By: Jan Albert van Laar, j.a.van.laar@rug.nl

User Guide: App Assisted Middle Ground

1. Introduction

App Assisted Middle Ground is an educational software application that assists groups of 2 to 5 students in developing a reasonable compromise that settles public or political controversy. Not all disagreements allow of a substantial resolution, even if open-minded participants seriously attempt to convince one another. When the disagreement concerns action or policy, and those involved do not expect that they can rationally persuade one another, it can be useful to examine whether a well-reasoned compromise would be feasible (van Laar 2019). With the method Middle Ground, participants deliberate in an attempt to develop a reasonable compromise that settles a public controversy (see on such "deliberative negotiation": Mansbridge et al, 2010), thereby training specific conversational skills and getting triggered to form their opinions about the prospects and limits of compromise solutions.

Middle Ground can be used for several learning objectives that are central in civic education and critical thinking: a) gaining insight into (historical or topical) public controversies and political processes; b) developing a point of view about the virtues and vices of compromises; c) obtaining knowledge about the conditions for fruitful negotiation; d) developing skills for cooperative argumentation, conversation, listening, and collective problem solving; e) increasing moral and ideological sensitivity, empathy, spirit of compromise, integrity; f) reducing polarization and group thinking (van Laar 2019). Some of these objectives are brought nearer by engaging in a Middle Ground discussion, whereas others by evaluating the process, procedure and outcome of a Middle Ground session afterwards.

In the first part of this user guide, we explain how the admin (instructor) prepares and uses the Middle Ground app. In the second part, we describe the various stages the participants go through.

*2. How to prepare and use App Assisted Middle Ground?*

In short:
1) Create an account by sending an e-mail to Jan Albert van Laar: j.a.van.laar@rug.nl
2) Plan a new session
    2.1 Select a practical issue
    2.2 Divide the students into groups
    2.3 Develop a fictive scenario
    2.4 Enter the start time, the scenario and the problem
    2.5 Send the obtained group codes to the participants
    2.6 Ensure that the participants login before the start time
3) Provide participants with information about Middle Ground discussion in advance
4) Optionally: download the results

1) To plan sessions, you need to create an account by contacting Jan Albert van Laar: j.a.van.laar@rug.nl. With this account, you can plan a new session by going to https://middleground.nl/admin.

2.1) A Middle Ground discussion is about an explicitly *practical* issue that requires a policy or course of action as a solution. Thus it is not about: "Is eating meat ethical?" but rather about: "How, if at all, should the government reduce meat consumption?" Further, the issue is best cast as an *open question*, rather than as a yes-no question. So not: "Should the government establish a referendum?" but rather: "How should the government implement referenda within the democratic process?"

2.2) The Middle Ground format is most useful when the participants disagree about their preferred solutions. For this reason, the admin needs to ensure diversity within each group, either by composing groups based on an opinion poll, or by asking participants to roleplay a specific stakeholder or party.

2.3) It is best to embed a Middle Ground discussion in a fictive scenario. First of all, the participants need to suppose that, due to time pressure and/or the wide gap between the various stances, it is of no avail to try to rationally convince the others. Second, they need to suppose that there exists some pressure to make concessions. For example, it can be imagined that the participants make up a divided board that needs to make a timely decision, or a committee made up from competing politicians that is required to give an advice. Depending on the case, the scenario can be specified further, so that a failure to reach an agreement has adverse consequences, such as reputational damage, financial losses or social unrest.
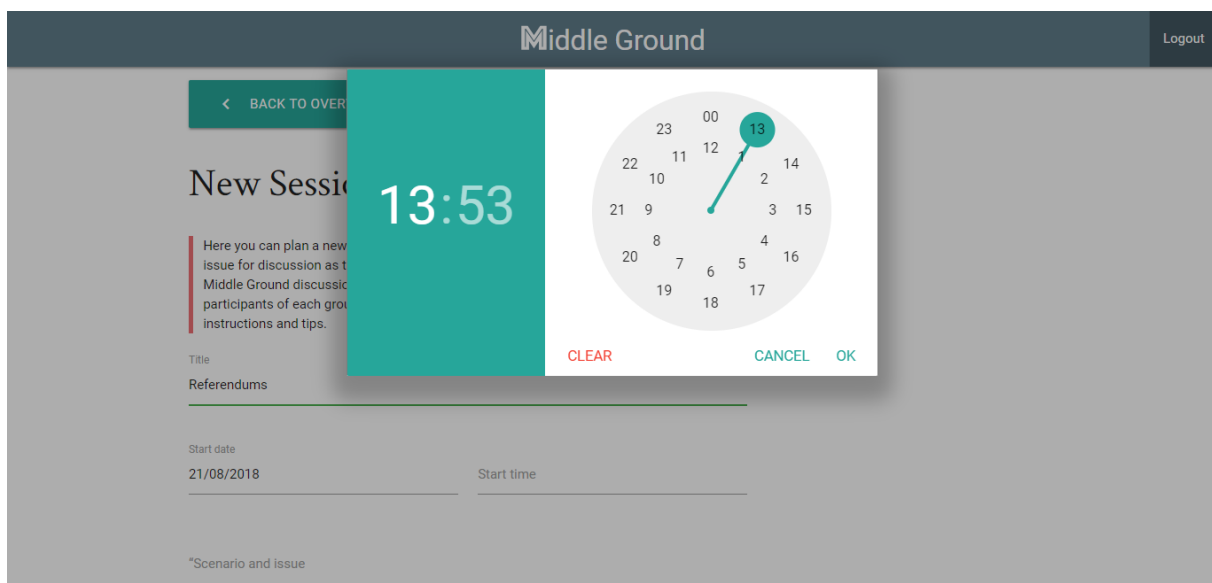
2.4) When specifying the "start time," select the desired local time. At this page you can also record the scenario and the issue. Further, you can determine the number of groups you need. (If there are 60 students and you wish groups of four, you create 15 groups.) You need to communicate, manually, to the participants who is enrolled in what group. You can also include a link to an online questionnaire form if you wish the participants to answer questions about the Middle Ground discussion afterwards. The amount of time for (a) recording motivated preferences and argued proposals, and for (b) discussing these preferences and

proposals is standardly set to 5 minutes. They can be increased to allow for more extensive deliberation, or decreased to create more time pressure. Often, groups need more than 5 minutes for discussing preferences and proposals.

2.5) After you have thus created a session, the app creates one group code (as well as a link that embeds this code) for each of the groups (so 15 group codes if there are 15 groups). In a separate message, you need to provide the members of each group with their group code (or link), which enable them to log in at: https://middleground.nl.

2.6) It is essential that the members of a group log in *before* the start of the session, so this needs to be communicated to the participants. The app doesn't keep track of who is a member of what group, so if only three of the members of a group of 4 have logged in on time, the discussion starts with the three of them. (Given that the starting time is rigid, it can be useful to schedule back up sessions, for example 15 minutes later than the initial sessions – which again requires the distribution of back up group codes over the groups.)

Participants should not close their browser or refresh pages during the discussion. It is possible for participants removed from the procedure to log back into the procedure by using the same link or discussion ID. However, the procedure is not paused during this interval.
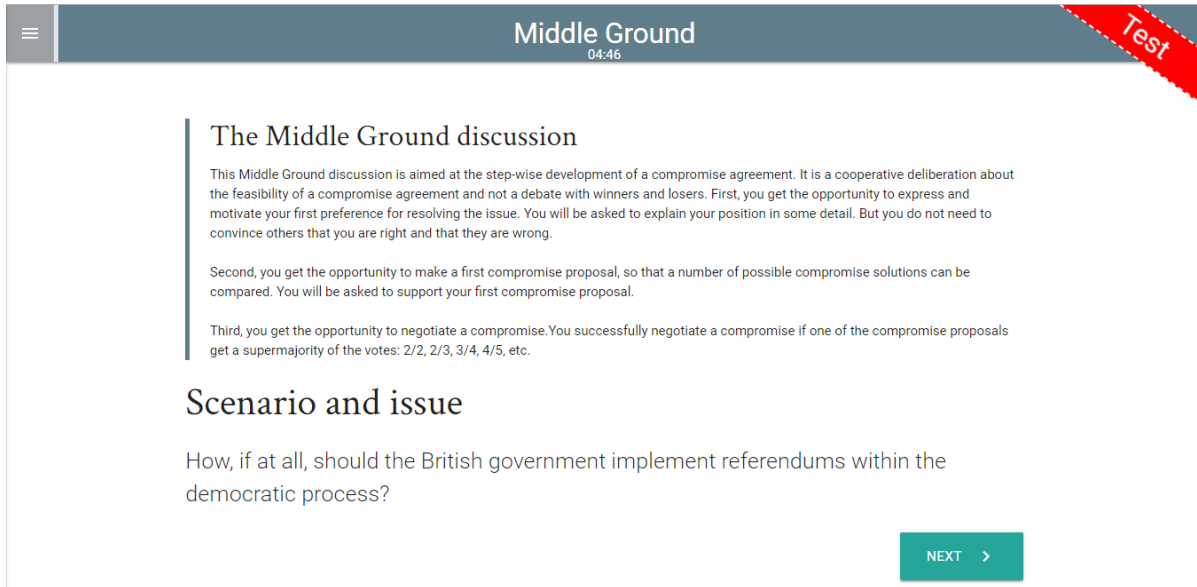
3) The app instructs the students what they have to do in each step. However, some idea of the aim and design of the Middle Ground discussion may facilitate the discussion and enhance the quality of the evaluation afterwards. The discussion might also improve if the students prepare the discussion by reading or by talking about the topic. When participants need to play a role, they can study their role in advance.

4) After the groups have finished their sessions, the results (motivated preferences, argued proposals, discussion moves, and voting results) can be accessed at the admin page (https://middleground.nl/admin) by click on 'Download result'. (If the file containing the results is opened in Notepad, select everything and then copy it to a word document for a better overview of the results.)

Reminder: send a separate message to the participants with the start time, and their group code (possibly also a back up group code).
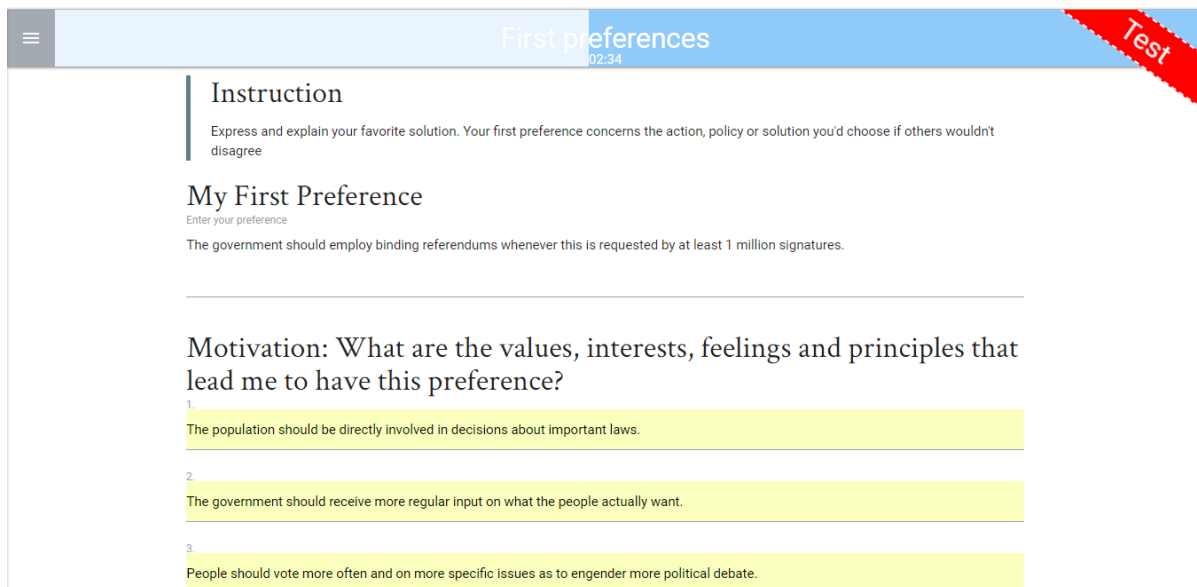
3. The stages of Middle Ground

After logging in, participants go through the three basic stages of the procedure: the First Preferences stage (blue), the First Compromises stage (purple), and the Negotiation stage (green). It is always possible to access the outcomes of previous stages by means of the top-left menu button. What follows is an overview of the various steps that make up the stages.
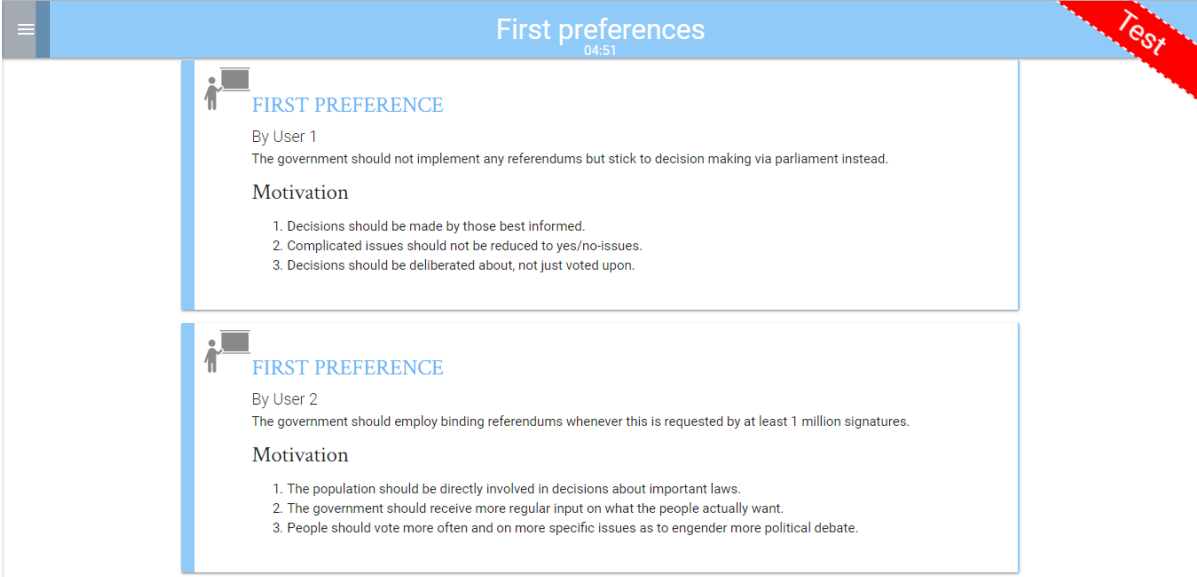

Introduction: The participant is informed about the outline of the procedure and the scenario issue.

Stage 1.1: The participant is asked to formulate, by means of keywords, his or her first preference for a policy or course of action, as well as a maximum of five values, interests, feelings or principles that motivate this preference.

Stage 1.2: All participants' preferences and motivations are shown in a survey.
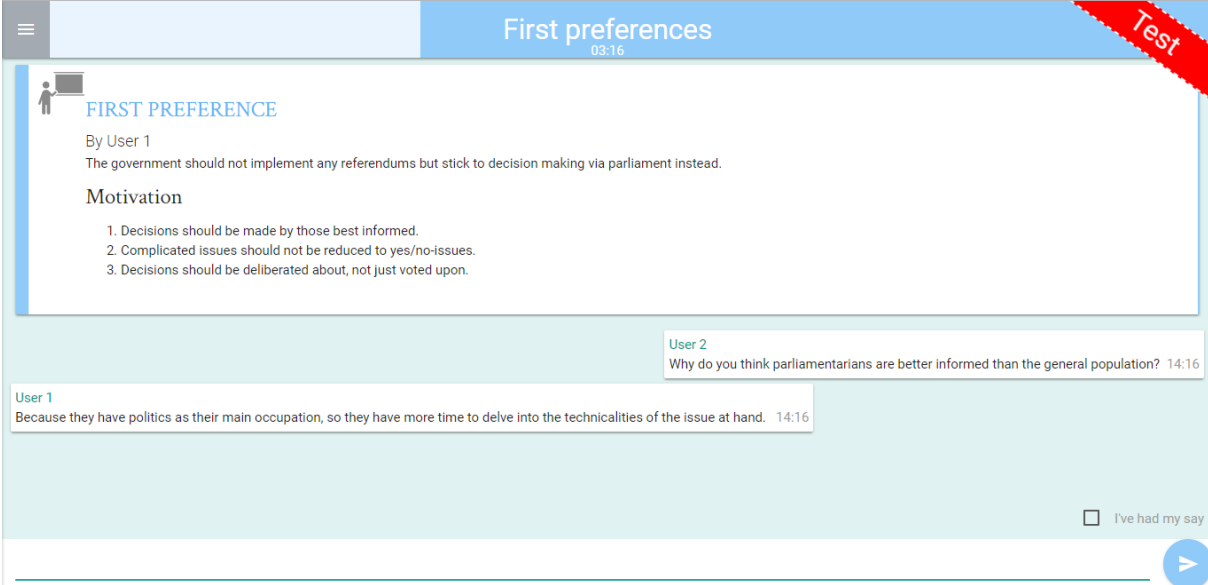
Stage 1.3: The participant enter a discussion room to ask and answer clarificatory questions about the participant's preferences and motivations.

First Part Completed

You have completed the first part of the Middle Ground discussion. You now enter the second part, where everyone is invited to think about and discuss possible ways to accommodate the values, interests, feelings or principles that motivate the participants. Use the menu if you want to inspect the preferences and motivations again.

NEXT >

Stage 2.1: The second stage of the procedure, i.e. the First Proposals stage, is announced and succinctly explained.

Instruction

Make a first compromise proposal by accommodating at least some parts of the other participants' positions.

My First Compromise Proposal

Enter your preference

The government should apply only advisory referendums about new laws, whenever this is requested by at least 1 million signatures.

Reasons why others might be willing to accept this

1.

Because the referendums are only advisory, ill-considered votes do not necessarily have political effects.

2.

Since politicians are still the final executive institution, their knowledge still plays a pivotal role in politics.

3.

Stage 2.2: The participant is asked to craft a first compromise proposal that includes some concessions that accommodate cherished values, interests, feelings or principles of the other participants, and state some reasons why others might find this proposal (somewhat) attractive. Again, only by means of keywords.

FIRST COMPROMISE PROPOSAL

By User 1

The government should choose about which laws to have referendums, and these referendums should not be binding.

Reasons why others might be willing to accept this

1. The government can still access citizen input if they seem necessary.
2. People are still stimulated to think about issues whenever a referendum is held.

FIRST COMPROMISE PROPOSAL

By User 2

The government should apply only advisory referendums about new laws, whenever this is requested by at least 1 million signatures.

Reasons why others might be willing to accept this

1. Because the referendums are only advisory, ill-considered votes do not necessarily have political effects.
2. Since politicians are still the final executive institution, their knowledge still plays a pivotal role in politics.

DONE READING >

Stage 2.3: All participants' first compromise proposals and the reasons why they might be (somewhat) attractive to other participants are given in a survey.

2. The government should receive more regular input on what the people actually want.
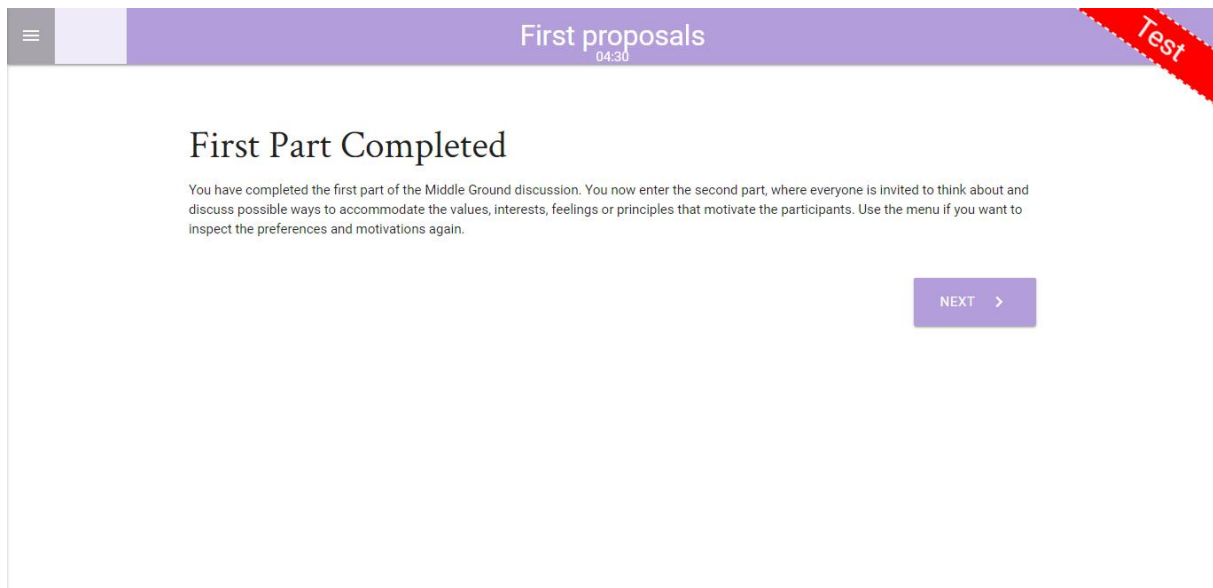3. People should vote more often and on more specific issues as to engender more political debate.

FIRST COMPROMISE PROPOSAL

By User 1

The government should choose about which laws to have referendums, and these referendums should not be binding.

Reasons why others might be willing to accept this

1. The government can still access citizen input if they seem necessary.
2. People are still stimulated to think about issues whenever a referendum is held.

User 2
Don't you think the government will just abstain from holding any referendums under your proposal? 14:27

User 1
No, because this would lead to major societal backlash. 14:27

☐ I've had my sa

Stage 2.4: The participant is taken back to the discussion room and instructed to ask and answer clarificatory or, if they wish, critical questions about the first compromise proposals.

Second Part Completed

You have completed the second part of the Middle Ground discussion. You now enter the third part, where you are invited to negotiate a compromise agreement that (almost) all consider acceptable. Use the menu if you want to inspect the preferences and motivations again. In a first negotiation round, each participant tables a next compromise proposal, followed by a discussion and a vote. You may have to wait for some time when another participant is devising a next compromise proposal! Note that you also need to vote on your own proposals. When each participant has in this way tabled a proposal, we repeat this procedure in a second round. However, as soon as a vote results in a supermajority - 2/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5, etc. -an agreed upon compromise has been realised and the Middle Ground discussion ends. If this agreement does not arise, each of the compromise proposals tabled before will without discussion be put to a final vote in the third round in order to see whether a supermajority is feasible after all.

NEXT >

Stage 3.1: The third stage of the procedure, i.e. the Negotiations stage, is announced and succinctly explained. The required supermajority for a compromise agreement is reached in either of the following situations: 1/1, 2/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5.

Instruction

In a first negotiation round, each participant tables a next compromise proposal, followed by a discussion and a vote. In a second round we repeat this procedure. As soon as there's a supermajority - 2/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5, etc. – an agreed upon compromise has been realised. If this agreement does not arise, each of the proposals tabled in the first two rounds will, without any discussion, be put to a vote in the third and final round.

Compromise

Enter your preference

The government should in principle write out referendums, whenever this is requested by at least 1 million signatures, and can decide beforehand whether these are binding or advisory. The government has the option to refuse a referendum, but must issue new general elections in that event.

PROCEED >

Stage 3.2: When it is his or her turn, the participant is asked to table a next compromise proposal, i.e. a proposal that might conceivably receive the support of the required supermajority. When it is another participant's turn, the participant waits until the other participant has tabled its next compromise proposal.
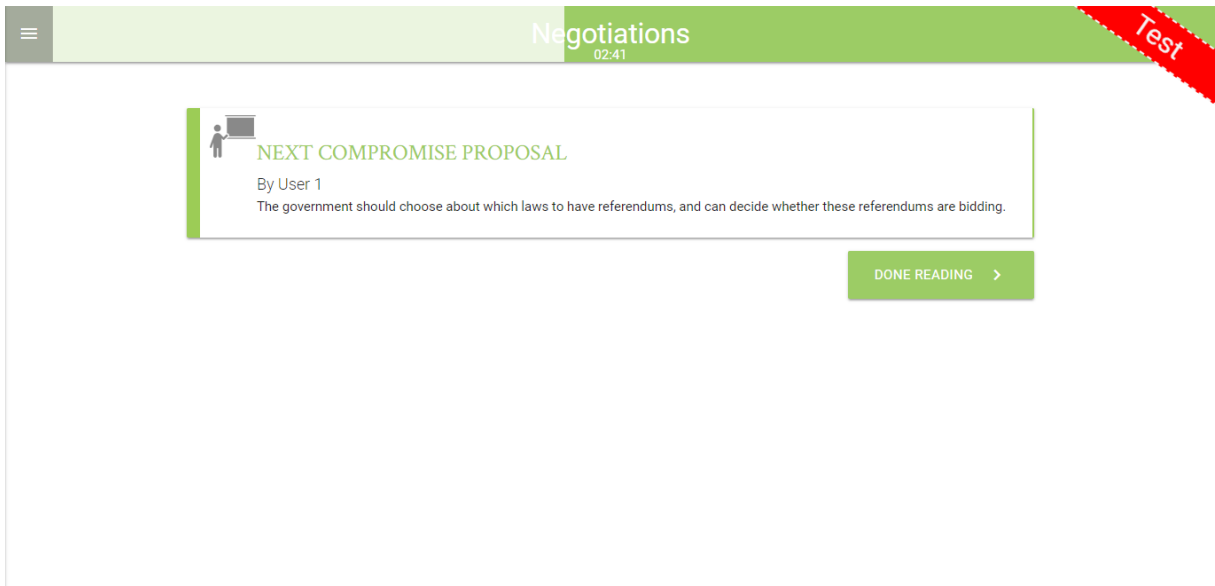
Stage 3.3: The participant is shown the next compromise proposal, i.e. the compromise proposal drafted in the previous step.

Stage 3.4: The participant is again entering the discussion room and allowed to discuss the current compromise proposal.

Stage 3.5: The participant can vote 'yes' or 'no' on the current compromise proposal, also when this proposal is his or her own. When the proposal receives the required supermajority of 'yes' votes, a compromise agreement has been realized. If not, a next participant tables a next compromise proposal. This cycle - a next compromise proposal, followed by discussion, followed a vote - repeats itself until an agreement is reached, or when each participant has tabled two compromise proposals. If each has tabled two compromise proposals yet no agreement has been secured, the participants enter a final voting round, where they can vote, but not longer discuss, on each of the previously tabled compromise proposals, one by one, starting with the first. They can vote "yes" as often as they wish, but as soon as the supermajority has been realized, the voting procedure ends, and that deal is on.
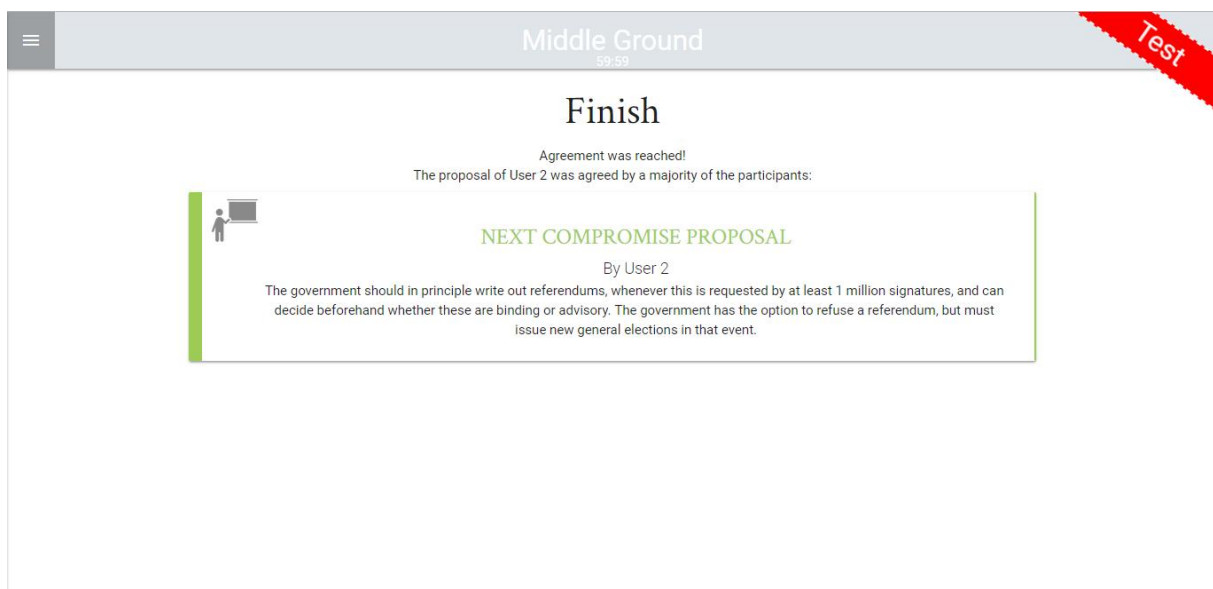
Finish: The participant is informed whether or not an agreement has been reached, and if so, which agreement. If the instructor has included a questionnaire, the link to it will be given here. The Middle Ground discussion is hereby finished.

References

Jan Albert van Laar (2019). Middle Ground: Settling a public controversy by means of a reasonable compromise. In: J. Anthony Blair (Ed.), Studies in Critical Thinking (pp. 69-80). Windsor Ontario: centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rethoric.

Jane Mansbridge, James Bohman, Simone Chambers, David Estlund, Andreas Follesdal, Archon Fung, Christina Lafont, Bernard Manin, and José Luis Martì (2010). The role of self-interest and the role of power in deliberative democracy. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18, pp. 64–100.