its democracy and prosperity. But it also realized that to use it effectively, internet access must be given to all, not only to a part of the population. That is why the government decided in 2017 to call for „Internet access as a basic human right".

As a result, the government created particular initiatives for remote and disadvantaged groups in Taiwan. Those included specific projects such as raising the internet quality of remote public health offices and clinics, improving broadband access for people in rural areas and encouraging all citizens to upgrade to broadband connections.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: To make digital democracy a reality, all citizens need access to high-speed internet. Europe can learn from Taiwan in how effective internet access for citizens living in rural areas or older citizens can be made a reality. Taiwan demonstrates that access to the internet is tantamount to access to politics and society at large.

### 3. Having the right digital platforms in place: Effective digital participation through vTaiwan, Join and Pol.Is

A key to Audrey Tang's work as minister has been the development of digital participation platforms through which citizens can effectively engage with public officials and be included in the policy making process. One of the earliest and most successful platforms is vTaiwan. vTaiwan was developed as a digital platform that provides people the opportunity to discuss policies and to produce consensus that the government can turn into laws and policies. At the heart of vTaiwan is a tool called Pol.Is. Through Pol.Is anyone interested can draft statements on how a policy issue should be solved and respond to the statements of others by agreeing

or disagreeing. The advantage of such an approach, according to Tang, is that it avoids polarizing debates and rather forces people to reflect on their own feelings about a certain issue. This should make participating citizens feel like they are part of one community, rather than of different sides. The result of such a process should be a "rough consensus", an overall agreement among all involved, rather than specific recommendations. This in turn provides the ground on which politicians and experts create targeted policy solutions.

Whereas vTaiwan is a collaborative effort by the government and civil society, another key tool for citizens' participation in Taiwan, Join, was created directly by the government's National Development Council. Join is a comprehensive platform on which citizens can interact with various levels of government in an open way. On Join, citizens can at the same time: a) discuss existing policies, b) get information on and "supervise" government policies, c) propose new policies through petitions that have to be discussed by the government if supported by 5000 or more people d) give feedback directly to heads of government agencies. Tang calls this approach to open government "radically trusting citizens". And trusting has paid off, with nearly half the population of Taiwan having been active and a significant amount of policy issues having already been resolved.

According to Tang, platforms as vTaiwan and Join do not make the job of bureaucrats and politicians harder, they make it easier. Through public discussions and the use of collective intelligence, these platforms help administrators and politicians to prioritise and see what the citizenry as a whole demands.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: When it comes to innovative tools of citizens' participation, politicians in Europe often react positively at first, but see them later on as mere instruments for communication and outreach. Bureaucrats on the other hand are often afraid of losing control over new forms of participation. With platforms as vTaiwan and Polis, Taiwan has shown that good participation is beneficial to citizens, administrators and politicians alike. At the same time, every European approach has to take into account, partly in contrast to the Taiwanese model, that most European cultures are based on an open, public and often upfront exchange of arguments and deliberation. The mere display and illustration of opinions does not suffice. The challenge lies in the combination and adaptation of technical tools to various national (discussion) cultures.
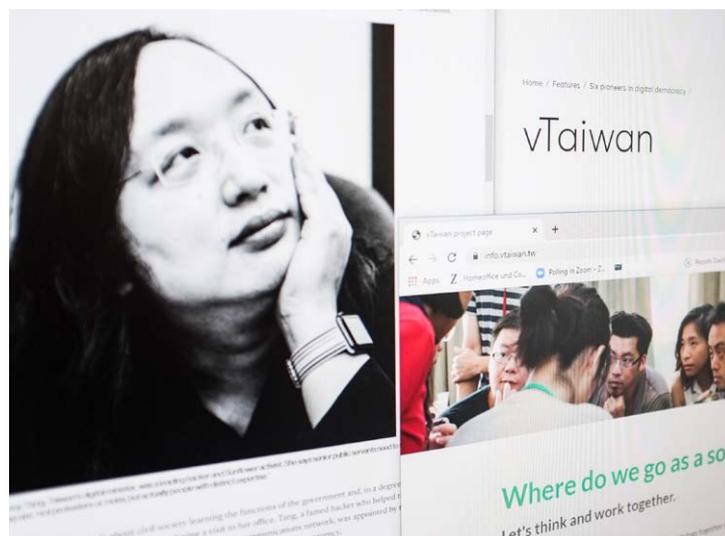


vTaiwan website and photo of Audrey Tang

## 4. Involving everyone through strong cooperation between civil society and government: presidential hackathons and social innovations lab

Through the introduction of participation officers, civil society organisations got direct counterparts in all ministries with whom they can share information and who help them in developing policy solutions collaboratively. Based on that system, hundreds of civil society teams have formed in Taiwan over the past years, collectively co-producing data on issues as air-quality, earthquakes or floods to be shared with the government. Many primary schools for example have set-up air boxes both as an educational measure and to provide vital data on air-quality for the government.

Every year, Taiwan holds a "presidential hackthon". A previously national, now international competition, the hackathon aims to collect cutting edge ideas and solutions towards furthering sustainable development based on open data. Besides helping to source innovative ideas, the hackathons provide a vital platform for the tech community and the government in Taiwan to connect with each other and to explore new avenues towards solving vital societal problems.

Taiwan has a strong tradition of social cooperation through community initiatives, NGOs, companies and others. To foster that tradition, a social innovations lab was opened in Taipei in 2017, to create a hub for all social innovation initiatives in Taiwan. In fact Audrey

Tang has an office in the lab and runs an open door policy towards any social innovator who wants to talk to her, given the conversation is recorded and openly shared with the community. The lab is also actively supporting the set up of regional centres for social innovation across Taiwan.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: Openness and social cooperation are more than a mere slogan in Taiwan. The government supports and engages with civil society through its participation officers, presidential hackathons and social innovations lab. Actively creating spaces, government-links and opportunities for innovative civil society initiatives could benefit many European societies in finding answers to some of their most pressing social, economic or environmental problems. However, a simple transferal of Taiwanese approaches to Europe will not work. Democratic oversight is key, scepticism about AI is widespread in many European countries, and the issue of data protection is at the heart of citizens' concerns. Still, this can only be overcome by bringing together the various communities, the public and the government.

## 5. Going one step further in education in a digital world: from media literacy to media competence

In 2017, Taiwan became one of the pioneers in digital education when it introduced "media literacy" into its curricula. This included the education of students in using social media critically and differentiating between real and fake news. As of recently, Audrey Tang pushed the level of digital education even further through changing the emphasis from "media literacy" to "media competence". According to Tang, the idea of competence acknowledges the fact that young people are no longer mere passive consumers of media but have become active producers in the age of social media. This form of education includes the teaching of journalistic techniques, checking your sources and how to produce useful media. Even further, media competence is supposed to help young students to get a feeling of being an active and responsible member of society, someone that can have a positive impact on their environment through their actions.

The promotion of media competences in Taiwan has already paid dividends in the presidential elections of Taiwan held in January 2020. In the run-up to the elections, the presidential debates were factchecked

through a crowd-sourced initiative involving citizens, many of them only high- or even primary schoolers according to Tang.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: In Taiwan, school children are regarded as active members of society that have a say and that can positively influence their society. In many European systems, students are still treated as passive consumers of knowledge. Social and political competences often play a minor- to no role in European curricula. Taiwan shows that the early and active education of media and societal competences has great benefits, as students become less prone to fake news and start to feel as real citizens from an early age on.



Twitter account of the Taiwan FactCheck Centre

## 6. Solving a contemporary problem: Civic participation as a means to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic

Taiwan has been a world leader in fighting the Corona crisis, despite its proximity to the People's Republic of China. Taiwan used its openness and its digital tools effectively in combating the crisis, avoiding lockdown and pushing its cases to zero very early.

Taiwan's open and vibrant social media called the "PTT bulletin board" was able to pick up the news and evidence of a new and dangerous virus in Wuhan as early as December 2019 and directed the information effectively to Taiwan's Centre for Disease Control. Based on that information, the centre started to check all incoming flights from Wuhan and created a collective information system for all citizens, as well as with the help of citizens. As Taiwan immediately started rationing masks, an App was quickly developed that helps people track down pharmacies that have masks on stock, so that the entire population could be effectively supplied. To this day, the Centre of Disease Control holds daily public briefings based on its own research and information from experts and citizens.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: Around Europe, citizens were not involved in their country's Covid-19 response. Measures were discussed between experts and politicians, with citizens waiting to take orders. In Taiwan on the other hand, openness, citizens' participation and seeking solutions collectively have proven to be excellent ingredients to an effective Covid-19 response. Whereas many European countries are now experiencing the backlash of disoriented and frustrated citizens, in Taiwan citizens trust their government while following all necessary Corona measures.

## 7. The bottom line: Failure culture as a precondition for success

For all the success stories Taiwan has to offer, there are plenty of projects, also in the digital participation realm, that were not successful and eventually discarded. Yet Audrey Tang is not ashamed of this. To the contrary she states: "We fail all the time and we fail loudly". Taiwan's mask distribution app eventually became a success, but failed miserably at its start. At first the app started to create a lot of confusion among pharmacists and did not manage to calculate stocks of masks timely or correctly. Yet Tang and her team actively sought feedback from pharmacists and citizens, updating the app weekly until it became a success three weeks after its first launch. This is just one example of many. Overall, failure culture is not merely a buzzword but lived in daily life.

Takeaways and challenges for Europe: Many European administrations and governments do not have a pronounced failure culture, failure is seen as something to avoid at all costs. In Taiwan experimentation through civic cooperation and citizens' participation is the norm and failure is a normal outcome of many such endeavours. Yet instead of scorning failure, Taiwan and Audrey Tang see it as a possibility to learn, to seek new insights and new information and to continuously built something that is better. A good democracy is never an end, it is always a process.

## Further information can be found on

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/

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