

## DIGITAL TOOLS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: CONTRASTING MODELS OF CIVIL EMPOWERMENT IN DECIDIM AND CHINA'S SCS\*

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### Introduction

The expansion of digital technologies in public governance has significantly reshaped how civil society interacts with state institutions. While concepts such as digital democracy and e-governance dominate academic discourse, research often remains fragmented between the automation of public services and grassroots digital activism (Sorice–De Blasio 2019). This gap leaves unexplored how civic technologies mediate citizen-state relationships and influence democratic legitimacy.

This study defines digital civic participation as the strategic use of digital tools to increase citizen influence over public decision-making, emphasizing platforms that foster inclusion, transparency, and accountability. Unlike traditional e-government initiatives, civic platforms such as *Decidim* embody values of deliberative engagement and public co-creation, aiming to strengthen civil society infrastructure. In contrast, systems like China's Social Credit System (SCS) illustrate how digital tools can be deployed to guide behavior and reinforce compliance in state-citizen relations.

The dual nature of digital governance—its potential to empower or constrain citizens—requires nuanced analysis. As Loader and Mercea (2011) argue, digital innovation in participatory governance challenges conventional intermediaries and opens new spaces for civic mobilization. Yet, this also raises concerns about accessibility, data ethics, and the erosion of democratic control.



To examine how digital infrastructures shape civil society across regime types, this study adopts a comparative qualitative case study approach. It contrasts *Decidim* as a civic-oriented participatory platform with China's SCS, an algorithmic mechanism of behavioral regulation. Drawing on institutional documents, scholarly analyses, and civic tech reports, the study investigates how these models differently configure the roles of citizens, data, and institutional power.

Ultimately, the aim is to explore how technology can either nurture civic empowerment or undermine it through opaque mechanisms of control. By focusing on civil society implications, this research contributes to debates within democratic theory, digital governance, and participatory institutional design.

## Theoretical background

### Understanding Digital Democracy Through Civic Participation

The increasing integration of digital platforms into public life has prompted a rethinking of how civic participation is structured in modern democracies. While traditional representative systems are often constrained by intermediaries and rigid institutional boundaries, digital democracy promises new channels for citizens to engage directly with political processes. Platforms such as *Decidim* illustrate how civic technology can be designed not only to disseminate information but to enable deliberation, co-decision, and co-design with civil society actors. These platforms provide structured spaces for participatory budgeting, collaborative policy-making, and transparent feedback loops, potentially redefining the role of the "active citizen" (Tuza–Kovács 2024).

Digital democracy, as distinguished from e-government or administrative digitization, focuses on fostering direct interactions between institutions and citizens. It empowers individuals to act as political agents rather than passive service recipients. As Helbing et al. (2019) emphasize, digital platforms can strengthen democratic structures when they promote transparency, responsiveness, and inclusivity – particularly when citizens are granted real influence over how digital tools are implemented and governed. However, as Bee (2014) notes, fragmented interests in the information society complicate the aggregation of coherent public preferences. For this reason, the design of digital platforms must deliberately address questions of accessibility, trust, and civic literacy. Decentralized "extra-discussion" spaces, where diverse voices converge outside of elite mediation, have emerged as key innovations. These spaces challenge traditional models of top-down participation by offering a multidirectional flow of ideas, empowering citizens with the rights of access, inquiry, and contribution.

At the heart of these civic innovations is the tension between democratic aspiration and digital infrastructure. Civic technologies can reinforce civic culture and institutional trust – but only if embedded in a broader ecosystem of openness,



legal protection, and deliberative accountability. As Loader and Mercea (2011) suggest, digital democracy is not merely a technological phenomenon but a political project that reshapes relationships between state and society.

In this context, platforms like *Decidim* stand in contrast to opaque systems where citizen input is either symbolic or excluded entirely. The extent to which a platform can be considered “democratic” depends not only on its interface, but on its institutional context and the rights afforded to users.

### Risks and Potentials of Digital Platforms for Civil Society

Digital platforms have emerged as dual-edged tools within civil society, offering unprecedented opportunities for engagement while simultaneously introducing new risks. One of the foremost concerns is the threat of disinformation and algorithmic manipulation, which can distort public discourse and erode democratic norms. As Tucker et al. (2018) highlight, unregulated digital spaces may expose citizens – especially those lacking institutional affiliation – to fake news and anti-democratic content, thereby exacerbating political polarization and undermining trust in participatory institutions.

The risk of participatory inequality is another significant challenge. Despite claims of openness, digital platforms often privilege already-empowered groups – technologically literate, urban, and socioeconomically advantaged – over marginalized communities. This dynamic reinforces structural exclusions rather than remedying them. For instance, platforms like *Decidim*, while lauded for their transparency and deliberative potential, may inadvertently exclude older adults, low-income users, or rural populations due to gaps in digital literacy and access (Friess–Eilders 2015; Hilbert 2016).

The design and ownership of digital infrastructure also affect civil empowerment. The centralization of technical platforms in the hands of profit-driven corporations introduces conflicts of interest that may compromise civic integrity. As Van Dijck–Poell–De Waal (2018) observe, many platforms operate within a “platform society” where public values must contend with commercial logic – undermining neutrality and amplifying dominant voices while sidelining deliberative diversity. Moreover, false or manipulated civic personas – including bots, fake profiles, or gamified participation – may compromise deliberative quality and civic legitimacy. Papacharissi (2014) emphasizes the need to distinguish between authentic civic participation and performative or manipulated engagement, warning of the rise of “networked individualism” that weakens collective political action.

Nonetheless, digital platforms hold significant transformative potential when governed through participatory design and ethical infrastructure. Grossi et al. (2024) stress the importance of embedding civic technologies in institutional ecosystems that promote literacy, access, and accountability. This is echoed by Martí–Noveck (2022), who emphasize that platform affordances – such as open-source



architecture, deliberative moderation tools, and multilingual accessibility – can significantly enhance civic agency when co-designed with civil society stakeholders. At their best, civic platforms can democratize access to public deliberation, decentralize authority, and promote sustained engagement. However, these potentials are often contingent upon broader political, legal, and technological frameworks. Without such supports, even well-intentioned initiatives risk devolving into “techno-solutionist” quick fixes that fail to address underlying civic inequalities or institutional inertia.

### Authoritarian Control and Civic Autonomy

In contrast to democratic digital platforms that seek to expand civic agency, authoritarian regimes have increasingly turned to digital infrastructures as instruments for behavioral monitoring and control. The Chinese Social Credit System (SCS) exemplifies a governance model that integrates algorithmic surveillance into everyday life, converting civic participation into a metric of compliance.

The SCS deploys a combination of biometric tracking, financial monitoring, and online behavior scoring to establish what Liang et al. (2018) describe as a “data-driven society.” Under this framework, civic autonomy is redefined as adherence to state-prescribed norms, with individual scores influencing access to social benefits such as transportation, employment, and education. Unlike democratic platforms like *Decidim*, which encourage deliberative input and algorithmic transparency, the SCS operates through opaque systems that insulate algorithmic logic from public scrutiny (Chen–Cheung 2022).

Authoritarian control is further reinforced through predictive surveillance, which allows the state to intervene preemptively based on algorithmic inferences about potential dissent. These dynamics align with Aneesh’s (2009) concept of “algorithmic governance,” in which automated systems displace deliberative processes and curtail human discretion. Such systems do not merely regulate behavior; they recalibrate the social contract by substituting dialogue with data-driven compliance. Additionally, behavioral consequences under the SCS are often amplified through public display mechanisms and propaganda campaigns. Kostka and Antoine (2020) note that such public reinforcement of “model citizenship” generates societal self-policing, as citizens internalize state-sanctioned behaviors to avoid social exclusion. However, this system is fragile; studies reveal that perceived utility (e.g., fraud prevention) rather than legitimacy explains public approval (Kostka 2019), and instances of resistance – such as VPN usage or coded dissent – indicate a persistent desire for civic space beyond surveillance boundaries (Liu 2020).

The SCS’s logic thus represents a reversal of civic empowerment: instead of citizens shaping governance, governance shapes citizens. In this sense, the system reflects what Creemers (2018) calls “digital Leninism”, wherein the state monopolizes technological infrastructure to preempt political unrest. This approach con-

trasts sharply with open-source participatory frameworks, where feedback loops and co-design mechanisms aim to institutionalize civic voice rather than suppress it. From a civil society perspective, the SCS illustrates how algorithmic tools, if unchecked by legal safeguards and transparency norms, can undermine fundamental civic rights. The erosion of civic autonomy under authoritarian digital regimes highlights the urgency of embedding technological infrastructures within accountable, participatory frameworks – lest digital innovation become a vector for repression.

## Method

This study examines how digital platforms shape civic participation and influence the autonomy of civil society across different institutional settings. It adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach, focusing on two distinct digital governance models: *Decidim*, a participatory civic platform developed by the Barcelona City Council, and the Chinese *Social Credit System (SCS)*, a state-led algorithmic infrastructure. The purpose of this comparison is not to evaluate technological performance per se, but rather to investigate how institutional contexts affect the civic consequences of digital tools.

To analyze how digital systems mediate the relationship between citizens and governing bodies, the study draws on a wide range of sources, including:

- policy documents and legal frameworks related to each platform, which are systematically coded through qualitative content analysis to identify governing principles, accountability mechanisms, and rights provisions.
- academic literature on civic technology, digital participation, and algorithmic governance.
- platform documentation and open-source community resources, technical manuals, GitHub issue threads, contributor charters, examined via desk-based document review to reconstruct design choices and operational workflows.

The research employs a Weberian ideal type comparative framework, where each case serves as a conceptual exemplar of distinct logics of civic empowerment and algorithmic authority. The ideal-type approach is especially suited for analyzing the value-laden and structurally distinct features of public governance systems in the context of digital transformation (Aristovnik et al., 2022; Pollitt–Bouckaert 2017). Analysis is structured around four interconnected dimensions that capture the civic implications of digital platforms:

1. *Citizen participation*: the degree to which citizens can influence decisions, initiate proposals, and hold institutions accountable.
2. *Algorithmic transparency*: the extent to which the technological and decision-making processes behind the platforms are visible and contestable.
3. *Data sovereignty*: how personal and collective data are managed, protected, and controlled within the platform infrastructure.



4. *Sociopolitical outcomes*: the broader effects of the platforms on civic freedoms, public trust, and the inclusiveness of civil society.

These dimensions enable a grounded comparison of how digital tools are embedded in institutional practices that either foster or restrict civic engagement. Rather than framing the contrast strictly along regime lines (i.e., democratic versus authoritarian), the study emphasizes the institutional conditions under which civic technologies can serve inclusive participation or reinforce hierarchical control (Osborne 2010).

By analyzing *Decidim* and SCS through these dimensions, the study contributes to the broader discourse on digital governance from a civil society perspective, providing insights into how digital infrastructures reconfigure agency, accountability, and participation in the public sphere.

## Case studies

### Decidim — Co-Designing Civic Infrastructure

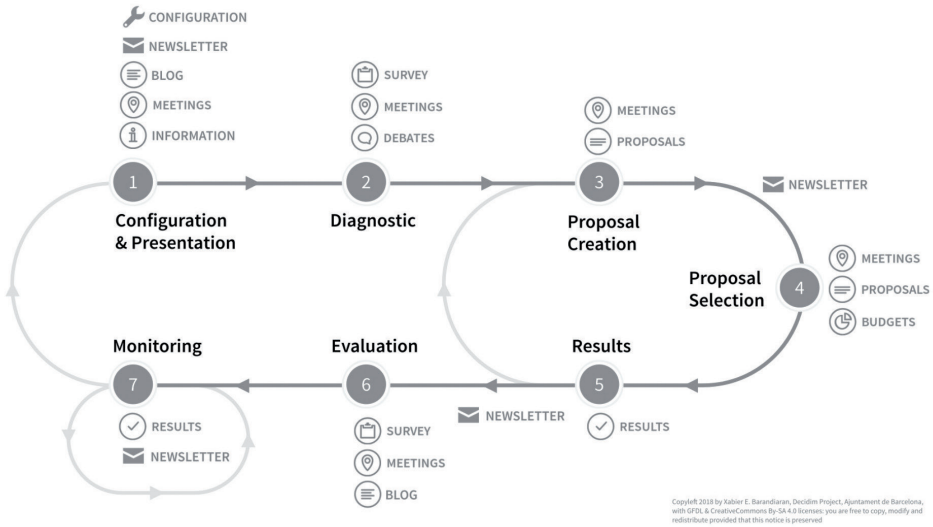
Decidim is a free and open-source participatory platform developed by the Barcelona City Council in 2016 to transform institutional engagement into a collaborative, citizen-led process. Unlike conventional e-governance tools that digitize bureaucratic services, *Decidim* functions as a democratic infrastructure that empowers citizens to actively shape public policy. Its modular architecture allows users to propose initiatives, deliberate on projects, co-develop regulations, and participate in budgeting processes. The platform has been adopted in over 100 municipalities and civil society organizations, showcasing its adaptability across institutional settings (Barandiaran et al. 2024).

At the heart of Decidim's design philosophy lies the principle of co-design. Rather than treating citizens as service recipients, the platform invites them to act as co-creators of democratic infrastructure. Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in this process. For example, feminist associations in Barcelona collaborated with municipal actors to create a participatory budget framework focused on gender-inclusive urban planning (Caravantes & Lombardo, 2024). Similarly, migrant solidarity groups used the platform to successfully introduce proposals for multilingual municipal services. These instances exemplify what Martí and Noveck (2022) term "civic-centered digital governance," where participatory infrastructure is iteratively shaped by user feedback and collective experimentation.

Technically, *Decidim* is built using a modular framework, enabling adaptation to specific participatory contexts. Its transparency features – such as version tracking, public logs, and comment visibility – aim to prevent manipulation and promote deliberative integrity. However, challenges remain. Despite its inclusive ethos, barriers such as digital literacy gaps, limited outreach in marginalized communities, and

language access constraints persist (Blanco et al. 2019). In practice, participation often skews toward highly educated, digitally competent users, raising questions about representativeness (Barandiaran et al. 2024).

Figure 1. Governance structure of Decidim and the positioning of civil society actors about public, private, and commons sectors



Adapted from Barandiaran et al. 2024.

*Decidim's* governance structure is hybrid, comprising a Democratic Guarantees Committee – an independent oversight body ensuring ethical platform use – and collaborations between municipalities, civic hackers, and local organizations. This multi-actor governance fosters a level of institutional trust and adaptability often absent in top-down digital systems. As Aragón et al. (2017) observe, the project represents a rare case where “technopolitical design serves civic empowerment rather than administrative efficiency”.

The platform also reflects an alternative approach to algorithmic logic. Unlike systems that employ opaque scoring or filtering algorithms, *Decidim* privileges traceability and user control. Decisions are grounded in transparent deliberation rather than automated classifications. This design supports what Gabor (2024) refers to as “algorithmic accountability” – an emerging norm in civic technology development.

While not without its limitations, *Decidim* stands as a counterpoint to centralized, surveillance-based digital governance models. Its emphasis on co-design, transparency, and participatory pluralism provides a meaningful framework for understanding how digital tools can bolster civic agency and reinvigorate local democratic institutions.



## Case Study: China's Social Credit System

Since its official announcement in 2014, China's Social Credit System (SCS) has been the subject of significant global scrutiny. Much of the international discourse frames the SCS as a dystopian apparatus of state surveillance and behavioral control (Creemers 2018; Liang et al. 2018). However, from a domestic civil governance perspective, the SCS is often presented as a tool to increase social trust, compliance, and administrative efficiency in a complex society of over 14 billion people (Kostka 2019; Hou–Fu 2024).

The SCS operates through a combination of data-driven technologies, including AI-powered surveillance, real-time behavioral tracking, and algorithmic scoring. These tools are used to assign "trustworthiness" scores to citizens based on diverse criteria ranging from traffic violations to social media behavior. While proponents argue that it promotes lawful behavior and deters corruption, critics highlight the opaque nature of its algorithms and its potential for misuse (Chen–Cheung 2022; Liang et al. 2018).

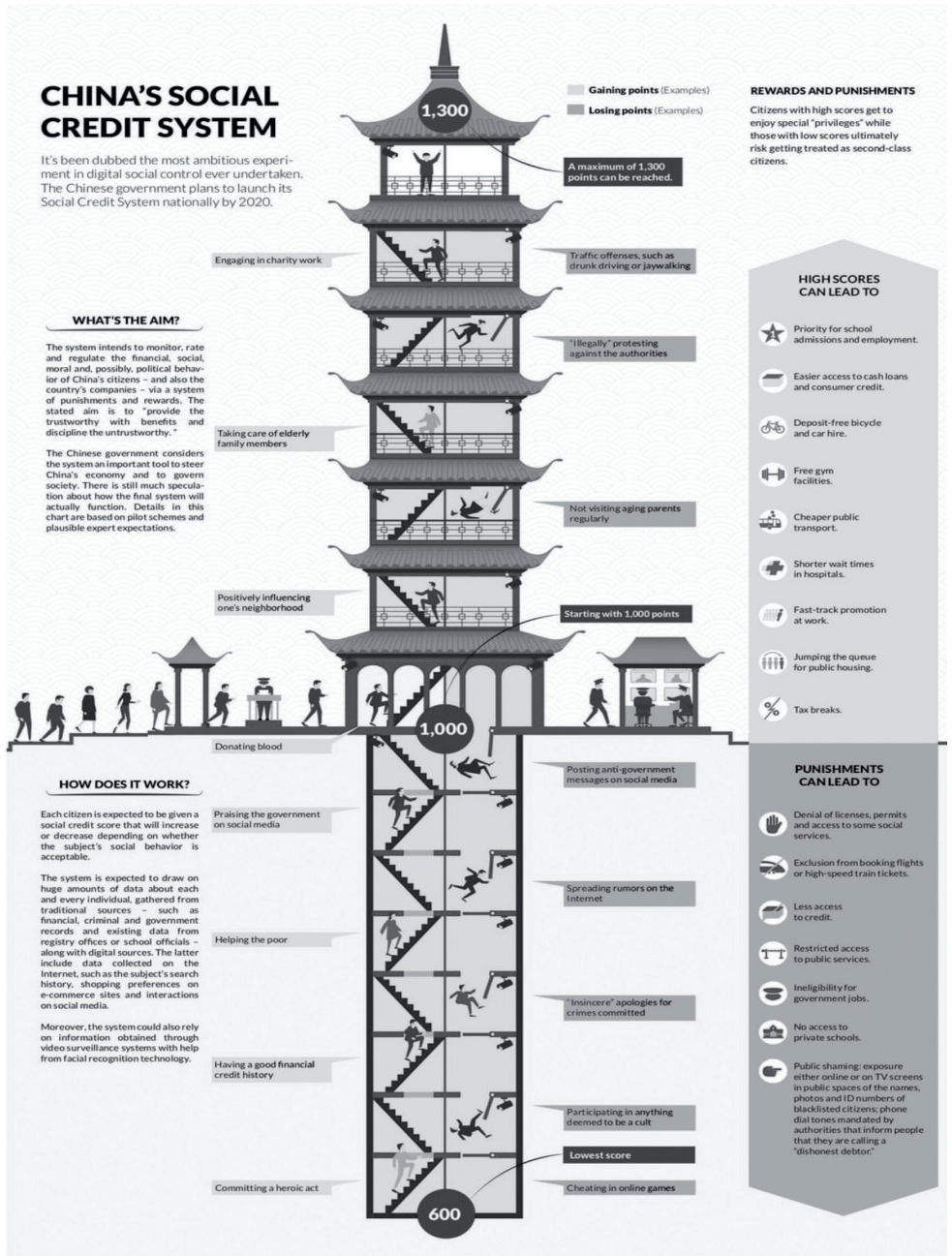
From a civil society lens, the SCS embodies a form of algorithmic governance that profoundly restructures the citizen-state relationship. Unlike participatory models such as *Decidim*, which encourage active civic input, the SCS positions citizens as passive recipients of state-defined norms, enforced through automated decision-making. This framework aligns with Aneesh's (2009) idea of "governance without government," where control is executed via non-transparent technological systems.

The implications for civic autonomy are significant. Citizens with low scores may face restrictions on travel, education, employment, or even public visibility. Despite these constraints, survey data suggests surprisingly high levels of public support, especially among citizens who perceive the system as fair and as a safeguard against fraud and misconduct (Kostka–Antoine 2020). Still, researchers caution that such acceptance may stem more from normative alignment or resignation than from democratic legitimacy (Qiang 2019).

Furthermore, the SCS reflects a deeper shift in the infrastructure of civic life. As Liu (2020) notes, public dissent is increasingly channeled into less visible forms such as encrypted messaging or offline gatherings, suggesting a civic adaptation to digital authoritarianism. In contrast to *Decidim*'s model of co-creation, China's platform centralizes decision-making and limits opportunities for reciprocal feedback loops between the state and citizens.



Figure 2. China's social credit system (URL1)



TOP: BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG; BOTTOM: CHRISTIAN LEONARDI; INFOGRAPHIC: GAZETTE

Bertelsmann Stiftung



Table 1.\* *Contrasting Digital Governance Models: Civic Implications of Decidim and China’s Social Credit System*

| Dimension                   | Decidim (Barcelona)                                                                            | Social Credit System (China)                                                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Civic Participation         | Co-design with CSOs, open proposal modules, deliberative forums, and participatory budgeting.  | Behavioral monitoring; no meaningful channels for civic deliberation or feedback.         |
| Governance Logic            | Democratic and pluralistic; overseen by a guarantees committee and participatory councils.     | Technocratic and centralized; state-controlled without independent oversight.             |
| Data Transparency & Control | Open-source, traceable inputs, citizen control over contributions and proposals.               | Opaque algorithmic scoring; personal data used without transparent consent mechanisms.    |
| Impact on Civic Autonomy    | Enhances agency by empowering citizens to shape public decisions; fosters trust and inclusion. | Conditions civic rights on behavioral compliance; induces self-censorship and conformity. |

Created by the author.

## Discussion

The digital governance landscape increasingly reflects a tension between civic empowerment and algorithmic control. This study has explored two paradigmatic systems – *Decidim* and China’s Social Credit System (SCS) – to demonstrate how the deployment of digital technologies shapes civic autonomy across democratic and authoritarian contexts. Moving beyond a binary perspective, this discussion traces the sociotechnical implications of each model, integrating existing research and visual tools to contextualize key governance logics.

### Democratic Deliberation and Design Logics: The Case of Decidim

*Decidim* presents a compelling illustration of how civic technologies can extend participatory democracy. Originating in Barcelona, the platform enables inclusive policy co-creation by allowing citizens to submit proposals, participate in deliberations, and audit administrative responses. Its open-source nature embodies a commitment to algorithmic transparency, a principle underscored in recent research

\* Table 1. presents a side-by-side analysis of how Decidim and China’s Social Credit System mediate the intersection between civic engagement and digital governance. It highlights their sharply contrasting approaches to participation, transparency, and autonomy. While Decidim fosters co-creation and democratic trust, the SCS reflects a top-down enforcement structure that prioritizes behavioral conformity over civic agency.

emphasizing the role of platform design in sustaining democratic accountability (Barandiaran et al. 2024; Martí-Noveck 2022).

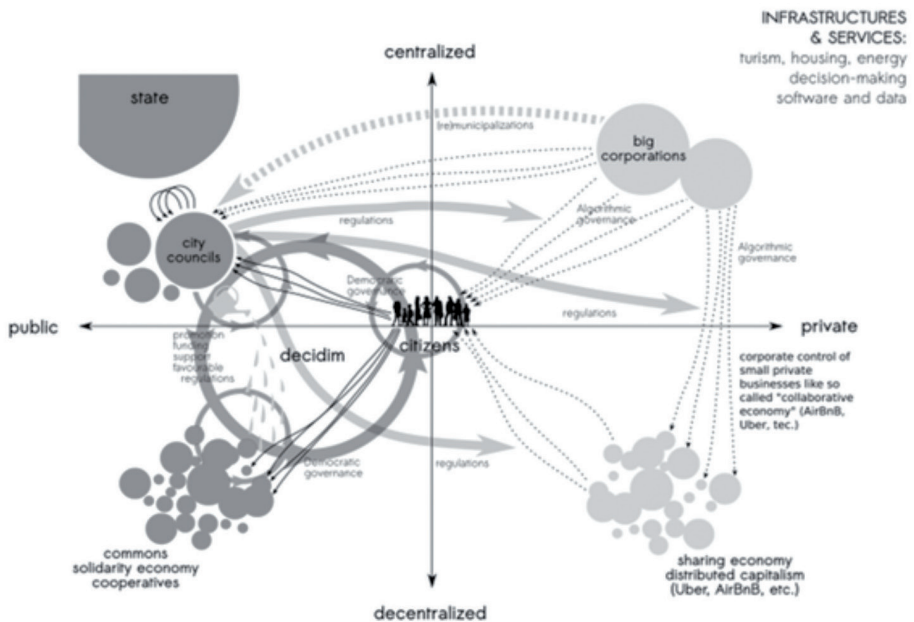
The emphasis on modularity and localization has allowed municipalities to tailor civic engagement mechanisms to their unique sociopolitical contexts, increasing accessibility and fostering political trust.

Empirical evidence suggests this model can foster inclusivity: for example, participatory budgeting initiatives facilitated by Decidim in Madrid and Barcelona resulted in increased engagement from women, youth, and marginalized communities. These findings align with European scholarship stressing the significance of "deliberative infrastructures" that operationalize democratic values through digital interfaces (Tuza–Kovács, 2024). However, institutional responsiveness remains an ongoing challenge. Without formal obligations to implement citizen proposals, the impact of digital deliberation may be symbolic rather than transformative.

## Contrasting Ideologies: Decidim vs. the Social Credit System

The SCS operates within an entirely different ideological framework. Rather than cultivating deliberative civic agency, it evaluates citizens based on behavioral metrics derived from financial data, digital communication, and social relationships.

Figure 3. Decidim vs. China's social credit system



Source: Barandiaran et al. 2024.



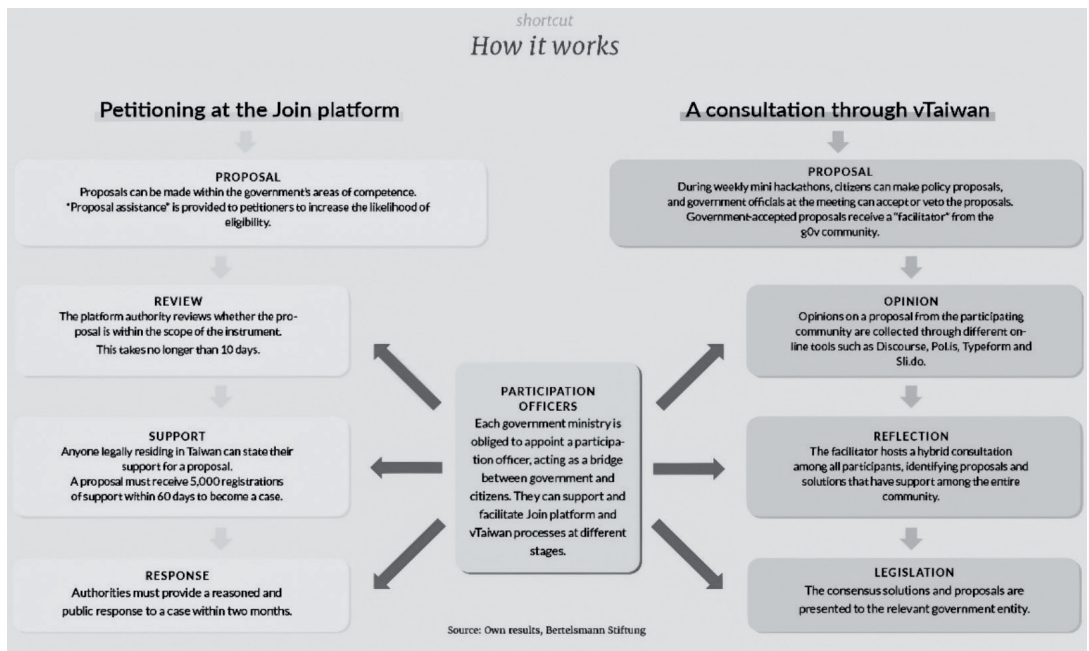
This governance-by-numerical-index reflects what Zuboff (2023) calls “surveillance capitalism,” albeit within a state-controlled architecture. Unlike Decidim, which invites scrutiny and citizen participation in its development, the SCS remains opaque and top-down, limiting individuals’ capacity to understand or contest their scores.

Yet, it would be reductive to categorize the SCS merely as a dystopian apparatus. Chinese officials have framed it as a tool for building “trust societies” and enhancing administrative efficiency (Kostka–Antoine 2020). Some Chinese citizens have even reported feelings of security and order under the system, complicating Western narratives of unilateral repression. This highlights the importance of contextual and cultural relativism in assessing digital governance models.

### Hybrid Possibilities and Future Directions

While the *Decidim* and SCS models represent ideological extremes, emergent hybrid platforms like Taiwan’s *vTaiwan* suggest a third path. By combining AI-assisted deliberation with legal safeguards and civic oversight, *vTaiwan* illustrates how democratic and digital logics can be integrated to improve governance outcomes (Hsiao et al. 2018).

Figure 4. *vTaiwan* (URL-2)



These cases underline the importance of institutional scaffolding in determining whether civic tech serves emancipation or control. To further analyze these trajectories, *Figure 1*. ("Decidim and Civic Governance Landscape") should be inserted at the beginning of this discussion to visualize the decentralized-public quadrant in which *Decidim* thrives. In contrast, *Figure 2*. which models the SCS as an extension of centralized-private control, can be placed mid-way through this section to highlight the divergent sociotechnical configurations. The comparative matrix (*Table 1.*) offers a synthesized view of how civic participation, data control, algorithmic transparency, and social consequences diverge across systems. This table underscores not just functional differences but the normative assumptions that undergird them.

### Toward a Theoretically Informed Civic Tech Agenda

The implications for civil society are profound. Digital platforms are not inherently democratizing; they must be critically examined as ideological and institutional artifacts. As Rak (2016) emphasizes, civic infrastructures must evolve beyond consultative participation and embed mechanisms of accountability that transcend digital tokenism. For example, successful participatory platforms in Southern Europe have emerged where local governments integrate civic input with budgetary decisions, legal mandates, and feedback loops – conditions largely absent in centralized systems like the SCS.

Furthermore, algorithmic design must prioritize explainability and contestability. Scholars caution against the "black boxing" of governance algorithms, which can obscure power relations and amplify inequality (Eubanks 2018; Pasquale 2015). Civic platforms like Decidim provide a model for how public oversight can be encoded into software architecture – a process rarely observed in state-run algorithmic systems. The participatory design principles embedded in Decidim resonate with digital rights scholarship, which emphasizes inclusion, diversity, and algorithmic justice (Schrock 2016).

In short, the comparative framework outlined in this study reveals how digital infrastructures reflect and reinforce existing political configurations. Decidim enables the co-production of public policy in democratic ecosystems, whereas the SCS codifies surveillance and compliance in authoritarian regimes. However, the boundary between civic empowerment and algorithmic control remains porous. Democratic societies must remain vigilant to ensure that digital participation does not devolve into performative governance, and authoritarian regimes must recognize that legitimacy cannot be fully engineered through datafication alone.

The evolution of digital governance depends on sustained collaboration between policymakers, technologists, and civil society. As digital infrastructures become more embedded in public life, the principles of transparency, inclusion, and civic autonomy must remain at the core of innovation efforts.



Only through such commitments can we ensure that technology serves democracy rather than diminishes it.

## Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Decidim and China's Social Credit System (SCS) highlights the stark ideological and structural divergences shaping contemporary digital governance. While Decidim embodies the democratic potential of digital innovation – promoting transparency, inclusivity, and citizen engagement – the SCS exemplifies how technology can serve centralized authority and behavioral compliance. These opposing trajectories reinforce a critical point: digital technologies are never politically neutral. Their societal impact is determined by the institutional frameworks, political cultures, and normative values in which they are embedded.

The study's findings suggest that civic platforms like Decidim can indeed enhance democratic legitimacy and public trust – especially when supported by legal safeguards, inclusive design, and strong institutional commitments. Yet, such potential is not automatic. Barriers such as digital inequality, limited civic literacy, and institutional inertia persist, often limiting participation to digitally empowered actors. Conversely, the SCS illustrates how algorithmic governance, when devoid of transparency and rights-based protections, can systematically erode civil liberties. Its technocratic opacity and punitive orientation raise profound ethical concerns around surveillance, data autonomy, and civic marginalization.

At the same time, the comparison indicates that these systems are not simply dichotomous; rather, they reflect ideal types formed through historical contingency and political intent. Between the poles of participatory pluralism and digital authoritarianism, new hybrid models are emerging. Platforms like vTaiwan demonstrate that democratic ideals and algorithmic tools can coexist – when civic accountability and deliberative infrastructure are embedded by design (Hsiao et al., 2018). These platforms offer a middle ground for societies navigating the dual imperatives of technological innovation and political inclusion.

The analytical synthesis presented in Table 1, located after the case studies, clarifies these contrasts in measurable terms. The table articulates how Decidim and the SCS differ along four key governance dimensions: civic participation, algorithmic transparency, data sovereignty, and sociopolitical impact.

In parallel, *Figure 3* – which graphically summarizes these dimensions – acts as a complementary visualization that anchors the reader's understanding of how civic infrastructure and algorithmic power intersect. Together, these representations highlight how digital platforms can either sustain or undermine civic agency.

Given these insights, policymakers, civic technologists, and rights-based organizations must recognize that digital governance poses both opportunity and risk. Protecting democratic values in an era of digital transformation requires not just





technological literacy, but the intentional embedding of transparency, accountability, and civic empowerment into digital design. Achieving this vision depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration – including state institutions, civil society actors, and open-source communities – particularly in societies where state legitimacy is contested or fragile.

Future research should prioritize comparative and longitudinal investigations across political regimes. Special attention must be paid to how platform architectures evolve under civic pressure, legal reform, or technological shifts. Furthermore, informal practices such as civic hacking and grassroots resistance deserve closer scrutiny, as they may represent emergent strategies of autonomy within digitally mediated power structures (Schrock 2016).

In conclusion, digital platforms must be evaluated not only on their technical affordances but also on the institutional and normative ecosystems in which they operate. This study demonstrates that while Decidim represents a promising model of participatory civic innovation, the SCS reveals the peril of algorithmic governance embedded in opaque, centralized regimes. Ultimately, the future of digital governance rests not in code alone, but in the political will to align technology with democratic values, civic dignity, and shared accountability.

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## Szabó Balázs—Erőss Ágnes

*Szabadtéri tüntetések Budapest 2010–2022 között*

A cikk az illiberális rendszer kiépülésével szembeni társadalmi ellenállás alakulását vizsgálja. A sajtóbeszámolókra alapozott empirikus elemzés a Budapest 2010 és 2022 között szervezett kormányellenes utcai tüntetésekre fókuszál, ezek adatait a korábbi kutatások eredményeivel is összeveti.

Az adatok tanúsága szerint az autoriter fordulatot követően csak néhány évig érvényesült az a folytonosság, amely a tiltakozási kultúrát a rendszerváltástól kezdve jellemezte. A tüntetések száma 2014-ig – az egyre kedvezőtlenebb politikai légkör ellenére, vagy éppen az ellenséges kormányzati lépésekre reagálva – még növekedett, de ezt követően csökkenni kezdett, majd a COVID-járvány hatására az időszak végén rendkívül alacsony szintre esett vissza. A kormányellenes megmozdulások mindvégig dominánsak maradtak és nem csökkent a tüntetések sokszínűsége. Céljaik között első helyen szerepelt a demokrácia és a szabadságjogok védelme, de nagy számban foglalkoztak a gazdasági/jóléti rendszerrel kapcsolatos követelésekkel is. A kulturális, emlékezetpolitikai és a környezetvédelmi ügyekkel kapcsolatos tiltakozások aránya az aktuális kormányzati lépésekre reagálva ingadozott. A vizsgált időszak során megfigyelhető volt egyfajta professzionalizálódás, az energiák jobb kihasználása: csökkent a legkisebb létszámú tüntetések aránya. Az illiberális rendszer térnyerése – a korábbi kutatói várakozásokkal összhangban – az informális szféra és a bázisdemokratikus formák irányába mozdította el a tiltakozásokat. A hatósági zaklatások célpontjává vált hagyományos tüntetés-szervezők (szakszervezetek, civil szervezetek) mellett új, kevésbé vagy egyáltalán nem intézményesült szereplők jelentek meg. Ez együtt járt a tüntetések tartalmi és formai megújulásával, a figyelem felkeltésére fokozottan alkalmas, látványos demonstrációk és az állampolgári engedetlenség gyakoribbá válásával.

**Kulcsszavak:** Utcai tüntetés, társadalmi tiltakozás, demokrácia, illiberális rendszer, Budapest.

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## Balázs Szabó—Ágnes Erőss

### *Open-air protest events in Budapest between 2010–2022*

The paper investigates into the social protest against the development of the Hungarian illiberal regime. The empirical analysis based on media reports focuses on the anti-governmental street demonstrations organized in Budapest between 2010 and 2022. Its results are compared to the findings of previous research.

The data reveal that the continuity, which had been a constant feature of the protest culture from 1989 till 2010, prevailed only for some years after the autocratic turn. The number of street protests increased until 2014 – despite the deteriorating political climate or maybe because of it – but it started to decline later on and dramatically decreased in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. Anti-governmental demonstrations remained dominant throughout the whole period. The diversity of aims also proved to be a lasting feature of protest movements. The protection of democracy and human rights was the single most important aim of demonstrations. A large part of protests revolved around economic and welfare issues. The number of demonstrations related to cultural, historical and environmental issues fluctuated depending on the intensity of government measures affecting these fields. Some professionalization and better efficiency could be detected in the organization of protest events by the end of the period: the share of very small demonstrations decreased. As it was expected by several researchers, the rise and strengthening of the illiberal regime pushed the protest movement toward the informal sphere and basic democratic actions. Besides the usual protest organizers (trade unions, civil society organizations) that became a target of harassment by government authorities, there appeared new, less established or completely informal organizers. This resulted in a content and form renewal: both the civil disobedience and the attention-grabbing, spectacular protest events became more frequent.

**Keywords:** Street demonstration, social protest, democracy, illiberal regime, Budapest.

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