

# User Guide: App Assisted Middle Ground

This user guide is meant for teachers or instructors who wish to use the ‘Middle Ground’ web app. This app assists groups of 2 to 5 students in performing a reasonable discussion on some predetermined scenario-based issue, with the goal of crafting a compromise agreement despite the participants’ having diverging opinions on the topic. The user guide consists of two parts. The first part explains how to choose a suitable scenario issue, how to create a session for students to participate in, how students should be instructed beforehand, and how to collect and evaluate the results of the session afterwards. The second part contains an illustrated description of all stages of the Middle Ground procedure.

## 1. How to Use Middle Ground

### Step 1: Issue Selection

The Middle Ground format is flexible: it can be used to discuss national problems (“how to deal with the refugee crisis?”) as well as small-scale ones (“how to spend our sports club budget”), and anything in between. The issues can also range from a very high level of abstraction (“how should the EU deal with global warming?”) to a very low one (“as a club, we have €1,000 to spend, which must be divided between the following items of expenditure: ...”). Discussion on a very abstract issue may stimulate students to think about abstract social themes and to translate them into concrete proposals, whereas a specific scenario can be useful for training participants to deal with real-life decision-making problems in a reasonable way.

There are a few criteria that should be kept in mind when selecting the issue to be discussed:

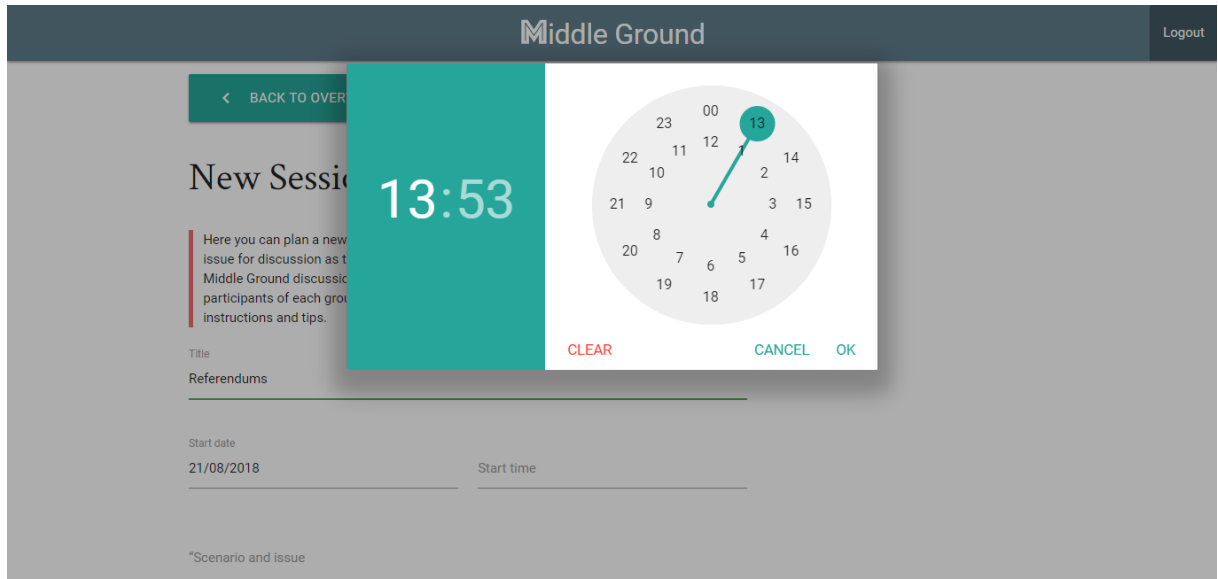
- The issue should be *practical* in nature and require a policy or course of action as a solution. So not: “Is eating meat ethical?” but rather: “How, if at all, should the government reduce meat consumption?”
- The issue should allow for multiple viewpoints, not just ‘yes’ and ‘no’. So not: “Should the government establish a referendum?” but rather: “How, if at all, should the government implement referenda within the democratic process?”
- The Middle Ground format is only of use when the participants within each group disagree about the preferred solution. This can be accomplished by selecting an issue that is actually contested in the group. Alternatively, the participants can be assigned certain positions beforehand, or (if the issue is specific enough) be assigned the role of a certain stakeholder. In the latter case, the participants should of course be informed of their assigned position or role before the start of the session.
- The scenario should be set up in such a way that the participants are under pressure to reach a compromise solution. This can be achieved assigning all participants a role (e.g. that of company board member or advice committee member) and attaching hypothetical consequences when, within that role, they fail to issue a course of action with the required supermajority (e.g. reputational damage or financial loss).

### Step 2: Planning a Session

To plan sessions in the Middle Ground app, you first need to create an account by contacting Jan Albert van Laar: [j.a.van.laar@rug.nl](mailto:j.a.van.laar@rug.nl). From this account, you can then plan a new session

by logging in to the sessions overview via <https://middleground.nl/admin> and clicking ‘Create new session’. You will be taken to a screen in which to insert the following information:

- Title. This title is only for personal reference and will not be seen by the participants.
- Start date and time. The time will be automatically adjusted to your computer or device. Note: please make sure that your computer’s time is synchronised with the intended time zone. When setting the start time, the clock should initially show the present time, e.g. when setting the time at 13:53, the screen should look at follows:



When this time does not correspond with the intended time zone, this means your computer’s time is wrongly synchronised.

- Issue. This is the issue that the participants will be asked to deliberate about. See step 1 for guidelines on selecting the scenario issue.
- Number of groups. Here you can insert the number of groups you wish to deliberate simultaneously. So if there are 60 students you wish to deliberate in groups of four, the number of groups is 15.
- Questionnaire URL. You can include a link to an online questionnaire form if you wish the participants to answer questions about the Middle Ground discussion afterwards. The link will be shown to the participants after the session has ended.
- Amount of time for determining preferences and proposals, and for discussing these preferences and proposals with the other participants. These amounts are standardly set to 5 minutes. They can be increased to allow for more extensive deliberation, or decreased to create more time pressure.

After you have created the session, participants can enter the discussion using the link provided, or go to <https://middleground.nl> and fill in the discussion ID provided.

### Step 3: Preparation

The app instructs the students what they have to do in each step. However, some anterior knowledge of the aim and set-up of the Middle Ground discussion can be useful, both to facilitate the discussion and to enhance the evaluation afterwards. It can also be helpful to invite students for a practice session shortly before the actual discussion to guarantee everyone is familiar with the software.

The discussion might also improve if the students anteriorly study the issue of the discussion, especially if this issue is complex or requires some level of specialised knowledge. When the students are assigned a certain role or position, they should also be informed of this before the start of the procedure.

It is advisable to instruct the participants to log in a few minutes in advance, although it is possible to log into the session up until a few minutes after the official starting time. It is also advisable to instruct the participants to make sure their internet connection is reliable, because participants will be removed from the procedure when they are disconnected from internet (or when they close their browser). 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.

#### Step 4: Collecting Results

After the groups have finished their sessions, you can access the results. To do so, return to the sessions overview via <https://middleground.nl/admin> and click on ‘Download result’ next to the session in question. Your computer will download a zip file containing information about the different proposals that were made as well as the voting outcomes in each group. If you have included a questionnaire, you can of course also access its results.

## 2. A Stage-by-stage Overview of Middle Ground

After logging in, participants go through three stages of the procedure: the First Preferences stage (light blue), the First Compromises stage (light purple), and the Negotiation stage (green). It is always possible to review the outcomes of previous stages by means of the top-left menu button. Below is an illustrated overview of all steps these stages consist of. The top bar indicates the time left for the current step.



The screenshot shows the 'Middle Ground' interface. At the top, there is a dark blue header with a hamburger menu icon on the left, the text 'Middle Ground' in the center, and a red 'Test' banner on the right. Below the header, the main content area is white. It features a section titled 'The Middle Ground discussion' with a vertical line on the left. The text describes the process: 'This Middle Ground discussion is aimed at the step-wise development of a compromise agreement. It is a cooperative deliberation about the feasibility of a compromise agreement and not a debate with winners and losers. First, you get the opportunity to express and motivate your first preference for resolving the issue. You will be asked to explain your position in some detail. But you do not need to convince others that you are right and that they are wrong. Second, you get the opportunity to make a first compromise proposal, so that a number of possible compromise solutions can be compared. You will be asked to support your first compromise proposal. Third, you get the opportunity to negotiate a compromise. You successfully negotiate a compromise if one of the compromise proposals get a supermajority of the votes: 2/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5, etc.' Below this is a section titled 'Scenario and issue' with the text: 'How, if at all, should the British government implement referendums within the democratic process?'. At the bottom right, there is a green button with the text 'NEXT >'.

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

**First preferences** 02:34 Test

**Instruction**  
Express and explain your favorite solution. Your first preference concerns the action, policy or solution you'd choose if others wouldn't disagree

**My First Preference**  
Enter your preference  
The government should employ binding referendums whenever this is requested by at least 1 million signatures.

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**Motivation: What are the values, interests, feelings and principles that lead me to have this preference?**

1. The population should be directly involved in decisions about important laws.
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.

Stage 1.1: The participant is asked to formulate 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.

**First preferences** 04:51 Test

**FIRST PREFERENCE**  
By User 1  
The government should not implement any referendums but stick to decision making via parliament instead.

**Motivation**

1. Decisions should be made by those best informed.
2. Complicated issues should not be reduced to yes/no-issues.
3. Decisions should be deliberated about, not just voted upon.

**FIRST PREFERENCE**  
By User 2  
The government should employ binding referendums whenever this is requested by at least 1 million signatures.

**Motivation**

1. The population should be directly involved in decisions about important laws.
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.

Stage 1.2: All participants' preferences and motivations are shown in an overview.

The screenshot shows a web interface for the 'First preferences' stage. The header is blue with the text 'First preferences' and a timer '03:16'. A red 'Test' banner is in the top right. The main content area has a white background with a blue border. It features a section titled 'FIRST PREFERENCE' by 'User 1' with the text: 'The government should not implement any referendums but stick to decision making via parliament instead.' Below this is a 'Motivation' section with a numbered list: 1. Decisions should be made by those best informed. 2. Complicated issues should not be reduced to yes/no-issues. 3. Decisions should be deliberated about, not just voted upon. At the bottom, there are two comment boxes: one from 'User 2' asking 'Why do you think parliamentarians are better informed than the general population?' and one from 'User 1' stating 'Because they have politics as their main occupation, so they have more time to delve into the technicalities of the issue at hand.' A checkbox labeled 'I've had my say' is at the bottom right, and a blue arrow button is at the bottom center.

Stage 1.3: The participant is taken to a discussion room and instructed to ask and answer clarificatory questions about all participant's preferences, and if necessary refine his or own preference on the basis of these questions.

The screenshot shows a web interface for the 'First proposals' stage. The header is purple with the text 'First proposals' and a timer '04:30'. A red 'Test' banner is in the top right. The main content area has a white background. It features a large heading 'First Part Completed' followed by a paragraph: '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.' At the bottom right, there is a purple button labeled 'NEXT >'.

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

First proposals 02:41 Test

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**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.


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**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 formulate a compromise proposal, i.e. a proposal for a certain policy or course of action that he or she thinks might receive more support than the firstly preferred policy or course of action. The participant also formulates reasons why he or she thinks the proposal will be more attractive to (some) other participants.

First proposals 04:26 Test

 **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 more attractive to other participants are given in an overview.

03:39

First proposals

Test

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 say

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

04:56

Negotiations

Test

## 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 summarily explained.

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Negotiations  
03:25

Test

### 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 his or her 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 their next compromise proposal.

☰

Negotiations  
02:41

Test

 **NEXT COMPROMISE PROPOSAL**

By User 1

The government should choose about which laws to have referendums, and can decide whether these referendums are bidding.

DONE READING >

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 taken back to the discussion room and instructed to deliberate about the compromise proposal currently on the table (i.e. discuss the merits of the compromise proposal, discuss whether or not it is better than no compromise at all, discuss whether better compromise proposals are likely forthcoming, etc.).



Stage 3.5: The participant can vote 'yes' or 'no' on the compromise proposal currently on the table (also when this proposal is his or her own). When the proposal receives a supermajority of 'yes' votes (according to the rules laid down in the instruction of stage 3.1) this proposal will be agreed upon and the participant is taken to the finish screen. If not, the participant is taken to stage 3.6.

There was no majority for the proposal of User 1

**NEXT COMPROMISE PROPOSAL**

By User 1  
The government should choose about which laws to have referendums, and can decide whether these referendums are binding or not.

User 1 User 2

NEXT >

Stage 3.6: If no majority has been reached on the current compromise proposal, the participant is informed about this and shown the distribution of votes. After this, stages 3.2-3.5 are repeated for the next participant. If all participants have tabled one proposal and none has received sufficient support, each participant may table a second proposal along the same procedure. If no supermajority can be reached the second round either, the procedure ends without an agreement.

Agreement was reached!  
The proposal of User 2 was agreed by a majority of the participants:

**NEXT COMPROMISE PROPOSAL**

By User 2  
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.

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 procedure is hereby finished.