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## 2. Framework for analysis of the management and organization of e-participation initiatives

**Tiina Randma-Liiv, Kadi Maria Vooglaid and Veiko Lember**

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### 1 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN

This volume includes e-participation initiatives from 15 European countries. The aim of the book is to empirically uncover how e-participation initiatives are organized and managed and what the contextual challenges associated with the implementation of e-participation are. The following research questions guide the research of the book:

1. How are e-participation initiatives launched and institutionalized?
2. How are e-participation initiatives organized and managed?
3. Which national-, organizational- and individual-level factors are particularly important in explaining the implementation of e-participation initiatives?
4. What lessons can be drawn for organizing and managing e-participation initiatives?

In addressing these research questions, the following chapters employ both exploratory and explanatory approaches to investigate the functioning of e-participation platforms. A qualitative case study method has been used, as detailed case studies that examine internal institutional variables affecting citizens' online participation are still rare (see Chadwick, 2011; Steinbach et al., 2019). Using holistic case studies, this book follows the recommendation by Reddick and Norris (2013), who suggest that scholars who undertake further studies on e-participation should consider the use of qualitative methods, such as case studies, to tease out some of the more subtle nuances of the real-life functioning of e-participation initiatives. In-depth single-platform case studies are expected to provide thick empirical descriptions on how e-participation initiatives are organized and administered and how contextual characteristics as well as institutional features affect their performance.

Existing e-participation initiatives take various forms, from online discussion forums and consultation platforms to legislation wikis, e-petitioning, online complaint systems and one-stop participation portals. However, some of these forms do not allow for actual collaboration in policy making. In this book, the focus is set on digital initiatives which establish novel platforms for participation processes with stakeholders and users in policy design.

The authors and editors were jointly involved in case selection. All partners proposed information on the general e-participation landscape in their respective countries with more specific information on two to four e-participation platforms following a common case selection strat-

egy. With the editors, one appropriate case was chosen for each country. As the e-participation landscape is highly fragmented, it is virtually impossible to compile a set of cases similar enough to warrant a strict comparison. In some countries, one will find a number of local-level e-participation initiatives, but no national-level initiatives. In other countries, it is the other way around. Additionally, in some cases, the e-participation platforms function informally (they are not formally integrated into the policy-making process) and are operated and maintained by civil society organizations. In this book, the focus was set on those e-participation platforms which could be explicitly linked to the policy-making process, regardless of whether it was tied to national or sub-national policy making.

It was acknowledged that the content and politico-administrative process of national-level and municipal-level initiatives may differ due to the topics and issues that are relevant for citizen participation on either level of government. National-level discussions are often considered high-stake issues that attract a lot of public interest, such as immigration policy or minority rights, whereas local-level discussions revolve around more down-to-earth topics, such as urban planning, which people may relate to more easily. As Dawes (2008) found more than a decade ago, central governments have done little to require, encourage or proactively guide new forms of online citizen engagement. At the same time, in the states where local governments have a relatively large authority compared with central governments, municipalities may have more room to manoeuvre to adapt and add rules and policies for their own use, including the introduction of local-level e-participation initiatives. This may explain the popularity of e-participation at the local government level. It can also be argued that at the level of a local government (*vis-à-vis* national government), interactions with citizens can be proximate and take place not only formally but also informally; in addition, both decision-makers and citizens may find it easier to establish public support and action for locally experienced problems. This is referred to in literature as ‘the proximity principle’, implying that citizen engagement has more potential for high participation rates and informal institutionalization on the local rather than national level (Meijer et al., 2015).

The criteria for case selection were the following:

1. Initiatives which connect stakeholders with the public sector via an open and transparent online platform.
2. Cases which were designed for long-term or permanent collaboration and which have been in operation for at least one year.
3. Cases which included a deliberative element that fed into the policy-making process.

Despite the increasing relevance of social media in the policy-making process, this book excluded social media platforms. Participatory budgeting is another field which is growing both in theory and in practice, but in the context of this book, more generic practices of policy collaboration were preferred. Table 2.1 summarizes the e-participation initiatives selected for the book.

Data collection took place from January 2019 to August 2020. The case studies relied on information collected through desk research and interviews. The mix of interviews and secondary documents allowed an adequate level of data triangulation to be maintained, which was deemed important in tracking the variation between primary and secondary data and thus improving the accuracy, interpretation and analysis of the collected data (see Mingers et al., 2013). Desk research involved the exploration of the following sources: the website of the

Table 2.1 The selected e-participation initiatives

	Platform/title of initiative	Web	Adoption	Administrative level
Austria	Participations-plattform der Stadt Wien (Digitale Agenda Wien)	<a href="http://www.partizipation.wien.at/en/consultation/digitale-agenda-wien-2020">www.partizipation.wien.at/en/consultation/digitale-agenda-wien-2020</a>	2014	Local
Belgium	Leuven, co-create it	<a href="https://leuvenmaakhetmee.be/">https://leuvenmaakhetmee.be/</a>	2018	Local
Croatia	eConsultations	<a href="https://savjetovanja.gov.hr">https://savjetovanja.gov.hr</a>	2015	National
Czech Republic	Brno 2050 and participatory budgeting	<a href="https://damenavas.brno.cz/">https://damenavas.brno.cz/</a>	2016/2017	Local
Estonia	Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal	<a href="https://rahvaalgatus.ee/">https://rahvaalgatus.ee/</a>	2016	National
France	Parlement et Citoyens	<a href="https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/">https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/</a>	2013	National
Germany	meinBerlin	<a href="https://mein.berlin.de">https://mein.berlin.de</a>	2015	Local/district
Hungary	National Consultation	<a href="http://abouthungary.hu/national-consultation/">http://abouthungary.hu/national-consultation/</a>	2017	National
Ireland	OpenConsult	<a href="https://civiq.eu">https://civiq.eu</a>	2014	Local
Latvia	MyVoice	<a href="http://www.manabalss.lv">www.manabalss.lv</a>	2011	National
Lithuania	E-Citizen	<a href="https://epilietis.lrv.lt/en/">https://epilietis.lrv.lt/en/</a>	2015	National
Slovak Republic	Slov-lex	<a href="https://www.slov-lex.sk">https://www.slov-lex.sk</a>	2016	National
Spain	Decide Madrid	<a href="https://decide.madrid.es/">https://decide.madrid.es/</a>	2015	Local
Sweden	Gothenburg proposal	<a href="https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/start/kommun-opolitik/sa-kan-du-paverka/har-du-ett-battre-forslag/goteborgsforslaget/om-goteborgsforslaget">https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/start/kommun-opolitik/sa-kan-du-paverka/har-du-ett-battre-forslag/goteborgsforslaget/om-goteborgsforslaget</a>	2017	Local
United Kingdom/Scotland	We asked, you said, we did	<a href="https://consult.gov.scot/we_asked_you_said/">https://consult.gov.scot/we_asked_you_said/</a>	2014	National

e-participation initiative and their publications; the respective laws and secondary legislation; governmental policy documents, strategies, action plans and reports regarding participatory policy making in general and e-participation in particular; relevant reports and analyses prepared by third parties such as non-profit organizations, think-tanks and international organizations; media coverage of the chosen initiative; and statistics available on e-participation in general and the selected e-participation platform in particular. In addition, partners were encouraged to become a 'tester' of the platform, i.e. registering as a user and trying out the functionalities that the platform offers.

The interviewees included the following groups: the initiators of the platform; people who are formally involved with the maintenance and/or moderation of the platform; a senior manager of the public-sector organization where the e-participation initiative is administered; representatives of important governmental and non-governmental partners who are actively involved in running the platform; representatives of policy makers who have used the

e-participation platform as an input in the policy-making process; and stakeholders who have been engaged in some of the cases that have been discussed through the selected platform. In most cases, the anonymous semi-structured interviews followed a detailed case study protocol and lasted for one to one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## 2 ANALYSING THE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION OF E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

Macintosh and Whyte (2008) claim that there is a need for more coherent frameworks for analysing e-participation initiatives. They consider three aspects that need to be addressed when exploring e-participation projects: the socio-technical aspects, democratic aspects and characteristics of the 'project'. First, the socio-technical perspective focuses on the design of the information and communication technology solutions. Second, as regards the democratic aspects, the characteristics of society are addressed, for example, the number of Internet users (e.g. Åström et al., 2012), digital divide (e.g. Min, 2010; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015), trust in e-participation (e.g. Scherer and Wimmer, 2014) and the socio-economic background of the population (e.g. Medaglia, 2007; Williams et al., 2013), which have been shown to have a link to e-participation adoption. Third, the 'project' perspective looks in detail at the specific aims and objectives of the e-participation initiative (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). Similarly, Toots (2019) distinguishes between three types of failure-related factors in e-participation: those related to the design of information systems, specific challenges that emanate from democratic participation, and those emerging from the public-sector context. This book intends to contribute to the studies on e-participation as a 'project' within the public-sector context.

As argued by Borman and Janssen (2012), a comprehensive model of e-participation should include factors that focus not only on outcomes and the implementation process, but also on the 'operating environment', i.e. how the e-participation initiative is managed and organized. Accordingly, the case studies concentrate on the 'operating environment' and a further elaboration of the factors related to the management and organization of e-participation initiatives. Whereas the factors addressing the 'operating environment' of e-participation are represented in the theoretical models in existing literature on e-participation, the empirical research on these is rather scarce and mostly based on large-N surveys (see a thorough literature review by Steinbach et al., 2019). For example, Panopoulou, Tambouris and Tarabanis (2014) highlight the following factors related to 'operating environment' in their large-N survey: vision/strategy; scope and goals; policy and legal environment; support from government/management; management and planning; funding; organizational structures, processes and data; organizational culture and collaboration; value for government/organization; employee training; participation process, policy-making stage and roles; change management; leader/champion; promotion plan; monitoring and evaluation plan; and sustainability. While large-N studies are useful for the identification of important factors affecting the functioning of e-participation initiatives, they fall short in explaining these factors and analysing their root causes.

Existing qualitative case studies on e-participation tend to limit themselves to emphasizing single factors, being frequently biased toward management (rather than organizational design or processes), such as top management support, the presence of change agents or champions and promotion-related issues, without paying much attention to the other factors influencing the 'operating environment' identified by Panopoulou, Tambouris and Tarabanis (2014).

Often, however, important management- and organization-related factors, such as the organizational and managerial set-up of e-participation projects and the design of e-participatory processes, have not been considered sufficiently in empirical studies. For example, a systematic approach to organizational design and cross-organizational collaboration among actors supplying e-participation platforms is missing in the empirical e-participation research. The case studies in this book complement existing research by utilizing a qualitative research design which enables a more nuanced analysis for the systematic elaboration of critical factors related to the organization and management of e-participation initiatives.

For conducting the case studies, a coherent analytical framework was developed by means of the Common Case Study Protocol, which provided a basis for data collection and analysis. Several other models for describing (e.g. Kalampokis et al., 2008; Macintosh, 2008; Porwol et al., 2016; Scherer and Wimmer, 2016) and evaluating (e.g. Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016) e-participation initiatives have been introduced in the past decade, but most of these models suffer from too little focus on the contextual, organizational and managerial aspects surrounding e-participation. The model developed below assumes that citizen involvement is embedded in existing institutional arrangements and is constrained by historical, cultural, legal, political, administrative, organizational and individual factors. The analytical framework used in this book is composed of five aspects of e-participation initiatives: first, a thick description of the e-participation initiative; second, the national context surrounding the platform; third, organizational factors; fourth, individual factors; and fifth, the evaluation of the e-participation platform. These five aspects will be further elaborated below.

## **2.1 Description of the e-Participation Initiative**

The first aspect of analysis focuses on the descriptive and exploratory components of the e-participation initiative by providing information on the goals, scope, legal and technical features of the platform (Table 2.2). It also helps to shed light on when, why and by whom the e-participation initiative was launched, whom it has been targeted to, at what point in the policy cycle it is used and how it has developed over time. A description of the legal framework of the platform enables the exploration of the formalization and institutionalization of the platform, whereas the overview of the technical aspects of the platform allows a better understanding of the technical drivers of and barriers to the e-participation initiative.

## **2.2 National Context**

The following aspects of analysis are both exploratory as well as explanatory in character. The focus is on investigating which national-level factors are particularly important in explaining the functioning of e-participation initiatives (Table 2.3). The impact of technology on the public sector is strongly mediated by the national-level context that frames the ways in which the public sector interacts with citizens and other governmental and non-governmental units contributing to participatory policy making. There have been a number of studies looking at e-participation in different national settings, showing that the national context influences the adoption of e-participation (e.g. Aichholzer and Allhutter, 2009; Santaniello and Amoretti, 2013; Moss and Coleman, 2014). Particularly relevant are the politico-administrative, socio-economic and cultural-historical contexts, the development of civil society as well as

Table 2.2 Description of an e-participation initiative

Characteristics	Guiding questions
Formal goals of the initiative	What is the aim of the e-participation initiative?
	What is the expected outcome of the initiative?
Scope of the initiative	Is the platform intended for use at the national, regional or local level?
	Is the platform used in multiple regions, municipalities or organizations?
	In which phase of the policy cycle is the platform used: agenda setting, policy analysis, policy formulation, policy implementation, policy monitoring or policy evaluation?
	Who are the stakeholders of the initiative? Whose participation is targeted? Individual citizens versus organized interests, specific demographic groups, etc.
Chronology of the establishment and further development of the initiative	When and why was the platform launched? Who launched it?
	Was the launch of the platform embedded in larger political processes at the time?
	What have been the key stages in the development of the initiative?
	Have there been any (political) pushbacks or attempts to delegitimize the platform?
Legal framework of the initiative	Are the processes unfolding on this platform regulated to any extent by law or guided by formal policy documents?
	Does the legal and policy framework influence the maintenance and future development of the initiative by providing legal or financial guarantees?
Technical features	What is the technical solution of the platform? Are there any novel or innovative components in the technical solution?
	Are there any important technical barriers that might deter participants, such as complicated identification procedures or lack of mobile browser support?

the national-level digitalization policies. For example, previous studies have demonstrated that e-democracy initiatives achieved better results in countries with stronger democratic institutions (Gulati et al., 2014) and a more professional and efficient public sector (Moon and Norris, 2005). In addition, national-level regulations may determine conditions for democratic participation, including access to technology and information, the right to participate and safeguards for participants (Berntzen and Karamagioli, 2010).

### 2.3 Organizational Factors

Which organizational-level factors are particularly important in explaining the functioning of e-participation initiatives? Here, the aim is to explore organizational design, processes and resources that enable, support or hinder the functioning of e-participation initiatives (Table 2.4). This aspect of the analytical framework constitutes potentially the most important contribution to e-participation literature, as the relationship between the theory of e-participation and the administrative practices surrounding these initiatives has been underrepresented in academic discourse on e-participation. Organizational factors include the formal ownership of the e-participation initiative and its organizational design, leadership and resources. Administration and funding matter in maintaining the development of e-participation initiatives (Panopoulou et al., 2014). e-Participation initiatives are hardly ever provided by single organizations or units (Macintosh, 2004; Sæbø et al., 2011). e-Participation is a collaborative process involving a number of actors (e.g. government units, non-governmental organizations,

**Table 2.3** *Characteristics of the national context for the adoption and development of e-participation initiatives*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Guiding questions</b>
Cultural-historical context	Do administrative traditions support citizen participation in policy making?
	Are participation, openness and transparency valued in society?
	Have there been any recent reforms regarding democratic decision-making and/or participatory policy making?
Socio-economic context	What is the socio-economic background of the population?
	What are the characteristics of Internet users? Is there a digital divide?
Politico-administrative context	Do the general political characteristics of the state (general state structure, type of political system, type of government, ideology of governing parties) exert any influence over the adoption and development of e-participation?
	Are there specific political and/or administrative positions and/or units which are in charge of e-government in general and e-participation in particular?
Legislative context	Is citizen participation formally regulated by the government?
	Does the legislation allow the inclusion of online solutions in governing?
	How do data protection rules affect e-participation?
Digital governance	Is digital transformation prioritized in politico-administrative processes and identifiable in party programmes, formal governmental policies, strategies or action plans?
	What is the trust of society in technological solutions?
	What is the current level of e-government development?
	What are the relevant digital infrastructures, such as digital identification systems and Wi-Fi speed/penetration?
	Is the selected e-participation platform the only electronic participation option available for stakeholders? What are the other practices of electronic participation which are being used in the policy-making process (social media, other platforms, etc.)?
Civil society	What is the general level of civil society development?
	What are the characteristics of (offline) participation in policy making?
Lesson-drawing	Have other domestic or foreign practices influenced the development of this particular e-participation initiative?
	Is this initiative in any way related to any international policy agendas set by supranational organizations/partnerships (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Open Government Partnership)?

businesses, information and communication technology support) that contribute to the functioning of the platform and are likely to have different roles, leading to complex interrelationships among actors. The greater the number of affiliated actors, the more crucial seamless collaboration among them becomes. By and large, organizations can be seen as processors of information (Arrow, 1974). Consequently, organizational arrangements determine the information they seek, how they process the signals and how they act on their perceived reality. In the context of e-participation, after citizens give their voice, whether and how that voice affects the actual policy-making process depends on the characteristics of the organization. In addition, supportive organizational culture in terms of civil servants' openness to innovation is necessary, which may be facilitated by normative pressure, rules or policies (Welch and Feeney, 2014).

Table 2.4 Organizational characteristics of e-participation initiatives

Characteristics	Guiding questions
Formal ownership of the initiative	Which organization is the formal proprietor of the platform?
	Is this particular e-participation initiative affected by decisions and policies of other (higher-tier) governmental units?
Administration of the e-participation initiative	Which organization and which unit are responsible for the everyday operation of the e-participation initiative?
	What is the formal status of the e-participation initiative in the organizational structure and accountability framework?
	Are there any higher-level proprietors of the platform influencing its decision-making processes, legitimacy, resources, and technology?
Partners of the core unit in the administration of the initiative	Who are the partners in the processes relevant to the e-participation initiative within the organization?
	Who are the partners among other governmental bodies?
	Are there any non-governmental partners who are important for the functioning of the e-participation initiative?
Internal collaboration	Has the e-participation initiative affected existing collaboration or created new practices of collaboration within the government?
	What are the roles and relationships of various governmental partners? Which coordination mechanisms and instruments are used?
	What is the scope, formality and intensity of internal collaboration within an organization in administering the initiative?
Funding	How are the everyday operational costs of the e-participation initiative funded? Does it have its own budget? Does it receive subsidies from the government? Is it funded by donations? Is it a paid service? Is the funding regulated?
	Are these financial resources sufficient? Is it permanent or project-based funding? What is the financial sustainability of the initiative?
Human resources	How many people administer the e-participation initiative? Do they work full time on the e-participation initiative or is it their side task?
	What are their roles and responsibilities?
	How are the administrators of the e-participation initiative recruited, trained and motivated?
Compliance with existing organizational processes	Does the administration of the e-participation initiative follow the existing organizational processes and managerial practices (e.g. human resources management, performance management, budgeting) or is it more like a separate 'island' compared with the rest of organization?
	Is the initiative embedded in formal or informal policy-making processes (including offline participation in policy making)?
Organizational culture	How does the administration of the e-participation initiative fit with the existing organizational culture?
	Has it had any impact on the organizational culture?
	Does it make up a particular sub-culture within the organization?



Table 2.5 Individual-level characteristics

Characteristics	Guiding questions
Influential and capable leaders	Were influential and capable leaders present in the establishment phase of the e-participation initiative? Who were they and what were their roles?
	Are such leaders involved in the everyday operation of the initiative? What are their roles?
Formal actors	How are political leaders involved in the development and everyday operation of the e-participation initiative?
	How are administrative leaders involved in the development and everyday operation of the e-participation initiative?
Informal actors	Which non-governmental leaders have exerted influence on the establishment and/or the implementation of the e-participation initiative? What have been their specific roles?
	Has the media played any role in the set-up and development of this initiative?
	Are there any other informal actors (e.g. consultants, international agencies) who have influenced the set-up of this initiative?
Administrators of the e-participation initiative	What is the decision-making power of the administrators of the e-participation initiative? Have they had direct influence on how the e-participation platform works, either formally or informally?
	What are the key competencies of the administrators of the e-participation platform? Which knowledge, skills or abilities are they lacking? What kind of training would they like to get? Have they received relevant training?
	How is the performance of the administrators of the e-participation initiative monitored and assessed? What are the most important elements of their performance?

## 2.4 Individual Factors

Here, the analysis of e-participation zooms in on individuals who are administratively connected to the e-participation initiative (Table 2.5). Previous research has shown that permanent leadership is regarded as one of the main success factors for e-participation initiatives as it helps maintain personnel commitment as well as attract financial resources (Carrizales, 2008). Although there has been some research on the influence of managers on the adoption of e-participation (Carrizales, 2008; Aikens and Krane, 2010; Baldwin et al., 2012), little effort has been made to look at the individual characteristics and roles of either formal or informal policy actors and particularly administrators of e-participation initiatives in the adoption, diffusion and institutionalization of e-participation. This is why this framework focuses on the individuals associated with and/or responsible for the launch and everyday operation of e-participation initiatives.

## 2.5 Evaluation

The fifth and the last aspect of the analytical framework is the evaluation of e-participation initiatives, which ultimately tries to analyse the influence of e-participation on policy design and external collaboration (Table 2.6). However, the link between citizen input on the platform and actual policy output may vary, as the content of the final policy decisions is left to the discretion of the decision-makers. In addition, the challenge of defining ‘success’ in e-participation has been generally acknowledged. As Aichholzer and colleagues (2016) have pointed out, there has been no explicit stakeholder differentiation in the evaluations of e-participation. This

means that different actors in the e-participation process may define and/or perceive success differently, depending on their institutional belonging, formal position and individual goals set for the participatory process. In order to address this challenge of evaluation, the present study focuses on the thorough examination of one particular group of actors – civil servants and administrators of e-participation projects (while background information is also collected from other stakeholders). Rather than try to evaluate the ‘success’ of the e-participation practice, the current framework focuses on the e-participation *process*: whether there are specific performance indicators and whether the performance of the platform is regularly monitored; whether the rules and processes of e-participation have been made explicitly clear and transparent; whether there are formal processes in place to ensure that citizen input is being considered; and whether it is possible for the citizens to follow up on the politico-administrative process after they have submitted their input. In addition to evaluating the process, another aim is to assess whether the platform addresses larger issues of democratic legitimacy (e.g. whether a concerted effort is made to include all stakeholders and citizens with diverse socio-economic backgrounds).

The analytical framework for exploring the organization and management of e-participation initiatives is illustrated in Figure 2.1. Such a coherent framework could be useful for further research on e-participation as well as for government practitioners who are in the process of establishing or revising existing e-participation initiatives. The guiding questions posed in the tables above can serve as a testing ground to make sure that the key managerial and organizational aspects of e-participation have received due attention.

### 3 OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The edited volume includes both national- and local-level e-participation initiatives. As argued above, the e-participation landscape is highly fragmented, so this book includes case studies on national and local levels, which could be explicitly linked to the policy-making process. From the perspective of readers, some of whom are hopefully government practitioners, the case studies are divided into two clusters: e-participation initiatives on the national level and those on the sub-national level (see Table 2.1). The national-level cases include those from Croatia, Estonia, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Scotland and Slovakia. The cases from the sub-national level of government contain e-participation initiatives from Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Sweden.

All case studies in the edited volume follow the same internal structure and seven main components. After a general introduction, the analytical background and methodology are further elaborated. This is followed by an analysis of individual elements of the analytical model presented in Figure 2.1: national context, description of the platform, organizational characteristics (including individual characteristics if relevant) and an evaluation of the e-participation initiative. Each case study is concluded by an analytical discussion of the case and the lessons learned.

The e-participation initiatives included in the book are not a representative collection as they do not represent a coherent set of ideas and tools. The selected e-participation initiatives are generally characterized by different expectations regarding input and processes as well as output, activities and outcomes. Such a complex mix of characteristics reflects the multi-dimensional nature of public administration, a systemic feature that public-sector organ-

Table 2.6 Evaluation of e-participation initiatives

Characteristics	Guiding questions
Performance indicators	Does the platform have any formal or informal performance indicators? Have the performance indicators changed over time?
	Are the performance indicators explicitly linked to the original goals of the platform (e.g. democracy, transparency, inclusion)?
	Are the performance indicators monitored on a regular basis? By whom?
	Are the performance evaluations made open to the public?
Democratic legitimacy	How is the e-participation initiative promoted among the stakeholders? How are the stakeholders motivated to participate?
	If only a specific group of people/organizations is targeted, who determines the choice of stakeholders and how is it done?
	Is there a concerted effort by the administrators of the e-participation initiative to involve diverse segments of society (age, gender, location, etc.)?
	Has the e-participation platform attracted input from different interest groups? Are different ideas and standpoints represented on the platform?
	Which groups tend to be under-represented in e-participation processes?
Transparency of the e-participation process	Who decides what is being discussed on the platform? On what grounds?
	Is the discussion moderated? If so, by whom and how?
	What kind of background information is disseminated to the stakeholders regarding different topics? If so, how are these materials chosen?
	Are experts systematically engaged in the deliberation process? If so, how and by whom are the experts chosen and what is their role?
	How is the interaction between the government and the stakeholders structured on the platform? Does the platform also allow communication among the stakeholders?
	Which feedback instruments are targeted to citizens? Are any summaries prepared based on the proposals and comments of citizens?
Influence on policy design	What happens to citizen input after the deliberation through the e-participation platform has ended?
	What types of decisions are made on which levels of the government on the basis of the input from the e-participation platform?
	Who makes the final decisions on the issues that have been discussed on the e-participation platform?
Influence on collaboration with external stakeholders	Has the e-participation initiative changed or influenced previously established collaboration practices with non-governmental stakeholders? Has it triggered new collaborations?
	Does the e-participation practice co-exist alongside other collaborative and participatory practices?
	What are the advantages and disadvantages of e-participation compared with traditional (offline) participatory practices?
Successful practices	Are there any examples of successful topics/petitions/participatory practices on this platform?
	What constitutes success in these cases and what are the determining factors of success?
	Are there any examples where the e-participation process has brought about specific changes in proposed policies or governmental documents? What crucial factors have led to such an influence?
Failures	Are there any examples of problematic (or failed) topics/petitions/participatory practices on this platform?
	What constitutes failure in these cases and what are its determining factors?

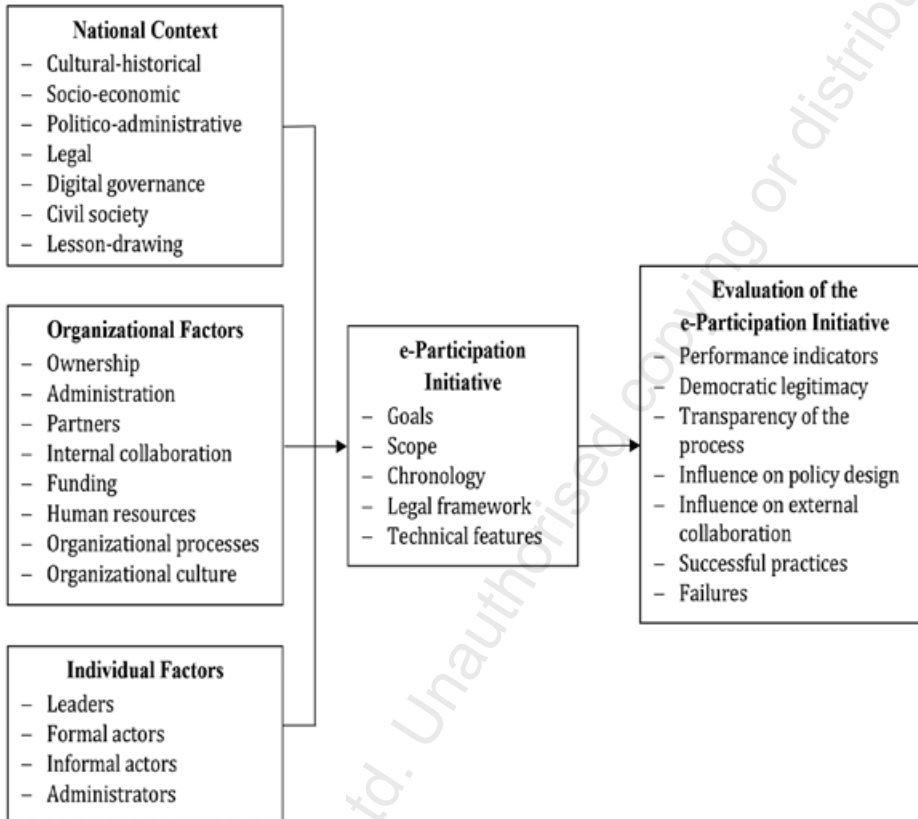


Figure 2.1 Analytical model for analysing the organization and management of e-participation initiatives

izations have to live with. The great variety of e-participation initiatives makes it impossible to identify a typical e-participation platform that would symbolize online democracy trends in Europe or to draw general statistical conclusions from the case studies. Nevertheless, the case studies give valuable insights and each individual chapter points to important lessons to be learned.

Although it is acknowledged that the investigation of e-participation is contingent on specific contextual factors, situations and issues, there is reason to expect some general patterns across contexts and issues. The concluding chapter summarizes and systematizes the organization- and management-related factors based on empirical findings from the multiple cases presented in the book. The analysis of the collected case studies enables the distinction between three groups of critical factors in the organization and management of e-participation: first, the factors related to organizational design; second, the factors related to the participatory process; and third, the factors related to management. It is concluded that the impact of tech-

nology on policy making is strongly mediated by the institutional context that frames the ways in which the public sector interacts with citizens and other governmental and non-governmental units. Such a framework of organization- and management-related factors could be used by academics when investigating e-participation in addition to government practitioners when establishing new or developing further existing e-participation projects.

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## PART I

e-Participation initiatives on national level

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### 3. *We asked, you said, we did*: Assessing the drivers and effectiveness of an e-participation practice in Scotland

**Benedetta Bellò and James Downe**

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#### 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines an e-participation practice that promotes external stakeholder and citizen involvement in the decision-making process and policy design in the United Kingdom (UK). The initiative called *We asked, you said, we did* has been adopted by the Scottish Government and integrated in its website (<https://consult.gov.scot/>). The government decides on the topic of the e-consultation (*We asked*) and, through the medium of e-consultations, collects stakeholder/citizen opinions and suggestions on the issue (*You said*). Finally, it keeps the public informed on the actions policy makers have taken as a result of the e-consultation (*We did*).

An analysis of this e-participation practice is important for a variety of reasons. The Scottish Government has a long record of being committed to engaging stakeholders, citizens and communities in the policy-making process. This is evidenced by the work of the Christie Commission (Scottish Government, 2011) and, generally, the so-called *Scottish Approach* to policy making (Cairney et al., 2016). *We asked, you said, we did* is an innovative practice that goes beyond the collection of external citizen and stakeholder views (*We asked, you said*) by providing a transparent overview of the medium- and long-term results of the process, the decisions taken and the policies decided (*We did*).

The analysis of this national-level practice focuses on two main aspects. The first is related to the ‘supply side’ of e-participation research (Krishnan et al., 2013), with an examination of the impact of the national and organizational context on the adoption of the initiative. The prevailing role of the national context (Aichholzer and Allhutter, 2009; Santaniello and Amoretti, 2013; Moss and Coleman, 2014) and the peculiarity of the *Scottish Approach* will be revealed.

The second aspect is related to the effects of e-participation practices on external collaborations and more generally on the policy design process in which public concerns and aspirations are considered. The role of the Scottish national context will be analysed to determine whether *We asked, you said, we did* can be considered a successful practice in terms of the inclusion of citizen and stakeholder views.

We begin this chapter by reviewing the literature on e-participation practices and outlining the methodology. The national context and Scottish approach to policy making is explained before considering the organizational characteristics behind the initiative and its impact.



Finally, we conclude by discussing the lessons learned and reflecting on the implications of the findings for future research and practice.

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

e-Participation is ‘the process of engaging citizens through information and communication technology (ICT) in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends’ (United Nations, 2014, p. 61). The ultimate outcome is to support democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy by supplementing it with the use of digital tools (Macintosh, 2004; Mulder and Hartog, 2013).

A rapid expansion of e-participation as a tool for engagement and strengthening collaboration between governments and citizens has occurred since Macintosh (2004) divided e-participation into three levels: (1) e-enabling, which refers to aspects of accessibility and understanding of information; (2) e-engaging by providing support to consultations and debates; and (3) e-empowerment as the actual and effective impact on policy making.

There are many reasons why governments want to engage with citizens and stakeholders. This includes the belief that new forms of collaboration with stakeholders and citizens may lead to more informed decision-making processes and ultimately better performance and service delivery (Quan-Haase 2004; Wellman et al., 2001). The increased use of ICT applications is intended to improve the availability of information which, in turn, fosters public-sector efficiency and the transparency of decision-making in public policy (Hart and Teeter, 2003; Jaeger, 2003; OECD, 2003b; Macintosh, 2004; United Nations, 2012). For policy makers, it provides the ability to make citizen-to-government contact more inclusive (Reddick, 2005).

Moreover, governments may want to broaden their engagement with the public due to austerity and budget cuts. e-Participation is becoming important in all developed countries in the fight against political apathy after the economic crisis and is likely to continue in response to COVID-19. According to Margetts and Dunleavy (2013), a new wave of digital-era governance powered by the development of social media has gained extra impetus from new austerity pressures for the rationalization of public service delivery chains. Engaging with communities (not just e-engaging) could support policy making to solve problems and allow governments to continue to deliver services with less money by trying to maintain their quality and reduce potential inequalities.

It is not clear, however, whether those expectations have been realized. There are concerns about the digital divide and the under-representativeness of specific groups to engage electronically (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). There is a need for the further evaluation of online participation in order to understand whether this type of engagement meets both citizen and government objectives and whether these efforts have produced positive impacts (OECD, 2003a, 2004; Rose and Sanford, 2007; Loukis et al., 2010). The adoption of e-participation practices constitutes a challenge for public organizations that want to take full advantage of its potential in order to increase multilateral communication from the government to citizens/stakeholders and vice versa (Vragov and Kumar, 2013).

If the inclusion of citizen and stakeholder views is the main objective of e-participation initiatives, governments need to consider the best way to do this. Some groups need to be managed in a paternalistic way, while others feel that they have to have their say and be

listened to (Scholl, 2001; Flak and Rose, 2005; Axelsson and Lindgren, 2013). It is therefore important to clearly identify stakeholders and try to meet their needs and expectations in order to keep them engaged (Royo et al., 2011; Sæbø et al., 2011). It seems that the higher level of accessibility offered by ICT has yet to be complemented with offline tools allowing access to information, consultation and public participation in policy making and maintaining citizen engagement (Macintosh, 2004; Yetano and Royo, 2017). This is because e-participation may offer new opportunities but also build new barriers to participation and create new divisions in society (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016).

Existing research suggests a general weakness of e-participation initiatives to deliver expected outcomes and fulfil the democratic promise of reaching the disengaged segments of society (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). This may be due to administrative and organizational issues rather than technical factors (Zheng et al., 2014). An exclusive top-down approach has been criticized, while a bottom-up approach that allows citizens to influence and participate in policy formulation and agenda setting has been recommended (Sclove, 1995).

National governments can play a crucial role in adopting e-participation practices and implementing ICT policy strategies (Wright, 2006; Medaglia, 2012; Welch and Feeney, 2014). They are usually responsible for organizing and managing top-down online opportunities and other communication channels with which citizens and stakeholders can engage in the political arena (Welch and Feeney, 2014). It has been suggested, however, that e-participation can deliver results and facilitate openness only if those in power want these things to happen (Bannister and Connolly, 2011). The ‘success’ of e-participation not only depends on technological issues, but also needs a political culture that supports citizen engagement in decision-making (Steinbach et al., 2019).

Literature on the evaluation of e-participation initiatives has outlined a range of frameworks and success factors (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008; Toots, 2019). Pratchett et al. (2009), for example, focused on the extent to which communities can exercise more influence over local decision-making. Others have defined success as the mobilization of certain target groups, the transparency of the consultation process and the commitment of decision-makers (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016). Finally, the most important link for some is between e-participation mechanisms and decision-making processes so that governments are able to act on the feedback provided by citizens (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

This case study on the use of *We asked, you said, we did* by the Scottish Government analyses the main drivers for its adoption and impact. Evidence is utilized from a documentary analysis of Scottish public-sector reform reports (e.g. Community Empowerment Act Scotland, 2015) and other relevant papers (e.g. Scotland’s Action Plan on Open Government) to explain the peculiarity of the context. Moreover, the researchers conducted 13 semi-structured interviews from January to February 2019, the main actors of which included representatives from:

- Delib – the company that provides the platform and is still involved in its maintenance, implementation and customization in collaboration with the Scottish Government. The interviewee was particularly useful in providing the background on the development of the e-participation practice and how it works (Interview 1).
- The Scottish Government – a range of senior managers, including those who work in teams, that manage the e-participation initiative as well as people from other areas of government (e.g. policy, law, family and property) provided information on how (and why) the platform was chosen by the government. The interviewees also provided examples of

where the e-participation platform has been used as an input in the policy-making process (Interviews 2–9).

- Stakeholders – representatives from organizations which have extensively used the e-participation practice provided their perceptions on how it worked for them. We also interviewed non-governmental partners who were actively involved in developing the National Standards for Community Engagement in collaboration with the Scottish Government. (Interviews 10–13).

The case study is inspired by the framework proposed by Porwol et al. (2016), which includes an analysis of the socio-technical view (description of the platform), the project view (contextual factors) and the democratic process view (impact on policy making). We also assess organizational characteristics and provide a brief evaluation in terms of performance indicators, transparency and impact on policy-making processes.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Scotland has a tradition of engaging citizens/stakeholders in the policy-making process. As one interviewee explained: ‘The Scottish Government, when it was re-established by the Scotland Act in 1999, told parliament that we would consult the public on anything that came before parliament so there was a requirement from our side to do consultation as a particular thing’ (Interview 3).

A range of legislation and policy over the last decade has aimed to improve the way the Scottish Government engages with the public. Most of the initiatives precede the introduction of *We asked, you said, we did* and other forms of e-participation as a method of engagement.

In 2005, the Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish Community Development Centre – a charity which aims at increasing the influence of community in policy development and in decisions that impact their lives – to design a framework made of ten National Standards for Community Engagement to shape the participation processes of public bodies. The framework was updated in 2007–2008 and since 2015 has had seven standards (inclusion, support, planning, working together, methods, communication and impact).

Since 2007, Scotland has been developing a unique style of policy making compared with other European countries. This so-called *Scottish Approach* (Scottish Government and ESRC, 2013; Cairney et al., 2016; Coutts and Brotchie, 2017) or *Scottish Policy Style* (Cairney, 2008; Keating, 2010) started under the Labour–Liberal Democrat government. It has been developed under the Scottish National Party government, which introduced the National Performance Framework on the values of openness, accessibility and public engagement that the government should pursue (Scottish Government, 2007). The aim of the framework was to encourage more effective partnership working, reduce inequalities and give equal importance to economic, environmental and social progress. It contains a set of national outcomes (e.g. live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe, open and connected and make a positive contribution internationally) and measures Scotland’s progress against these outcomes through a set of national indicators (economic, social and environmental) that give a measure of national wellbeing.

The Scottish Government pursues the values included in the National Performance Framework by working with local authorities, the private sector, voluntary groups, unions and citizens. The government has ‘the desire to work with people rather than do stuff to

them' (Interview 3) to achieve the national outcomes. This bottom-up approach to policy making means that policy follows consultation and negotiation with a wide range of external organizations (Cairney, 2009, 2011, 2013; Keating, 2010; Cairney and McGarvey, 2013) and is therefore able to devolve the delivery of policy to other organizations in a meaningful way (Cairney, 2009). It may also reflect the restricted capacity of the Scottish Government, which means that civil servants rely more on experts outside the government (Waller et al., 2001; Cairney et al., 2016).

In 2010, the Scottish Government established the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (called the Christie Commission). It concluded that services must be designed with and for people and communities, not delivered 'top down' for administrative convenience. Since 2013, the Scottish Government has focused on the co-production of services with communities and citizens and further tried to measure its impact (Scottish Government and ESRC, 2013). The *Scottish Approach* encompasses the natural inclination of the government to make an effort in ensuring long-term collaboration with stakeholders/citizens. In recent years, the use of e-government practices has provided new ways of pursuing a consultative and cooperative style of policy making and reaching a wider range of people.

In 2016, Scotland became a member of the Open Government Partnership. This is an international initiative with more than 65 participating countries that aims to develop reforms that promote transparency, participation and accountability and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. In December 2018, the Scottish Government published its Second Action Plan on Open Government as part of its programme to make the government more inclusive, responsive and accountable. The plan contains five commitments, including 'providing a framework to support systemic change in the Scottish Government to improve the way people are able to participate in open policy making and service delivery'. A multi-stakeholder steering group composed of civil society members and government officials has worked together to support participation and design solutions to deliver outcomes.

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF *WE ASKED, YOU SAID, WE DID*

*We asked, you said, we did* is a feature of the platform *Citizen Space*, designed by private company Delib and used by more than 180 organizations around the world (mainly in the UK, Australia and New Zealand), including national and state governments, local authorities, healthcare institutions, utilities companies, police, regulators and trusts. In Scotland, *Citizen Space* is used by local authorities (e.g. City of Edinburgh Council), governmental agencies (e.g. Scottish Environment Protection Agency), the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

*Citizen Space* was chosen by the Scottish Government over competing platforms to solve a common problem where 'people didn't ever see where their work went, and they weren't clear what happened to their views ... we needed a platform that would help us do that' (Interview 3). *We asked, you said, we did* aims to involve external stakeholders and citizens in the decision-making process and policy design by asking them for opinions and suggestions on a specific topic of the e-consultation (*We asked*), collecting their ideas and publishing them on the Scottish Government website (*You said*) and informing the public of the actions taken by policy makers as a result (*We did*), which increases transparency and clarity regarding the government's actions.

*Citizen Space* was created in 2005 and initially co-funded by the UK Government (Central Information Office) with the aim of finding a way to consult across central government and publish consultations centrally. Delib has developed *Citizen Space* iteratively over time in response to feedback from customers and changes in technology (e.g. the increasing use of mobile phones), with the latest version built in 2010. Any changes made to the platform as a result of requests from organizations are rolled out across all Delib customers. The Scottish Government started using the platform in 2014 and, from 2016, decided to make it a mandatory tool for all government consultations (more than 100 per year). The *We did* part was a customization driven by the Scottish Government and has become a commonly used feature for all users. Delib charges an annual fee to each organization that includes all updates, hosting, backups, disaster recovery, etc. It also provides technical support and account management to all customers.

As far as the policy cycle is concerned (agenda setting, policy analysis and preparation, policy formulation, policy implementation, policy monitoring and policy evaluation), the platform is generally used for consultations regarding policy implementation. For example, one interviewee explained that, ‘you get a lot of, “the government’s position is this, but we’re looking to understand what the impact would be or how we should implement some things”’ (Interview 2). However, it has also been used for other stages of the policy cycle, such as procuring citizen and stakeholder views in supporting policy makers to decide on which problems to address.

The Scottish Government website ([https://consult.gov.scot/we\\_asked\\_you\\_said/](https://consult.gov.scot/we_asked_you_said/)) shows the number of consultations per year, the responses of each consultation and an analysis report for each evaluation providing the *We did* part of the process. Through the ‘Find consultations’ window, you can filter by ‘title or description’, ‘status’ (e.g. open, closed), ‘audience’ (e.g. animal trainers), ‘interest’ (e.g. art, culture and sport) and ‘department’ (e.g. Child Protection). It also allows the public to read the consultation papers and, for closed consultations, the responses received. When a consultation is open, through the link ‘Give us your views’, anyone can contribute with their opinions, state whether they are participating as an individual or as members of an organization and decide whether to publish their responses in anonymized form. All responses are publicly visible in the *Published Responses* section and a summary of what the Scottish Government decided to do is published under the *We did* section with all of the accompanying documents and/or results of the analysis undertaken.

The website is constantly updated and the number of consultations changes frequently. In February 2020, there were five open consultations and 516 closed ones, 20 of which showed their results following the structure *We asked, you said, we did*.

Each consultation is unique. Sometimes they are run solely online, but they can also be complemented with face-to-face offline consultations because, as one interviewee explained, ‘there isn’t a rulebook around how this is done ... we’re trying to capture and design things around that need rather than saying “This is the way to do it”’ (Interview 2). If there are any concerns about a consultation (technical or content-related problems) or complaints, the respondent can obtain an expert response by contacting the specific numbers and e-mails reported in each consultation that link directly to the policy team in charge of the consultation.

Moreover, the platform includes a feedback form that allows participants to provide comments on their experience of the consultation and the platform as a method for response. We

heard that officials are able to get a good insight from the answers provided on how to improve the platform and make it fit for its purpose.

The interactions in the platform are one to one with no space for e-discussion or moderation. However, before putting a response into the public domain, a redaction dashboard allows the user to edit them to remove potentially inappropriate content. The platform assures that accessibility standards are inclusive for all areas of society. For example, the consultations work with assistive technology such as screen readers or can be viewed by tabbing through content without needing to use a mouse.

There are many organizations that participate in *We asked, you said, we did* (e.g. local councils, NHS Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Chartered Institute for Housing, Police Scotland) by responding to consultations. Interest groups or stakeholder organizations may also ask the Scottish Government to run an e-consultation about a topic of interest, but it is usually the internal policy teams (civil servants) that decide on the consultation.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Scottish Government is structured in a wide range of departments where civil servants and policy makers manage the policy-making process. Each policy team is responsible for running consultations. They write the consultation question, manage the process, tailor the advertisement of the e-consultation according to its content and audience, decide which additional tool(s) to use in order to guarantee citizens'/stakeholders' participation (whether to complement the e-participation with offline, face-to-face forms of participation) and determine how the results will be analysed (either in house or through the commissioning of external analysts such as academics). They may also ask stakeholders to use social media (e.g. Facebook), select hashtags to disseminate the consultation or use other platforms such as ideas.gov.scot to give policy makers more responses. Once the consultation is closed, each policy team collects the responses and reports the conclusions back to government ministers. It is up to the politicians to decide what to do with the results, either through informing legislation, revising policy or potentially doing nothing.

The Scottish Government's Engage and Digital Engagement teams are responsible for the initiative internally. They jointly proposed the adoption of *Citizen Space* to the Scottish Government senior management team and met with Delib to customize the platform for their needs. The Engage team leads the mission of being an open and accessible government. The Digital Engagement team is responsible for running the platform and for the technical and non-content-related issues concerning e-consultations. Moreover, it provides the connection hub between the Scottish Government departments and Delib for information technology issues (e.g. missing responses). For technical and non-content-related aspects, firstly Delib and then the Digital Engagement team provide support and training to make the policy teams aware of all of the features offered by the platform. The team works in collaboration with officials in other departments to ensure the consultation is compliant with data protection and regularly reports on how the Scottish Government is using the e-participation tool to support policy professionals in being more transparent, collaborative and creative.

There are numerous policy teams spanning the whole remit of the government that may be involved in the consultation process. There is also a team of analysts and a group of social

researchers that work to redraft the best practice guidance and can help design consultation questions. The government's Online Communication team is involved in advertising and promoting the consultation to external citizens/stakeholders and engages when a consultation is about to be published. The Scottish Government moves people internally from one unit to another when there is a peak in the work and support is needed in this area. This occurred, for example, when there was an unexpectedly high number of responses to a consultation. The government can also externalize or contract an analysis of the responses or the write-up of a report when there are capacity issues or if there is a need for an external analysis.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

*We asked, you said, we did* is part of a complex puzzle of arrangements, including an array of online and offline forms of participation that have intensified the collaboration between the Scottish Government and citizens/stakeholders. According to one interviewee: 'Many people in Scotland were unhappy with the quality of community engagement that was happening, they felt that statutory agencies had already made decisions before they engaged the community. They felt that they were not fully part of the decision-making process' (Interview 10). *We asked, you said, we did* is trying to remedy this problem. It has also had the unintended effect of fostering improved communication among stakeholders who have a common interest in a specific consultation. This happens when the Online Communication team does a news release or a social media post (e.g. Twitter) or a blog to advertise that a consultation is live for responses, and this immediately generates a wider online debate among specific stakeholders.

There are no formal performance indicators to evaluate the effects of *We asked, you said, we did*. Since 2016, it has been mandatory for all Scottish Government consultations, and the automatic system records the numbers of consultations run and the responses received. However, those figures cannot be considered a proxy for success. There are consultations that aim to reach 'a niche audience of 150 people and if you got 150 responses that would be an overwhelming success. Similarly, you could run a consultation that involved the whole Scottish public, 150 responses would not be a success' (Interview 6). In general, the number of responses to consultations range from very small (less than ten) to significant numbers (e.g. nearly 7000 for the consultation on a Draft Referendum Bill (2016–2017)). The policy teams predict how many responses they expect given the effort made to involve stakeholders/citizens and attempt to fashion the questions in the most useful and unbiased way. They can then marry this expectation with the statistics on the number of respondents using Google Analytics and conclude whether the consultation is deemed successful or not.

The initiative is considered by our interviewees (Interviews 10–13) to work smoothly and be user friendly. The information provided is useful and clear so that respondents can gain a quick understanding of each consultation issue. Interviewees suggested that information on new consultations circulates very quickly and is easy to share with their members. The function that allows the results of e-consultations to be displayed, in terms of the actions policy makers took as a result (*We did*), was particularly welcomed. This means that *We asked, you said, we did* provides a process that guarantees that public ideas and concerns are considered by officials and feeds into the policy-making process so that, 'whenever any piece of new legislation or action goes to parliament, it is accompanied by information which will include whether or not and how we are consulted' (Interview 3).

One successful example of the use of the platform was the consultation on the content and timing of the Scottish independence referendum that took place in 2014. Through the e-consultation, they produced a comprehensive consultation report that identified some key findings about how the referendum should be run that shaped the Scottish Government's proposal for the referendum. One of the interviewees said, 'we got 26,000 responses through the platform, which was very good. Then the team that was running the independence referendum utilised some of that information for the subsequent referendum' (Interview 6).

An interviewee highlighted the consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act as another successful example. This received more than 15,000 responses. 'The Scottish Government had already formed a policy of seeking to reform the Act but wanted to consult on its proposals and also some of the areas where it hadn't made up its mind' (Interview 7).

Interviewees also outlined several areas for improvement related to *We asked, you said, we did*, including technical issues, ways to improve the process, the choice of consultation topics and the impact on policy making.

First, having computer-related skills and access to the Internet is a pre-requisite for *We asked, you said, we did*, but not everyone is in this position. Some deprived areas of Scotland are still waiting for broadband, and 10 per cent of the country cannot get online and suffer from a digital skills gap compared with other more technologically advanced areas. Alongside these technological barriers, there may also be barriers of culture and age. For example, 'people are still massively reliant on documents and they've got this real print mindset ... If you can only access the Internet on your phone, expecting you to download PDFs and all that, that's just not a thing for the majority of people' (Interview 1).

Second, the interviewees brought up some weaknesses in the process of using the tool. While there is corporate support and common motivation to engage with citizens/stakeholders, the overall quality of the process depends on each policy team. The government is trying to standardize the e-consultation process to guarantee the same quality despite different policy teams involved. In fact, one of the interviewees explained that, 'at the moment, it is a bit erratic, some teams are incredibly good at it and others are less so. What we're trying to do is give colleagues in public service a way of understanding the tools and techniques you can use to ensure you have effective engagement at each stage' (Interview 3).

A third area of improvement comes from a complaint made by interviewees outside the Scottish Government on the discrepancy of the *We did* part of the initiative not being aligned with the *You said* part. In fact, despite the strong commitment to improve the way people are able to participate in open policy making, the platform was mainly used for consultations on policies that have already been developed and the government was looking for responses on something that already exists. This mismatch of expectations represents a familiar story of consultations, whether they are facilitated by electronic means or not. This is also the reason why the Scottish Government has been actively involved in the process of revising the whole engagement process.

A fourth potential improvement to *We asked, you said, we did* concerns the choice of consultation topic. For example, the consultation on gun control, 'Proposals for Licensing Air Weapons in Scotland', produced a small number of respondents, but a large majority of these suggested this type of gun should not be controlled. Interviewees from the Scottish Government believed that the answer would have been reversed if an opinion poll were conducted. The people who participated in the consultation were likely to be those who either



have guns or believe in the right to bear arms. This raises a significant question over whether this was the right question to pose. An official suggested that, ‘there was a decision already taken ... We always knew that the decisions that came back were going to be ... I think with hindsight, the questions we asked were not the ones that we were able to be flexible on’ (Interview 3).

Another example was the consultation on same-sex marriage, where the consultation responses were predominantly against same-sex marriage: ‘At the same time, there was independent research done on a random sample of people, a representative research survey, which showed that the majority of the population were in favour of same-sex marriage. So, when that was taken forward into legislation, same-sex marriage came in in Scotland, but there were a lot of people who were unhappy about that and felt that the consultation responses hadn’t been considered properly’. (Interview 5)

A final area for improvement is related to the lack of a proper system to evaluate the impact of *We asked, you said, we did* on policy making and wider issues of accountability or trust in government. Apart from the raw number of participants in each consultation, the Digital Engagement team has no other specific performance indicators and is unable to provide specific trends.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

*We asked, you said, we did* is a well-established e-participation practice that has become a routinized activity within the Scottish Government. However, the Scottish Government is active in searching for the combination of traditional offline consultations and e-consultation initiatives such as *We asked, you said, we did* with other tools (e.g. social media) to increase the number of people involved. They are also using new online planning and evaluation tools to assist individuals, organizations and partnerships to design and deliver effective community engagement (e.g. VOiCE – Vision and Outcomes in Community Engagement, funded and published by the Scottish Government: [www.scdc.org.uk/what/voice](http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/voice)). This approach is in line with research which suggests that in order to make the best use of new tools, they need to be integrated with traditional ‘offline’ tools for access to information, consultation and public participation in policy making (Macintosh, 2004; Yetano and Royo, 2017).

While the UK national government played a strong role in the decision to adopt the practice, since it provided 50 per cent of the initial cost, the main driver to adopt *Citizen Space* is directly related to the peculiarity of the Scottish Government’s approach to policy making. The Christie Commission report, the Open Government and the policy-making style combined to improve the way the Scottish Government consulted. The use of *We asked, you said, we did* aimed to continue the trend of making it as easy as possible for people/organizations to express their opinions on a proposed area of work and find out how these representations informed policy making.

A positive consequence of austerity was that a range of local governments started to look for a change in their relationship with the public so that communities would take more ownership of their own wellbeing. This moves away from a paternalistic (top-down) government which will do everything for you to a government which will engage with citizens/stakeholders and try to co-produce ideas that will improve public services with fewer resources (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013). Our research reveals strong support for *We asked, you said, we did*

in helping foster the co-production of ideas/solutions that were previously solved by public authorities alone.

Overall, the initiative was viewed positively by both external (stakeholders and citizens) and internal (officials) interviewees. It is an easy-to-use tool and provides useful insights for officials and ministers who want to improve policies. Our analysis shows that a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. non-governmental organizations, businesses) and specific groups of citizens have been extensively involved in different phases of the policy cycle. Some consultations involve all citizens, but most are targeted towards specific stakeholders (e.g. demographic groups, academic groups, policy organizations, age groups) by various policy teams.

However, the e-participation practice is mainly used for consultations on policies that need implementation, improvement or evaluation and is less frequently used in the earlier stages of the policy cycle (e.g. agenda setting, policy analysis and preparation, policy formulation). This may suggest that the involvement of stakeholders/citizens in the decision-making process is only at a superficial level and allies with complaints that the government largely consults on topics where they have already decided. One of the main lessons learnt is the importance of asking questions in cases where there is some flexibility on policy choices and where the process is about to change. The results of the consultation need to be discussed and incorporated in such a way that makes an impact on policies. Consultation questions need to be about how to implement a change rather than a yes/no decision as in a referendum.

The timing and effort needed to process a consultation is another important learning point. Interviewees explained that they must plan an e-consultation far in advance of drafting legislation in order to target those most likely to be informed about the consultation.

Equally important is that more needs to be done to evaluate whether the e-participation initiative is having the desired effect. The fact that we found no performance indicators or statistics available, except for the raw number of participants, is a significant weakness that the Scottish Government is currently trying to overcome.

To conclude, *We asked, you said, we did* can be considered a successful mechanism for consulting with stakeholders and citizens. The Scottish Government recognizes the criticisms and there is a widespread understanding of where the initiative could be improved. It is evident that the impact of the initiative depends on the drafting of good consultation questions and the use of the practice at an appropriate time to make the responses meaningful in the policy-making process.

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## 4. Parlement & Citoyens in France: An e-participation platform connecting legislators and citizens for collaborative policy design

**Samuel Defacqz and Claire Dupuy**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

In France, efforts to strengthen the citizen–government nexus and their collaboration initially focused on service delivery. Recent initiatives, however, have emphasized policy design and online solutions targeting collaborative governance. This turn to e-participation for policy design is embedded in the context of support for an open government, with France joining the Open Government Partnership in 2014. Since then, e-participation platforms for policy design have flourished, mostly at the local level, but also at the national level. The highly covered Law for a Digital Republic in 2015, where citizens could directly participate in the drafting of the law through an online platform, is a clear, though one-off, instance of online collaborative policy design.

This chapter takes on the task of contributing to the study of online collaborative policy design in France by investigating the sole longstanding e-participation platform for law-making that exists at the national level: *Parlement & Citoyens* – ‘Parliament and Citizens’ (P&C) (see <https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/>). P&C is a platform connecting citizens and legislators to make them work together to draft policy proposals. Legislators are invited to upload draft laws on the online platform, which is open to the comments and votes of citizens and organizations. The case of P&C differs from most of the initiatives analysed in this volume in three ways. First, P&C is a private initiative. The platform was launched bottom up by individuals concerned with democratic issues. Second, P&C is intended to tackle national policy issues, not local or regional matters. And third, the platform aims to connect citizens with legislators, rather than with actors of the executive branch.

In this chapter, a supply-side perspective on the e-participation platform is adopted. A wide range of studies have contributed to the study of the participants of online collaborative platforms and the process of participation as such, thereby exploring the demand side of online collaborative policy design (Gerl et al., 2018; Lutz and Hoffmann, 2017; Rasmussen and Carroll, 2013). Along with other chapters in this edited volume, the attention is shifted to the thus far mostly overlooked organization of e-participation platforms. Specifically, the chapter relies on an institutionalist perspective to analyse how the organizational features of P&C shape the participation of critical actors, the legislators themselves and citizens, as well as the outcomes of e-participation on the design of policies.

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Most of the studies on e-participation are based on normative expectations and are focused on the demand side, namely citizens. Existing empirical scholarship, however, shows that e-participation platforms do not significantly improve the nature of deliberation as such (Farina et al., 2013; Moss and Coleman, 2014). There is also evidence that e-participation platforms fail to actually expand the scope of participants beyond the usual suspects (Moss and Coleman, 2014), that is, ordinary citizens who already engage and are interested in politics.

This chapter focuses on the supply side of online collaborative platforms for policy design. First, the platform as such is introduced by delving into its organizational features. An institutionalist perspective is adopted to identify which organizational features foster and hinder collaborative policy design by shaping actors' resources, constraints and motives. The empirical analysis presented in this chapter explores the drivers and barriers of citizen participation, legislator involvement and the likely impact of the platform on policy design. The analysis of critical organizational characteristics aims to look 'inside the box' of participatory initiatives in order to ultimately link technology, policy making and political institutions to better understand the failure or success of a platform (Chadwick, 2011). This analysis follows an integrated perspective on e-democracy, identifying drivers and barriers that relate to the institutional context and the political culture, but also to the rules and resources that influence the development of policy-making processes mediated by technology (Parvez and Ahmed, 2006).

The focus on the supply side of e-participation platforms also entails a study of a group of actors that have not been considered much in e-participation research: political representatives. The study follows an emerging strand of research which departs from the usual understanding that participatory initiatives are to be considered alternatives to representative democracy. Instead, we concur with Jacquet and colleagues (2015), who argue that the actors of representative democracy are to be considered in order to illuminate how democratic innovations may supplement or combine the existing processes of representative democracy. This approach allows for an analysis of the outcomes of e-participation initiatives that pertain to citizen involvement, but also that of policy makers – in this case, legislators. This group of actors plays a crucial role in participatory democracy and, thereby, contributes to its outcomes, (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019). Legislator involvement in participatory initiatives has to be analysed based on the broader literature on the roles and daily work of parliamentarians. This scholarship illuminates the tension between constituency work and parliamentary work, that is, between the role of the delegate and the trustee (Blomgren and Rozenberg, 2015; Brouard et al., 2013). Some parliamentarians put emphasis on work in the parliamentary arena and mainly follow policy goals. Others entertain a closer relationship to their constituency and are more involved and active at the constituency level. Their main focus is to serve their constituents. E-participation platforms may serve both of these parliamentarians' goals, working as either a platform to support policy-oriented work or an additional channel to foster relationships with constituents (Defacqz and Dupuy, 2021).

In order to investigate the case of P&C, data were collected through interviews and desk research. Desk research was helpful to contextualize information collected through interviews and prepare the discussions with our different interlocutors. Document analysis included legal texts, public documents on the websites of members of parliament (MPs) and senators, data from the platform as well as press articles about P&C. Interviews were conducted with rele-

Table 4.1 List of interviews for analysing *Parlement & Citoyens*

Interviews	Position and details	Date
Interview 1	Parliamentary assistant of a senator using the platform	8 January 2019
Interview 2	Founder and president of <i>Parlement &amp; Citoyens</i>	8 January 2019
Interview 3	Former parliamentary assistant of a senator using the platform	9 January 2019
Interview 4	Citizen using <i>Parlement &amp; Citoyens</i>	15 January 2019
Interview 5	Parliamentary assistant of a member of parliament refusing to use the platform	18 January 2019
Interview 6	Former member of parliament who has used the platform	22 January 2019
Interview 7	Citizen using <i>Parlement &amp; Citoyens</i>	24 January 2019
Interview 8	Senator using the platform	31 January 2019
Interview 9	Parliamentary assistant of a member of parliament using the platform	31 January 2019
Interview 10	Former member of parliament who has used the platform	18 February 2019

vant actors: parliamentarians (or their staff), citizens who participated in consultations and the founder and president of P&C (see Table 4.1).

The citizen interviewees were selected among the most active users of the platform (one was particularly active during one consultation, the other is active on a regular basis no matter the issue of the consultation). Interviewing the founder and president of the non-governmental organization managing P&C was instrumental to trace the history of the platform, as well as the technical issues regarding the operation of the platform. A large part of data collection focused on lawmakers from both chambers (the *Assemblée nationale*, lower house, and the *Sénat*, upper house), providing that they initiated at least one consultation on P&C. Each legislator who had initiated a consultation on P&C was contacted (namely 17 parliamentarians), and interviews were organized with the six of them who replied positively to the request. Interviews were conducted with them or the parliamentary assistants working with them. This does not introduce any bias to the analysis since the chapter looks at behaviours and events denoting usage of the platform that parliamentary assistants are well aware of. In addition, parliamentary assistants are actually the key actors for collecting information about the consultation process as they are in charge of the related tasks. The sample also includes an interview with a staff member of an MP who has been committed to transparency and e-participation issues and who overtly criticized P&C and refused to initiate a consultation on the platform. All interviewees filled in and signed a consent form in which they accepted the publishing of their quotes in reports and academic publications. Interview questions were adapted to each group of interviewees.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The national context in which P&C has been developed and is operating can be characterized as conducive to the establishment of e-participation platforms. First, there has been strong governmental support for e-participation. France scores ‘very high’ (0.9663; 13th state out of 193) with regard to the United Nations e-participation index (United Nations, 2018). The country also has a high score for the telecommunication infrastructure index: 0.7979 (United Nations, 2018). This index includes, for instance, the percentage of individuals using the Internet (85.62 per cent of the French in 2018). There is a relative consensus that public



authorities in France have become more open and inclusive with greater use of new technology over time (Boulesnane and Bouzidi, 2018). Open online consultations and co-creation platforms were introduced to include citizens in the law-making process after France joined the Open Government Partnership in April 2014. A turning point was the adoption of the Law for a Digital Republic in 2015. For the first time, citizens were given the opportunity to voice their opinions and participate in the process of drafting a law before it was introduced to parliament. Over a period of three weeks, 21,330 citizens participated in the online consultation and a total of 8500 contributions were posted on the platform (Secrétariat d'Etat au numérique, 2015). Finally, the enriched bill was voted into law by both legislative houses. It included five articles stemming from the online consultation. In addition to this consultation, many e-participation initiatives have been conducted at several levels of government and by various public institutions. For instance, the national government mandated the High Commission for Pension Reform to conduct a national public consultation on the issue in 2018. The consultation process included both online and offline participatory channels (e.g. face-to-face meetings, digital consultation platform). Regional and local governments have also launched participatory initiatives and implemented (online) participatory budgeting (Gourgues, 2013; Mazeaud and Nonjon, 2018, 2019). Other public institutions, such as universities or the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, are also engaged in participatory initiatives. The most recent example was the Citizens' Climate Convention between October 2019 and June 2020 which gathered 150 citizens to work on solutions to combat climate change (Gougou and Persico, 2020). Private companies are also clients of French 'civic tech start-ups' that conduct internal e-participation projects. Overall, the French context is characterized by a very wide offering of participatory initiatives at all levels of government and both in the public and private spheres.

P&C has been developed in the particular French institutional context where parliamentary institutions are comparatively weak. The platform thus provides parliamentarians with a solution to circumvent the weakness of parliament. In the Fifth Republic, the relationship between the executive and legislative branches clearly works to the detriment of the latter (Elgie and Grossman, 2016). The French political system is semi-presidential. The president is directly elected and enjoys a wide array of competences. The prime minister and the government hold the executive power as long as parliament allows it (Duverger, 1980). However, parliamentary elections are held just after the presidential elections. Moreover, while the reforms in 2008 attempted to strengthen the legislative houses (Thomas and Tacea, 2015), the executive branch still controls most of parliament's agenda and the constitution grants the government extensive instruments to limit the role of parliament (Huber, 1996). More generally, parliamentarians themselves claim that the French representative system malfunctions (Interviews 1, 6, 8, 10). They mention the weakness of parliament vis-à-vis the executive government (an issue raised by French parliamentarians for decades; see Cayrol et al., 1971), the omnipotence of the executive branch and, in particular, that of the president, as well as the harmful consequences of the majority voting system. Many French parliamentarians refer to parliament's feebleness to justify their lack of interest in parliamentary work and their focus on constituency work (Brouard et al., 2013, p. 157), which benefit legislator engagement with citizens. Parliamentarians' constituency offices are thus the main points of contact between legislators and citizens, where the latter express their requests and grievances, despite the fact, as evidence shows, that these are often unrelated to national politics (Kerrouche, 2009).

In this context, P&C provides parliamentarians with an opportunity to (re)gain power and centrality in the political system at the national level. Parliamentarians introduce consultations on the platform to strengthen their position, notoriety or reputation for three types of audience: inside parliament, towards their parliamentary group or fellow legislators, towards the public via the media and towards the executive government (Defacqz and Dupuy, 2021). Overall, in this context, the usage of participatory mechanisms is perceived by parliamentarians as a solution to fix a malfunctioning democratic system.

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF PARLEMENT & CITOYENS

The P&C website introduces the platform as an online solution that ‘enables citizens and parliamentarians to work together to find solutions to [France’s] problems’. The platform has been running since 2013, and 17 senators and MPs have conducted 24 consultations (at the time of the fieldwork, in winter 2019; see Table 4A.1 in the appendix for additional information about the consultations). The platform is the output of a private initiative and was originally managed by a small group of citizens. P&C began as a website and then became a non-profit organization in April 2017. P&C seeks to tackle what the organization calls the threefold crisis of the French representative democracy: a crisis of effectiveness of public policies, a crisis of policies’ legitimacy and a crisis of the mistrust of citizens in political actors. For this purpose, P&C is structured around three goals. First, increasing effectiveness of the policy-making process by diversifying the sources of information of MPs and senators. Second, P&C aims to strengthen the legitimacy of law-making by opening legislative work to as many citizens as possible in order to restrict the influence of lobbies and partisan interests and ensure better knowledge and representation of the general interest. The third goal of P&C is to improve trust between citizens and elected politicians by building open and transparent collaboration.

P&C provides two participatory instruments to connect citizens and lawmakers. On the one hand, individual (or a group of) MPs or senators can submit a draft law for citizens and organizations for comment, discussion and amendment. This is the core service provided by P&C. On the other hand, citizens and organizations can launch petitions on the website. The latter function of the website is not further analysed in this chapter, as it has been seldom used and has never resulted in any output. Regarding consultations, MPs or senators can use the platform not only to directly discuss the components of a draft law, but also to consult citizens and stakeholders about a given issue (usually in the context of an information mission of one of the chambers). The goal is to collect diverse ideas on the topic, highlight the divergent positions and collectively engage in finding causes and solutions to the issue at hand. Website users, citizens, organizations and lawmakers must adhere to a charter when registering on the platform. Citizens commit to not use voluntarily false information or racist or abusive language; while lawmakers commit to comply with each stage of the consultation method proposed by P&C, including the writing of a report and the organization of a final debate, as well as to conduct consultations for any law they introduce in parliament or for which they are designated as rapporteur. In practice, however, lawmakers do not comply with most of these requirements.

The platform provides some flexibility to MPs and senators regarding the consultation process, which usually consists of five main phases: (1) the presentation, (2) the consultation,

(3) the synthesis and the lawmaker's answers, (4) the debate, and (5) the report publication or the law itself.

1. For each consultation, the issue at hand is presented by the MP or senator who submits it either by video or brief written statement. The lawmaker structures the consultation with two or more questions or sections (e.g. sections of a draft law or sections about incentives and obstacles related to the issue at hand).
2. Participants who can remain anonymous are invited to contribute with their propositions and comments on one or more of the sections with arguments in favour or against the propositions. Each participant can vote on each of the propositions (and the arguments posted below them) made by the MP or senator or other participants. Each vote on propositions can be in favour, mixed or against (green, yellow or red buttons). For each proposition, any participant can upload 'sources' on the platform (e.g. reports, press or academic articles).
3. At the end of the consultation period, the MP or senator in charge is expected to provide a synthetic report of the arguments and propositions that were discussed during the consultation process. The lawmaker should also address the most supported propositions and engage with them.
4. Based on that, a contradictory debate is to be organized (physically or online) between the MP or senator and some of the participants (the most important contributors and randomly selected participants). In practice, this phase is often ignored.
5. The last formal step consists of the submission of a final report (mission report) or the introduction of a draft law in parliament.

Theoretically, any issues from any policy fields can be the topic of a consultation on P&C. In fact, consultations are about national issues that are of interest to the MPs or the senators who initiate them. The issues at hand display a significant variation, from artificial intelligence to the protection of biodiversity to the status of elected politicians. While this e-participation platform primarily aims to connect legislators with citizens, the website is also open to contributions by other stakeholders, such as companies, subnational governments, public institutions and interest groups – either civil society organizations or business associations. This usage of the platform by actors that are not individual citizens is encouraged and even sought after by the founder of the platform (Interview 2), MPs and senators (Interviews 1, 6, 8). The idea of the P&C founder was to make P&C a substitute for informal relations and meetings behind closed doors between lawmakers and interest groups (Interview 2). By introducing their proposals on the platform, the contribution of interest groups to policy design is expected to become more transparent.

Lastly, P&C is used during the various stages of the policy cycle. Consultations may fulfil several functions: from agenda setting (consultations to raise awareness about a particular issue) and policy preparation (consultations as part of an information mission) to policy formulation and law-making (consultations on the precise content of a draft law).

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

This section presents an institutional analysis of P&C that aims to identify the critical organizational characteristics – categorized as either drivers or barriers to e-participation – that impact the platform's outcomes. These outcomes are (1) legislator involvement in online

Table 4.2 *Organizational characteristics fostering (drivers) or hindering (barriers) collaborative policy design based on Parlement & Citoyens in France*

	<b>Parliamentarian involvement in online collaborative policy design</b>	<b>Citizen participation in online collaborative policy design</b>	<b>Impact of online collaborative policy design on policy making</b>
Drivers	<p><i>Central role of legislators</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legislators are initiators of consultations on policy issues of their choice in a context where they have few institutional opportunities to shape policy design</li> <li>The platform is cross-partisan</li> </ul>	<p><i>Private status of the platform</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The initiative is private (not a public one which would have been open to governmental manipulation)</li> </ul> <p><i>Interaction-rich design</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>P&amp;C allows direct contact between active participants and political representatives that feed back into a greater interest for legislative work</li> </ul>	<p><i>No significant drivers foster the platform's impact on policy design</i></p>
Barriers	<p><i>Reliance on limited parliamentarian resources</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consultations rely mainly on the voluntary work of (overworked) legislators' collaborators</li> </ul>	<p><i>Limited platform resources</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The organization managing the platform lacks the staff and resources to ensure actual feedback to citizens after each consultation</li> </ul>	<p><i>Broken commitments</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The platform has too few resources to follow up on the online consultations and ensure that their outputs are included in policy design</li> </ul> <p><i>Lack of institutional support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The platform is not officially endorsed by any house of parliament, which prevents the initiative from having a structural effect on policy design in France</li> </ul>

collaborative policy design; (2) citizen participation in online collaborative policy design; and (3) the actual impact of such e-participation processes on the design of policies. Table 4.2 provides a summary of the results.

### 5.1 Organizational Characteristics Shaping Parliamentarian Involvement in Parlement & Citoyens

Two main organizational features of the P&C platform directly impact legislator involvement in online collaborative policy design. On the one hand, the aim of P&C is to depart from electoral patronage and establish instead a cooperative relationship between citizens and their political representatives. P&C is designed to place individual parliamentarians centre-stage as they initiate consultations on the platform. This e-participation platform is set up first and foremost for legislators to consult citizens on their chosen topic at different stages of the policy process – agenda setting, policy preparation or policy formulation. The platform stems from the objective to foster an objective and non-ideological approach to solve policy issues. P&C aims to strengthen the legitimacy of law-making by opening legislative work to as many citizens as possible in order to restrict the influence of lobbies and partisan interests and ensure better knowledge and representation of the ‘general interest’. Designed for this purpose, P&C

contributes to (re)legitimizing legislators and legislative work in an institutional context where parliamentary institutions are weak and have been side-lined at the expense of the executive branch of government. Moreover, P&C was set up as a cross-partisan initiative. This feature is likely to increase the appeal of P&C from an individual parliamentarian's perspective and thereby expand the scope of parliamentarians who would use P&C to discuss a policy issue. When the founder of P&C envisioned the platform in 2009 and 2010, he worked (part time and voluntarily) as a parliamentary assistant (Interview 2). His job inside French parliament was related to consulting MPs and senators with various partisan affiliations; he managed to convince a few of them, whose affiliation ranged from the radical right to the radical left, including the centre-right and centre-left parties, to conduct the first consultations. Since then, consultations have been introduced by parliamentarians from diverse political backgrounds. Also, the board of directors of P&C includes MPs (28 out of 577) and senators (11 out of 348) from across the political spectrum. The central role of legislators as well as the cross-partisan nature of the platform's set-up are clear drivers of their involvement in online collaborative policy design.

On the other hand, another organizational feature of P&C works as an important barrier to the involvement of MPs and senators in this collaborative initiative: the limited resources of the organization managing the platform and the reliance on the limited resources legislators can commit to the consultation on P&C. P&C employs no staff and the organization has never benefited from dedicated funds, neither for the design of the platform nor its operation. Initially, P&C relied on the voluntary work of its founders and, as of 2020, P&C still does not employ dedicated staff. After launching P&C, its founders created a new business that develops participatory solutions for public and private customers. The staff members of this private company are allowed and invited to work for a couple of hours a month on P&C. They mostly do preparatory work for consultations and provide help to the parliamentarians and their staff regarding communication and the structure of the consultation, they make 'light' interventions during consultations, such as handling users' signals about inappropriate content and they also deal with organizational issues, such as organizing the debate that follows the consultation when such a debate actually takes place. When P&C was first established, they were also in charge of writing reports on consultations in the form of a synthesis of all contributions (Interviews 3, 6), but they no longer do this due to a lack of time. Beyond this side help provided by the start-up's staff members, the operation of consultations on P&C is mostly reliant on legislators' own staff. In some cases, such as the writing of the final report, the company provides a template (Interviews 1, 2), but parliamentary assistants have to carry out the task themselves. From a parliamentarian's perspective, the fact that they have to commit their own resources (in this case, their parliamentary assistants' time) to conduct the e-consultation to its full term is likely detrimental to their involvement on the platform due to time constraints and, more often than not, the already expansive use of their assistants' working time: 'We spend so much time responding to emergencies that we don't have much time to carry out prospective work, such as citizen consultations [on the platform], as quickly as we should' (Interview 1).

## 5.2 Organizational Characteristics Shaping Citizens' Participation in Parlement & Citoyens

Three organizational features of P&C shape citizen participation in online collaborative policy design. P&C stems from a private initiative and, as such, holds a particular place in the French context where, so far, most public consultations have been publicly initiated and supported. P&C's set-up as a private initiative, and initially even as a 'citizens' lobby', is likely to support citizen participation in P&C online consultations. The private status of the initiative, which is open to parliamentarians from all political parties, helps to remove concerns about the possible manipulation of the consultation process by the government or the ruling party (Interview 2). In addition, while criticism has been raised in public or academic debates regarding private online consultation platforms (Mazeaud and Nonjon, 2018), in this case, the actors were supportive of the private status of the platform: 'I trust [the company that owns the platform] because I think that they have values. As long as I think they have values, it's good' (Interview 7).

Another driver of citizen participation in P&C concerns its interaction-rich design. Interviewees representing citizens stressed that their contributions could feed the work of legislators with experiences from the ground and that their participation could potentially serve as public support for draft laws introduced by MPs (Interview 4). They highlight that platforms such as P&C allow citizens to speak more directly with political elites: 'I think it's giving another form of expertise, from the field, because our elites are disconnected from the real world [...] it allows field expertise to be given to our elected representatives' (Interview 7).

Online consultations contribute to connecting citizens with legislative work. In that sense, for participating citizens, P&C and other e-participation initiatives thereby act as channels of political (re)engagement. However, the limited resources that the organization managing P&C can commit to the platform's daily operation constitute an important barrier to citizen participation. The lack of dedicated staff and the reliance on parliamentarians' limited resources result in the absence of a systematic follow-up of consultations. In fact, most consultations miss the final report outlining the outcomes of online debates.

I printed out all of the contributions, on nine hundred pages. It is extremely difficult to process the data and arrive at a result, to produce replies for all the items. I'll be honest, but I think that without the assistance of an automated system, it seems to me ... It is a means that is not hopeless, but that ... It is a lot of energy for a result which may be disappointing in the end compared with the energy we have devoted to citizen engagement. (Interview 9)

This is detrimental to citizen participation in P&C consultations as it breaks the spirit of the participatory initiative, which is to establish two-way dialogue between citizens and parliamentarians. To foster participation, consultations need to eventually result in an actual impact on policies. Nevertheless, from the point of view of 'committed contributors', the direct influence on policy making that P&C may result in is not considered as the most decisive feature, as they are well aware of the context in which citizen consultations take place (Interview 7).

### 5.3 Organizational Characteristics Affecting Parlement & Citoyens's Likely Impact on Policy Design

Regarding the organizational features shaping the impact on policy design, two main barriers are likely to result in the limited influence of the platform on policy design. First, the lack of resources directly impacts the ability of P&C to follow up on the online consultations and thereby ensure that they actually feed the process of policy design. As noted above, only a few consultations are concluded by a summary statement and a report by the legislator who initiated the consultation about the law. In the cases where the consultations were conducted in the context of a parliamentary information mission, the parliamentary information report served as the report of the consultation conducted on P&C:

I cannot tell you that there is a direct link between the proposals that were made there [on P&C] and the parliamentary report. Because there [the consultation on P&C] it was organized in three beautiful parts with very particular reasoning, whereas the reasoning of this report here is very different ... And I think that for someone who responds to this kind of consultation, it may even be frustrating. (Interview 9)

In terms of impact on policy design, such a chaotic, if not absent, follow-up on the consultative process severely narrows the scope of P&C's actual output. The operation of the platform has the potential to redefine its purpose as a mere consultation platform, instead of a co-production platform where citizens express their preferences and opinions and where parliamentarians commit to draft laws based on citizen input.

In addition, despite the fact that the institutional context is conducive to parliamentarian involvement in online collaborative policy design, its systematic impact on policy design is less likely. Indeed, P&C is directly supported neither by the Senate nor the National Assembly. Both assemblies' bureaus refused to financially support the initiative or endorse it as an official platform available to their members. Interviewees pointed out different explanations. First, the advent of participatory democracy is not a priority for the majority of lawmakers. Many of them do not see the potential benefits of such practices and do not see the point of investing resources in their development (Interview 8). Also, the president of the National Assembly did not want to support the project because the platform is open to all lawmakers from all political parties, including radical ones: 'The president of the National Assembly turned his back to the project, after saying that he was going to support it, on the grounds that we had chosen to open the project to all political parties, from the radical right to the radical left' (Interview 2).

Second, as a variety of civic tech start-ups exist, official support for one of them might be seen as problematic (Interview 8). Lastly, the status of the software used by P&C (proprietary software) is debated and highly criticized, notably by an MP of the majority party: 'At the end of the day, we transform democratic processes that are transparent in real life into processes that are entirely opaque in the digital world' (Interview 5).

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

While the founder of P&C has mentioned the potential 'success criteria' of P&C – a draft law is finally introduced in parliament or a draft law includes input from the consultations – no explicit performance indicators exist for P&C. The main objective of P&C is to ensure that

consultations enable policy makers to map out debates on a given topic (Interview 2). This usage is also pointed out by lawmakers themselves (Interview 6). When assessing the performance of P&C with respect to the commitment of lawmakers, the conclusions are mainly negative: many consultations miss final reports, contradictory debates are often not organized and very few consultations end with the introduction of a draft law in parliament. The founder of P&C acknowledges this situation. However, he also claims that P&C is part of a larger movement towards a more open democracy and any step in this direction should be duly appreciated (Interview 2).

With respect to the democratic legitimacy of the platform, the main rationale of P&C is to allow any citizen, as well as any stakeholder (e.g. civil society organizations, business associations or companies), to initiate dialogue with legislators through a consultation process, regardless of any type of representativeness threshold. The platform thereby emphasizes a broad definition of public interest, relying on the possibility of any citizen or stakeholder to voice their preferences and views. Lawmakers also value the platform for the same reason. In this respect, the democratic legitimacy of the platform departs from the traditional electoral channel of legitimation and rather rests on the general, yet only partly implemented, principle of ‘one person, one voice’. Overall, as such, P&C’s democratic legitimacy is rather difficult to assess.

The issue of the transparency of the consultation process and, specifically, the nature of the software running the platform have been debated. P&C uses a proprietary software developed by the founders, which has been highly criticized by actors from the French civic tech and a majority MP who refuses to use P&C as long as its source code is kept closed (Interview 5).

Lastly, in order to assess the influence of the e-participation initiative on policy design, two types of consultation must be distinguished. On the one hand, the consultations conducted for the purpose of a parliamentary information mission usually ask citizens and stakeholders to identify the potential benefits and obstacles of an issue and propose solutions to adopt new laws or amend existing ones. According to interviewees, the added value of such consultations is that they confirm information collected through other consultation arenas (meetings with public servants, companies, public hearings, etc.) and provide examples and illustrations from citizens’ experiences (that can feed the report). It also allows the involvement of citizens in parliamentary work. On the other hand, other consultations aim to draft laws or amendments. In this case, their influence is difficult to assess as amendments cannot officially be traced to information supplied by interest groups or citizens (Interview 3). Moreover, opposition MPs or senators may conduct consultations about a draft law that they know has little chance of being introduced on the parliamentary agenda due to limited opportunity windows for opposition groups (Interview 1). Only once has a draft law submitted on P&C become a law. Overall, the influence of P&C on policy design can be characterized as limited.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

In this case study of P&C in France, an institutionalist approach was adopted in order to assess how the organizational set-up of the platform is likely to affect citizen and parliamentary involvement and shape the impact of their consultations on policy design. Several lessons can be drawn. First, the presence of the e-participation platform’s own resources is very important for driving citizen and parliamentary involvement as well as securing the impact



on policy design. Own resources help to assure that the consultations are not mere replicas of a vertical relationship between citizens and parliamentarians where the former may provide input without any guarantee that the latter is taking it into consideration (from a citizen's point of view) or where the commitment of additional resources without clear benefits is required (from a parliamentarian's point of view). Second, the weak position of the parliament in the French institutional context explains why parliamentarians may be keen on using participatory instruments in order to regain some control over policy making. Third, as the institutions and personnel of representative democracy are contested, citizens are likely to support alternatives to representative democracy, particularly in the form of e-participation tools. Lastly, regarding the impact of the e-participation platform on policy design, as long as parliamentary institutions stay committed to the strict logic of political representation inside parliament without officially endorsing the participatory platform as a new tool – or at least a supplementary tool – to law-making, it is unlikely that the e-participation platform significantly and systematically impacts policy design.

Overall, P&C proves to be an interesting case for observing the evolution of a national context to being more supportive towards e-participation initiatives, notably because of the involvement of private actors. The establishment of P&C is part of a national movement towards a greater use of online participatory tools by public institutions in France. One of the turning points was the Law for a Digital Republic adopted in 2015 (Secrétariat d'Etat au numérique, 2015). For the first time, this consultation gave citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions and participate in the process of drafting a law before its introduction to parliament. This consultation was a governmental initiative, but private actors played an important role by designing and providing the platform used for the consultation. An e-participation start-up supported State Secretary Axelle Lemaire, who was in charge of the project, throughout the process. This start-up was built on the 'success' of P&C (Interview 2). 'Success' here refers to the fact that lawmakers from all political parties took part in the initiative and, more particularly, that one draft law was introduced and voted into parliament after a consultation on P&C (prohibiting the use of pesticides in the public space).

Along with other organizations, P&C has thereby played a role in the digital transformation of policy design in France. Importantly, civic tech initiatives come first from the private sector. Ideas, organization and the platform's design initially resulted from the work of committed citizens and civil society actors, forming a civic tech network, which is why participatory democracy in France has been depicted as a market (Mazeaud and Nonjon, 2018). But the centrality of private actors in the development of e-democracy is both an opportunity and a threat. It raises crucial issues regarding transparency and the democratic legitimacy of such e-participation initiatives. These questions should be the subject of further research in political science and public administration but must also be publicly debated among all stakeholders, citizens and political representatives.

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## APPENDIX

Table 4A.1 Consultations conducted on Parlement &amp; Citoyens from 2013 to 2019

Name of consultation (translated)	Policy field (as categorized on the website)	Participants	Contributions	Votes	Start date	Political Party of the initiator(s)
#ParlonsRIC (referendum of popular initiative)	Democracy; citizenship	3377	4605	45,645	16 December 2018	NA
School in the digital society #ÉcoleNumérique	Education; digital	2056	2478	29,219	5 June 2018	Centrist
Support the development of local currencies	Economy	186	197	1017	30 April 2018	Green
France–Germany, rethink the role of the border!	International	20	20	N/A	13 April 2018	Centrist
Update our constitution: five chapters to build a new democracy	Democracy; citizenship	939	1255	9172	11 April 2018	Socialist
Status of the elected representative: rights and duties	Democracy; citizenship	427	387	3517	7 February 2018	Socialist; Green
Implement favourable conditions for the development of artificial intelligence	Digital	283	424	1188	6 December 2017	Centrist
Design a data policy adapted to artificial intelligence challenges	Digital	466	570	2387	6 December 2017	Centrist
An ecosystem for flexible and diffusive research	Digital	218	246	652	6 December 2017	Centrist
Establish an ethical and trustful framework for artificial intelligence development	Digital	386	457	1514	6 December 2017	Centrist
Anticipate and control the impacts of artificial intelligence on work and employment	Digital	778	469	2655	6 December 2017	Centrist
Artificial intelligence in the service of a sustainable and ecological economy	Digital	203	138	609	6 December 2017	Centrist
Boost strong momentum and catalyse opportunities in key sectors	Digital	111	108	261	6 December 2017	Centrist
Reception of humanitarian migrants and national integration policy	Housing; democracy; citizenship; aid	195	156	1415	12 July 2017	Socialist

Name of consultation (translated)	Policy field (as categorized on the website)	Participants	Contributions	Votes	Start date	Political Party of the initiator(s)
Restore trust in public action	Democracy; citizenship	1122	1250	10,602	30 June 2017	Socialist; Green
Generalize online consultations	Democracy; citizenship	670	511	5256	17 November 2016	Right; Socialist
How to rebuild local democracy	Democracy; citizenship	390	420	2156	3 February 2016	Socialist
Constitutional Bill for the Protection of the Nation	Justice	1649	558	8774	27 January 2016	Green
Bill for biodiversity, nature and landscape conservation	Environment	9373	2052	51,495	18 December 2015	Green
Collaborative economy: what are the challenges for our society model?	Economy	149	313	779	29 October 2015	Socialist
Open data: release public data	Digital	123	312	1153	11 March 2014	Centrist
Prohibit the non-agricultural use of pesticides on the national territory	Health; environment	504	1214	4714	19 June 2013	Green
How to make the prison useful	Security	294	821	2687	26 April 2013	Socialist
Restore trust between citizens and legislators	Democracy; citizenship	778	2434	9806	13 February 2013	Right
Citizen's initiative to amend the constitution	Democracy; citizenship	188	276	1636	12 February 2013	Radical Right
<i>Des Clics De Conscience: l'Expérience!</i>	<i>Experiment</i>	5	7	N/A	1 January 2013	NA

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data retrieved from Parlement & Citoyens: <https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/project>.

## 5. (e-)Participation and propaganda: The mix of old and new technology in Hungarian national consultations

**Sara Svensson, Andras Molnar and Agnes Batory**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

When the Hungarian government announced in February 2020 that a national consultation would soon be held on the country's justice system, citizens largely knew what to expect. Based on the pattern of the previous eight consultations held since Fidesz came to power in 2010, they would receive a printed letter from the prime minister, sent by regular postal service, together with a questionnaire, and there would be a massive propaganda-like campaign to promote the consultation all over state and private television, radio, the press, billboards and Internet channels. The stated goal of the exercise was to secure popular input, but the government would not hide another key purpose: to 'gather societal support so that the government could use this against domestic opposition or possible attacks from international actors, courts and EU institutions' (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2020).

Research has previously demonstrated that national consultations in Hungary were deeply flawed when it came to securing genuine popular input on policy making if evaluated based on content, process, effect, resource efficiency and communication (Batory and Svensson, 2019c). Unlike the fears and debates surrounding the use of information technology by authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, the Hungarian consultations have been surprisingly old school, with physical mass mailing and posters playing prominent roles. However, there has also been the possibility to participate by filling in the questionnaire online, something which has received less attention. The intersection between populism and participatory governance demonstrates that participatory governance enthusiasts need 'to be more aware not just of the uses, but also the abuses of public input' (Batory and Svensson, 2019c). However, the addition of an online component has not been the subject of research and thus constitutes the focus of this study. The Hungarian case study is instructive as a reminder that e-participation practices are in themselves normatively neutral and can be used for partisan purposes that may serve to enhance democratic quality, but also the opposite.

### 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Contemporary societies have been transformed by the use of information and communication technology (Dutton, 2004). While agriculture, manufacturing and classic services still consti-

tute important parts of human activity, they are gradually overshadowed by technology that enables the storage, exchange, control and sometimes manipulation of knowledge and data (Bannerman and Orasch, 2019). Social commentary has paid much attention to the effect of this development on the relationship between the state and citizens, with popular media focusing especially on the threat of ‘Big Brother societies’ as well as the potential positive effects on developed and democratic societies (Everett, 2009; Sætra, 2019). At the same time, social science research has been somewhat fragmented, with the impact of big data, surveillance and cyber security (e.g. Dinev et al., 2008; Ju et al., 2018; Weiss and Jankauskas, 2019; Percia David et al., 2020; Vishwanath et al., 2020) being studied separately from research on e-governance (Torres et al., 2006; Porwol et al., 2013; Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016). Where the former literature focuses on risks (e.g. Sundberg, 2019), the latter literature has often been normative, meaning ‘the more participation the better’ (Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid, 2019, p. 11), which may be due to the way e-participation has been promoted by international and regional organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union (EU), or influenced by the literature on collaborative governance, which also often has a normative bias (Batory and Svensson, 2019b). At the same time, the importance of looking at the various ways technology can be used by governments for non-benign purposes is becoming paramount in the light of a global backlash for democracy (Lührmann et al., 2019; Csaky, 2020; Plattner, 2020; Scholte, 2020). While the negative effects on privacy and the increased possibilities for mass surveillance in non-democratic states, such as China, are well known (Wang and Hong, 2010), it is vital to broaden the focus beyond surveillance and extend the geographical scope to include Europe, where the quality of democracy seems to have deteriorated in several countries that are members of the EU, sometimes referred to as backsliding democracies (Sedelmeier, 2014; Sitter and Bakke, 2019). A key component of this is the strengthening of populist parties and their inclusion in or control of governments.

While populism has been an essentially contested concept in social science, current research appears to converge around a thin ideational approach to populism. At the core of this approach is a view of populism as defined by the populists that makes two claims. First, there is a gap between the people (or the ‘common man’) and the current elites (if the populists are not in power) or former elites (if the populists are in power). Second, a ‘common will’ exists that can be distilled (only) by the populist leader or the populist party (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins and Littvay, 2019). This approach can also be aligned with the emphasis of populism as a ‘style of rhetoric’ that is grounded in these two components, whereas it ‘remains silent about ... what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 4). In Europe, Hungary stands out as having been led by a party (Fidesz) that originated as a mainstream party, but transformed into a party embracing these characteristics and winning a supermajority in parliament in 2010 (Batory, 2016) as well as two consecutive parliamentary elections (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018). The national consultations which were initiated by Fidesz and which are investigated in this chapter serve both of these elements. Through replicating direct democracy tools without being constrained by constitutional regulations, the government can claim to have distilled the popular will, and the result can be shown to portray the inability of the left-liberal opposition with its (communist) elite past and, at the same time, portray Hungary as standing against the global liberal left manifested in those international bodies

that regularly criticize Hungary (e.g. the Council of Europe, certain bodies in the European Parliament, sometimes the European Commission) (Krekó and Enyedi, 2018).

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it addresses whether the addition of an online element changed the way the government portrayed and used national consultations. Second, it seeks to investigate whether the added online element has had an effect on the participatory process in terms of procedural guarantees as well as citizen involvement through responses to questionnaires. This is accomplished by a case study on the two consultations that were the most recent at the time of writing. The selection made it possible to control for the relevance of issue and policy focus, since these differed significantly between the two consultations. The analysed material consists primarily of information in the public domain: speeches by members of the government, notably Prime Minister Viktor Orban, news reports, websites of Hungarian public administration units and analyses from Hungarian and international sources. The decision not to conduct interviews was based on a host of issues related to the political situation in Hungary – in particular legislation and a political campaign targeting Central European University. (On 6 October 2020, the Court of Justice of the EU pronounced the law in question incompatible with EU law (*Commission v Hungary* [Higher education] [C-66/18])). The university subsequently moved most of its operations to Austria. All authors of the chapter were affiliated with Central European University at the time of the research, which made access to decision-makers difficult. However, a written request to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister in 2020 yielded some basic information, including separate quantitative data print and online submissions. This enabled further analysis, since very few data have been released to the public regarding the consultations beyond the crude numbers of responses to each question. The available sources allow for a preliminary analysis, but future research based on more extensive document archives and testimonies of key participating actors would be needed to solidify the findings and perform a more in-depth analysis.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Since the regime change in 1989–1990, Hungary has been considered a leading reformer in the region (see Greskovits, 1999) and this was characterized by relative political stability in the first two decades of Hungary's political history. The political landscape changed dramatically in 2010, when, thanks largely to the fallout from the 2008 global economic crisis, Fidesz won a qualified majority in parliament. (Fidesz technically sits in a coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party, but, to all practical effect, Hungary has a single-party government.) Having changed the electoral law in its favour, Fidesz then won elections in 2014 and 2018 resulting in massive parliamentary majorities, following what many independent observers characterize as democratic backsliding in the country, involving the weakening or takeover of independent institutions, checks and balances in the country's constitutional order and the rule of law (Sedelmeier, 2014; Bogaards, 2018). As a country with a combined Roman and Central and Eastern Europe public administration, heavily influenced by both Germanic traditions (through Habsburg rule) and legacies of communism and different transition trajectories, Hungary has long been characterized by centralized and hierarchical decision-making procedures (Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit, 2011; Kuhlmann and Wollman, 2014). Since Fidesz's entry into power in 2010, these tendencies have been significantly amplified, including coordination of government units through further centralization (OECD, 2017) and the increased



selectivity with which the government interacts with external actors. In general, civil society has been polarized into one sector that is either openly government friendly and one that is, or is perceived as, oppositional (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2016; Szalai and Svensson, 2019). The possibility to favour interaction with ‘friendly’ civil society was institutionalized through parts of Act CXXX of 2010 on the adoption of legislation and Act CXXXI of 2010 on Public Participation in Developing Legislation, which allows for long-term ‘strategic partnerships’ to be formed with select organizations, that therefore get privileged access to policy makers (Szalai and Svensson, 2019).

The opportunities provided by the rapid development of information technology have been utilized in an uneven manner in the intersection between policy makers, public administration and citizens. The focus has been on electronic public administration developments, which to a large extent have been co-financed by the EU, first through the Electronic Public Administration Operational Programme (2007–2013) and later the Public Services and Civil Service Development Operational Programme (2014–2020). For instance, early initiatives in the Fidesz-led government aimed to make public services more user friendly, e.g. through establishing so-called ‘government windows’ or one-stop shops for administrative services to citizens (Kovács and Hajnal, 2014), an important part of which was merged databases and new technological interfaces for communication. However, the capacity to absorb new technology at lower levels of government is limited by the lack of resources and training (Budai, 2018). e-Government therefore shows a dual picture. The ratio of citizens that use online channels to access public services is at the EU average (Dán, 2018) even though the ratio of households with Internet access at 83 per cent is still six percentage points below the EU average, with significant rural and poor parts of society excluded (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2019). However, technical development is not mainstreamed or used in innovative ways throughout the administration (Majzikné Bausz, 2008; Kovács and Hajnal, 2014). Hungary was ranked 45 in the United Nations e-government development report in 2018 (United Nations, 2018). In general, less attention has been paid to developing the possibility for citizens to provide input on policy making. There is no overarching legislation on how to include online solutions in policy design and implementation, although a government decree from 2010 implementing Act CXXXI of 2010 on Public Participation in Developing Legislation stipulates that draft legislation should be made accessible online and includes rules for how comments from the public should be collected and summarized (Batory and Svensson, 2019a). Therefore, it is not surprising that a separate e-government law enacted in 2015 only deals with administration–client contact within the framework of public services (Act on e-Government, CCXXII) (EUGo, 2015).

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION AND ITS ONLINE COMPONENT

This case study focuses on the online component of the two most recent national consultations: the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, which was carried out in autumn 2017, and the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family, which took place a year later (at the time of writing, spring 2020, a new consultation had been announced but was postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak) (see Table 5.1). These were the last in a series of eight national consultations that had taken place since Fidesz came into power in 2010, which previous research

Table 5.1 Key characteristics of the two Hungarian consultations

	Soros Plan Consultation	Family Protection Consultation
Date	10 October 2017–15 December 2017	6 November 2018–21 December 2018
Opinions received	2,356,811	1,382,294
Of which submitted online	178,491	113,420
Letters submitted	7,939,899	7,886,290
Response rate	29.68%	17.53%
Percentage of online submissions	7.57%	8.21%
Accessibility	N/A	Access for the visually impaired provided

Source: Government of Hungary (2018a, 2019), response to Freedom of Information request 2020.

has demonstrated lacked legal control and transparency – there were no legal guarantees that the results would be taken into consideration during the legislative process and it was not clear whether they fell under the legal category of political survey, opinion poll or something else (Pál, 2016). However, even though the consultations did not meet the standards of tools of direct democracy (Erdős, 2018), the government greatly emphasized them in political communication.

National consultation questionnaires were printed and posted directly to all adult citizens (except the first in 2010, which targeted only pensioners) and generally comprised a letter from the prime minister and a return sheet containing questions with two or more answers. For the two consultations in focus in this chapter, citizens were also given the possibility to submit their answers through a National Consultation website.

The National Consultation on the Soros Plan consisted of seven questions with two answer options related to Hungarian-born American financier and philanthropist George Soros' alleged activities to promote migration. A press interview with one of Fidesz's American chief political consultants later revealed that George Soros was deliberately selected and built up as a target in the party's campaign to personally symbolize the abstract idea that foreign venture capital was attacking Hungary (Grassegger, 2019) and that migration was linked to this. An example of one of the questions demonstrates this tendency: 'The aim of the Soros Plan is for the languages and cultures of European countries to be pushed into the background in order to further the integration of illegal immigrants. Do you support this part of the Soros Plan? Yes/No.' George Soros himself denied that he had any plan to promote migration per se, stating that 'the national consultation contains distortions and outright lies that deliberately mislead Hungarians about my views on migrants and refugees' (Soros, 2017). Based on public statements made by high-level Fidesz party representatives (Kovacs, 2017; Orban 2017a, 2017b), the consultation was meant to serve four goals: to validate the government's policy; to provide the government with legitimacy; to strengthen Hungary's position internationally ('improve the Hungarian national position' in international forums); and to feed into decision-making ('preparation of a certain decision'). Results were presented in December 2017 and were followed up with a legislative package announced in spring 2018 and voted through parliament in June 2018 (see Table 5.2). Almost 2.2 million responses were returned in paper format, whereas less than 200,000 used the online version. While the consultation overwhelmingly

Table 5.2 Results of the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, 2017

Question	Online results		Paper results	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	6.49	93.51	0.31	99.69
2	6.41	93.59	0.31	99.69
3	6.56	93.44	0.33	99.67
4	6.33	93.67	0.28	99.72
5	6.23	93.77	0.31	99.69
6	6.37	93.63	0.29	99.71
7	6.46	93.54	0.38	99.62

Note: See the translation of the questionnaire at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/national-consultation-on-the-soros-plan>.

Source: Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.

supported one set of positions, a higher share of persons submitting online chose opposing answers.

The National Consultation on the Protection of the Family was the first national consultation to be undertaken after the government won a third term in the elections held in April 2018. The consultation was announced in early autumn 2018 and sent out to households in late October and November. The theme this time was family policy, even though the link to migration was maintained, as the first question was ‘Do you agree that the shrinking population should not be dealt with through immigration but through the stronger support of families? Yes/No’. The aim to strengthen the government’s anti-migration communication to international audiences was openly stated when the consultation was announced: ‘It is also a possibility to send a strong message – the renewal of Europe is impossible without strengthening families. If the families are strong, the pro-migration forces would have less space’ (State Secretary Csaba Dömötör, Government of Hungary, 2018b). The deadline for returning answers was set for 20 December 2018 and an online platform to vote was added a few weeks before the deadline. As with the previous consultations, this exercise was criticized for biased and misleading content (Kövér, 2018, 2019). The consultation was held at the end of the campaign ‘Year of Families’, and the majority of new family policy measures had been introduced or announced prior to the consultation itself, implying that the consultation was more about promoting government policy than an instrument for gauging public opinion. The overall number of responses was significantly lower than in the previous consultation, but the share of online responses was somewhat higher. The answers were more varied in general and between online and paper submissions, but the trend that online respondents were somewhat more critical of official government policy continued (see Table 5.3).

To the user, the online version of the consultations was straightforward and simple. Instead of sending the return sheet by post, respondents only needed to visit a website, provide their name and e-mail address and indicate their age. Respondents also had to state that they had read the data protection notice and that they were Hungarian citizens. According to the privacy policy published on the website, answers to the questionnaire were collected anonymously. This means that their personal data were only stored for a limited period of time and dealt with separately from the survey answers. Based on interviews and data requests, Rossi (2017)

Table 5.3 Results of the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family, 2018

Question	Online results		Paper results	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	97.17	2.83	99.36	0.64
2	93.62	6.38	97.87	2.13
3	96.03	3.97	98.35	1.65
4a	93.51	6.49	96.11	3.89
4b	89.80	10.20	93.69	6.31
5	90.60	9.40	94.00	6.00
6	95.73	4.27	97.97	2.03
7	97.10	2.90	98.94	1.06
8	97.63	2.37	99.53	0.47
9	96.38	3.62	99.00	1.00
10	95.32	4.68	97.70	2.30

Note: See the translation of the questionnaire at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/heres-the-english-version-of-hungarys-national-consultation-on-the-protection-of-the-family>.

Source: Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister.

found that data were sufficiently anonymized. Control for participation, however, was latent: there were no barriers to participation, such as thorough and reliable identification procedures. The downside of this simplicity was that the system was not protected against accidental or deliberate misuse. As pointed out by Rossi (2017) and Pál (2016), there were no guarantees integrated in the online submission forms that only citizens submitted answers to the questions or that only one answer per citizen was submitted. When this process drew criticism, government spokespersons said they trusted ‘in the good faith of voters and that each voter would only fill out the questionnaire once’. Moreover, it was highlighted that not so many would use the opportunity to reply electronically (Government of Hungary, 2017b). The platform continued to allow multiple submissions by the same person during the National Consultation on the Protection of the Family in late 2018. What did develop between the two consultations was that the latter made software available to aid the visually impaired at the request of the Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted (Government of Hungary, 2018d). This may have been highlighted in communication as a way to demonstrate the government’s willingness to listen to what it considers credible parts of civil society. Despite this, the Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted found numerous faults with the accessibility of the online consultation, which led to a meeting with representatives in the Prime Minister’s Office in spring 2019 on how to improve subsequent consultations (Hungarian Federation for the Blind and Partially Sighted, 2019).

As for the outcome of the consultations, few data were released to the public. For instance, the same website that was used for the submission of answers subsequently contained only a link to a short summary of the results, limited to a basic description, such as the total number of answers and the percentages allocated to each response option. In connection with the National Consultation on the Soros Plan, members of parliament from opposition parties sought to verify the process of the consultation and the data communicated by the government, but only had the opportunity to visit three sites where the physical handling of questionnaires

happened. The visits were restrictive in time and extent, since the two parliamentarians only had 90 minutes for their inspection, including travel time between the venues (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2017). Instead of receiving verification of the integrity of the data collection process, the public learned from the government that those opposition politicians were acting in line with the Soros Plan and that they offended the people who submitted the answers (Government of Hungary, 2017a). Both the Soros Plan and the Protection of the Family consultations were communicated as a success, with predictable overwhelming support for the government's position and their planned actions (Government of Hungary, 2018c, 2019). According to the information provided by the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister on the Freedom of Information request by the authors of this chapter, there were practical differences between the handling and storage of the physical and online responses. While answers received by post needed to be digitalized (mainly by a human workforce), the online responses were processed fully without human contribution. Online responses are stored only digitally, while the storage of paper submissions is done both physically and electronically.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The consultations were designed, promoted and executed by the government. Within the government, the Prime Minister's Office was the most important unit for the national consultations and organizing and communicating the initiative. The Ministry of the Interior, which is responsible for the legal framework and the development of e-government services, or the National Council for Telecommunications and Informatics (NHIT), which is an advisory body to the government, seemed to play no significant role. The technical implementation of the online platform of the consultations was outsourced to private companies. Other than the name of the companies handling the physical copies of the consultations, very little was disclosed to the public about the companies' involvement. What can be reconstructed based on a subsequent report and ruling by the Data Protection Authority indicated that the Prime Minister's Office signed a framework contract with the companies New Land Media and Lounge Design in February 2017 (Hungarian National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, 2017). These were technically separate companies specialized in media planning and marketing communication, respectively, but both were part of the same Lounge Group, which counted several ministries and other state agencies among its clients (Bruckner, 2018; Spirk, 2018; Lounge Group, 2019). The National Consultation website appeared to be formally owned by the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, but jointly administered by the Office and the New Land Media and Lounge Design companies. The funding came directly from the central budget under the line 'tasks related to governmental communication and consultations', which was around 65 million euro, or 20 billion forint, in the years 2017 and 2018 (Central Budget: Act XC. 2016, Act C. 2017).

In a country known for excessive regulatory activity (OECD, 2017), it is striking that there was no dedicated legislation governing the consultations and the online platform and that the conduct of consultations lacked transparency (Pál, 2016). National consultations do not satisfy the principles set in Act CXXXI of 2010 on social inclusion in legislation. Remarkably, there was no central website containing data for all of the consultations that have been held. The online platform mentioned in the previous paragraph was only used for the actual (latest) consultation on family policy and even then only a short summary of the results was made

available to the public. This lack of public archiving casts serious doubt on the validity of the response rates and the breakdown of answers mentioned by government spokespeople, since no independent actor – public authority, media, civil bodies or opposition parties – can verify the accuracy of the statements concerning either the online or the traditional paper-based version of the consultations.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

Even though online options were available for both of the analysed consultations, it is notable that this option did not feature highly in government communication and not at all in any of the speeches that were held and recorded in Hungarian parliament and mentioned in the national consultations. It is questionable whether the general objectives of the online platform can be discerned from those that were stated for the overall consultation (validation of existing policies, provision of legitimacy for the government, strengthening the position of the country in a hostile international environment and input on decision-making). We can speculate about the motivation for an online option having been to increase the total response rate, appear technology friendly or provide work for information technology companies favoured by the government, but there is no evidence for any of these. It is clear, however, that a high overall response rate was important to secure those objectives and, for the government, the outcome of the consultation on the Soros Plan, at least, seems to have met expectations – with the caveat, as mentioned above, that no independent actor could actually verify the government's claims on the outcome. The result was hailed as 'the most successful consultation of all time' as 2,356,811 opinions were received (2,178,320 by post and 178,491 online) (Government of Hungary, 2018a). The government did not comment on the ratio between online and post submissions, but merely communicated the fact. The latest consultation on family policy had fewer responses and there was no information available on the number of online submissions (Government of Hungary, 2019). The data included earlier in this chapter were received from a Freedom of Information request by the authors to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister in 2020.

The low share of electronic responses may reflect the relatively low level of digital penetration in Hungary outside the capital city, the low level of familiarity with e-participation practices and/or the low level of trust towards the digital platform of the consultations themselves. In line with international trends, young people overwhelmingly use the Internet daily (93 per cent), but among the elderly (above 65), this drops to 22 per cent. Data from the Central Statistical Office also show that a significant proportion of those not using e-government services specified a lack of skills (11 per cent) or concerns about data protection (13 per cent) as reasons for relying on traditional methods for interacting with the authorities (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2019). Since there is no demographic or public opinion data on those that submitted online responses to the national consultation, we do not know how well these characteristics of e-government fit them and if that can explain the low uptake of the online version. Likewise, the somewhat higher ratio of respondents opposing the official government line in the online version cannot be explained without more demographic and geographic data.

Other reasons for the low use of the electronic platform for the consultation may include the absence of a concerted effort to involve diverse segments of society (e.g. people with disabilities or from minorities). This was partially changed during the consultation in 2018 as

accessibility for reading aides was developed. Another possible exception is the differential mobilization of the population: the governing party was generally more popular among rural voters (support for Fidesz tends to be higher in the countryside than in urban areas), and the national consultation may have followed this pattern in terms of a higher than average return rate from Fidesz's heartlands. Internet penetration is lower outside Budapest (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2016), which may have led to more respondents returning hard copies.

Unrelated to the technical means of submission (print and postal or online), the consultation was deeply flawed with respect to questionnaire methodology: the questions were framed to lead to the 'desired' answer and create or maintain misperceptions or incorrect information. The process was also deficient in procedural guarantees, for example, in the absence of external or independent actors to verify the results, and in the way the online version allowed for multiple submissions. The process before, during and after the online element was added to the consultation was opaque. There was little publicly available data. In terms of policy impact, the online and offline national consultation on the Soros Plan was followed by a Soros Legislation Package, which, among other things, introduced a tax on any externally funded organization that carries out activities in support of migration. The government argued that this came as a consequence of the national online consultation. However, given that the consultations confirmed Fidesz's positions on the policy issues at stake, it is plausible that these developments would have taken place even in the absence of a consultation.

The results from the consultation on the family policy were widely used in government communication as evidence that Fidesz's vision enjoyed wide support from the electorate. There is no evidence of any changes in collaboration practices with stakeholders as a result of the online national consultation, i.e. it had no demonstrable influence on the dynamics of external participatory practices (lobbying, petitioning, neo-corporatist practices, etc.). It should also be noted that the process of consultations did not seem to significantly stimulate the participation of marginalized social groups, although it has led to a discussion on and advocacy by citizens with impaired vision. To sum up, the addition of an online component did not significantly enhance or change the overall dynamics of national consultations. It actually decreased the transparency of rules and procedures for the submission of input as there was no guarantee that online respondents were citizens, which was an eligibility criterion for participation, and there were no efforts to prevent multiple submissions. Both the offline and online options lacked clarity on how and on what grounds citizen input would be considered.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The most decisive factors for the performance of the e-participation initiative were the national context combined with the individual characteristics of the country's highest political leadership. However, much research assumes that participatory instruments employed by governments genuinely seek to ensure public involvement in decision-making (Michels and De Graaf, 2010; Batory and Svensson, 2017), whereas in the case of the Hungarian national consultations, even the government's own communication confirmed that a main goal of the exercise was to validate and/or generate support for existing policy positions and, in this sense, served the partisan goals of the party in power.

In the context of collaborative and participatory governance initiatives, the Hungarian national consultations stand out in several respects. First, while the initiator – the government – argued that the consultations would inform policy making, it appears that the questions sent out in hard copy or offered online mainly served to demonstrate popular support for the (ideological) position held by the government. The consultations did not provide new information about popular preferences, or at least not in a way that independent observers would accept. The methodology of the consultations was flawed since the questions very clearly led the respondent to pick the ‘correct’ answer. The consultation was, for this reason, not effective, at least in the sense of a ‘neutral’ participatory exercise. It was however a very effective measure for Fidesz to get its partisan message across, using public resources while doing so.

The electronic platform of the consultations, in particular, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. The clear acknowledged yet dismissed potential for abuse by government spokesmen makes the results of the e-consultation highly questionable: there was a possibility for one respondent to submit the questionnaire several times, there were doubts regarding data protection issues and there was no possibility for verification of the results by an independent agency or external observers, be they opposition parties or civil society groups. With respect to democratic legitimacy and transparency, the national consultation in general and the online component in particular did not live up to international norms and standards. The effect on policy design and collaboration with civil society and private actors appears to be negligible, even though the consultations were followed by legislative packages. As discussed in this chapter, the exercise of national consultations served more as a dissemination tool for the government’s political agenda, and they were used to confirm previously formed political decisions. At the same time, the discernible difference between the online and print versions, both in terms of response rate and distribution of answers to specific questions, demonstrates the need for further research on this topic.

In conclusion:

[The] Hungarian case suggests that manipulated consultation processes can serve at least three political purposes: they lend (more) credibility and authority to governments’ claims of merely serving the popular will while following their essentially partisan agenda; they provide effective ammunition against criticism, particularly from the international arena; and they provide opportunity for shaping public opinion through propaganda and political marketing ‘dressed up’ as participatory governance. (Batory and Svensson, 2019c, p. 238)

The addition of an online component did not change this situation. We share the argument of Rossi (2017) on the role of trust in participative consultative processes: trust in the neutrality and anonymity of the consultative process must be established in order to consider it a real element of a participatory democracy. It could, however, be argued that online participation made the weakness of procedural guarantees even more glaring to those already critical of the government’s national consultation process.

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## 6. Enhancing law-making efficiency, public value or both: Case study of e-participation platform in Slovakia

**Matúš Sloboda, Katarina Staroňová and Alexandra Poláková Suchalová**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, rapid developments in information and communications technology (ICT) have shifted the way in which participation is conducted. So-called e-participation refers to various measures and platforms supporting the engagement of the stakeholder in the policy-making process (OECD, 2003a; Sæbø et al., 2008). Consequently, governments at all levels invest in the innovative usage of ICT to enhance communication with the public and support transparent decision-making, which includes the online availability of all legislation, formal documents and contracts in addition to ‘real’ engagement tools for online consultation within legislative drafting and the policy-making process.

The benefits of traditional public participation in public administration are well documented in many scholarly works (e.g. Goodsell, 2006). One of the key arguments for public participation is the expected increase in legitimacy. However, research on the effect of the quality of deliberation (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001; Schlossberg et al., 2008) and/or the ability to exert influence by the stakeholder on the co-production of policies is questioned. Thus, one of the key puzzles remains what value e-participation is aiming to achieve.

A very specific subfield of e-participation is the utilization of ICT in law-making, covering both executive (Farina et al., 2011) and parliamentary levels (e.g. Loukis et al., 2010; Sobaci, 2011). E-Law-making, sometimes also referred to as e-rulemaking (Farina et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 2008) or e-consultation (Tomková, 2009), constitutes interactive platforms where stakeholders purposefully search for information and deliberation and provide input and, in this way, influence regulations and policy making. These platforms are government initiated and thus have the highest formal authority on up-to-date information and deliberation. Being a formal platform, their design and structure reflect the formal law-making process. Often, they simultaneously incorporate both the governmental organization-to-governmental organization dimension as well as the stakeholder-to-governmental organization dimension. It is particularly the latter dimension – the opportunity for stakeholders to influence policy making – that makes e-participation in law-making so unique (Tomková, 2009). Thus, the formal e-participation platforms for law-making need to be distinguished from those that

informally provide discursive e-spaces and which are often run by an active civil society or lobbyists, but which, at the end of the day, do not have influence over formal policy making.

In this study, we aim to look at the e-participation platform in the law-making process, namely the Legislative and Information Portal of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic (Slov-lex), which is a recent example of an e-participation platform at the national level. Slov-lex aims for the creation of an access point for e-participation for citizens, businesses and public administration bodies. This case study explores how this specific goal has been implemented and what values are ascribed to this platform. One of the main objectives of this study is to investigate the e-platform and its contribution to the creation of an open, transparent and collaborative environment for government–stakeholder–citizen interaction. In doing so, we will provide insights into its involvement, functionality and challenges. The approach is stakeholder centric as opposed to government centric, which is predominant in existing literature.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

E-Participation in law-making provides stakeholders with enhanced tools for accessing information that is debated, discussed and legislated (Crowe, 2006) as well as enhanced tools for engaging in decision-making. Accordingly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001, 2003a) proposed three levels of (e-)participation: information, consultation and active participation. Half a century ago, Sherry Arnstein (1969) published her seminal paper ‘A ladder of citizen participation’ in which she analysed the levels of involvement and influence in the decision-making process from non-participation to citizen control. This work is important because she showed that participatory measures may in reality be only ‘facades’ without the real engagement of stakeholders.

Meanwhile, the field of participation progressed significantly, with many governments taking advantage of ICT, which is reflected in the growing body of e-participation literature, mostly tackling the implementation of technology and the range of online tools facilitating e-participation. Studies examining the benefits for stakeholders cluster around efficiency (OECD, 2003b; Peristeras et al., 2009; Srivastava, 2011) and underexamined public value (but see Harrison et al., 2012; Castelnovo, 2013; Scott and Golden, 2016). Others portray the benefits for the administration itself, also within the efficiency realm (OECD, 2003b) with its cost-effectiveness logic. The efficiency arguments relate to New Public Management literature on improving public services with an emphasis on better services for citizens and administrative efficiency within the government. Public value arguments focus on liberal democratic values, promoting access to *all* stakeholders, engagement, responsiveness and open and transparent government, leading to regained trust in institutions. These three positions correspond to a rough approximation of e-services, e-democracy/e-society and e-administration (Lofstedt, 2012; Twizeyimana and Andersson, 2019) divisions.

Under the New Public Management approach that dominated when e-participatory measures were launched, efficiency has become a key component for evaluating these measures at the risk of overlooking other values labelled as ‘public value’, such as access, transparency, democratic participation and responsiveness. In our research, we therefore want to offer a deeper analysis of the e-participation platform without relying solely on technology-based levels of information-consultation-participation in decision-making. Thus, in order to assess

the functionalities of an e-participation platform for law-making, we must develop a framework where we take into consideration both efficiency and public value arguments. We plan to build upon Macintosh's (2004) original proposal of three levels of e-participation: *e-enabling*, *e-engaging* and *e-empowerment*, which correspond to the OECD and Arnstein concepts. E-Enabling refers to aspects of understanding information; in this case, a legislation document. E-Engaging provides support for consultations and debates; in our case, input to law-making. We treat these first two levels (e-enabling and e-engaging) as efficiency. We propose to extend the framework on the public value produced when e-participation truly happens via e-empowerment, with a transformative effect on citizens, who become, as stated by Macintosh (2004, p. 3), 'producers rather than just consumers of policy'.

The efficiency dimension of e-participation relates to easy-to-use and effective functions which are essential for accessing and gaining information, since 'e-participation can play its role well only if citizens use it' (Zheng, 2017, p. 3). Scholars (Farina et al., 2011, 2013; Manosevitch, 2014) acknowledge the existence of substantial barriers to broader, better and qualitative e-participation, particularly in law-making: ignorance of the legislative process, information overload and complexity of legal material. To mitigate these barriers, several measures are in place to provide support to stakeholders (Silverstone, 1999), alerting systems that invite stakeholders to utilize e-participatory platforms (Farina et al., 2011) and designs that facilitate deliberation (Manosevitch, 2014), including human mediators (Farina et al., 2013). Such efforts aim to not only meet the ideal of inclusion of the public in law-making (quantitatively), but also increase the quality of the input.

The creation of public value is the intrinsic goal of public organizations (Moore, 1995) and better government. E-Participation in law-making is only possible with the support of democratic decision-making, allowing more transparent and responsive engagement between the government and civil society and businesses. The essence of this dimension is the ownership and empowerment of stakeholders (Roberts, 2004) along with the perception of being able to exert influence (Coleman, 2004). As shown by previous studies, equally important are the quality feedback and responses received by stakeholders through interaction with the government regarding their input (Webler and Tuler, 2000) – government responsiveness.

Finally, the relationship between democracy and transparency is fundamental. The idea of 'open government' with the use of ICT draws on this philosophy, as e-participation might be closely associated with the level of democracy in a society. A less democratic government (and society) is less likely to advance e-participation because the government does not support openness and transparency in general. Therefore, external push factors from civil society and businesses might be key in promoting and facilitating e-participation in law-making.

This research focuses on the Slov-lex e-participation platform, which is an officially organized government portal that has enabled the participation of stakeholders in law-making since 2016. Our main research goal is to assess the functionalities of Slov-lex vis-à-vis values of efficiency and public value creation. Therefore, this study proposes an analytical model, which is introduced in Table 6.1.

The case study covers contextual information on how the e-participation platform was launched and developed, its goals, administration and interactions among various stakeholders through the e-platform Slov-lex. The exploratory part of the research focuses on the implementation of the e-participation platform and its advances towards efficiency and public value. The ultimate goal of this investigation is to reveal and evaluate values such as transparency,

Table 6.1 Efficiency and public value dimensions of e-participation platforms

Dimensions	Levels	Measures/submeasures	Indicators/description
Efficiency (of service)	e-Enabling functionality (provides information)	Information centralized, organized and reliable	The entire law-making process covered by the e-platform
		Easy search	Perceived user friendliness of the platform by users
		Search engine	Consolidated version of legislation documents – allows the user to see amendments in context
	Legislation documents are in consolidated version	Positive ICT is used for organizing information sources so that an impact is had on working mode and internal operations – improved effectiveness	
	Organizing information – clear structure	Notifications about published legislative acts and/or preliminary notification about forthcoming legislative acts (filtering possibilities)	
	Alerting about new information (filtering possibilities)	Perceived accuracy/reliability of information by users and real-time updates	
		All information is accurate, up to date	Providing information on deadlines for commenting on legislation drafts
		Timings of the process (deadlines)	Uniform and modern design
		Technical interface	Responsiveness to various smart devices (smartphones, tablets)



Dimensions		Measures/submeasures		Indicators/description	
Efficiency (of service)	Levels	Inputs	Insertion of comments	The online platform allows users to submit comments on legislation drafts	
e-Engaging functionality (enables communication)	Document management system	Interaction	Collection of ideas and suggestions	The platform creates an ideas marketplace that can be a source of reflection for policy makers (civil servants)	
			Discussion fora	Increased control of document system by stakeholders	
	Moderator to enhance deliberation	Quantity of comments and participants			
		Perceived usefulness of interactions			
	Technical support	Perceived usefulness of interactions			
		Availability of guide book or any other form of frequently asked questions for (new) users			
		Responsive helpdesk			
		Tool for reporting bugs in the system			

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Dimensions	Levels	Measures/submeasures	Indicators/description	
Public value	e-Empowerment (enables participation)	Influence on decision-making	Comments integrated into final proposal	
		Early-stage involvement	Perceived ability to influence final outcome	
	Open government	Access to law-making process for <i>all</i> stakeholders		Involvement (generating ideas) before legislation draft is submitted
				Registered users (unique) for categories (businesses, civil society, individual citizens)
				Diversity of stakeholders providing comments
			Transparent and holistic overview of comments from all stakeholders	Perceived transparency of the process
			Transparent and holistic overview of <i>all</i> stakeholders involved in generating comments	Perceived transparency of stakeholders
			Responsiveness	Platform responsiveness
	Accountability and trust		Ownership	Feedback and follow-up on suggestions for improvements to the platform
				The e-platform clearly and visibly presents who the owner and provider of the platform is and provides contacts or a contact form
Government responsiveness to legal substance (comments)				Dispute procedure with stakeholders who submitted a comment
				submitted a comment

Table 6.2 Interviewees in the Slovakian case

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Interview 1, former political advisor to Ministry of Finance, 4 June 2019
Interview 2, former head of Ministry of Justice, 12 June 2019
Interview 3, top civil servant, 13 June 2019
Interview 4, civil servant, 4 June 2019
Interview 5, political advisor, 16 May 2019
Interview 6, civil servant, 14 May 2019
Interview 7, member of parliament, 23 July 2019
Interview 8, stakeholder, civil society, 30 July 2019
Interview 9, stakeholder, civil society, 23 July 2019
Interview 10, stakeholder from business community, 25 July 2019
Interview 11, stakeholder from business community, 23 August 2019
Interview 12, stakeholder from non-governmental organization, 17 September 2019

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user friendliness and perceived influence on policy making as well as contextual factors and the legacy of the previous regime.

To this end, we utilized qualitative in-depth interviews and a survey as well as quantitative data on the use of e-participation. This case study also employs complementary document analysis (legal documents, policy documents, strategies, media coverage). Between May 2019 and September 2019, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with external stakeholders active in the e-participation module of the platform (civil society and businesses) as well as insiders from public administration (both civil servants and political appointees) who are actively involved in running the platform or were involved in its formation (see Table 6.2). The interviews focused on the following topics: the interviewee's experience with e-participation in law-making within the Slo-lex platform, the perceived influence on policy making, the added value of the platform and the structural and organizational barriers concerning e-participation in law-making.

To reveal the perceived influence on law-making through the e-participation experience, we designed a survey questionnaire, implemented in April 2020 ('Survey 2020'). The respondents (users) were all external entities (civil society and business organizations) registered on Slo-lex that submitted at least one comment on a legislation draft via the e-participation platform in 2018; in total 240 users. We collected survey data from 71 participants (response rate of 29.6 per cent): 29 from civil society, 38 businesses, 2 public bodies and 2 unidentified.

The use of the e-participation platform was measured by the unique number of registered users. These data were requested directly from the government body running Slo-lex. Aggregate data cover e-participation in law-making on a yearly basis (2016–2019).

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Transparency movement, development in ICT, pressure from civil as well as business society and, last but not least, attempts to succeed in the accession period to the European Union (EU) led to the opening up of the entire law-making process via the Free Access to Information Law, which was the cornerstone of the formation of the e-participation platform, i.e. Slo-lex. From the perspective of administrative traditions, Slovakia belongs to Germanic and Soviet types of families (Painter and Peters, 2010). Thus, Slovakia is considered to have a strong legalistic tradition with civil servants having discretionary power, enabling informal practices

and patronage (Staroňová, 2016). Overall, we distinguish five periods that shaped general participation as well as e-participation in law-making in Slovakia. Figure 6.1 shows the historical context and essential events or initiatives.

### **3.1 Semi-Authoritarian Post-Communist Era (1992–1998)**

The governing regime of Mečiar was one of the most closed and non-transparent, famously summarized by Madeleine Albright who described Slovakia as the ‘black hole of Europe’ (Politico, 2018). By the end of Mečiar’s reign, there was no external actor who could enter into the law-making process. The drafting of legislation acts was solely in the hands of government agencies without external participation and transparency. According to legislative rules, there were only two ways to gain the opportunity to comment on a legislation draft: either as a historical legacy from the previous regime (such as trade unions) or via an informal, non-standard relationship with a civil servant drafting the legislation (Interview 1).

### **3.2 Reform Activities of Post-Semi-Authoritarian Rule (1998–2002): Free Access to Information Law and Goal of Transparency**

The new pro-reform-oriented government (1998–2002) faced a difficult and challenging task: to return Slovakia to the integration processes, such as the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In order to identify the most problematic and urgent reform areas, two crucial measures were taken: (1) a functional review, on the basis of which legislative process was reformed; and (2) the Free Access to Information Law (FOIA) was adopted in 2000. Both became the break-point for enhancing transparency. FOIA opened up the interministerial review process to the general public and it de facto made ‘every citizen equal to the minister’ (Interview 1). Any material released to the interministerial review process must be published in advance via the Government Office website and be open to public consultation. For the first time, comments could be sent via e-mail to an e-mail address provided by the relevant public body (Malíková et al., 2010). Twenty years passed and ‘the philosophy of the system has not changed since its inception; what changed was the technical solution’ (Interview 1).

However, there was a dilemma yet to be solved: ‘to find the balance between transparency and external participation by the public and feasibility with sustainability for the public administration [to process them]’ (Interview 1). This dilemma was solved by creating a so-called collective comment (comment supported by at least 500 citizens (signatures)), followed by an obligatory dispute procedure, in which face-to-face negotiations among representative(s) of the public (often a civil society organization) and civil servants (including a minister in many cases) must take place to reach agreement.

### **3.3 Consolidation of e-Participation**

The Dzurinda government’s (2002–2006) commitment to enhance the use of ICT has made the government more transparent, participatory and cooperative. The new website of the Office of the Government provided information on the government’s agenda to the general public. Between 2002 and 2010, the two predecessors of the Slov-lex platform were developed: JASPI and the Legal Information Portal (LIP). JASPI, established in 2002, contained

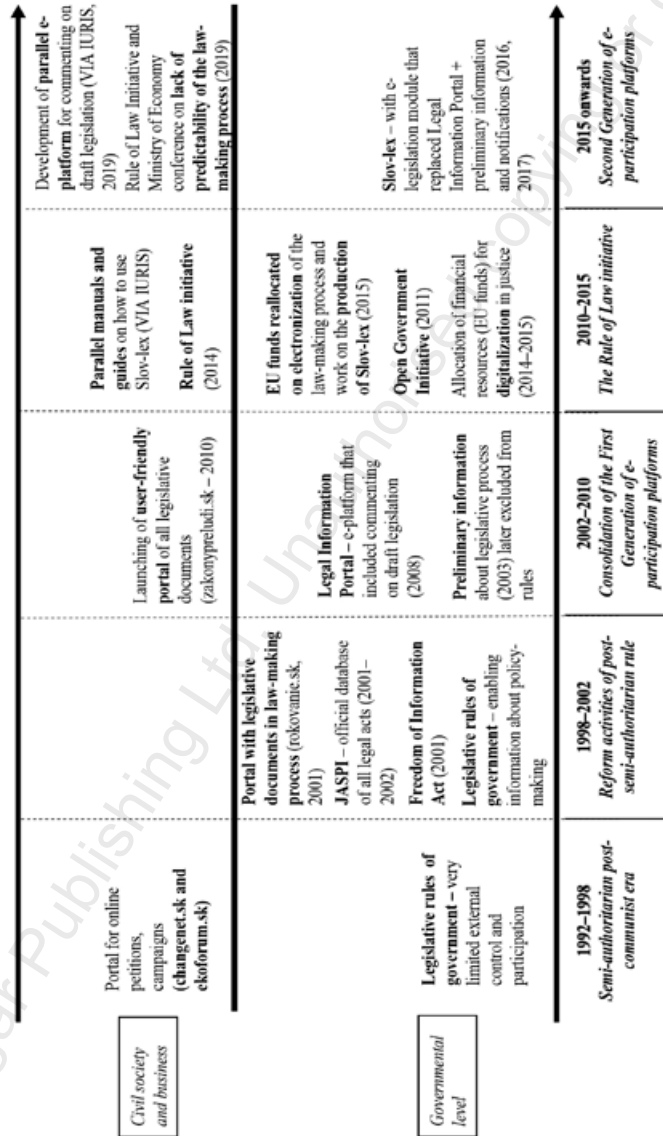


Figure 6.1 Historical context and essential events in e-participation in Slovak law-making

all consolidated legal documents, however, without any possibility of participation. The LIP e-platform enabled external participation and, in 2008, became the only central platform for e-participation, including public bodies. Still, civil society preferred to send their comments informally to their public administration contact (Interviews 7, 9).

The short period of Radičova's government (2010–2012) prepared and approved the Open Government Initiative with the commitment to develop 'rules for public participation in the legislative process by law' (Government Office, 2011), but the change of government stopped further efforts. As a reaction, the business community established the Rule of Law initiative to foster the need to sustain basic values, including the transparency and predictability of the legislative process (Rule of Law, 2014). Requests from this initiative were incorporated into the Government Manifesto by the new Minister of Justice as the Action Plan for Strengthening the Rule of Law in Slovakia in 2015 (Government Office Slovakia, 2015).

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF SLOV-LEX

Slov-lex aims for the creation of an access point for e-participation in law-making for citizens, businesses and public administration bodies. The major goals of the Slov-lex platform in e-legislation include, according to the Action Plan, increasing the satisfaction of citizens and entrepreneurs with public administration, the electronization of processes in public administration, improving the performance of public administration and increasing the competence of public administration (Government Office Slovakia, 2015). The Slov-lex platform aimed to strengthen participation in law-making. 'The aim of law-making is to prepare legislation with public participation' and 'legislation proposal is created through the electronic system' (Act No. 400/2015).

The platform was launched in January 2016. The e-participation platform Slov-lex consists of two closely linked modules, e-collection and e-legislation.

The e-collection module enables free access to the legal system of the Slovak Republic. In other words, e-collection is providing information on drafts of legislative and non-legislative materials proposed by the government of the Slovak Republic to ensure that the general public has the possibility to gain complete information. The uniqueness of the e-collection module compared with previous platforms (e.g. JASPI) is twofold. On the one hand, it offers an archive – a vast collection of legal acts (Collection of Laws of the Slovak Republic since 1918) and, on the other hand, what is probably more important, the e-collection of law is legally binding and equal, even prior to the written Collection of Law. In addition to the e-collection, which also has a search engine, Slov-lex provides a notifications feature for registered users.

The primary function of the e-legislation module, on which this study focuses, is to provide its users with access to the law-making process at any time, regardless of geographical location. Via this module, the interministerial review procedure is executed, where the general public can enter and submit comments on ongoing law-making processes. E-Legislation enables active participation – to be engaged in the process through the insertion of either single or collective comments. This functionality is available only for registered users, with filtering comments as well as the possibility to support submitted comments from another commenting subject.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Slo-lex platform is under the full management and formal ownership of the Slo-lex unit within the Ministry of Justice. Formally, the unit is called the Editorial Board of Slo-lex, hierarchically under the Section of Edition Activities. The whole Slo-lex unit has support from the top management of the Ministry of Justice and financial resources not only to work on the maintenance of the platform but also for implementing improvements (Interview 3). There have not been any serious political push-backs or any attempts to delegitimize the platform, besides the fact that the National Council refused to include its legislative processes in Slo-lex (Interview 2).

The director of the unit with 17 civil servants, who are editors with law education and work full time on the Slo-lex platform, has not changed since 2009. In 2011, he was involved in discussions on technological changes in replacing the old system (Interview 3). Only the director and his deputy have the authority to publish the final version of any legislation on the Slo-lex platform (Interview 3).

The unit does not have its own budget autonomy. The major investments in the development of the platform were financed by the structural funds of the EU, whereas the information technology (IT) services, hardware, support and maintenance are outsourced to a private company, including the development of the whole platform due to the lack of capacity to develop it in house (Interview 8). According to the Value for Money Department, the public sector fails to build internal capacities for the development of IT services and relies on the private sector which increases costs and is less sustainable (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The responsiveness of the unit towards its stakeholders is relatively limited. The development of the Slo-lex platform took place in the ministry without any consultations with relevant stakeholders from business and civil society (Interviews 7, 9). According to the top civil servant, the unit is open to feedback from all users but does not proactively seek feedback on the experience of the stakeholders with the platform. Rather, the stakeholders are expected to contact Slo-lex via e-mail or an online contact form on their own initiative or at various workshops and conferences. Thus, it is not surprising that most suggestions for interface improvements come from inside the public administration (Interview 3). The systematic control of platform functions by unit employees is carried out only for technical issues, despite a general awareness of Slo-lex limitations. ‘We all know what the limitations of Slo-lex are, but it has not been revised since its kick-off’ (Interview 8).

## 6 EVALUATION OF E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

We evaluate the functionalities of Slo-lex vis-à-vis values of efficiency and public value. Moreover, the evaluation of the platform takes into consideration three levels of participation – e-enabling, e-engaging and e-empowerment.

### 6.1 Efficiency: From e-Enabling to e-Engaging

In the Slo-lex platform, information provision is carried out by the e-collection module, which is one of the two main parts of the e-participation platform. The uniqueness of the e-collection module compared with previous platforms is twofold: (1) an archive – a vast collection of legal

acts in a consolidated version which are legally binding; and (2) a search engine for finding all materials on ongoing law-making processes (Contract, 2015) in a clear structure.

The Slo-lex platform does not cover the entire law-making process despite initial efforts to do so. Instead, stakeholders are asked to comment only on the legal text, rather than contribute ideas that could genuinely influence the content of the legislation draft. Similarly, the final steps of deliberation in the parliament are missing completely (Interviews 2, 8, 11), which significantly weakens the position of civil society and business. This creates the potential for non-standard attempts to misuse the final acts. Therefore, the total value added by Slo-lex, taking into consideration money resources spent, lags 40 per cent behind its potential (Interview 2). The lack of interconnection of systems (government and parliament) forces even advanced users (e.g. lawyers) to make an extra effort to gain an overall picture of the specific law-making process with additional searches on different platforms. There has not been any political will to change this.

Nevertheless, stakeholders use the platform because the information is reliable, accurate and official (Interviews 9, 10, 11). In fact, the reliability of information is the second most appreciated added value of Slo-lex. Moreover, the fact that the online legislation version equals the 'printed' one in terms of authority is a sign of an efficient e-government (Interview 9).

Findings from the survey, carried out by the authors in 2020, show that the search function in Slo-lex is complicated and intricate. The search results are not shown in a straightforward way (e.g. in time sequences) and, without knowing the specific legislation procedure number, it is almost impossible to search successfully (Survey, 2020). The measure of searching not only in legal acts (e-collection) but also in the legislation formation part of the Slo-lex platform (e-legislation) is evaluated as the one that should be improved the most (Survey, 2020).

Legislation drafts are usually not in a consolidated version, and suggested amendments from public bodies are not easily traceable. Thus, the preparation of comments is much more demanding even for individuals and/or organizations with significant legal expertise (Interview 7). Therefore, users perceive the commenting on legislation drafts as complicated and confusing (Survey, 2020).

From the user's point of view, limited information (e.g. the number rather than the name of a legislation draft) is provided in the notifications sent directly to the e-mail address of a registered user about a legislation draft; however, they contain a direct link (one click) to the text body of the legislation draft (Interview 10). Registered users can use specific filters (e.g. document type, specific policy area). However, setting up the notification system is less intuitive for lay users (Interview 12). Improving the system to include alerts on the timing of ongoing or close-to-end law-making processes could comfort users, particularly in the accelerated legislative process, and also enhance the predictability of the law-making process (Survey, 2020).

The entire e-participation process in law-making has to be carried out exclusively via Slo-lex (Act No. 400/2015). Two out of three users perceive the centralization and information about upcoming legislation activity (preliminary information) as the greatest added value of Slo-lex (see Figure 6.2). The platform enables registered users to participate through the insertion of single or collective comments, which is also highly regarded by the Slo-lex platform users. The platform also contains discussion fora on legislative processes, which are not utilized, probably due to the outdated interface and the availability of more efficient alternatives for communication (e.g. social media).



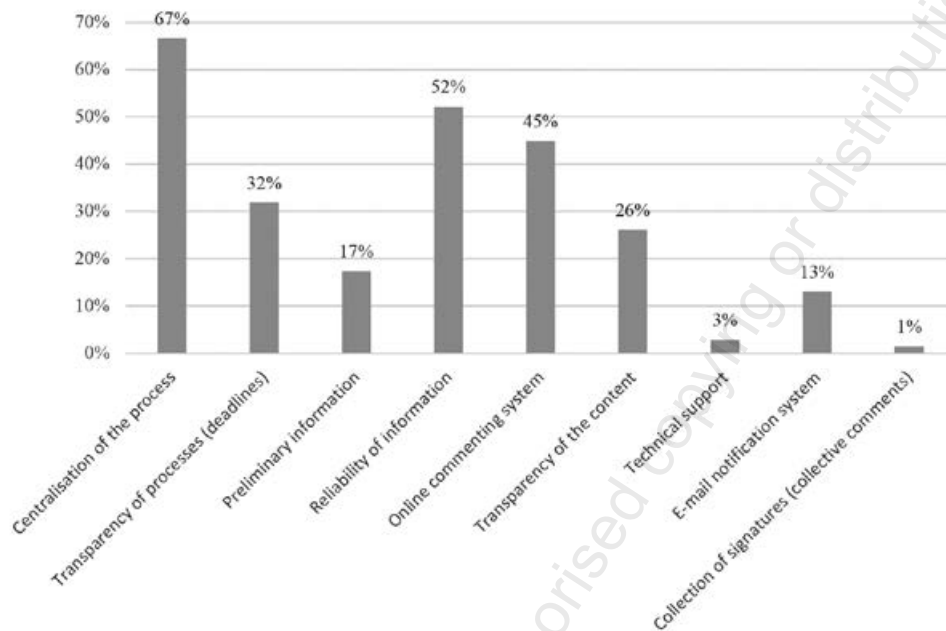


Figure 6.2 Perceived added value of Slov-lex by users

Users perceive the Slov-lex interface as very unfriendly. It allows users to upload comments only in non-structured text format, without figures or tables, which is a problem especially in cases where the comment is longer text (Interviews 7, 8, 9, 10). According to users, user friendliness is one of the measures in Slov-lex with great potential for improvement. One out of three users report a fair (5) or lower score for user friendliness. A significant share of users does not rely exclusively on the e-participation platform. Additional actions are perceived as needed to ensure and enhance the rationale, validity and/or explanation of submitted comments (e.g. almost every fourth user sends the same comment via e-mail; see Figure 6.3). Interviewees viewed the whole experience as a torment (Interview 8), too complicated or needing significant improvement (Interview 10) or they preferred the previous ICT solution (Interview 9). Slov-lex provides a user guide/manual on how to use the platform. However, the system is not intuitive and users frequently do not know how to proceed. Therefore, the civil society actor VIA IURIS developed its own manual *How to Participate in Law-Making* and developed an e-platform for commenting on legislation draft (Interview 9).

Slov-lex has an outdated interface (Interviews 7, 9) and the webpage lacks a responsive design for all screen sizes and devices. It does not follow the design manual of electronic public services. According to most interviewees, the Slov-lex platform is a disappointment compared with the previous ICT solution and some stakeholders are not able to identify any significant improvement (Interviews 8, 9). However, some respondents report minor improvements in clarity, structure and technical stability. Centralizing both the collection of legal acts and the comment submission interface ‘under one roof’ is perceived as an improvement (Survey, 2020).

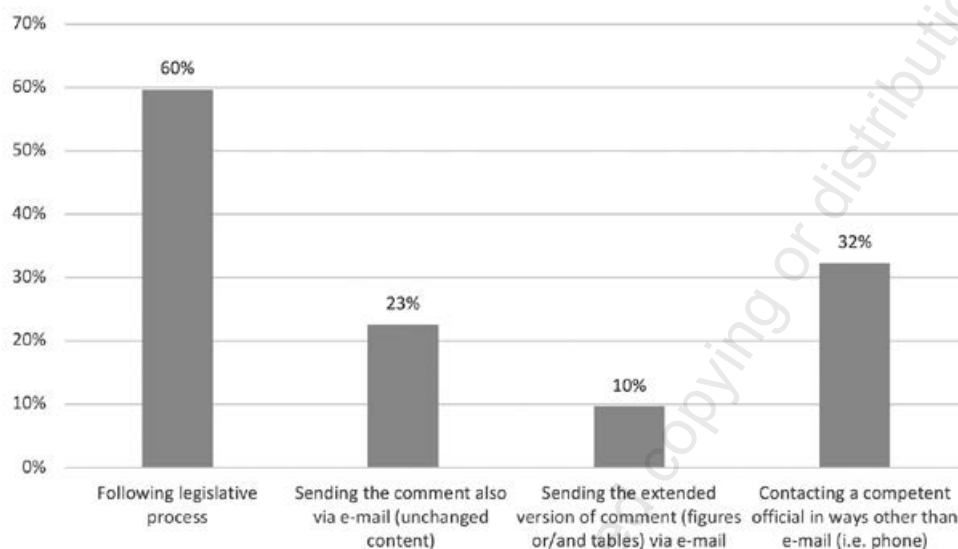


Figure 6.3 Additional non-formal actions by users following e-participation in Slov-lex

## 6.2 Public Value: Accessibility, Transparency, Responsiveness and Effectiveness of the Platform

One of the most important functions of the Slov-lex platform is to provide its registered users access to the law-making process at any time, regardless of geographical location. The obligatory registration of a new user as well as an Internet connection and basic ICT literacy are the only formal barriers for a potential user. Registration to Slov-lex is easy and intuitive and is supported by the user manual and help desk from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday.

e-Participation in the form of commenting on legislation drafts is used intensively, although the intensity varies and depends on whether the topic is under strong public scrutiny (Interview 2). On average, 240 collective comments are submitted each year (Ministry of Justice, 2020). The median and average number of comments per legislation document vary significantly (Table 6.3). The share of legislation drafts with five or more comments and the median number of comments can be used as proxies for the rate of use of the platform and accessibility to the law-making process. The median number of comments has a downward trend and in 2018 and 2019 oscillated at around 16. The vast majority of legislation drafts have at least five comments; however, this share has also been declining (Ministry of Justice, 2020). There are several possible reasons for this trend. Besides the low user friendliness, another factor is the ‘accelerated legislation procedure’, which reduces the interministerial review process from 14 days to 7 days. The procedure can be applied only in specific cases (e.g. life-threatening, imminent economic damage). However, its application is often illegitimate and limits access to law-making (Malíková et al., 2010).

The platform provides a transparent and holistic overview of comments from all users. The fact that all comments from all commenting bodies are visible for everyone is perceived as one of the greatest added values (median score of 9). The risk that a comment will ‘get lost’ is elim-

Table 6.3 Rate of use of Slov-lex

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Median number of comments per legislation draft	30	24	17	15
Average number of comments per legislation draft	60	62	52	78
Number of collective comments	243	237	266	206
Share of legislation drafts with five or more comments	87.6%	88.4%	86.3%	79.1%
Share of legislation drafts in accelerated legislation procedure	29%	25%	28%	47%

*Note:* There are 801 unique users registered on the platform as of May 2020 and 80 per cent of them have submitted at least one comment during the existence of the e-participation platform since 2016 (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

*Source:* Slov-lex data processed by the authors.

Table 6.4 Users' evaluation of efficiency and public value measures

	Efficiency		Public value	
	User friendliness	Central authority over the e-participation platform (Ministry of Justice)	Transparency of the e-participation process	Influence on law-making (decision-making)
Median	7	10	9	5.5
Average	6.3	8.3	8.2	5.8
Minimum	1	0	3	0
Maximum	10	10	10	10

*Note:* Measured on a scale from 0 to 10. Correlations were computed among four indicators on data for 60 respondents (who rated all four categories). The results suggest that two out of six correlations are statistically significant. Statistically significant correlation (Pearson's  $r = 0.444$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between perceived user friendliness and transparency of the e-participation process. Statistically significant correlation (Pearson's  $r = 0.315$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) between perceived user friendliness and perceived influence on law-making on policy design.

*Source:* Slov-lex data processed by the authors.

inated (Interviews 7, 8, 10). The results also suggest a moderate positive (linear) relationship between the perceived user friendliness and the transparency of the e-participation process. Users who are more satisfied with the user friendliness of the Slov-lex platform perceive the e-participation process as more transparent (Slov-lex, 2020).

Formal ownership of the e-participation platform by the Ministry of Justice is perceived by users as the highest value possible (Table 6.4). The higher credibility of this platform compared with previous ICT is due to the obligation to use the Slov-lex platform for commenting on legislation drafts (Survey, 2020).

Empowerment in e-participation can be measured by perceived influence on law-making or by the number (share) of comments integrated into the final legislation. However, the latter is highly problematic (Interview 9) and inaccurate due to the fact that some comments are refused as a result of negotiations (with the agreement of concessions) and early amendments

to the legislation in the future (Interview 2). Therefore, we looked at perceived influence on law-making, which was the lowest. This can be interpreted as a moderate possibility for influencing law-making. Moreover, the results suggest a weak positive (linear) relationship between perceived user friendliness and the perception of potential influence on law-making. The users who are more satisfied with the user friendliness of the Slov-lex platform tend to report a higher score for their potential influence on law-making through submitting comments on legislation drafts (Survey, 2020).

In terms of timing e-participation, several stakeholders stated that it is too late for real empowerment. Stakeholders would prefer early-stage involvement in the generation of ideas or in the working groups that prepare the conceptual basis for intervention (Interviews 9, 10). In other words, there is very limited room for significant change at this stage.

Responsiveness to e-participation is viewed very formally via the rules of dispute procedures as defined in legislation, which is very vague as to who is to be invited for face-to-face deliberation. This therefore opens up space for informal practice, e.g. it is up to the civil servant and/or political appointee to choose who they talk to. Unpredictability of responsiveness is perceived as high, which has an influence on the level of trust and accountability of public institutions. Some stakeholders literally describe their experience with responsiveness as being based on 'goodwill' or the 'perceived expertise' and 'power' of the stakeholder by the public institution (Survey, 2020). Still, both civil servants and political appointees in the public institution think that 'some discretionary power should remain in the hands of the minister. They should have the option to meet with whomever they consider as having an important insight for the legislation draft' (Interview 1).

The results of e-participation along with explanations for the acceptance or denial of submitted comments for each legislative process are visible for every user, which is a measure for building accountability and trust that was introduced with FOIA.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

This chapter uses a stakeholder-centric approach to explore two dimensions of the e-participation platform in law-making efficiency (e-enabling and e-engaging) and public value (e-empowerment, open government, access, accountability). We believe that our public value addition to the conceptualization of e-participation is vitally important, particularly in the Central and Eastern European context where democratic values can be seriously jeopardized (Sitter and Bakke, 2019). Thus, the nature of open government, e-empowerment in participation, accountability and essentially trust in government will not be achieved through the mere provision of data and consultation. The e-participation platform must be reliable and useful and most importantly allow stakeholders to influence law-making, otherwise e-participation is just an empty shell.

There have been several e-participation platforms in law-making in Slovakia since 2001, each with varying degrees of functionality and openness to users. The introduction of the Slov-lex platform in 2016 was innovative, aiming to increase opportunities for the general public to access the law-making process. This was possible mainly due to the window of opportunity created by the pro-reform and pro-transparency-oriented Minister of Justice (Žitňanská) who gave the green light for European structural funds to be spent on this project and gave a free hand to the director of the project to do so. Nevertheless, since then, the

application of the platform has become somewhat stale and routinized as the momentum was lost (change of minister and therefore loss of political support for pro-transparency-oriented projects).

From the efficiency dimension perspective, the study reveals that the Slov-lex e-participation platform fulfils both the informing (e-enabling) and e-engaging functionality with high user satisfaction. The informing function of the governmental platform is of high importance as it centralizes all existing legislative initiatives under ‘one roof’ and, in this way, all of the information is transparently provided with the authority of a ‘formal’ guarantor. In fact, stakeholders evaluate the reliability (centrality) of data and transparency as the greatest added values of the e-participation platform.

The e-engaging functionality of the e-platform, by enabling submission of comments on legislation drafts, is one of the most important aspects. Its philosophy is anchored in FOIA, which was introduced 20 years ago by a pro-reform-oriented government; nevertheless, the corresponding e-participatory tool has evolved only a little in the past decade. Consequently, the interface is perceived as very unfriendly and hard to use. This increases costs for users and affects their work efficiency. Thus, user friendliness in Slov-lex has significant potential for improvement, particularly when taking into consideration our findings, which suggest a positive association between user friendliness and perceived transparency and influence on law-making.

The potential of the Slov-lex platform to deliver public value is lagging. Its design is structured to provide information rather than utilize modern tools, such as mediators, or lessen the complexity of legal material (Manosevitch, 2014; Farina et al., 2011, 2013) to encourage deliberation or any broad-based interaction in order to overcome barriers to broader e-participation. In fact, the preparation of comments requires high legal expertise, which, again, increases costs for stakeholders (and decreases their access possibilities). Empowerment is also limited because of the exclusion of initial idea generation from final parliamentary deliberation, though it is recognized as an essential phase of e-law-making (Coleman, 2004; Sobaci, 2011; Loukis et al., 2010). The perception of being able to exert influence (Coleman, 2004; Twizeyimana and Andersson, 2019) is an important public value. However, the Slov-lex (expert) users perceive only a moderate opportunity to influence final legislation, and responsiveness to submitted comments on legislation drafts is based on the goodwill of the drafter.

These findings are even more relevant for non-expert users from the general public who are dependent on the use of the official Slov-lex platform because they have limited access to the law-making process via informal networks and practices. The organizational culture of informal processes plays an important role and limits the real engagement of the users, with the potential risk of unequal access to e-participation. The findings reveal that more than half of all respondents report having conducted additional (informal) actions after the formal submission of a comment. There are several possible reasons for this practice. First, the abovementioned low user friendliness and low responsiveness from the public body side. Second, existing literature shows that the post-communist region struggles to build effective formal institutions (such as Slov-lex), resulting in informal networks and patterns (e.g. Dimitrova, 2010).

In the case study of Slov-lex, we identified two types of contextual public value push factors: (1) a pro-reform- and pro-transparency-oriented government (and/or Minister of Justice); and (2) civil society and businesses. The former was important in institutionalizing

the philosophical principles, while the latter in the promotion and facilitation of e-participation in law-making. It seems that ICT advancement in both values is dependent on both factors.

In conclusion, e-participation in law-making is not just a technological issue with the potential to increase administrative and/or public service efficiency; rather, it encompasses the public value that, in order to be meaningful, has to be able to inform policy making, and civil servants and government representatives have to be responsive to input from all stakeholders equally. This involves a complex process of institutional change and we must therefore acknowledge the political nature of such a change.

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## 7. Participatory law-making in the digital age: The case of the e-public consultation platform in Croatia

**Petra Đurman, Anamarija Musa and Ivan Koprić**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Electronic public consultations (e-consultations), which are conducted in the drafting process of laws and regulation as well as in that of strategic and planning documents, represent a rather novel participatory instrument in Croatia. In 2013, e-consultations became legally mandated (and monitored) for public authorities when they prepare law proposals and other regulations that affect citizens and businesses. Since then, the number of e-consultations has gradually grown to become a widespread practice, especially at the national level. The introduction of the central government *eSavjetovanja* (eConsultations) portal (see <https://savjetovanja.gov.hr/> and the dashboard <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/>) in 2015 constituted a new phase in the implementation of e-consultations that is characterized by a significant quantitative and qualitative advancement. The main formal goals behind the initiative were to increase the opportunities for wider participation and to obtain more transparent input from the interested public. Its launch, alongside a number of other administrative reforms directed towards greater government transparency, openness and digitalization, has, however, been considerably influenced by the top-down processes of Europeanization from the mid-2000s onwards.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to explore the crucial drivers behind the introduction of the eConsultations initiative to the Croatian regulatory framework and practice. Second, it assesses the extent to which the formal goal of the initiative – enabling citizens to actively participate in the process of law-making – has been accomplished. In doing so, this chapter first presents the analytical framework and applied research methodology (Section 2) and then moves on to an overview and elaboration of the national context's important features (Section 3). In Section 4, the eConsultations initiative is described, and this is followed by an exploration of the organizational and individual factors related thereto (Section 5). Section 6 offers an evaluation of the initiative, while Section 7 contains a discussion and conclusions.

### 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Public participation as a postulate and as a practice is considered an inherent component of contemporary governance. Although a number of potential benefits of participation (and additional ones in the case of e-participation; cf. Fuchs, 2007) can be listed, from legitimacy of

government functioning to greater effectiveness of public policies, empirical research has not quite kept abreast of normative literature (Michels, 2011), implying that the practical effects of participation still largely remain unclear (Fung, 2015). One of the most important deficiencies in existing studies pertains to the missing links between (e-)participation exercises on the one hand and various contextual factors on the other. These contextual factors refer to different politico-institutional, legal, organizational, socio-economic and other features that can affect the implementation of an (e-)participation process and/or its outcomes. It has been argued that for the effectiveness of e-participations, instruments such as contextual factors are much more important than their technical characteristics (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016, p. 22; Zheng et al., 2014). In order to provide a contribution to existing literature, this chapter investigates the interrelation between such contextual factors (national, organizational, individual) and the introduction and implementation of the eConsultations initiative in Croatia.

For young democracies such as Croatia, the European Union (EU) accession process and prospective membership has made supranational factors much more salient. As a consequence, Europeanization processes in post-transition countries have appeared to be specific because of their socialist heritage. The adoption of politico-administrative reforms has largely been characterized by power asymmetry and the politics of conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Héritier, 2005; Musa, 2014). Since modifications directed towards the ‘opening’ of government organizations can be assessed as quite an innovation for the pre-existing political and organizational culture in Croatia (Koprić, 1999), it can be assumed that such top-down processes required agents of change at the national level. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the introduction of the initiative explores the role of the main policy change actors, the (supra)national context factors and the organizational barriers and enablers. The first research question, focused on the ‘supply side’ of the e-participation initiative, is formulated as follows:

*Research question 1: What were the main drivers behind the introduction of the eConsultations initiative?*

In evaluating the implementation of eConsultations, this chapter focuses on the ‘demand side’ of e-participation – the empowerment of citizens – which, the Croatian government stated, is the formal goal of the introduction of the initiative. Citizen empowerment is assessed by looking at two types of indicators: the acceptance rate of participants’ comments and participants’ satisfaction with their involvement in e-consultations. First, the objective indicator is explored more deeply in order to provide additional insight into the determinants of government responsiveness towards public input. The acceptance status of participants’ comments is compared to the type of participant and the type of the comment itself. These are factors that some research efforts (Eckerd, 2014; Yackee, 2015) have identified as relevant for explaining administrative responsiveness towards public input. Second, attitudinal indicators measure e-consultation participants’ satisfaction level through the results of their involvement.

*Research question 2: To what extent has the eConsultations initiative contributed to citizen empowerment and to which contextual factors can the empowerment be attributed?*

The research design follows a combination of research methods (both qualitative and quantitative) and research data (primary and secondary). Research findings are based primarily on the results of doctoral research conducted in 2019 by one of the authors (Đurman, 2019) using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and content analysis of e-consultations documents as well as secondary data (the reports of Croatian institutions – the Government Office for Civil Society (GOCS), the Information Commissioner (ICO); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)). The interviewees (ten) were civil servants responsible for conducting e-consultations in government organizations and servants of the administering body of the eConsultations Portal (GOCS), including current administrators as well as those involved during the establishment of the portal. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews, conducted in May and June 2019, was to collect deeper insights into the introduction and functioning of the eConsultations Portal. In order to investigate personal attitudes and the level of satisfaction with the e-consultation implementation, a questionnaire was given to participants that were involved in an e-consultation between the beginning of 2016 to the end of 2018 at least once. Since it was only possible to identify the participants via desk research, individuals are underrepresented in the sample of participants due to difficulties in finding the contact information of individual citizens (except in the case of some experts, academia professors, etc.). The questionnaire was distributed electronically in February 2019 by sending an e-mail request with a link to the questionnaire. The response rate of the questionnaire was 42 per cent (211 participants). Finally, data on the frequency and the type of participants, the type of comments and the acceptance of the comments were obtained via a quantitative content analysis of the reports on e-consultations (1350 of them) implemented in a three-year period in Croatia (2016–2018) by selected government organizations (19 ministries, five central state organizations and one regulatory agency). Reports on e-consultations must be published by each public authority after conducting an e-consultation and must contain all the names of the participants and their comments as well as information on whether the comments were accepted.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Croatia is a unitary state with a centralized but very fragmented two-tiered territorial structure and a parliamentary political system with a government responsible for the executive and a directly elected president who acts as a factor of stability and has limited prerogatives in external relations and in the defence sector. The government is dominated by a rather strong prime minister who is involved in the policy-making process of every cabinet portfolio; this significantly contributes to the notion of prime ministerial government as a dominant model of governance in Croatia. During the 29 years since independence (1991), the dominant party in power has been the centre-right Croatian Democratic Union, with two periods of centre-left coalition governments (2000–2003 and 2011–2015).

Croatian public administration is rooted in strong German legal and administrative tradition, with a strong legalistic approach. However, it is characterized by accentuated normative optimism, the consequence of which is normative hyper-production and frequent changes in legal regulations. Administrative culture at the organizational level has widely been bureaucratic and authoritarian with strong political influences (Koprić, 2018). The Europeanization processes that imposed the issue of public administration reform have placed great emphasis

on political and social values. These reforms, starting from the 2000s, included different segments of administrative structure and functioning, with one of the guiding forces being the achievement of more transparent and open public administration.

The development of e-government in Croatia can also be related to Europeanization processes after 2000, when the digitalization of different sectors was initiated (e-health, e-education, e-business, etc.), mostly at the national level and without a holistic strategic approach, resulting in the rather slow and fragmented development of e-government (see Musa and Đurman, 2016). The information technology sector has been pushing the government towards more complex e-government projects in the last decade, such as the eCitizens service portal (*eGrađanin*), which garnered an award at the Global Summit of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in Mexico in 2014. In relation to European and international digital governance benchmarking (e.g. the EU DESI Index; the United Nations e-Government Development Index or the e-Participation Index), Croatia is mainly situated at the bottom of the third quarter among EU countries, or at the top of the second quarter globally.

The first steps towards participatory policy making in Croatia were taken within the anti-corruption policy and the open government policy, which were considered the most challenging areas during the EU accession process. Under these policy frameworks, access to information was strengthened in 2013 and the new independent institution of the ICO, whose task is to supervise access to public information, open data and public consultations, was established. In parallel, when it comes to collaborative law-making practice, regulatory impact assessments were introduced in 2011, with public consultations also being an obligatory step in the process. In general, the standards of transparency and openness, which have gradually become institutionalized over the course of the past ten years, are largely a consequence of the harmonization process with the European standards of transparency and openness in relation to democratization as well as better law-making and especially the promotion of the anti-corruption agenda.

In those processes, as well as in the introduction of the portal itself, the greatest pressure came from civil society, which has been very active in promoting the open government agenda. Prominent leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (e.g. Gong, Green Action, Institute for Public Administration), members of academia and the media strongly supported the introduction of public consultations in 2009 and 2013 as well as the eConsultations Portal in 2015. An important role was played by the members of the OGP Initiative and Anti-Corruption Strategy Council, since both forums provided the activity framework and a place for discussion and the exchange of opinions among stakeholders: government officials, civil society and the private sector, which usually managed to reach a high degree of consensus. It cannot be said that political leaders have either promoted or pushed for the initiative; however, they did not place obstacles before it, accepting that the opening of the law-drafting process is an EU requirement. The prime minister of the centre-left coalition in 2011–2015 as well as the minister of administration generally backed up the inclusion of the legal obligation to conduct online consultations in the access to information legislation in 2013 as well as the inclusion of the eConsultations Portal in 2015, with the subsequent two prime ministers and four ministers of public administration taking a mostly neutral stance in relation to the portal. Considerable influence was exerted by several top civil servants and political officials from the eConsultations Portal's coordinating and monitoring institutions (see Section 5).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE ECONSULTATIONS PORTAL

The central eConsultations Portal (*eSavjetovanja*) constitutes a platform through which e-consultations are conducted in Croatia. e-Consultations are the interested public's main instrument for online participation in the policy formulation process, i.e. in the preparation of law and by-law proposals, strategic and other planning documents (cf. Koprić, 2020), as well as for the evaluation of documents and reports on policy implementation. The official proprietor of the eConsultations Portal is the government of the Republic of Croatia, which has the legal obligation to maintain the platform.

The portal was launched in April 2015 with the formal aim of ensuring transparent, accessible and wider public participation in the process of law-making and issuing regulations. The inauguration of the portal marked the final phase of the evolutionary process of public consultations in Croatia, after its introduction via the Code of Practice in Public Consultations in 2009 and the mandatory provision of the Law on the Right to Access Information in 2013 (LRAI), when public consultations in online mode (e-consultations) became legally mandated for a great majority of the 6000 public bodies in the process of preparation of laws, binding regulations and strategic and planning acts that affect the interests of the public. More precisely, the 2015 amendments of the LRAI introduced the obligation of central government authorities to conduct e-consultations via the central portal established for that purpose. The LRAI also delegated oversight powers to the ICO, which can conduct investigations and, among others, reports to parliament on the implementation of e-consultation provision. The portal has undergone development which can be summarized through three stages depending on the level of the development of the portal and the responsible authorities: from the development stage, to the establishment stage, to the evaluation and advancement stage.

In the development stage (2012–2014), preparatory activities were in place. GOCS is responsible for the coordination and implementation of the Government Code for Public Consultations (since 2009) as well as the implementation of the activity of the establishment of a central e-consultations portal within the OGP Initiative Action Plan. The zero version of the portal was developed by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Crafts within the framework of an EU-funded project for the purpose of the business community's participation in law-drafting.

In the establishment phase (April 2015 to June 2019) under the coordination of the GOCS, the portal was launched and became fully functional, with a gradual increase in the public authorities included in the platform, in the number of consultations conducted and in the participants involved in consultations. The formal obligation for central government authorities to conduct e-consultations via the eConsultations Portal became effective in August 2015 when the LRAI amendments came into force. The wider public got acquainted with the portal through several draft law cases that gained high public visibility due to controversy (e.g. the definition of family in the Family Law).

In the last phase (from July 2019 onwards), the administering of the portal came under the Government Office for Legislation (GOL). Given that the GOL is responsible for the support of the law-drafting process, it has started to monitor more rigorously whether the procedure adheres to LRAI Article 11 on public consultations and the Government Rules of Procedure, which require that an e-consultation report is attached to the draft legislation.

The use of the portal is obligatory for central government bodies (government offices, ministries, state administration bodies), while other public bodies (state bodies, agencies, chambers, local governments) may use this tool or decide to establish their own portals and/or continue to consult the public via their websites. In practice, in addition to around 35 central government bodies, it is used by some other central-level or nationwide administrative organizations, such as a dozen semi-autonomous and independent agencies and bodies (the Croatian National Bank, independent authorities, agencies, professional chambers). Until the establishment of the portal, (e-)public consultations were conducted via public bodies' websites and/or offline in the form of expert roundtables or public discussions (the latter mainly at the local and regional levels of government). The obligation to conduct e-consultations still does not exclude the use of additional participatory instruments such as roundtables, focus groups, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with experts, etc.

An e-consultation starts with an act proposal on the portal being published by the public authority issuing the act. The text of the draft legal or planning act must be published on the portal and be accompanied by an explanatory statement. The notice to the public on the ongoing e-consultation procedure must be published on the public body's website. The timeframe for e-consultations is 30 days, and the shortening of the timeframe must be backed up by arguments (e.g. emergency situations). Upon finalization of the process, the public authority must publish a report on the conducted e-consultation with an overview of the process as well as elaborated responses to the comments. The comments can be annotated as accepted, partially accepted, denied or duly noted, with an explanation as to why a certain proposal has not been accepted. This report must be attached to the proposal which is sent into the adoption procedure (e.g. in the government, the parliament, local council). In addition, in order to meet the public's expectations and needs, public bodies are obliged to publish their annual e-consultation plans on their websites and update them regularly.

The portal was essentially created to address external collaborations with citizens, NGOs and businesses. However, in addition to their role as organizers of e-consultations, public authorities often appear as participants and commentators of the proposals (see Section 6), although intergovernmental collaboration is ensured through different channels. The method of participants' selection is all-inclusive, i.e. the platform is open to the general public and participants are self-selected. However, public authorities (especially respective ministries) tend to invite relevant stakeholders to engage in the e-consultation process by other means (website, newsletters, e-mails).

The portal is simple to use, searchable (by topic, institution and timeframe) and requires users to register. Registration is simple and offers different authentication means (including e-banking) through eCitizens, the e-services portal. Each participant can submit one or more comments pertaining to the act in general or to its sections. Drafts, comments as well as reports are displayed publicly.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The implementation of e-consultations is essentially a responsibility held by each central government body or other organization conducting e-consultations via the portal, the crucial role being that of public consultation coordinators/moderators. Three national institutions are involved in the coordination of the eConsultations Portal through which e-consultations are

conducted and in the implementation of its standards in general: one government office, one ministry and one independent ombudsman. The leading officials in these institutions acted as the main proponents of the development (and later the implementation) of the initiative and can be considered policy entrepreneurs.

A few civil servants in each central government body are in charge of the implementation of e-consultations, with their number and position mostly depending on the size and function of the organization. They perform three types of task related to conducting e-consultations: interorganizational coordination, e-consultation moderation and administration of the process. Most central government bodies have at least one public consultation coordinator who is responsible for coordinating e-consultations within the organization and with the GOCS/after the GOL. Together with the information officer, who is responsible for the implementation of the LRAI (on access to information and open data), they act as a central contact and coordinating point in relation to other servants included in the process of conducting e-consultations. Public consultation moderators, servants usually responsible for drafting law and regulations, are responsible for analysing the comments received and providing feedback to participants. Public consultation administrators are in charge of the technical task of uploading documents to the portal: draft acts, reports on conducted consultations and other related documents.

Alongside the network of public consultation coordinators in central government bodies and other organizations that perform e-consultations via the portal, in the overall coordination and development of e-consultations, three institutions have been involved: the GOCS (which had the primary role from 2009 when the consultations were introduced until 2019 when its tasks were taken over by the Legislation Office), the Ministry of Public Administration (MPA) and the ICO. The GOCS (in the period from 2015 to 2019) continuously provided education and training for the civil servants responsible for e-consultations within central government bodies as well as substantive and technical support for conducting e-consultations. Within the GOCS, two civil servants (later three) have been in charge of administering the portal as well as communicating with public consultations coordinators/administrators in central government bodies, with registered users and with information technology support, which is provided by a private software company. The head of the GOCS (2007–2016), originally a political science scholar with a research interest in lobbying, acted as the main proponent of the introduction of public consultations in 2009 and the launch of the portal in 2015 as well as a promoter of the continuous improvement of e-consultation standards in central government bodies. He was vice-chair of the OGP Initiative and, in that capacity, made public consultations one of the main pillars of the initiative, pushing for the legislative underpinning of e-consultations and financial resources. At the time of the introduction of the portal, the head of the Legislation Office (who took over the portal in 2019) was also supportive of the portal's development.

The MPA is a key partner in terms of technical issues, namely the provision of the hosting platform (Central State Portal) and the e-citizens connections for registration purposes. The ministry is also the body responsible for drafting legislation on e-consultations (the LRAI in particular). The head of the e-government division in the MPA (2012–2016), the former deputy in the e-Government Office, provided strong technical support and innovative solutions. He supported the portal and its connection to the main portals of the government as well as e-citizens services. The issue was also backed politically in terms of government commitments to further advance the implementation of e-consultations that were expressed through

the activities in the OGP action plans and anti-corruption strategies prepared jointly by the government on the one hand and civil society and the private sector on the other.

The ICO, an independent office for the protection, monitoring and promotion of access to information, is responsible for the monitoring of e-consultations in general (especially at the local level, since the GOCS does not cover local government). The ICO issues opinions and guidelines on the implementation of e-consultations in accordance with the LRAI, institutes investigations on petitions or *ex officio*, prepares monitoring analyses and reports and promotes e-consultations by providing training and organizing public events, either independently within the access to information education campaign or jointly with the GOCS through specialized workshops and events. In the period from 2013 to 2018, the ICO, also originally an academic with a specific interest in the transparency and openness of public administration, has been strongly supportive of the strengthening of the formal obligation in relation to consultations and the formalization of the portal in the text of the LRAI. She has been continuously active in providing opinions, conducting oversight of the consultation process and raising the relevance of the issue before parliament as well as in providing training to coordinators. A number of activities aimed at raising politicians' and public servants' awareness of the importance of consulting the public were initiated directly or through the OGP and the anti-corruption initiative.

From the perspective of the prevailing organizational culture of civil servants and political officials, the introduction of public consultations in 2009 was not seen as a preferable practice in government bodies. The reason behind this attitude involves the 'culture of secrecy', which has traditionally been present in public administration, as well as the fear of slowing down and complicating the usual ways of 'getting things done', including a possible disturbance to the EU accession agenda. These fears have especially been manifested on behalf of political officials. One of the interviewees explained 'that which was problematic was the overall climate in which any practice that would result in the prolongation of the legislative procedure was not seen as welcome because of the ambitious EU accession agenda'. In addition, 'there was this general fear of being exposed by public critics, more so on behalf of politicians than of civil servants ... however, those fears gradually began to fade'. The development of the legal framework (and obligation) for e-consultations and its more consistent implementation, as well as the introduction of the technical platform which facilitates the e-consultations procedure, have incentivized a change of organizational culture. In the words of one of the interviewees, 'In the beginning, our superiors did not want the draft laws to undergo the consultations procedure. You had to press them with a legal obligation. They fought against it as long as they could ... Huge progress has been made over the past ten years.' It can be said that, today, after initial resistance, different aspects of the e-consultation practice are integrated in the existing tasks and modes of organizational functioning, with the most prominent problems being the timely planning of e-consultation procedures and the urgency of their completion. In addition, e-consultations are sometimes still seen as a pure formality. As assessed by one interviewee, 'It is largely a formality ... At least in our organization. It is done because the law requires it.' However, in many instances e-consultations are seen by civil servants as a means of testing regulatory alternatives. For this purpose, they are seen as beneficial for the quality of regulation.



## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

The eConsultations Portal represents an important facet of e-government initiatives in Croatia. This was acknowledged in the sharp increase in the United Nations e-Participation Index: from 97th place in 2005 to 25th place in 2016. It was also praised by the OECD review of regulatory performance in Croatia for 2019 (OECD, 2019). The initiative has contributed to the transparency of the policy-making process as the Portal makes all the submitted comments, participants and information on whether the comments are accepted by the public authority conducting the e-consultation visible to the general public.

As shown in Table 7.1, a continuous increase in e-participation opportunities in the period from 2010 to 2019 can clearly be observed. The significant growth in the number of e-consultations is largely the consequence of an increase in public authorities conducting e-consultations. During the portal's five-year operational period (2015–2019), four times more e-consultations (4020) were held than in the previous five-year period (1078 e-consultations from 2010 to 2014), with almost three times more e-consultations in 2013 when the legal obligation was conducted, followed by another leap in 2015 with the functioning of the portal. Table 7.1 presents data on public consultations (e-consultations from 2013 onwards) in state administration in two distinctive periods: before and after the introduction of the portal in 2015.

The number of registered users of the portal has risen over the last five years (from 4000 in 2015 to 23,214 in 2018 and 27,129 in 2019). However, their interest in actively participating in e-consultations has declined; while in 2015 the average number of participants per e-consultation was ten, in 2019 it decreased to four participants. Therefore, the growth of e-consultation opportunities has not been followed by an increase in participants. The dominant type of participants in e-consultations are individuals (between 70 and 80 per cent each year), followed by NGOs (approximately 7 per cent), public establishments and companies (approximately 9 per cent) and local governments (approximately 3 per cent). Other types of stakeholders, such as political parties and religious organizations, rarely engage in e-consultations, posting only a few comments each year. An indicative finding of the e-consultation content analysis is that a considerable share (36 per cent of analysed e-consultations in a three-year period) received no comments at all (mostly by-laws).

The share of accepted comments per year ranges roughly between 15 and 30 per cent; for example, from 16 per cent in 2016 to 29 per cent in 2017, while in 2018 or 2019, every fifth comment was accepted. However, three points need to be emphasized. First, a significant part of partially and fully accepted comments are substantially similar or even overlapping. Second, a significant share of accepted comments pertain to technical and minor modifications to drafts, rarely encompassing deeper and more substantial alterations to the act. Third, there is a steady share of comments that are 'duly noted' or 'acknowledged' (meaning that they are neither accepted nor refused) – 34 per cent in 2016, 28 per cent in 2017, 38 per cent in 2018 and 25 per cent in 2019. Although justified in some cases, this is a useful exit strategy employed by public authorities to avoid taking a position on citizens' attitudes.

The acceptance status of the comments is related to the type of comment and the type of submitter. The results of the content analysis suggest that informed comments (backed up by arguments) tend to have a greater acceptance level than attitudes and opinions. As one of the interviewees mentioned: 'The strength of public comments based on expertise can be decisive.'

Table 7.1 (e-)Public consultations in Croatia, 2010–2019

Year	Public authorities conducting consultations	(e-)Public consultations	Registered users	Participants	Total comments	Accepted comments	Partially accepted comments	Total accepted (fully and partially)	Share of total accepted/total comments
2010	15	42	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2011	16	48	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2012	22	136	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2013	29	348	N/A	8299	9270	2391	579	2970	32.04
2014	31	504	N/A	7482	11,587	3366	2734	6100	52.65
2010–2014 $\Sigma$	N/A	1078	N/A	15,781	20,857	5757	3313	9070	43.49
2010–2014 $\bar{x}$	22.6	215.6	N/A	7.891	10,429	2.879	1.657	4.535	42
2015	37	608	4000	5863	15,411	2816	1437	4253	27.60
2016	37	642	N/A	4147	12,978	1400	722	2122	16.35
2017	40	706	16,277	5821	22,566	4288	2382	6670	29.56
2018	44	1033	23,214	4712	22,075	2929	1642	4571	20.71
2019	N/A	1031	27,129	4150	19,543	3039	1236	4275	21.87
2015–2019 $\Sigma$	N/A	4020	N/A	24,693	92,573	14,472	7,419	21,891	23.65
2015–2019 $\bar{x}$	39.50	804.00	N/A	4938.60	18,514.60	2894.40	1483.80	4378.20	23.22

Source: Authors, based on the GOCS, Annual Reports on the Code of Practice for Public Consultations for the years 2010 to 2018, available at: <https://savjetovanja.gov.hr/dokumenti/10>; Information Commissioner, Annual Reports on the Implementation of the LRAI for the years 2014 to 2019, available at: [www.pristupinfo.hr/dokumenti-i-publikacije/izvjesca-o-provedbi-zppi/](http://www.pristupinfo.hr/dokumenti-i-publikacije/izvjesca-o-provedbi-zppi/).

Every eighth comment classified as an attitude/opinion and every fourth comment classified as informed is fully or partially accepted. This correlation is in line with the finding that the least accepted comments are those submitted by individuals, the category of participants which submits the highest share of comments classified as attitudes/opinions. Namely, only 13 per cent of individuals' comments are fully and 6 per cent partially accepted. However, the comments of other government bodies and public authorities tend to be most frequently accepted; 50 per cent of their comments are accepted (41 per cent fully and 9 per cent partially). The results of the content analysis also suggest that the level of comments' acceptance is related to the type of government organization conducting the e-consultation: the level of acceptance (including both fully and partially accepted comments) amounts to approximately 40 per cent for agency-type organizations and 21 per cent for ministries conducting e-consultations.

The results of the questionnaire conducted among e-consultation participants revealed that they consider their influence generally rather low and that it should be much higher. It also pointed to a high level of dissatisfaction with the results of their involvement in e-consultations. The majority of participants (80 per cent) assess their influence in e-consultations as low or very low. Accordingly, 89 per cent of questioned participants agree that the public should have a greater influence on e-consultation procedures. When asked to estimate their level of satisfaction with the results of e-consultation participation, half of the participants declared themselves as mostly or very unsatisfied, one-third of them opted for an ambivalent attitude (neither satisfied nor unsatisfied), while only 16 per cent answered that they were satisfied with the results of their involvement in e-consultations.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The introduction of the eConsultations Portal was primarily a product of (supra)national and individual factors (see Table 7.2). First, the main contextual factor can be found in the political (supra)national context in the form of the EU's pressure to enhance the possibility for public participation on the road to the EU (and once in the EU). The informal *acquis*, which as far back as 2009 required the introduction of e-consultations, helped push for the initiative. Second, the introduction of the initiative was related to advancing the national policies of open government, anti-corruption and e-government. Moreover, the period of introduction corresponds to the overall orientation towards the politically salient issues of greater transparency and openness as they were expressed through the strategic documents of the centre-left government through collaboration with civil society and businesses. Finally, the key coordinating and monitoring institutions at the time were led by openness enthusiasts who devoted their attention and resources to accomplishing the goal of the greater inclusiveness and transparency of the law-making process. Therefore, it is possible to identify several change agents, i.e. actors who were the main proponents or enabling actors during the introduction of e-consultations: the heads of the GOCS and ICO as well as the key civil servants in these authorities, followed by the key actors in the MPA and the leading figures of the OGP and Anti-Corruption Council.

The implementation of particular e-consultations is more related to individual and organizational factors. The presented data and evaluation suggest that the eConsultations Portal has only partially succeeded in accomplishing its formal goal of enabling citizens to actively participate in the process of law-making and issuing regulations, although it has appeared rather effective in ensuring the procedural legitimacy and transparency of the policy-making process.

*Table 7.2 Overview of the factors related to the introduction and implementation of the eConsultations Initiative*

	Level		
	National	Organizational	Individual
Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU accession and membership</li> <li>• Improvement of transparency through anti-corruption policy/ open government policy and legal framework</li> <li>• Development of e-government</li> <li>• Institutional mechanisms for coordination and monitoring (GOCS, ICO)</li> <li>• Civil society pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational culture</li> <li>• Features of the law-drafting process (urgency, planning of the process)</li> <li>• Network of public consultation coordinators</li> <li>• Training and support provided to public consultation coordinators by coordination and monitoring institutions (GOCS, ICO)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders of key institutions (GOCS, ICO, MPA)</li> <li>• Prominent NGO leaders</li> <li>• Type and competence of participants</li> </ul>

Namely, the portal provides an opportunity for each and every interested physical or legal person to submit remarks or suggestions on the draft of a law or other types of regulations. e-Consultations are extremely important in their role of ‘democratic safeguards’, providing an opportunity for wide and inclusive participation, although not necessarily for a very substantial one. In the technical aspect, the portal is very user friendly and ensures the visibility of all participants in an e-consultation procedure and their comments to the general public, with the information and an explanation on whether and why the comments have (not) been accepted.

The level of acceptance of the comments highly depends on two contextual variables related to the participants: the type of comment and the type of participant. Informed comments backed up with solid argumentation most often tend to be accepted, as they contain new information or alerts on omissions or possible implementation problems. Hence, such inputs are mostly appreciated by the civil servants drafting regulations and most often accepted; although, as emphasized by the interviewees, there is a large share of ‘poor quality’ comments. As stated by one of the interviewees, ‘There is a lot of nonsense you have to read until you find something good, but that good can be really very useful, people can correct us.’ Since the type of comment reflects the competence of the submitter, the correlation between the acceptance status of the comments and the type of participant has also been confirmed by the content analysis as well as the interviews. Comments submitted by organized stakeholders (institutions, NGOs, businesses, etc.), especially those involved in the implementation of certain regulations, tend to be more often accepted than those posted by individuals. Hence, the more organized and competent the participants, the greater the chance that the public authority will accept their input.

Participants’ low level of satisfaction with the results of their participation in e-consultations can be interpreted as the ‘gap between bureaucratic reality and participant expectations’, which can result in participants’ disappointment (Buckwalter, 2014, p. 578). As explained by Buckwalter, the more realistic the expectations of participants with regard to the outcomes of the process, the greater the possibilities for them to develop the perception of empowerment as well as a trust-based relationship with the government. Therefore, while participants should

be more aware of objective restraints on the government's side (e.g. financial constraints to their requests or existing government agenda), politicians and civil servants should abandon the formalistic view of e-consultations – partly still present – and embrace the more substantial purposes of e-consultations: acquiring new information and drafting better and more sustainable regulations.

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## 8. The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal: Drivers and barriers of institutionalized e-participation

**Kadi Maria Vooglaid and Tiina Randma-Liiv**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The scholarly debate on participatory democracy has increasingly focused on the impact of information and communication technology in fostering greater civic engagement in policy design and service delivery (Bentivegna, 2006; Freeman and Quirke, 2013; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013; Bannister and Connolly, 2014). This dynamic between the aspirational rhetoric of participatory democracy and the practical potential of the Internet to foster greater dialogue between the state and its citizens has materialized in numerous e-participation projects around the world, many being government led.

The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP; see [www.rahvaalgatus.ee](http://www.rahvaalgatus.ee)) is a quasi-governmental e-participation portal that allows individuals to submit collective addresses to parliament (Riigikogu). Since its inception in 2015, up to August 2020, 246 discussions have been started on the platform. The ECIP is formally institutionalized, with a cluster of laws and regulations framing the processes pertaining to the platform. The combination of bottom-up establishment and a high level of formalization makes it an interesting case for further exploration.

The Estonian context provides a rich tapestry in this case, as a number of contextual aspects might potentially influence the performance of the ECIP. Estonia's civil society is relatively fragmented (Rikmann et al., 2014), but there is high demand for participatory opportunities, as has been shown by the strong public support for legislative agendas which promise to implement forms of direct democracy. However, although Estonia's *e-government* is well developed (see Digital Economy and Society Index, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/scoreboard/estonia>), several *e-participation* projects undertaken in Estonia since the early 2000s have been deemed a failure. This phenomenon has been dubbed 'the Estonian paradox' (Toots et al., 2016), where success in e-government and e-voting has not translated into success in e-democracy. The aim of this chapter is to look at the drivers and barriers of the ECIP to shed light on this particular paradox.

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

e-Participation platforms are often assessed from a pre-defined normative viewpoint (Macintosh, 2004; Molinari and Ferro, 2009; Chun and Cho, 2012), in which participation is conceptualized on a continuum from low to high (Bishop and Davis, 2002). While this is in line with most theoretical research on participatory policy making (Arnstein, 1969; Nabatchi, 2012), the normative bias present in the research on participation prevents readers from better understanding real-world participatory processes, where, according to Dean (2017, p. 215), tension often results 'from unacknowledged definitional conflicts'. In other words, it is common for stakeholders to disagree on what constitutes a desirable outcome or adequate level of engagement in the participatory process. This is not a glitch in the system – it is a feature of democracy as an institutionalized process, but also of democracy as a perpetually evolving system of governance.

Despite the difficulties acknowledged in assessing the performance of e-participation platforms, a number of previously published studies have highlighted the various drivers and barriers of e-participation (see Chadwick, 2011; Reddick and Norris, 2013; Manosevitch et al., 2014; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Jho and Song, 2015; Zheng and Schachter, 2017). A recent thorough literature review on e-participation (Steinbach et al., 2019) determines the need for more research that focuses particularly on the organizational and institutional factors in exploring how public administrations can become either drivers or barriers to e-participation, build a facilitating environment and implement e-participation successfully. Borman and Janssen (2012) claim that research on drivers and barriers in e-participation should also include factors that not only focus on outcomes and the implementation process but also on the 'operating environment'. In line with the main focus of the book, this chapter concentrates on said 'operating environment'. The scope of such an environment or context can be manifold. Citizen involvement is embedded in existing institutional arrangements and constrained by historical, cultural, legal, technological, political, administrative, organizational and individual factors. For this chapter, the contextual factors that surround e-participation platforms and affect its performance – either positively or negatively – are divided into the national context and organizational- and individual-level factors.

The case study is based on both exploratory and explanatory approaches in order to investigate the drivers and barriers that contribute to the performance of the ECIP. The main research question is: What are the drivers and barriers of the Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal? The sub-questions considered in the case study are: (1) Which national-level factors are particularly important in explaining the functioning of the ECIP? (2) Which organizational-level factors are particularly important in explaining the functioning of the ECIP? and (3) Which individual-level factors can explain the functioning of the ECIP?

Accordingly, three types of contextual factors will be considered in order to capture the context of e-participation initiatives, covering several levels of analysis:

1. *The national context of the e-participation project.* The impact of technology on the public sector is strongly mediated by the national-level context that frames the ways in which the public sector interacts with citizens and other governmental and non-governmental units contributing to participatory policy making. A number of studies have looked at the drivers and barriers of e-participation in various national settings, showing that national context influences the uptake of e-participation (Aichholzer and Allhutter, 2009; Santaniello and

Amoretti, 2013; Moss and Coleman, 2014). Particularly relevant for this case study are the cultural-historical context, especially in relation to the development of civil society, the adoption of digital solutions in society as well as the legislative and institutional context surrounding the e-participation platform.

2. *Organizational aspects of the e-participation initiative.* Here, the aim is to explore the governmental structures and processes which enable, support or hinder the functioning of this particular e-participation initiative. Organizational factors include the formal ownership of the e-participation initiative and its organizational design, leadership and resources. After citizens give their voice, whether and how that voice affects the actual policy-making process depends on the characteristics of the organization. Organizations are processors of information (Arrow, 1974). Organizational arrangements determine the information they seek, how they process the signals and how they act on their perceived reality. If the participatory process is not carefully organized and administered, it may delay decisions, increase conflict, disappoint participants and lead to more distrust than trust (Yang and Pandey, 2011).
3. *Individuals who are administratively connected to the e-participation initiative.* There has been some research on the influence of managers on the uptake of e-participation (Carrizales, 2008; Aikens and Krane, 2010; Baldwin et al., 2012), but little effort has been made to look at the individual characteristics and roles of either formal or informal policy actors and particularly of administrators of e-participation initiatives in the adoption, diffusion and institutionalization of e-participation practices. Although it is acknowledged that the characteristics of individual citizens may play a role in launching petitions, this is beyond the main focus of this study, which targets the administrative and organizational aspects of e-participation. Therefore, the characteristics of citizens are handled under the national context addressing civil society at large.

The research was designed as a qualitative case study and conducted from September 2018 to May 2020 as part of the larger comparative research project 'Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments', funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Program for Research and Innovation. The case study relied on information collected through desk research and interviews. The desk research involved the exploration of the following sources: the website of the e-participation initiative and their publications; the respective laws and secondary legislation; governmental policy documents; and the statistics available on the selected e-participation platform. In addition, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with politicians, senior administrators and stakeholders, all of whom either had direct influence over the administration of the portal (administrators) or were actively involved with some of the key initiatives which came through the portal as primary decision-makers (politicians) or active campaigners (users/citizens). The anonymous interviews were semi-structured and lasted for one to one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Estonia is a small country with a population of 1.3 million (2020). Its independence as a democratic republic was restored in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The public sector in post-Soviet Estonia was rapidly digitalized, and the country as a whole has often been dubbed an e-government success story (Kalvet, 2012). The foundation of the so-called e-Estonia



infrastructure is the digital identification system, which was codified into law as early as 2000 through the Digital Signature Act, thereby giving digital signatures legal force and making them equal to handwritten signatures. Estonia became the first country in the world to use legally binding e-voting in national elections in 2005 (Madise and Martens, 2006). The share of e-voting has grown with every subsequent election; a new record was reached in the elections of the European Parliament in 2019 when 48.3 per cent of all eligible votes were cast electronically.

The reasons for the development of digital government are manifold, encompassing historical, social and political aspects. The IT community's early initiatives were supported by some political leaders because these initiatives were consistent with their goals of creating a minimal and efficient state in the 1990s. Rapid digitalization has created a culture of e-government (Björklund, 2016) where citizens find it increasingly self-evident that all interactions with the state must be conducted online. The presence and role of a 'digital culture' is exemplified by the fact that public trust towards digital solutions has remained high despite setbacks involving some security issues related to e-voting systems (Madise and Vinkel, 2014).

Estonia was also one of the first countries to experiment with e-participation (Toots et al., 2016). In March 2001, a quasi-governmental foundation – the Estonian Legal Centre – piloted the online forum Themis. Within the first year, 15 draft laws were posted on the forum for comment, eight of which received relevant remarks, with many of those finding their way to the amended versions of the drafts (Siivelt, 2002). In addition to Themis, another e-participation portal called 'Today I Decide' was set up by the Estonian government in June 2001. It enabled citizens to propose ideas for policy or legislation, vote on ideas proposed by others as well as comment on draft laws posted by ministries. The most popular ideas were forwarded to the relevant institutions for processing by the prime minister's resolution. While this garnered a lot of support at the beginning, it was declared a failure just three years later. Themis was also discontinued in 2004.

As of 2020, there are three other national-level participatory platforms (see Table 8.1) in addition to the ECIP. *Osale.ee* offers citizens the opportunity to propose ideas to the government as well as comment on draft resolutions, which, however, is a rather passive tool and has been seen as a failure as well (Toots, 2019). In addition, there is the governmental draft law portal 'Eelnõude Infosüsteem' (EIS), where government units upload all formal documents for commenting and coordinating among government organizations; however, this also allows input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizens. Lastly, there is the informal e-petitioning site *Petitsioon.ee*, which is run bottom up by the Estonian Homeowners' Association. None of these platforms is strictly binding to any institution in terms of the level of regulations pertaining to participatory processes. The ECIP was chosen as a case study for that same reason – it is the only participatory portal backed by procedural regulations, making it possible to probe the potential effects of institutionalization on the participatory process.

One reason for the failure of earlier e-participation tools can be linked to the poor development of civil society reflected in a small number of active users and the low quality of ideas proposed through e-participation platforms (Toots et al., 2016). It could be argued that the Estonian civil society has not been mature enough to fully take advantage of such participatory tools. The slow development of the Estonian civil society could be put down to two main reasons. First, there is the Soviet legacy – during the Soviet occupation, the entire civil society was limited to inherently non-political activities, such as cultural clubs or voluntary

Table 8.1 National-level e-participation portals in Estonia since 2001

e-Participation portal	Status in 2020	Proprietor
Themis	Discontinued	Estonian Legal Centre
Today I Decide	Discontinued	Government of Estonia
Osale.ee	Passive	Government of Estonia
EIS	Active	Government of Estonia
Petitsioon.ee	Active	Estonian Homeowners' Association
ECIP	Active	Estonian Cooperation Assembly

fire-fighters (Randma-Liiv et al., 2008; Ruutsoo, 2012). Second, there is the dominance of a strong neoliberal ideology, which was instituted during the first freely elected government of post-Soviet Estonia and cemented during the subsequent government coalitions, ultimately leaving its footprint on core values in Estonian society, leading to the atomization of the consumerist individual and consequently to the demise of collectivist strategies in the political sphere (Ruutsoo, 2012). It has been argued that policy makers often view 'inclusion' as an activity separate from the policy-making process (Kübar and Hinsberg, 2014), which means that public participation is often performed as a mere formality. This criticism has also been applied to all e-participation platforms which have been set up by the government since 2001.

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE ESTONIAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE PORTAL

The ECIP is a digital solution for Estonian citizens to exercise their legal right to petition the government. It is a formally institutionalized online tool for participatory policy making that enables the co-creation of citizens' initiatives, which can be sent to parliament for deliberation. The ECIP is regulated by the Response to Memoranda and Requests for Explanations and Submission of Collective Addresses Act (hereinafter referred to as the Collective Addresses Act) adopted in 2014 by the Estonian parliament. The idea for collective addresses was proposed to parliament by an ad hoc People's Assembly (Rahvakogu), convened as a response to a financing scandal involving the ruling political party at the time. Rahvakogu comprised a stratified random sample of ordinary citizens, who gathered in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, in 2013 to brainstorm proposals for amendments to electoral laws, ideas to curb unethical lobbying practices and suggestions for more public involvement in policy making.

The Collective Addresses Act and the accompanying laws stipulate that a policy proposal initiated by citizens, which gathers 1000 or more signatures, must be formally processed by parliament. Citizens' signatures can be collected either offline or online. The core technical innovation of the platform is a back-end solution for the digital mass signing of documents through the use of the Estonian digital identification system, which is a fast and reliable way of collecting signatures. Before the launch of ECIP, it was possible for only a limited number of people to digitally sign the same document, as with a larger number the system would crash. The presence of digital mass signing has been of critical importance because it enables the Chancellery of the Riigikogu to receive all collected signatures in one document and check the validity of the signatures. This also makes it easier to collect signatures, as campaigning can be done entirely online.

Anyone can create an initiative, but only Estonian citizens of at least 16 years of age can sign an initiative. To encourage co-creation of the final text of the proposal, the author of the initiative can only begin collecting signatures after three days, before which time the initiative is in 'forced co-editing mode'. The text editing part of the platform is built on Etherpad – an open-source component that enables the co-editing of text in the same way that Google Docs does. According to the project manager of the ECIP, not many people take advantage of this opportunity though. After the initial three-day 'incubation period', the author can make the proposal public and start collecting comments and votes. The author of the initiative can decide on the deadline for signature collection and also extend the period for signature collection if not enough signatures have been received by the initial deadline.

The parliament is legally compelled to act within 30 days once the proposal is submitted to the Riigikogu. According to an interviewee from the Chancellery of the Riigikogu, parliament usually undertakes all proposals that fulfil the formal criteria, i.e. the sufficient number of signatures. When the proposal is verified by the Chancellery of the Riigikogu, the Speaker of the Riigikogu will decide which parliamentary committee will be the 'owner' of the proposal and forward the proposal to the relevant committee for deliberation. It is mandatory to include the author of the initiative in at least one of the sessions held on the topic. The process itself must be concluded within three months and any result or decision made must be forwarded as a formal response to the author of the initiative no later than six months after the start of the proceedings.

There are six modes for the further processing of any given initiative by the relevant parliamentary committee, all of which are listed in the Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act.

1. The first option is for the parliamentary committee to initiate a bill or draft resolution on the issue when they reach an agreement on the changes necessary, which will then be voted upon in parliament. The committee can also convene a general assembly when the initiative is thought to address issues of 'significant national importance'. By April 2019, only two initiatives had been granted that opportunity – an initiative on long-term care insurance and an initiative regarding Estonia's exit strategy from coal energy.
2. The second option is for the committee to hold a public sitting, where anyone is welcome to join. More often than not, this option is used for environmental initiatives due to high public interest.
3. The third option is for the committee to forward the initiative to the competent institution (ministry, agency or local government) for taking a position and resolving the issue.
4. The fourth option is for the committee to transmit the initiative to the Government of the Republic, which is instructed to develop a position regarding the proposal and is obliged to notify the committee of their resolution.
5. The fifth option is to reject the proposal. The committee rejects any proposal which is clearly incompatible with the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia or any international obligations imposed on the country by international agreements. The committee also rejects proposals which are substantially similar to any proposal in respect to which proceedings were conducted less than two years earlier. Initiatives can also be rejected on other (political and/or administrative) grounds; but in these cases, the committee is obliged to explain their decision in detail, referring to relevant documents or laws where applicable.

6. The sixth option is to resolve the initiative ‘through other means’. It is not specified in the law what said other means might be.

The multitude of processing pathways reflects the diversity of the initiatives that have been forwarded to the parliament. There have been a number of initiatives concerning the environment, ranging from local issues, such as air quality in an industrial town in east Estonia, to initiatives calling for the protection of certain species or banning pesticides, to highly complex issues, such as Estonia’s exit strategy from coal energy dependency. Some initiatives read more like manifestos than specific proposals, yet other initiatives focus on solving very particular problems, such as the regulation of e-cigarettes, road safety, fireworks taxes or the processing of missing persons reports.

The follow-up feed appears under the original text of the initiative within the ECIP platform, where it is possible to read the official responses of parliamentary committees. The website of the Chancellery of the Riigikogu also shares all relevant documents related to the initiatives, which include the official records of all sessions held on the topic in committees or the general assembly and explanatory memoranda on any referrals of the initiative to other branches of the government.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

As for organizational design, the ECIP is an example of so-called ‘ambivalent ownership’. Many aspects of the platform as well as the participatory process are managed by various political, governmental, quasi-governmental, private and non-profit organizations, each with its own agenda, resources, rules and organizational culture. During the collection of empirical data, the ECIP ran on the CitizenOS app, which is an Estonian open-source platform specifically designed to allow for the digital mass signing of co-created documents. The formal proprietor of the ECIP is the Estonian Cooperation Assembly foundation – a quasi-governmental centre founded in 2007 by the president of Estonia. The Estonian Cooperation Assembly was a key partner in facilitating the People’s Assembly of 2013, which resulted in the codification of the Citizens’ Initiative into law (Collective Addresses Act). The Cooperation Assembly also supports the Estonian government in the Open Government Partnership network, which made it possible to ensure the technical development of the portal as part of its Action Plan for 2014–2016 as well as for the period 2016–2018. The Cooperation Assembly thus possesses strong psychological ownership of the ECIP.

The Cooperation Assembly and the Chancellery of the Riigikogu share responsibility for the administration of citizens’ initiatives, with the Cooperation Assembly focusing on the maintenance of the portal and the Chancellery dealing with the coordination of the political process. The Cooperation Assembly is responsible for securing funding for the portal as well as educating the public about everything that has to do with the procedure for submitting a Collective Address, which includes devising guidelines for deliberation and commenting, and guiding users on how to obtain and use a digital identification to sign documents. The responsibility of the Chancellery of Riigikogu is limited to checking the validity of the digital signatures on the initiatives, but parliament as a whole bears the brunt of the workload after the proposals have been verified for parliamentary deliberation. Once the parliamentary process is complete, the Cooperation Assembly once again takes the reins in curating the online follow-up phase –

visualizing the processing pathway and any actions taken by parliament or the government in response to any citizens' initiative.

There is only one employee – the project manager – in the Cooperation Assembly, who deals with everything related to the ECIP, among other duties, which means that their workload is quite heavy. The project manager sees an acute need for a full-time employee who would exclusively deal with communication and information dissemination on the ECIP. Their main tasks would involve educating the public, but also members of parliament (MPs), about the right to petition. According to an interviewee, some MPs have a vague understanding at best of not only the ECIP portal but the underlying legal procedure itself. While a number of MPs display a very positive attitude towards the portal, there are many who have not even heard of the ECIP or the citizens' initiative.

The funding of the ECIP is a patchwork of various revenue streams. The running costs of the portal, such as fees regarding the processing of digital signatures and front-end design solutions, have been covered by micro-donations from the users of the ECIP. The back-end solutions are free because of an informal agreement between the project manager of the ECIP and the chief executive officer of CitizenOS. The personnel costs are partially covered by the budget allocations received from the Office of the President, but this does not cover all activities undertaken by the Cooperation Assembly. Additional revenue comes from successful project proposals submitted to various foundations. The Chancellery of the Riigikogu does not provide any financial support for the platform.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

The development of an e-participation initiative is a living process grounded on continuous innovation, learning and adaptation. In order to enable organizational learning, it is vital to examine which positive and negative outcomes the use of the online platform produces, whether there are any unexpected outcomes, whether it remains sustainable and what challenges it faces. However, publicly available sources provide only basic information on the performance of the ECIP. Since its inception in 2015, up to August 2020, 246 discussions have been started on the platform, 132 collective addresses have been co-created and 47 initiatives have been forwarded to the Riigikogu for deliberation; altogether, 90,065 signatures have been collected. Information on current and previous initiatives is also available on the ECIP website.

There are no specific objectives and/or performance indicators in place for the ECIP, which could be related to ambiguous ownership and accountability relations. Interviewees also did not have a fixed normative position when it came to defining the criteria against which the performance of the ECIP should be assessed. Consequently, citizens and the leaders of the ECIP alike have limited access to consolidated information on the platform, its actual performance and the underlying trends. Due to the lack of formal objectives and the shortage of performance information on the ECIP, the focus of the evaluation is set on three aspects that reflect the general democratic criteria of the platform: legitimacy, transparency and influence on policy making.

## 6.1 Democratic Legitimacy

The democratic legitimacy of the ECIP is dependent on whether the portal is formally integrated in the institutional framework of democratic governance and whether the number and diversity of people and organizations who use the ECIP reflect a broad representation of Estonian civic life. According to the interviewees, the participatory process through the ECIP has been set in motion relatively successfully – the process is regulated by law, and an increasing number of people and organizations are using the platform to resolve issues and propose ideas to the government. However, due to strict data protection policies, information on the demographic and socio-economic profile of the users of the platform are not publicly accessible, which implies limitations to the assessment of input legitimacy. According to the project manager of the ECIP, it has also been a matter of principle – because of the sensitive nature of some of the information processed on the ECIP, a conscious decision was made not to publish any statistics on the demographic profile of the users.

At the same time, the throughput legitimacy of the ECIP is noteworthy as it is backed by a detailed legal framework. The fact that the participatory process is regulated by law was positively brought up on numerous occasions during the interviews. This was especially apparent when talking to the politicians who handle the initiatives, since the regulatory framework provides for ‘an automated process’ of addressing the initiative. If the initiative received through the ECIP lands on the agenda of the parliamentary committee, a response must be formulated because that is the law. It was also emphasized by the interviewees that the legal backing combined with the adequate level of citizens’ interest contributes to (financial) sustainability for the ECIP.

## 6.2 Transparency

While the level of institutionalization of the ECIP is high, there is still room for development when it comes to transparency. While transparency is explicitly mentioned as a guiding principle on the webpage of the ECIP, there are still links missing between certain parts of the participatory process, the most problematic being the follow-up phase. As there are a number of options for how parliament decides to process the initiative, it is very difficult to design a comprehensive and user-friendly view of these processes and to steer the entire feedback phase. On the one hand, the proceedings of parliamentary committees reflect information related to any given initiative and a public and digital record of all related documents is kept so that the process could be dubbed legitimate and sufficiently transparent. On the other hand, citizen initiatives submitted through the ECIP often end up in the complex system of the various government organizations, where broader issues related to policy coordination and impact assessment come into play. This lack of transparency is not due to a lack of will, though, as it is inherent to the institutional complexity of democratic governance.

## 6.3 Influence on Policy Making

As profuse law-making is often an issue in modern democracies, the success of any given initiative cannot be measured by whether it resulted in new laws and policies. More recent theorizing on participatory democracy (Dean, 2017) also stresses the importance of a more

holistic approach to the analysis of participatory mechanisms, which contextualize participation within the constraints of representative democracy. However, a number of examples of the ECIP can demonstrate its impact on policy change. Moreover, there is evidence that the ECIP has an effect on the political process as a whole.

One of the initiatives processed by the Riigikogu was a plea made by the residents of the industrial city of Kohtla-Järve who complained about poor air quality. What was seemingly a local issue was taken up by the environmental committee at the Riigikogu, which organized a session including the representatives of all major industrial polluters of the area as well as local authorities, the Ministry of Environment, the Environmental Board and the Environmental Inspection. While the formal level of pollution was norm compliant, the committee took further steps to ensure that additional measures were taken by the polluters to further reduce pollution. The chair of the environmental committee acknowledged that this problem would never have been solved or even addressed by the government if the issue had not been taken up in the form of a citizens' initiative.

There are more examples, however, which did not result in any tangible changes in laws or policy. Due to the institutional constraints imposed on such processes by the constitution, parliament always has the final say. This is why actual influence on law or policy cannot be the yardstick for measuring the performance of the ECIP. Nevertheless, it is possible to gauge whether the ECIP has influenced the agendas of the parliamentary committees and whether the topics that come through the ECIP receive special attention when compared with issues that end up on the committees' agendas through other means. Regarding the influence of the ECIP over the committees' agendas, it is clear that this influence is substantial. Interestingly, the legal regulation has provided the parliamentary opposition a complementary opportunity to influence the parliamentary agenda, as the ECIP has been used several times by either single opposition MPs or opposition parties to forward their agenda to the relevant committee.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

There are several national-, organizational- and individual-level drivers and barriers that affect the performance of the ECIP. The analysis of these drivers and barriers allows lessons to be learned for the further improvement of the ECIP and helps take such drivers and barriers into consideration when establishing similar e-participation platforms either in Estonia or elsewhere.

### 7.1 Drivers

There are three major national-level drivers which contribute to the success of the ECIP: citizens' trust in digital solutions, technological infrastructure and the legally binding regulation of the ECIP. The experience of e-voting in national elections since 2005, general trust in digital solutions and the so-called 'digital culture' create a favourable national context for e-participation. The national policy of mandatory digital identification combined with the technical solution, which allows the digital collection of more than 1000 signatures, forms the technological infrastructure of the platform. This makes the input of citizens transparent and easily controllable. There is also a cultural dimension contributing to the digital signature as a driver of the ECIP. e-Signing for a citizens' initiative is essentially an act of digitally signing

a document – in many ways not all that different from digitally signing a bank transfer or any kind of legal contract. This technology is something that many Estonians use on a daily basis. When combining the high levels of use of the digital signature with an increasing awareness of the ECIP, there is a high chance that digitally signing citizens' initiatives will become increasingly habitual and that people will come to see the act of submitting initiatives as another way of digitally interacting with the government.

Next, the process of e-participation through the ECIP is regulated by law, which makes it legally binding. Due to the precise procedural rules, it is not possible for parliamentary committees to ignore the initiative, draw out the process indefinitely or bury the proposal until the next election. The formal regulation creates a basis for the clarity and predictability of citizen participation. The predominant legal culture in the Estonian public administration combined with (still) modestly developed civil society implies that legally forced participation has more opportunities to succeed than less formalized participatory tools. The legal guarantees of the ECIP also provide leverage over other participatory channels in the competition for the attention of the government.

As for the organizational-level drivers, the autonomy and political independence of the Cooperation Assembly can be seen as a driver of the ECIP. The quasi-governmental form of the Cooperation Assembly has made it possible for the organization to take on an active role in promoting the platform using approaches which are appropriate for NGOs but perhaps would not be as appropriate for parliament. The leadership of the assembly at the time of the launch of the ECIP had a strong background in grassroots activism, which positioned the ECIP from the very beginning as a democracy instrument by the people for the people. In other words, the organizational design of the ECIP has set the tone for the platform as being more in line with bottom-up values rather than top-down decision-making. And last but not least, since the launch of the ECIP, there have been enthusiastic individuals leading the platform who, next to the technical running of the platform, have educated citizens and NGOs on participatory democracy and have proactively searched for ways to promote the platform.

## **7.2 Barriers**

There are several national-level barriers to the development of the ECIP, including the failures of e-participation platforms in the past, confusion related to the multiplicity of existing e-participation portals as well as the limited capacity of civil society. As demonstrated in Table 8.1, previous experience with nationwide e-participation portals is not encouraging. The two first platforms were abandoned only a few years after establishment, and another existing e-participation platform, Osale.ee, has been seen as a failure (Toots, 2019). This recent history with e-participation raises the question of the long-term sustainability of e-participation platforms and is likely to demotivate not only governmental bodies but also NGOs and individual citizens from further engagement through e-participation tools.

In addition, there are three other national-level e-participation platforms in Estonia that co-exist with the ECIP: the governmental participatory portal Osale.ee, the government draft law portal EIS and the e-petitioning portal. Unlike the ECIP, none of these platforms is procedurally binding to any institution, yet people still use them, often in tandem. Such multiplicity of e-participation portals creates confusion around different processes of different e-participation channels. As the project manager of the ECIP put it: 'We have had cases where the author



of a citizens' initiative collects legally meaningless e-mail addresses instead of digital signatures, but this is because that is how it is done on the other e-petitioning site, which has been up and running for more than ten years.' The problem with the multiplicity of portals was also highlighted by the interviewee from the Chancellery of the Riigikogu:

There have been a few cases where some signatures were collected through the ECIP, and some through the other e-petitioning site, but the problem is that we cannot accept e-mails as signatures, so the whole initiative ends up not fulfilling the necessary criteria. In such cases, we have processed the initiatives as simple memoranda, which only require parliament to respond to the authors within 30 days and that's it.

The presence of several e-participation portals is an institutional barrier because citizens are essentially competing for the scarcest of resources – the attention of the government. It is the government that owns the other two e-participation portals used for inclusive policy making – Osale.ee and the draft law portal EIS – making it difficult for citizens and NGOs to understand when to use which portal. In addition, the privately run e-petitioning site Petitsioon.ee is much older than the ECIP and many people are used to using this, often for similar petitions which also feature on the ECIP. While the institutional framework is definitely a driver of e-participation in this particular case, as it favours the ECIP over other participatory platforms, the proliferation of national-level e-participatory instruments may still count as a barrier for the development of e-participation in Estonia overall. It would make sense for the government to conceptualize different national-level participatory processes and optimize the landscape of e-participatory instruments.

Yet another national-level concern is related to civil society with its low capacity to substantially influence the processes of policy making. Several interviewees mentioned that the number of signatures starts lagging somewhere around 500 (with the legally set threshold being 1000). This is related to the specific roles that NGOs fulfil in society. As the representative of the oldest and largest environmental organization in Estonia admitted, environmental NGOs are not much engaged in advocacy. Instead of campaigning for national issues, they mostly concentrate on participating in international projects on advancing environmental literacy or focus their efforts on engaging with policies on the EU level. When the interviewee tried to use the network of their organization to campaign for signatures, they were surprised by the low level of interest and engagement. Consequently, the modest level of the development of civil society can be seen as detrimental to the capabilities of NGOs in mobilizing their supporters and communicating their agenda on a broader scale.

There are also a couple of issues on the organizational level that hinder the functioning of the ECIP, including ambivalent ownership, problems with feedback and limited resources. The ownership of the ECIP portal offers an organizational puzzle: it is administered by the Cooperation Assembly affiliated to the Office of the President, even though the citizens' initiative is part of the procedural portfolio of parliament. This contributes to blurred ownership and accountability relations and assumes excellent collaboration. Ownership and accountability issues are also linked to the presence of formal authority, legitimacy and resources of the core unit of the e-participation platform – the Cooperation Assembly – thereby influencing the long-term sustainability of the ECIP. The existing organizational setup could profit from the Chancellery of the Riigikogu, as the main beneficiary of the platform, taking more prominent

Table 8.2 Drivers and barriers of the Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal

	Drivers	Barriers
National level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens' trust in digital solutions</li> <li>• Technological infrastructure</li> <li>• High level of formalization and legally binding procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failures of e-participation platforms in the past</li> <li>• Multiplicity of e-participation portals</li> <li>• Fragmentation and low capacity of civil society</li> </ul>
Organizational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous quasi-governmental organization as a proprietor of the platform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambivalent ownership and accountability relations</li> <li>• Difficulties in providing feedback on the proposals</li> <li>• Limited human and financial resources</li> </ul>
Individual level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiastic individuals leading the platform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little awareness among citizens and MPs</li> </ul>

ownership of the platform. It would further legitimize the ECIP as a participatory instrument, help with the financing of the portal and contribute to streamlining the follow-up phase.

Another organizational-level barrier is related to feedback to citizens. Structuring the follow-up phase has proven very difficult, as there are six ways for parliament to address a citizens' initiative. Sometimes the initiative is sent to other institutions in the executive government, which are instructed to formulate a response or propose a resolution. It may occur that the proposed solution addresses a problem other than the one pointed out in the initiative. Moreover, the initiative may even prompt a more substantial overhaul of a range of policies, as it did with the long-term care insurance. Namely, the author of the initiative proposed the idea for long-term care insurance, and the social committee forwarded the idea to the Ministry of Social Affairs, where a decision was made to analyse the issue of elderly care in a much more comprehensive manner. In such an instance, the initiative had a major impact on policy making, but with results other than those anticipated by the authors of the initiative. On the one hand, communicating the results of the participatory process is a systemic challenge. On the other hand, there is the question of human and financial resources. The Cooperation Assembly has one person to ensure the overall performance of the ECIP and lacks the resources to hire someone to take care of information dissemination and further promotion of the platform, as there is still little awareness of the ECIP among citizens and MPs. The roots of such underfunding are linked to the ambivalent ownership and accountability of the platform.

Drivers and barriers on national, organizational and individual levels are summarized in Table 8.2.

### 7.3 Lessons Learned

There are some aspects of the ECIP that might prove to be meaningful beyond the single case from Estonia. First, the level of institutionalization of the initiative. The high level of procedural formalization enables an increase in the legitimacy of the platform. The attention that can be allocated by the government for dealing with participatory processes can be

understood as a scarce resource. This means that if there is no formal obligation to process citizens' initiatives, other legally regulated government obligations may overrun the petitions in favour of 'more important' matters. This can be seen from the fact that the legal status of citizens' initiatives guarantees a spot on the relevant parliamentary committee's agenda. Second, the competition for the attention of decision-makers is also relevant in the presence of multiple channels for participation. In the absence of a clear governmental strategy regarding the principles and channels of participation, the proliferation of such portals can deepen mistrust between citizens and the government because the comparative outcomes of using each portal are ambiguous at best. Third, organizational design, ownership and collaboration among involved organizations and/or units play a crucial role in the operation and eventual sustainability of the platform.

Another more general lesson has to do with the input legitimacy of e-participation instruments. Even with such a low threshold for signatures as 1000, as in the case of the ECIP, it has still proven difficult to collect enough signatures. Even when the overall 'digital culture' and the ease of digitally signing initiatives drive e-participation, such a favourable context will not materialize before citizens, and NGOs are actually keen on using their opportunity to have a say in the policy-making process. As shown in the Estonian case, the e-participation platform is not a panacea for increasing citizens' engagement in policy making, as many NGOs that might potentially benefit from the opportunity presented by online participation have little experience in petitioning the government, insufficient skills for carrying out a campaign and few resources to allocate to coordinated dissemination activities. This is most likely one of the key factors that helps explain 'the Estonian paradox' (Toots et al., 2016), where success in e-government and e-voting has not translated into success in e-democracy.

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## 9. From online participation to policy making: Exploring the success behind Latvian legislative crowdsourcing platform *MyVoice*

**Visvaldis Valtenbergs**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Most early e-participation platforms in Latvia were built on the assumption ‘we will build and people will come’. Without strong organizational backing or a sustainable financing model, they largely failed to create a wider impact in society. The *MyVoice* platform is a notable exception in terms of public visibility and policy impact. Since its establishment in 2011 when citizens’ rights to directly petition parliament were introduced, the citizen initiatives coming through *MyVoice* ([www.manabalss.lv](http://www.manabalss.lv)) have changed several laws and even led to one constitutional amendment. From 2011 to 2019, 50 citizen initiatives have been submitted to parliament and 27 of them have been supported by parliament’s vote. Among the approved initiatives has been one constitutional amendment about using open voting for the president in parliament. Other notable policy successes include the introduction of a drinking bottle deposit system, the right to use the public transportation lane by motorcycles, the provision of state support for the treatment of lung cancer, hepatitis C and melanoma, automatic reimbursement of overpaid income tax, a reduced value added tax rate for certain fruits and vegetables and many others.

Besides the impressive policy record with more than half of collectively signed citizen initiatives leading to some kind of policy change, two features of *MyVoice* elevate its significance beyond the national context. First, the platform has significantly expanded the scope of political participation in Latvia. *MyVoice* allows the collection of signatures of Latvian citizens who are at least 16 years old, thus extending the rights of political participation to young people for whom the age limit to vote is 18. The necessary threshold of participation on *MyVoice* (10,000 signatures for national legislative initiatives and 2000 signatures for local government initiatives) is much lower than the required number of signatures for citizen-initiated draft laws (one tenth of the electorate). *MyVoice* has made it easy to participate in national politics from abroad, which is important for the sizable Latvian diaspora of more than 300,000. Second, unlike most e-petition platforms *MyVoice* has imposed certain content requirements for the incoming citizen initiatives, such as constitutionality and the concreteness of legislative proposals. In addition, the platform staff also consults volunteer experts on some of the initiatives. These measures are aimed at achieving better prepared citizen initiatives, bringing a higher impact on policy making.

To understand how the *MyVoice* e-participation initiative organized outside the institutional realm led to significant political impact without compromising the important values of political neutrality and trust, the chapter begins by identifying the key drivers for e-participation and then positioning the case of *MyVoice* within a broader political cultural context. This is followed by a description of the *MyVoice* platform and its organizational characteristics. An evaluation of the platform is then carried out and the key lessons are drawn.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

e-Participation has been defined as public participation via information and communication technology (ICT) in policy-making processes. More broadly, it refers to various ICT measures and platforms supporting the engagement of the stakeholder in the policy-making process (OECD, 2003; Sæbø et al., 2008). Many e-participation studies examine the benefits for the citizens and how strong participation enhances democracy and helps regain trust in institutions (e.g. Zheng and Schachter, 2017). The studies demonstrate how ICT can lower substantial barriers to creating broader, better and more qualitative e-participation, particularly in law-making, such as citizens' ignorance of the legislative process, information overload and the complexity of legal material (Manosevitch, 2014; Farina et al., 2011, 2013).

There is less research addressing the various political and administrative challenges related to the institutional and organizational context of e-participation practices. Some studies focus on management challenges relating to the costs of e-participation (Andersen et al., 2007; Wang and Bryer, 2013). Some have addressed organizational cultures and attitudes relating to the success or failure of e-government adoption in general and e-participation projects in particular (Carrizales, 2008; Aikins and Krane, 2010; Baldwin et al., 2012; Welch and Feeney, 2014). Others have touched upon stakeholders in e-participation (Feeney and Welch, 2012), while a number concentrate on the various drivers and barriers to e-participation (Chadwick, 2011; Reddick and Norris, 2013; Manosevitch et al., 2014; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Jho and Song, 2015; Zheng and Schachter, 2017).

By analysing various technological and institutional determinants of civil participation, Jho and Song (2015) emphasized that e-participation has a higher probability of increasing when institutions and technology act in conjunction. In other words, efforts to realize e-democracy through ICT will fail if only technological infrastructure is considered (Jho and Song, 2015). In a similar fashion, while attempting to explain the failure of citizen engagement initiative 'TechCounty', Chadwick (2011) concluded that the success and failure of e-participation initiatives can be explained more by complex institutional variables and less by the choice of technological tools. Therefore, the analytical model for analysing this case encompasses not only technical but also strategic, managerial, operational and societal aspects. More specifically, based on the work of Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid (2019), context, organizational factors and individual factors are examined to provide a thorough understanding of the e-participation initiative. The initiative is evaluated based on performance indicators, democratic legitimacy, the transparency of the process, influence on policy design and external collaboration.

In order to assess the role of *MyVoice* in policy making, a case study was carried out from October 2018 to February 2020. To gather first-hand empirical data, altogether nine semi-structured interviews were carried out. Three interviews with the platform's staff were aimed at examining the organizational aspects of the platform, the role of internal quality

checks of submitted initiatives and the interaction of the platform staff with stakeholder groups, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), state institutions and parliament. Two interviews were carried out with politicians from different political parties to examine the uptake of the proposed citizen initiatives in the political process. To understand the user perspective, four interviews were conducted with individuals who had used the platform to submit their initiatives for collective signing. In addition, content analysis of the platform's initiatives was conducted. The case description was supplemented by unpublished material emerging from earlier studies (Alkšere, 2016; Svence, 2016; Antonova, 2019).

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Latvia is a country with a population of 1.9 million and a low average population density (31 people per square kilometre). More than 1 million people are concentrated in the capital city Riga and its agglomeration. Its main strengths related to e-government and e-participation are its advanced coverage of ultrafast broadband. 4G in Latvia covers nearly 100 per cent of households (European Commission, 2019). According to the annual Digital Economy and Society Index, broadband was available to 90 per cent of households compared with 60 per cent in the European Union (EU) as a whole, coupled with the relatively good uptake of such connections (32 per cent of households compared with 20 per cent in the EU as a whole).

The Latvian government has made impressive progress in the development of e-government and e-services and opening up public data. According to the annual EU(27+) e-government benchmark report, Latvia ranked among the frontrunner countries in Europe, scoring 87 per cent of the highest possible score (European Commission, 2020a). According to the Open Data Maturity Report, Latvia scored just above the average EU27 level (78 per cent of the highest possible score) (European Commission, 2020b). However, there has been less emphasis on the development of participative solutions beyond developing user-friendly, one-way e-information portals. Without active state policies promoting e-participation, most projects have been launched by CSOs or active individuals. The first examples of e-participation in Latvia date back to 2007 when the CSO Tautvaldība (Popular Government) was founded. Its mission was to enable modern, informed and effective participation in government. The activists associated from Popular Government stressed the importance of low-cost and efficient Internet communication in bridging the gap between the government and the people. The organization promoted the idea of e-democracy and popular engagement opportunities and discussions about policy development. Activists criticized the formal one-way information provision model of the government and were inspired by the experience of Estonia's e-democracy platform *TID+* (*Today I decide*) implemented by the Estonian Government Office. Other projects were aimed not so much at influencing policy, but at facilitating transparent representative politics and conscious electoral choice (see Table 9.1). These were enabled by financial assistance from the Open Society Foundation and implemented by two CSOs – Providus and Delna.

Among the most successful past e-participation initiatives is crowd involvement initiative *Karstie rēķini* ('Hot Bills') created in 2012 by the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism *Re:Baltica* (see <https://rebaltica.lv/petijumi/karstie-rekini/>). The residents were asked to send their heating bills by e-mail, post or telephone. The collected bills were broken down into specific price categories and an interactive map was created that allowed citizens to



Table 9.1 Examples of most visible government and civil society e-participation initiatives in Latvia

No longer active		Active
Initiated by civil society	Initiated by government	Initiated by civil society
<i>Electoral information</i>	<i>Service evaluation, citizen feedback and suggestions</i>	<i>Legislative crowdsourcing/e-petition</i>
‘Try on a Party’, ‘Sorting Yard for Political Parties’, ‘ForAndAgainst’ and others	‘Let’s reduce the burden!’ – Mazaksslogs.lv	‘MyVoice’– Manabalss.lv
<i>Dialogue with politicians</i>	<i>Collection of online signatures</i>	<i>Electoral information</i>
‘Wise heads’	Latvija.lv – electronic signature collection for popular electoral initiatives, popular referendum on the dismissal of parliament	‘Integrity Watch, Latvia’ – Deputatuzdelnas.lv
<i>e-Petitions</i>		
Balsojums.lv (Vote)		
Peticijas.com (Petitions)		
<i>Crowdsourcing</i>		
‘Hot bills’, Karstie rēķini		

compare heating prices. More than 2200 bills were received during the campaign, which provided a large amount of data for the implementation and analysis of the study. Among the most visible government e-participation platforms is ‘Let’s reduce the burden’ (Mazināsim slogu), which is aimed at evaluating public services and collecting public feedback on state and local government institutions (see <https://mazaksslogs.gov.lv/>). The input is collected by the State Chancellery and forwarded to the relevant institutions to be sorted. A response is provided to the author of the proposal. However, due to the lack of adequate financing and human resources, there has not been significant activity on the platform since 2018. Another government-provided direct e-participation opportunity is offered by the national e-government portal Latvija.lv, where it is possible to sign popularly initiated draft laws or amendments to the constitution (see [www.latvija.lv/en/Epakalpojumi/EP177/Apraksts](http://www.latvija.lv/en/Epakalpojumi/EP177/Apraksts)). According to the law ‘On the Peoples’ Referendum, the Proposal of Laws and the European Citizens’ Initiative’, signature collection for the amendments can last for 12 months after they have been submitted to the Central Electoral Commission (LR Saeima, 1994a). As of January 2019, not a single draft law has been passed by popular electoral initiative (including electronically collected signatures), since the required minimum number of signatures (ca. 155,000) is high relative to the size of the national population. Among the six initiatives submitted on Latvija.lv, the most signatures (29,481) were collected for the draft law to abolish the real estate tax on one immovable property owned by a natural person of Latvia, in which the place of residence was declared. The campaign was backed by the political party From Heart to Latvia. Online collection of signatures is also allowed for initiating the popular referendum on the dismissal of parliament (Article 25, section 4). Importantly, the law also stipulates that besides the central national e-government platform Latvija.lv, other online platforms can be

used for the collection of signatures, thus extending the range of possible technological solutions for e-participation projects (LR Saeima, 1994a).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF *MYVOICE*

### 4.1 Background, Aims and Scope

*MyVoice* emerged in the aftermath of the Great Recession when legislature and government adopted a drastic financial austerity package. Several public protest activities ultimately led to the president's decree to dismiss parliament, which was approved in the popular referendum in 2011. The wave of social mobilization provided a significant push for the development of the *MyVoice* platform, as it created fertile ground for alternative citizen participation in civil society. The initial idea came from two social activists, Kristofs Blaus and Jānis Erts. In the beginning, several ideas circulated, including making the platform for electronic citizen referendums, but after consulting several legal professionals and citizen activists, it was decided to focus on the submission of citizen ideas aimed at changing the existing policy. It was deemed a more realistic alternative than referendums, considering that the level of citizen participation would not have reached the level that is constitutionally required for referendums (Interview with a platform manager, 19 January 2019).

In order to change policy, citizens' initiatives go through the following steps:

1. The citizen submits their initiative to the *MyVoice* portal.
2. The *MyVoice* team performs a quality test on the idea based on the platform's criteria.
3. The initiative is placed on the *MyVoice* portal for others to sign.
4. After reaching 10,000 signatures, the initiative is submitted to the Saeima.
5. If the initiative reaches the required majority under vote in the Saeima, it is introduced in legislation.

#### 4.1.1 Citizen initiatives

Unlike simple ideas, calls or proposals that are addressed as regular or electronic petitions to executive or legislative bodies, *MyVoice* works with so-called citizen initiatives that are in legal terms considered collective addresses. Unlike regular petitions, collective addresses typically have stronger content requirements (aimed at proposing concrete legislative change), a narrower scope of initiators (typically only citizens) and a certain minimum threshold of signatories. In addition, collective addresses usually require a decision or response (Tiburcio, 2015).

Since 2011, *MyVoice* has published over 500 citizen initiatives (see Figure 9.1 and Table 9.2), while the number of incoming initiatives is much greater. In the content analysis of the citizen initiatives dating to 2016, Svence (2016) found that most initiatives could be described as moderate, not strictly conservative or liberal, followed by moderately left-leaning initiatives. Most *MyVoice* citizen initiatives fall into the categories of economy, state governance, transportation, environment, culture or taxes. A significant number of initiatives are also dedicated to social order, health and urban planning.

In 2020, the platform published 109 citizen initiatives (of the incoming 273). Forty-two of those published gathered the required number of signatures and were submitted to parliament.

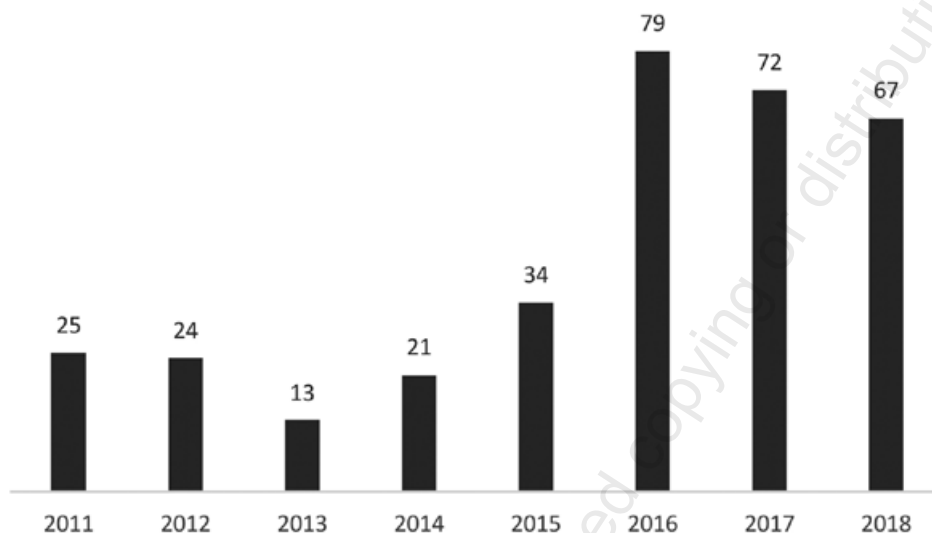


Figure 9.1 The number of citizen initiatives published on the MyVoice platform, 2011–2018

Table 9.2 Key performance indicators of MyVoice, 2019–2020

	2019	2020
Citizen initiatives received	190	273
Number of citizen initiatives published on MyVoice	56 (67 in 2018)	109
Number of initiatives submitted to parliament	13	42
Number of citizen signatures	257,064 (235,264 in 2018)	366,436
Number of new platform users	43,825 (28,327 in 2018)	60,672
Initiatives approved by parliament + changes made at governmental level	3	6

Source: Data obtained from the MyVoice platform content editor (14 January 2021).

Six initiatives were approved by parliament. Overall, the platform received 366,436 unique signatures and 60,672 new unique IP addresses (see Figure 9.1 and Table 9.2).

#### 4.1.2 Legal framework

The submission of collective addresses is regulated by the Rules of Procedure of the Saeima. Article 131 sets a threshold of 10,000 signatures of Latvian citizens who have reached the age of 16 on the day of submission of the collective address. The rules do not specify in what form (digital or paper) the initiatives can be submitted (LR Saeima, 1994b). There is currently no formal procedure for local-level initiatives. In order to present an initiative in the municipality, no specific number of signatures must be reached, but it is generally recommended by

*MyVoice* that the initiative gathers 2000–5000 signatures depending on the size of the municipality and the subject of the initiative.

It is important to emphasize that *MyVoice* distinguishes between the ideas submitted by citizens and by political parties. Political parties and companies willing to use the platform for gathering signatures and mobilizing public support are allowed to do so for a nominal fee of 1000 euros. This policy was adopted in 2017 to counter the risk of the hijacking of the platform by political parties even though regular party members can still post their private initiatives for no fee as long as they agree in writing not to associate the initiative with their political party. Several initiatives have been introduced by various political parties. In one instance, the portal removed the initiative because the politician did not want to comply with the requirement and pay for the initiative. This rule has been criticized by some politicians as non-transparent (Alkšere, 2016).

#### 4.1.3 Quality test for the initiatives submitted

*MyVoice* can be considered an e-participation platform that combines the ease of the few-click signing of published ideas with the elements of legislative crowdsourcing because of the significant effort that citizens invest in improving the initiatives before they are made public (Interview with a platform manager, 19 January 2019). Unlike in unmoderated petition platforms, the citizen initiatives on the *MyVoice* platform are filtered according to eight criteria (Box 9.1). The filtering is performed by the *MyVoice* team. In the case of doubt, voluntary experts are consulted.

### BOX 9.1 THE QUALITY CRITERIA OF CITIZEN INITIATIVES

1. The idea should be legally introduced by a vote of the Saeima or a local government of Latvia.
2. The idea must not conflict with the foundations of the State of Latvia.
3. The idea should offer a specific solution to a problem.
4. The initiative must be in line with the values of a democratic society.
5. The initiative must be formulated against certain people, events or ideas.
6. The statements made in the initiative must be true and verifiable.
7. The idea must be submitted in Latvian without grammatical errors.
8. In order to better reflect the idea, the initiative should contain an illustrative image.

Source: *MyVoice* website: <https://manabalss.lv/pages/par-manabalss-lv>.

In the beginning of the platform's operation, the portal published only around 20 per cent of all submitted initiatives. According to the platform's content manager, the quality of citizen initiatives has improved over time. For example, in 2019, the platform received 190 initiatives but published only 56 (see Table 9.2). This can be attributed to the clearer explanation of publishing criteria on the website, communication activities with the public and the overall positive learning curve of the platform audience. According to the platform's director, it is critical to respect the foundations of the State of Latvia or the constitutionality of the initiative. Meanwhile, some incoming initiatives have been plainly unrealistic and, according to the platform's staff, the filter was needed to avoid public shaming and to maintain the credibility and

legitimacy of the platform (Interview with a platform staff member, 10 May 2019). One such example was the proposal for the Latvian army to introduce nuclear weapons.

According to the platform's staff, it is not always easy to sort through incoming initiatives, therefore external experts are consulted (Interview with a platform staff member, 10 May 2019). Though it is not considered a general rule, according to the platform's director, there have been a few instances where the initiative was published on the platform even when the experts had voiced their doubts. For example, the initiative for raising the minimum wage to 1000 euros in two to three years was published alongside the commentary from the experts. The content administrator of *MyVoice* provides written feedback to the authors of the initiatives.

#### **4.1.4 Collection of citizen signatures**

After the citizen initiative has received positive feedback from the content administrator, it is published on the *MyVoice* platform. It remains there for as long as the author of the initiative desires. Sometimes the initiative remains on the platform even though it has been submitted to parliament in order to demonstrate that it continues to gather public support (Interview with a platform staff member, 10 May 2019). Most published initiatives do not contain any additional informative materials (such as evidence-based research, visual presentations), although it is possible to add them on the portal (Antonova, 2019). The authors of successful initiatives frequently engage in additional promotional activities for their cause, such as cooperating with media, popularizing the initiative via social networking platforms, organizing public events, etc. (Svence, 2016; Antonova, 2019). In the process of the collection of citizen signatures, *MyVoice* staff does not promote any initiatives.

#### **4.1.5 Submission to parliament**

After the initiative has gathered at least 10,000 signatures, it is submitted to the Mandate, Ethics and Submissions Commission (MESC) of parliament, which is obliged to review it within one month. Consequently, the MESC invites the authors as selected experts to a public hearing. Though the *MyVoice* staff is also present at the hearing, it abstains from taking any position regarding the initiative. In this phase, the authors of the initiative can bring their own selected experts to the MESC meeting. As a general rule, the MESC transfers an initiative to the relevant commission of parliament or to the relevant ministry of the government with a request for provision of an opinion. The initiative is never rejected by the MESC. The MESC maintains a public website on the parliament portal with a list of citizen initiatives (<http://mandati.saeima.lv/kolekt%C4%ABvie-iesniegumi>). The website lists the name of the initiative, the date on which the initiative was received by parliament, a short summary of the initiative and the key milestones in the advancement of the initiative. The key milestones include the date on which the initiative was sent to the relevant parliamentary commission or to the relevant ministry, the date on which the opinion was received from the relevant intuitions of the government, the dates on which the relevant decisions were taken by vote in parliament or in the commission and other relevant information.

On several occasions, the initiatives got stuck in parliament. At the end of 2020 there were 29 initiatives (dating back from 2015) awaiting action by parliament. Among these initiatives was the most popular initiative in the platform's history, 'On the abolition of real estate tax on sole property', which had gathered over 40,000 signatures (Table 9.3). The main reason for initiatives getting stuck is the lack of political support of the parliamentary majority, as

**Table 9.3** Overview of the status of submitted MyVoice initiatives from 2011 to May 2019

Status of initiative	Quantity
Submitted and approved by the Saeima	13
Approved by the Saeima before obtaining the required 10,000 signatures on <i>MyVoice</i>	14
Submitted to the Saeima and not approved	11
Currently submitted to the Saeima and under review	21
Submitted to the Saeima but not recognized as a proper collective address	1
Submitted to municipalities and approved	2
Submitted to municipalities and not approved	4
Submitted to municipalities and under review	6
Submitted to the ministry and not approved	1

illustrated by the initiative to ban gambling, which lacked the political force to get it through parliament. Parliament's Rules of Procedure do not require that a response to the initiative be provided. To resolve this, the *MyVoice* team meets with the representatives of the administration of parliament and the MESK to update the information on stuck initiatives. The team is also pressing for change in the Rules of Procedure so that stuck initiatives do not go unresolved for several months.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The *MyVoice* platform is maintained by the CSO Civic Participation Foundation founded by private individuals. Day-to-day technological support is provided by in-house specialists; larger projects are implemented by freelancers and partner private companies.

### 5.1 Leadership and Individual Characteristics

The staff is led by the director who is responsible for the strategic management of the platform. In addition, there is a content editor, a community editor and a part-time programmer. Additional staff can be recruited for specific projects. According to the platform's director, training a new staff member takes considerable time and effort. The employees require a level of competence that surpasses the need of an ordinary non-profit organization volunteer and matches the level required for work in a specialized public relations agency. The platform's director values trust and staff autonomy over supervision, micro management and performance review (Interview with platform director, 19 January 2019).

### 5.2 Organizational Processes and Collaboration

The key organizational process is to perform quality checks on incoming initiatives and to interact with different stakeholder groups that include the authors of citizen initiatives – individuals, informal groups, CSOs, interest groups and political parties as well as the members of parliament with the power to make decisions. Initially, the portal attracted mostly individuals, but lately there has been an increase in initiatives submitted by CSOs and informal activist

groups (Svence, 2016). CSOs have been behind the majority of successful initiatives bringing legislative decisions (Antonova, 2019).

In the process of checking the quality of incoming citizen initiatives, the leading role is performed by the *MyVoice* content editor, who scans the initiative along with at least one other *MyVoice* staff member (the four-eyes principle). If the initiative meets the platform requirements, it is usually grammatically and stylistically improved. If the legitimacy, purposefulness or expected effectiveness of the initiative is questioned by platform staff members, one or several external experts are invited to provide their opinion on the initiative. Experts are generally asked whether and how to reformulate or refocus the initiative to make it more feasible and better argued. This is followed by a round of correspondence with the authors about the necessary improvements or the rejection of the initiative. There is a network of around 30 volunteer experts who provide their opinions on the initiatives pro bono. The experts are selected based on their area of expertise and public visibility. During the academic year, most expert consultations are provided by law students from the Legal Practice and Assistance Center of the University of Latvia.

### 5.3 Financial Independence

Unlike many e-participation platforms, *MyVoice* does not receive state financing for covering operational expenses and therefore has adopted a self-financing model maintained through micro donations. Platform users who would like to sign an initiative are invited to click on the pop-up invitation and donate. Donations can be made by credit card or bank link. Since 2011 44,500 unique individuals have made donations. The most frequently donated amounts are 0.50, 2 and 5 euros. On average, the platform raises ca. 30,000 euros a year from 13,000 to 15,000 micro donations. The money is used to pay for the platform's basic operations (basic staff costs, server and maintenance costs). According to the platform's director, these donations are the cornerstone of the platform's independence and financial sustainability. The platform attracts additional financing from credible donors, such as the European Commission, the Ministry of Culture, the Embassy of the United States and a few corporate donors.

According to the director, each new project that the Civic Participation Foundation implements must be financially self-sustainable. Due to the growing costs of software development and programming, financial resources is currently the main operating restriction for *MyVoice*. Several platform modernization projects, such as the mobile app version, the global authentication module, instant verification of signatures and others, cannot be implemented due to lack of financing. The platform actively seeks funding opportunities in civic- and scientific-oriented projects that are mostly funded by EU programmes. The platform's management maintains that it keeps a firm distance from aligning with political parties and business groups and is generally cautious when collaborating with other CSOs in order to avoid being associated with certain interest groups (Interview with platform director, 19 January 2019).

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

### 6.1 Performance Indicators

In public presentations, *MyVoice* frequently emphasizes performance in policy making as the key to the success of the portal, implying that e-participation should be meaningful and lead to concrete results in policy change (Interview with platform staff, 24 January 2020). As indicated above, until the end of 2019, 50 initiatives were submitted to parliament and 27 of them have been supported by parliament's vote, whereas in 2020, only six initiatives out of the 42 submitted were approved by parliament. There is, however, contrasting evidence behind the success of citizen initiatives in changing law or policy. The content of citizen initiatives and the role of other factors influencing the political agenda explain the performance of the platform.

In the most popular initiatives, the text contained a clear and specific idea for which applicants would like to advocate. An important criterion for an initiative's success is its concreteness. According to the platform's content manager, the initiative should be realistic and financially possible to implement (Interview with platform content manager, 10 May 2019). Many popular and successful initiatives also mentioned the experience of other countries and posited Latvia as a 'lagging' country. It seems that the shaming rhetoric is working in favour of the popularity of the initiative (Antonova, 2019). Among the initiatives generating a lot of emotion were those addressing injustice, unfairness or dishonesty and strengthening the belief that the processes in state and public administration are not sufficiently open and transparent, that there is potential for corruption or that officials are getting too much out of their position in office. This was true for the initiative 'Against refunds for members of parliament who have lost their parliamentary mandate'. The initiative on the unfairness of the reimbursement system of the members of parliament quickly collected the required number of signatures. Overall, more emotionally saturated initiatives with a negative connotation attracted larger numbers of signees, though the publishing criteria of *MyVoice* imply that the wording of the initiative should be phrased in support of an idea (Antonova, 2019). In a number of cases, the initiatives essentially took a position against a decision, an activity or an existing law.

Nearly all of the most popular initiatives have been a public response to an event that has been widely spoken about in the media and in the public space at the time of the submission. Few popular initiatives (those with many signatures on *MyVoice*) actually lead to policy changes. Six of the initiatives submitted to the Saeima were so popular that they collected 10,000 signatures in less than a month. Yet, these initiatives have not materialized in policy change. As indicated above, the most signed initiative 'On the abolishment of real estate tax for the sole property' received over 50,000 signatures but did not lead to changes in tax law, which proves the importance of fiscal considerations in policy making as well as the political position of the ruling coalition. Other factors such party orientation and coalition agreements are important in determining the policy outcome of citizen initiatives. Among the initiatives that have failed to collect the required number of signatures for a longer period of time are initiatives on topics that may not be of great interest to a Latvian audience, such as the initiatives 'Inclusion of the Game of Cards in General Education Training Programme' and 'Recognition of the Palestinian State within the 1967 borders' or initiatives that are quite specific or aimed at narrow audiences, such as 'On the expiration date and prices of fishing permits'.



## 6.2 Democratic Legitimacy

*MyVoice* has broadened the channels of participation and mobilization by lowering the financial and time barriers to participation. The interviews with activists revealed that the prime reason for submitting an initiative was the perceived difficulty to bring the idea into the political agenda through the traditional political process. For most respondents, placing an initiative on the *MyVoice* platform provided an easy way to attract the attention of the general public and the media to the cause and helped save financial resources (Svence, 2016). Yet, despite these benefits, there was a shared concern about the responsiveness of state institutions after submission of their initiative to parliament. Respondents felt the gap between them and the political agenda and felt that the prospect of gaining public support was not going to lead to a straightforward change in policy (Svence, 2016). For some, the entire process took too much effort, crushing the myth that push-button democracy was an easy game changer. A respondent expressed the feeling of being intimidated when facing government officials on the other end of the table but felt relieved to receive support from the members of the Parliamentary Committee. An activist of the initiative ‘Life without the Hepatitis C’ acknowledged:

Three of us went to the Commission [hearing] – me, another girl who had studied public relations but did not have any understanding about the health policy – I also had no knowledge of it – and an old lady, a retiree, a head of an association who was a retired nurse. The three of us made calculations of the economic efficiency [of our proposal] and placed it before the Ministry of Health, the National Health Service, the State Agency of Medicines – a team of ten people who all play on one side. The Commission sent us home as they had not prepared; they just didn’t consider that we were better prepared than they were. (Svence, 2016)

There is some evidence that *MyVoice* has extended the range of issues that have been articulated and addressed to decision-makers. Commenting on the general features of *MyVoice* initiatives, the platform director highlights the fact that certain topics, such as animal rights, are indeed becoming more popular on *MyVoice* even though they may not yet be that relevant in the public domain (Interview with platform director, 19 January 2019). More than a quarter of initiatives analysed contained elements of post-material or so-called ‘new politics’ (Svence, 2016). Antonova (2019) has found that, according to Inglehart’s post-material and material value scale, 62 per cent of initiatives were identified as traditional-material and 38 per cent as post-material.

## 6.3 Transparency of the Process

The public can easily monitor the course of the initiatives from the date of submission to entry into political agenda on the *MyVoice* website, yet there is a transparency deficit at the beginning and at the end of the participation process. *MyVoice* staff performs a crucial gate-keeping function to sort out well-prepared initiatives. The platform’s own editorial processes and expert-driven evaluation in more controversial instances might seem less transparent and egalitarian, but according to the platform’s director, they encourage better-prepared citizen initiatives. Sometimes, the authors of rejected initiatives are grateful that they have been heard and have admitted to receiving a deeper understanding of the issues involved in this communication process (Interview with content editor, 14 January 2021). It is important to note that the names of neither the experts nor the authors of the initiative are disclosed in the process.

Some transparency deficit is also observed once the citizen initiative enters parliament. The parliamentary website shows the advancement of initiatives, but due to its poor design, it does not make it easy for the public and journalists to keep track. In addition, the information about the advancement of initiatives is updated on the *MyVoice* website, providing additional references to any related media coverage. The platform's staff plays an active role in strengthening transparency. Once the opinion is received from the parliamentary committee or from the government, the *MyVoice* staff contacts the author of the initiative and they consult on the course of further action. In the event of a negative opinion, the *MyVoice* staff might advise the author to contact one of the political parties in parliament to seek additional support for repeated examination of the initiative.

#### 6.4 Influence on Policy Design and External Collaboration

The influence on policy design is facilitated by the platform's neutrality and the level of trust and acceptance among major stakeholders – political parties and CSOs. Several citizen initiatives have been taken up by parliament and approved before reaching the required 10,000 signatures, such as providing transport registration licences in the size of a credit card. This shows that politicians are willing to take up some initiatives into the political agenda or use the platform to spot solutions to specific issues that might be technical and easy to implement (Interview with platform director, 19 January 2019).

The interviewed members of parliament generally viewed the submission of citizen initiatives in electronic format as a positive and democratic practice because the process provided an opportunity for people to express their views and communicate with state institutions as well as their supporters (Alkšere, 2016). An opportunity to articulate and defend their interests in instances where non-governmental organizations (e.g. trade unions) and political parties fail was also acknowledged. The interviewed members of parliament agreed that citizen initiatives should be of better quality, which could be achieved through the establishment of quality standards, codes or consultative boards. Political neutrality was seen as the key principle in maintaining the necessary level of trust in the platform so that collaboration can continue (Alkšere, 2016). These expectations are also confirmed by the platform's director, who stressed that the role of the *MyVoice* staff is limited to informational assistance:

We're not really a good-spirited office. We are neither supporters nor critics of a specific initiative. But we are, of course, in favour of all activities. That doesn't mean we support everything that has been published. But we support the enthusiasm, courage and daring of the authors to express themselves, but we do not provide assistance, for example, in organizing demonstrations. We are providing information assistance. (Interview with platform director, 19 January 2019)

There have not been major attempts to delegitimize the platform, although it has occasionally been drawn into political battles regarding controversial citizen initiatives, such as the initiative that called for the legalization of cohabitation between partners. However, in most cases, political parties on all sides of the political spectrum have come to accept the neutrality and legitimacy of the platform.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The *MyVoice* platform clearly represents a sociotechnical approach to e-democracy as a technologically simple participatory gateway for citizens with relatively sophisticated internal processes aimed at increasing the quality of incoming citizen initiatives. This echoes the conclusions of those who emphasized that e-participation has a higher probability of increasing when institutions and technology act in conjunction (Jho and Song 2015; Chadwick, 2011). *MyVoice* has successfully taken advantage of a hybrid media and political system. The mobilization of society in the process of collecting signatures is affected by traditional media and the digital environment, social networks and platforms, political events and offline activities (Chadwick 2007, 2013). Several lessons can be drawn from the factors influencing the performance and impact of *MyVoice* in Latvian policy making.

First, *contextual factors* such as high ICT use and the relative openness and transparency of the Latvian parliamentary system are relevant in explaining the success of *MyVoice*. The introduction of collective addresses in the form of electronically submitted citizen initiatives has created a low-barrier opportunity for the direct involvement of citizens in politics. During times of social, economic and political turbulence, demand for low-cost citizen mobilization and participation platforms increased in Latvia, and the public sphere became a lively place for a multiplicity of loud, sometimes unorganized, voices. *MyVoice* provided a time-saving participatory alternative with a concrete policy impact. Its scope and goals were defined clearly and realistically and have not changed since its establishment. The platform's relationship with parliament is based on an informal relationship. It is difficult to see this kind of informal relationship in larger democracies with complex institutional hierarchies and stakeholder relations.

Second, *organizational factors* and processes are appropriate for handling the ever growing number of incoming initiatives. *MyVoice* ensures important behind-the-scenes processes, such as performing quality checks on incoming citizen initiatives and providing informational assistance to activists whose initiatives have reached parliament. The platform's content manager and the network of external experts play an active role in verifying incoming initiatives, ensuring that the statements expressed in citizen initiatives are verifiable. While the filtering and editorial processes are currently not fully transparent, the platform's concern with the quality of content seems relevant in times when disinformation and fake news pose challenges for the quality of public discourse. The financial independence of the platform from major public and private donors also ensures its credibility, though the lack of stable financing poses significant challenges in developing the platform.

Finally, several *individual factors* contribute to the platform's greater value for citizens. Among these factors is clear and understandable online content. Feedback is provided to participants, showing how their initiatives influence decision-making at the political level. There is evidence that *MyVoice* has strengthened the decision-making process by allowing politicians to monitor and borrow citizen ideas; however, it has not always been easy to deal with politicized initiatives and vested interests.

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# 10. Public online consultation in Lithuania: A political declaration or the real empowerment of citizens?

**Rasa Bortkevičiūtė and Vitalis Nakrošis**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The growing need to enhance democratic governance, empower citizens and provide them with more practical channels of participation has led to the emergence of various e-participation initiatives (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). The widespread use of information and communications technology (ICT) was expected to serve as a new tool to increase political engagement (Sæbø et al., 2008). However, high initial expectations have not always become a reality in terms of users' willingness to participate (Toots, 2019).

It is important to elucidate the main reasons behind the existing mismatch between governmental expectations for e-participation and the uptake of these tools. To account for the outcomes of e-participation initiatives, scholars have analysed the successes and failures of e-participation platforms, identified research gaps and elaborated frameworks for further analysis (Gulati et al., 2014; Panopoulou et al., 2014). Despite general agreement that the implementation of e-participation initiatives is influenced by various macro-, meso- and micro-level factors, the interplay of barriers and drivers contributing to the success of e-participation platforms is still unclear (Steinbach et al., 2019).

The application of e-participation tools rarely interests Lithuanian scholars. Greater attention has been paid to the analysis of these practices at the municipal level (Petrauskas, 2012), which came into focus as a result of European Union (EU) financial support for e-democracy in 2007–2013. However, no recent research exists on the application of e-democracy tools.

This chapter aims to fill this research gap by conducting a case study on the implementation of public online consultations announced on the E-Citizen platform until the second quarter of 2020. E-Citizen is a part of the Office of the Government webpage 'My Government' providing access to government information and e-democracy tools. This initiative is important for three reasons. First, despite increasing awareness among Lithuanian citizens of the possibilities for e-participation, their engagement in decision-making processes remains rather low (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). Second, in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan for 2016–2018, Lithuanian authorities pledged to introduce a uniform public consultation standard based on a single public consultation methodology with the aim to foster civic participation and engagement in public governance (Office of the Government, 2016). Third,

*E-Citizen* is the sole tool of the Office of the Government that promotes online consultation with citizens during policy-making processes on the national level.

The analytical framework is based on synthesizing existing literature on e-participation, covering the aspects of success and failure of e-democracy initiatives, ranging from adoption to evaluation. Recent empirical findings highlight the need to move beyond a technological perspective in assessing e-participation (Medaglia, 2012). The chapter proposes a more integrated approach towards the evaluation of e-participation tools, bringing together the most relevant variables at the national, organizational and individual levels into one framework.

The empirical research is based on desk research, a documentary analysis of available administrative information and 11 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of public online consultations. Together, the data collected provide sufficient empirical evidence on the application of the tool and offer a better understanding of the factors and motivations behind its use.

The aim of this chapter is to assess whether the principle of government openness declared by Lithuanian authorities has resulted in the empowerment of citizens and which set of factors can account for the success or failure of the initiative. The study addresses two main questions. First, how successful is the Lithuanian platform for public online consultation? Second, which factors have the most significant impact on the results of this e-participation initiative?

This chapter is structured as follows. After the introduction, the analytical background and empirical research methodology are presented, followed by the analysis on public online consultations on the *E-Citizen* platform. Next, the contextual factors surrounding the Lithuanian online consultation initiative at the national, organizational and individual levels are discussed. Finally, the evaluation of the initiative is presented and the chapter concludes by discussing the main factors that influence performance of the platform.

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Recent research points to various barriers and drivers associated with the e-participation process. The effectiveness of e-participation tools is usually related to the national culture, the political system, technology or management strategies, without any in-depth analysis of their interdependence (Steinbach et al., 2019). In line with the transformational approach that has previously been applied in public administration research (Verhoest et al., 2010), it is claimed in this chapter that the influence of national-level factors can be transformed by organizational-level and individual-level factors and vice versa, thus shaping the implementation of e-participation initiatives.

### 2.1 National Level

*The politico-administrative context* plays an important role in the adoption of e-participation tools. Political institutions and processes provide a background for individual expression, transmission of information and social choices (Jho and Song, 2015). Academic research proves that e-democracy initiatives achieved better results in countries with stronger democratic institutions (Gulati et al., 2014) and a more professional and efficient public sector (Norris and Moon, 2005). In addition, the behaviour of civil servants is shaped by the policy and legal context, which in turn affects the use of e-participation tools. Regulations might

determine conditions for democratic participation, including access to technology and information, the right to participate and safeguards for participants (Berntzen and Karamagioli, 2010).

The dominant *public-administration culture* should also be considered: citizen engagement might interest a civil service oriented towards standardized administrative procedures (Rose et al., 2015). The dominant values are of the highest importance as they set a standard for the practices or activities of the organization (Esteves and Joseph, 2008). If practices are institutionalized, civil servants might gradually turn them into a mode of behaviour. Thus, citizen engagement is the outcome of long-lasting relationships between different government institutions as well as those between government and citizens (Jho and Song, 2015).

The aforementioned factors might also affect citizen behaviour. The introduction of ICT does not stimulate citizen engagement itself. On the contrary, it mirrors usual participation challenges and supplements them with ICT specificities (Le Blanc, 2020). There are a few success factors for e-participation on its demand side. First, there are citizens who are ‘willing but unable’ to participate. This might be due to a variety of reasons, ranging from language barriers to disability. As a digital divide might also play an important role, it is necessary to evaluate *digital governance*. Second, the strength of *civil society* matters. There are citizens who are ‘able but unwilling’ to participate, which may be caused by low interest in politics, limited knowledge or time resources. Political efficacy is also relevant, referring to the feeling that citizens might influence socio-political changes and their content (OECD, 2009).

## 2.2 Organizational Level

e-Participation projects usually involve various stakeholders, which brings organizational-level barriers into play. The *ownership* of e-participation initiatives matters, as research points to varying success between bottom-up (initiated by citizens) and top-down (initiated by state authorities) projects. Despite usually failing to mobilize citizens, ownership of public authorities is necessary to ‘place e-participation at the heart of public debate’ (Maier and Reimer, 2010, p. 47).

*Partnerships* with other stakeholders could soften the drawbacks of ownership. Collaboration with civil society or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public services or other groups attracts stakeholders who would not otherwise be involved. In addition, partners transfer their knowledge and experience to other stakeholders, thus promoting e-participation (Sánchez-Nielsen et al., 2014).

In addition, *administration and funding* matter in maintaining the incremental development of e-participation initiatives within administrative contexts (Panopoulou et al., 2011). Funding is important not only in terms of sufficient direct investment, but also as additional financing for human resources. Programme-defeating frustration might occur when managers and employees are required to maintain a new initiative in addition to their regular jobs (Rose and Grant, 2010).

Finally, it is important to ensure that e-participation initiatives are sustained after the official project life cycle has ended. This is closely related to the experience and knowledge gained in the implementation phase (Sánchez-Nielsen et al., 2014). Changes in *organizational culture* in terms of civil servants’ openness to innovation are necessary to achieve this goal, which may be promoted by normative pressure, rules or policies (Welch and Feeney, 2014).



### 2.3 Individual Level

The change in organizational culture and the overall success of e-participation initiatives depend on the role of *political and bureaucratic leaders*. Permanent leadership is regarded as one of the main success factors for e-democracy tools as it helps to maintain personnel commitment as well as attract financial resources (Carrizales, 2008). If state authorities understand the potential of e-participation tools, they can translate the idea for implementors, make it a priority and support it to its conclusion (Panopoulou et al., 2014). Fostered throughout the various levels of bureaucracy, support for a programme may not only lead to short-term positive outcomes of the cooperation (Rose and Grant, 2010), but also change the organizational culture in the long term.

### 2.4 Methodology

A definition of success is vital for determining the success of e-participation tools. Despite varying perceptions of this concept (e.g. Macintosh and Whyte, 2008), this chapter considers the outputs, outcomes and impact of *E-Citizen* during the assessment (Smith et al., 2011). Outputs are defined by the quality and quantity of consultations (their amount, the specificity of the topic, the structure of questions). Outcomes cover specific objectives that are mostly related to the participant side (their amount and target groups). Finally, impact stands for broader societal change. However, as part of this information was unavailable or it was too early to evaluate the impact of the *E-Citizen* platform, individual measures of possible impact (e.g. availability of results and further steps) were analysed. The evaluation of this platform was carried out by combining a general overview with the analysis of individual e-consultations.

To address the research aim, the study was carried out in three stages based on a qualitative case study method. First, desk research was executed exploring national-, organizational- and individual-level factors in order to understand the context of the initiative. Second, an in-depth analysis of the e-consultations implemented on the *E-Citizen* platform was performed. Third, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted in spring-summer 2019 and summer 2020 with the main stakeholders of the initiative. The following interviewees were selected based on purposeful sampling: a representative of the Office of the Government; two representatives (who participated in the interview together) from business consultancy Civitta; an expert in political participation; a participant in the programme 'Create Lithuania' (professionals with international experience contributing to government strategic projects); civil servants from five Lithuanian ministries performing public online consultations; and two members of NGOs who participated in public consultations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, all respondents gave informed consent. Data were analysed using open, selective and axial coding.

## 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

### 3.1 Cultural-Historical Context

The heritage of the Soviet administrative tradition produced a lack of accountability, low levels of trust in external control mechanisms and rigidity in hierarchy and legislation (Palidaukaitė et al., 2010). Although Lithuania has achieved an irreversible break from the Soviet administrative system, public administration remains very legalistic and follows the ‘Rechtstaat’ tradition. Legalism permeates the civil service where laws delineate the duties and responsibilities of civil servants, effectively limiting their discretion (Nakrošis, 2018). Despite going through ‘a transitional period in terms of culture and attitudes’ (Interview with a participation expert), most representatives of state institutions are still not familiar with the main tools of public participation (Pilietinės visuomenės institutas, 2015).

### 3.2 Politico-Administrative Context

Lithuania, with a population of approximately 2.8 million inhabitants, is a unitary state and a semi-parliamentary democracy. It has a dual executive: the president and the government. The prime minister and 14 ministers form the cabinet in the executive. The 2016–2020 (coalition) government led by Prime Minister S. Skvernelis was in office at the time of writing this chapter. The country’s legislative process has been found to be ineffective, suffering from a large volume of legal acts and frequent changes thereto (National Audit Office, 2018). The legislative process lacks timely evidence-based analysis due to the rarity of impact assessment, stakeholder consultation and policy evaluation, which might be related to the legalistic nature of policy making. In addition, a substantial number of laws are deliberated according to the procedure of special urgency, which limits the possibility of thoroughly discussing proposals with citizens (Nakrošis et al., 2018).

### 3.3 Policy and Legal Context

Over the last decade, Lithuania has established an enabling legal, institutional and policy framework for citizen participation (OECD, 2015b). Support for more open and inclusive governance is rooted in long-term strategic documents, such as National Development Strategy Lithuania 2030. It has also been a re-occurring topic in Lithuanian government programmes, backed by a few medium-term strategies (e.g. Programme for the Improvement of Public Governance 2012–2020), which highlight the need to develop e-democracy tools and mention public consultation as the main tool for citizen inclusion in policy making. The obligation to consult with stakeholders on draft laws is foreseen in the Public Administration Law and the Law on the Legislative Framework without providing specific details on the form or method of consultation. Moreover, the latter law connects consultation to the use of the Legislative Information System on the Seimas website that suffers from insufficient time allocated for contributions, belated involvement of citizens in policy making and low enthusiasm of the executive branch (OECD, 2015a). Despite government interest in the development of e-participation as expressed at the strategic level, the current regulation leaves a great deal of discretion to state institutions.

### 3.4 Digital Governance

Eighty-two per cent of Lithuanian households have access to the Internet, and people within the age group of 16–34 use it daily. Despite a significant growth in the United Nations e-participation and e-Government Indexes, the country's e-democracy practices attract a minor share of Internet users: only 1 per cent of them submitted draft legislation, and 3 per cent of users provided suggestions for improving such decisions (Official Statistics Portal, 2019). When searching for information about state institutions, most citizens still prefer direct interaction (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). This may be related with the digital divide, as elders, disabled people and citizens living in rural areas or having a lower income tend to use the Internet less (Informacinės visuomenės plėtros komitetas, 2018). There are a few e-participation platforms initiated by state institutions or civil society representatives, but they are usually not well developed or are no longer operational; therefore, *E-Citizen* is the main tool for facilitating collaboration between the government and citizens.

### 3.5 Civil Society

The culture of participation was abandoned during the Soviet period, and Lithuanian authorities have not yet found an effective prescription for rebuilding it (Šiugždinienė et al., 2019). Even though citizens' awareness of their potential influence on public affairs has been increasing, their engagement in policy making remained low during the last decade (Pilietinės visuomenės institutas, 2020). Low levels of civic engagement are often associated with low levels of trust in state authorities – only 10.6 per cent of the population trust parliament and 26.8 per cent trust the government at the time of writing, which is below the EU average. In addition, residents identify other root causes of their low interest in participation, such as disbelief that they could influence decisions, lack of time, information or initiative from public officials and insufficient cooperation or feedback (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). Finally, society generally lacks policy knowledge that could enable adequate understanding of government policy making and facilitate participation (Nakrošis et al., 2018). However, those who are competent to participate in decision-making processes choose more proactive tools (e.g. sending official letters to ministries or asking to be involved in work groups) due to the doubtful effectiveness of *E-Citizen* (Interview with representatives of NGOs 1, 2).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF *E-CITIZEN*

Although public consultation is not a new tool for increasing citizen engagement in policy making, no common approach existed to facilitate this process in Lithuania. Moreover, civil servants lacked the specific skills necessary to design and execute public consultations (OECD, 2015b). This issue became more salient in the context of Lithuania's accession to the OECD, when the need for better engagement of Lithuanian citizens in decision-making was identified (Trumpytė, 2018). Lithuanian authorities committed to improving the public consultation system in the framework of the OGP third action plan (2016–2018). The Office of the Government launched the project Open Government Initiatives and contracted business consultancy Civitta to develop a public consultation methodology, a toolkit for practitioners

and a monitoring methodology, testing them in practice and familiarizing civil servants with the new system.

The new Public Consultation Methodology provides a detailed overview of public consultation, including its principles, the main steps in the process and the methods. One of its drawbacks, however, is a broad definition of public consultation that does not set a clear professional standard of what public consultation entails (Interview with representatives of Civitta). Unlike the European Commission's better regulation guidelines concerning stakeholder consultation that clearly distinguish between public (online) and targeted (offline) consultations (European Commission, 2017), the methodology makes no mention whatsoever of the term 'public online consultation'.

According to the methodology, a consultation entails seven main steps: the decision on its implementation, planning, implementation, analysis of results, use of contributions, evaluation of the consultation and its communication through all stages of the process (LR Vyriausybės kanceliarija, 2018). The document recommends using the *E-Citizen* platform as the main channel for communication. Launched in 2015 as part of the Internet gateway to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 'My Government', *E-Citizen* aims to bridge the gap between the government, its institutions and citizens by including them in decision-making and providing various e-democracy services (e.g. the possibility to make a request, offer or complaint; to make an appointment with a minister; or to use e-services of the government and ministries). Thus, the section on public online consultations contributes to the overarching aim of more open and inclusive governance, based on citizen participation.

Although the methodology is intended to be used by both state and municipal institutions, the design of *E-Citizen* limits the scope of consultations to the central government level. The decision to implement consultations is made by ministries and supported by recommendations of the Office of the Government, which marks the draft legislation that may need consultation (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government). The content of public consultation is developed by the person responsible for the coordination of a project or the preparation of a draft law, usually in cooperation with a communication unit of the ministry. There is no mandatory structure, but the majority of public consultations published on *E-Citizen* contain the following information: organizer, expiry date, subject matter of the consultation and its aims, stakeholders, method, information on how contributions will be used and results of the consultation.

Offline, online or mixed public consultations are announced on *E-Citizen*. There are two types of online public consultation: surveys and calls for comments and suggestions contributing to both policy analysis and policy formulation. The platform's technical specifications allow for the creation of surveys or open-question forms on the page, but links to other platforms or requirements to send comments via e-mail are used more often. Participation in consultations is open to everyone, ranging from individual citizens to organized interest groups. However, the platform suffers from a lack of transparency. As input is only visible to the receiving institution and performance indicators are rarely published, it is impossible to track the number and type of participants, the content of their contributions and the decisions made on their use.

After the closure of the consultation, organizers are encouraged to publish the results on *E-Citizen* and send them directly to participants. However, communication with contributors is limited: usually they do not receive even a confirmation message (Interview with a repre-

sentative of NGO 2). In some cases, participants are asked to evaluate their experience, but emphasis is put on the organizational side. Participants' attitudes are also not reflected in the 'Report on Pilot Monitoring of Public Participation in Public Governance Processes' (Office of the Government, 2019), which keeps the impact of consulting practices on democratic legitimacy and sustainable civic empowerment unclear.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

### 5.1 Formal Ownership

The Office of the Government is responsible for the maintenance of the *E-Citizen* platform and coordinates the public consultation process at the central level. However, a common standard of public consultation is not internalized in ministries and the process lacks clear ownership. Only three out of 14 Lithuanian ministries (Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Agriculture) have described the use of public consultations on *E-Citizen* in the Work Regulations of the Ministry until the end 2020. This indicates a low level of institutionalization of the practice and a lack of formalized procedures in its implementation. The need to consult with society is briefly mentioned in the Work Regulations of three more ministries (Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and Ministry of Justice), but the process is not linked with the *E-Citizen* platform. None of the ministries included the organization of public consultations in the job descriptions of their employees, but this function is delegated to specific coordinators in a few cases.

### 5.2 Partnerships

This project is implemented by the Office of the Government together with the agency Invest Lithuania, which advises global companies on doing business in Lithuania. As part of the OGP activities, Invest Lithuania together with the Ministry of Economy and Innovation established the programme Create Lithuania, whose participants must carry out a public consultation while implementing their projects (Interview with a participant in Create Lithuania). The main project partner was business consultancy Civitta, which provided services to the Office of the Government from November 2016 until June 2019. The consultancy delivered training for civil servants, but this has not been embedded in the main activities of state institutions. There is no supporting network due to the unstable nature of the Lithuanian civil service: institutions tend to fall back into old habits when people trained in public consultations leave their positions (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government).

### 5.3 Administration and Resources

The *E-Citizen* platform is funded by the Office of the Government. The project Open Government Initiatives, with a budget of 1,924,000 euros, has been partly financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). Except for strategic priority projects, where a ministry can purchase external services to implement a public consultation, no additional funding exists, and

this process is often in addition to the regular workload of civil servants. Therefore, there is a risk that after completion of the ESF-funded project at the end of 2023, the attention given to public consultations will deteriorate.

From 2015 to 2017, the consultation process was steered by the Public Management and Social Affairs Department in the Office of the Government, whose director initially acted as leader of the project Open Government Initiatives. However, after the reorganization of the Office of the Government, the status of this project was somewhat downgraded in the administrative structure by moving this task to the Customer Service Division and treating it as more of a technical task than a specific reform initiative. The use of *E-Citizen* for public consultation is established in the Work Regulations of the Office of the Government stating that the Customer Service Division provides methodological assistance on the organization of public consultations and publishes information about them. One of seven employees in the division is responsible for the maintenance of *E-Citizen* among other duties. There is also a separate division of three employees responsible for the implementation of Open Government Initiatives.

#### 5.4 Organizational Culture

Despite some variation across state institutions, there is still no institutional commitment to use public consultation as a policy-making tool rather than a political declaration (Interview with a representative of ministry 2). The quality of a consultation usually depends on the dominant organizational culture: if the participatory process is treated as beneficial, more effort will be put into its implementation (Interview with representatives of Civitta). However, suffering from the intense workload, public servants treat the consulting process as an additional ‘check-box’ to their usual duties; moreover, ‘they take it very personally and treat it as a criticism of their work’ (Interview with a representative of NGO 1). In some cases, additional work involved in the organization of societal consultations has resulted in a passive attitude: ‘I am not announcing consultations because nobody asks me to do so, nor do I look for them because, well, nobody asked me to look for them’ (Interview with a representative of ministry 1).

In addition, institutions still prefer offline consulting that is similar to their usual collaboration practices, such as closed meetings of working groups (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government), and gives more freedom during execution (Interview with a representative of ministry 5). This could be also related to issues of representativeness, as it would be impossible to control the socio-economic background of participants in e-consultations (Interview with representatives of Civitta). However, in some cases, offline participation is chosen as the preferred method of interaction (Interview with a representative of ministry 3).

#### 5.5 Presence and Role of Leaders

Stable political attention contributes to the sustainability of a participatory practice (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government), while the role of leaders is key to policy and organizational change, as they mobilize the team and set the tone for its work: ‘Public consultations in the ministry are happening in the manner shaped and transmitted by political authorities’ (Interview with representatives of Civitta). The role of top management

as a facilitator of change in organizational culture was mentioned as a cause for success – the culture of inclusion has permeated through several levels of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, while the current political authorities of the Ministry of Environment took a more negative approach towards consulting practices (Interview with representatives of NGOs 1, 2).

Improving legislative procedures, opening government data and introducing a uniform practice of public consultation were among the priority tasks of the 2016–2020 Lithuanian Government. However, when a new commission for strategic projects was set up, public consultation was not included on this priority list. The most successful societal consultations were carried out during 2017–2018, with no major consultation work launched by the Office of the Government during 2019–2020. Despite the increasing number of consultations in Lithuanian ministries, it seems that the initial political attention paid to this initiative at the governmental level has declined over time.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

### 6.1 Output

Despite the fact that only around 5 per cent of all public consultations were published on *E-Citizen* (Interview with representatives of Civitta), desk research revealed growing willingness on the part of Lithuanian authorities to consult with citizens and the increasing popularity of online consultation methods. A total of 85 public consultations were implemented on the *E-Citizen* platform from its launch in March 2014 until March 2020, 54 of which were based on online participation tools. As Table 10.1 demonstrates, the number of online consultations conducted during 2019 more than doubled compared with 2018.

Table 10.1 Public consultations announced on the *E-Citizen* platform

Year	Offline public consultations	Public online and mixed consultations	Total
2020 (first quarter)	2	3	5
2019	19	26	45
2018	4	11	15
2017	6	6	12
2016	0	7	7
2014	0	1	1
Total	31	54	85

The most frequent user of the *E-Citizen* platform for online consultation is the Office of Government itself (46.3 per cent of consultations on *E-Citizen*), followed by ministries and institutions subordinate to the ministries (44.4 per cent). Create Lithuania also conducted a significant share of e-consultations (9.3 per cent). Eight ministries published at least one consultation on *E-Citizen* in the period of research, while six of them have never used the tool. However, the users of the platform do not treat it as their main tool for disseminating information about consultations as the platform lacks a wide audience (Interview with a representative

of ministries 1, 2, 3). Despite considerable growth in citizen interest (from 573 unique users from July to December 2018 to 1381 from January to July 2019), a gradual slowdown is visible (1105 visitors from July to December 2019), justifying doubts about the effectiveness of *E-Citizen*.

Since more than half of the consultations (59.3 per cent) are oriented towards a very narrow subject requiring specific knowledge of the field, the scope of potential participants is limited to experts. Surveys (42.6 per cent) or calls for comments and suggestions (40.7 per cent) are used as the main tools for consulting, sometimes in combination (16.7 per cent). Broad formulations, such as ‘make suggestions and comments on a draft law’ are used frequently (33.3 per cent).

The consultation method depends on its aim. Public online consultations are used for policy analysis and to inform decision-making (46.3 per cent) as well as to include citizens in policy formulation (42.6 per cent) by asking their opinion on a possible solution to policy problems. Even though the methodology recommends organizing consultations before the creation of a draft law, this process usually begins in the late stages of the law-making process when it is extremely difficult to make changes as a result of the consultation (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government). In addition, some consultations (11.1 per cent) are directed towards evaluation or feedback on services and tools.

## 6.2 Outcome

Due to the limited availability of data, it is impossible to measure the average number of participants in consultations, but it varies from zero to slightly more than 30,000. For example, during the two-week consultation period, only nine people filled in a survey of the Ministry of Health on factors of economic activity for the health of the population, while a survey on the new memorial for the Lukiškės square in Vilnius, organized by the Office of the Government and the Ministry of Culture, attracted unusual attention: more than 31,000 people voted in two weeks. Although the number of participants might not be the most relevant criterion for success, it does reveal the ability of the platform and its users to reach the target audience.

The communication of public consultations is usually marked by lock-up within the internal circle of a ministry. In addition to publishing the initiative on *E-Citizen*, the same invitation is sent to the ministry’s contact list of institutional partners instead of being widely circulated (Interview with a participation expert). Civil servants themselves also stress the problem of being unable to ensure suitable communication strategies (Interview with representatives of Civitta), leaving a major part of society unaware of the process.

Most public online consultations are aimed at society at large, naming citizens, organizations, inhabitants, social partners, public institutions and experts as their target group (79.6 per cent). Keeping in mind the high specificity of consultation topics, this might lead to unsatisfied expectations of both civil servants and citizens. For example, the likelihood that a highly technical contribution proposing precise changes to the draft law will be put to use is higher than in the case of a general idea (Interview with the representative of NGOs 1, 2), but also requires particular knowledge and skills that are usually not available within a broad audience. The structure of participants is rarely presented, making it impossible to estimate whether it is individual citizens or organized groups that best represent their interests, but ‘there are permanent players in every field’ (Interview with the representative of NGO 2).



### 6.3 Impact

There are three possible stages in a public consultation on the *E-Citizen* platform: ongoing, expired and reviewed. If the consultation is reviewed, citizens can download the report and examine the results. However, almost half of the consultation cases (42.6 per cent) were not reviewed, with only one-fifth of consultation reports stating the further steps in the use of results (14.8 per cent). As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the actual impact of citizen contributions. In the case of surveys, data are used, for example, to inform policy making by finding out citizens' preferences or opinions. The common phrase 'the best proposals can be used in the legislative process' is usually employed when requesting comments and suggestions on draft legislation, but the actual use is seldom mentioned in the consultation reports. This deters citizens from further participation: 'There is no reason to come back if you have no clue how your time was used, unless the issue matters to you a lot and you want to express this' (Interview with a representative of NGO 2).

Overall, it seems that the development of a common methodology for public consultation has not yet reached its initial goals. Even though the number of online consultations announced on the *E-Citizen* platform is increasing, the form of consultation and the quality of prepared materials varies. Due to limited publicity, the government's message about public consultation has not reached the wider society, while citizens' inclusion suffers from the lack of feedback and results.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Lithuanian case study points to a complex interplay of various factors at different levels, determining the limited success of the public online consultation platform. Public consultations on *E-Citizen* have not yet turned into an effective policy-making mechanism due to the lack of support from both civil servants (only a minor part of consultation possibilities are announced on the platform and no clear use of citizens' contributions is visible) and civil society (citizens are not aware of the tool or remain sceptical about its effectiveness).

This study supports the idea that the application of e-participation tools depends mainly on the culture and practices dominant in the public sector (Norris and Moon, 2005). The three main factors at the national level – the dominant legalistic approach to public administration, a weak civil society and decreasing political attention to *E-Citizen* – create unfavourable conditions for the development of public online consultation. The slow uptake of public consultations on *E-Citizen* can be explained by the heavy workload and fast pace of law-making as well. Despite the requirement to consult with stakeholders, the use of *E-Citizen* (as well as the methodology) remains optional, while declining political attention during the current political term diminishes the urgency of changes.

Both political actors and citizens influence whether and how public administrators use e-participation tools (Steinbach et al., 2019). This permeates the organizational level, as the institutionalization of public online consultation and its internalization in state institutions remain rather weak. Although civil servants have become familiar with public consultation practices and the functionalities of *E-Citizen*, the mere existence of online tools has not ensured their effective application. Having no formal responsibilities for public consultation and facing a pressing workload, civil servants are rarely willing to take consultation initiatives

on their own. Despite increasing awareness of the benefits of citizen inclusion, public consultations are usually organized when legislative acts are already almost complete and making any substantive changes would be complicated. As a result, it serves more as a formal tool for legitimizing decisions rather than a real invitation for co-creation.

Low political interest in public (online) consultations is especially harmful in the context of a weak civil society. In a substantial number of cases, the tool remains restricted to the inner circle of the country's administration, without reaching the broader society. *E-Citizen* does not help to resolve citizens' doubts as to whether their contributions will be properly taken into consideration and will make an impact on policy decisions. This, in turn, might dissuade citizens from more active participation. The consultation process is therefore locked in a vicious circle: Lithuanian ministries are reluctant to announce their consultations on the platform because of its low effectiveness, while citizens are unwilling to visit it because of its limited activity and impact. As a result, despite its potential to become key to better informing policy making and empowering citizens, public online consultation on *E-Citizen* currently remains a declaration of the government's openness rather than an effective policy-making practice.

## 7.1 Lessons Learned

1. A clear standard of consultation is necessary to ensure high-quality e-participation. Since Lithuanian ministries followed different consultation practices before the development of the new methodology, it is difficult for them to grasp the need for improving and embracing *E-Citizen* as a communication channel. Currently, the content of consultations on *E-Citizen* varies greatly across state institutions. In addition, the lack of a shared understanding of the aims and steps of a consultation (e.g. preparing a communication strategy, matching the information with the needs of target groups, publishing results) led to the low-quality implementation or even failure of the practice, which in turn causes reluctance to apply it in the future.
2. The political attention of authorities is intrinsic for the successful implementation of public online consultation. It is up to political leaders to set the general attitude towards inclusion of citizens. First, political attention is important to overcome the legalistic approach towards policy making. If higher-level authorities are supportive of openness, early inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process and prioritize the quality of legislation, these norms will be transferred to the lower levels of the institution as well. Second, if the political leaders treat the topic or the process of consulting as a priority, more resources will be allocated to addressing them. This leads to a better quality of communication strategies, effectiveness in their implementation and, consequently, a higher number of participants as well as more meaningful contributions.
3. The evaluation of public online consultation is necessary to grasp the impact of this tool. e-Participation practices are highly valued for their impact on encouraging active citizenship, increasing levels of trust in government, its democratic legitimacy and the quality of decision-making. However, the limited transparency of the E-citizen platform, insufficient communication of results and the limited impact of the consultation might have a negative effect on building trust and sustainable relations between citizens and the government. Specific performance indicators could be set and evaluation arrangements established in order to assess citizens' experiences, their perception of procedural justice and their

willingness to engage in further decision-making processes. In addition, this would help to evaluate the impact of public (online) consultations on the quality of policy making.

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## PART II

### e-Participation initiatives on local level

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## 11. *Decide Madrid*: A Spanish best practice on e-participation

**Vicente Pina, Lourdes Torres, Sonia Royo and Jaime Garcia-Rayado**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Achieving engagement and meaningful collaboration through digital technology requires a better understanding of what hinders governments and citizens from being able to effectively collaborate both online and offline (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018). Barriers to effective citizen participation are produced by various factors, such as poor public knowledge of the issues addressed, poor provision of information, mistrust between the parties involved, low adoption, failure to influence the decision-making process, poor execution of participatory instruments, coordination difficulties and regulatory constraints (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018; Sæbø et al., 2008). Moreover, public administrations are often not clear about the objectives of certain citizen participation initiatives. All of this can give rise to tension, disappointment and reluctance to engage in future processes (Font and Navarro, 2013; Yetano and Royo, 2017).

This chapter examines the e-participation practices carried out in Madrid city council through the *Decide Madrid* platform (<https://decide.madrid.es/>). With this platform launched in 2015, the city council of Madrid aims to encourage citizens to participate in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals in order to improve their quality of life. As of 2018, more than 400,000 users have been registered in the platform, with participatory budgeting being the option that has attracted the highest level of participation. The supporting software, Consul, has been adopted or is in the process of being implemented in around 100 institutions from 33 countries, most of which are in Europe (especially in Spain) and Latin America (Consul Project, <http://consulproject.org/en/>). Porto Alegre, the first city in the world to implement participatory budgeting in 1989, adopted Consul in August 2018 in order to implement its online participatory budgets and polls (OP Digital, <https://opdigital.prefeitura.poa.br/>). Furthermore, *Decide Madrid* received the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award in the category ‘Making institutions inclusive and ensuring participation in decision-making’. Therefore, this research focuses on an example that could be considered an international reference point in e-participation.

The use of information and communications technology (ICT) by citizens in Madrid exceeds the national average (INE, 2018). In 2017, 91.7 per cent of households in Madrid had broadband Internet connection and 91.3 per cent of inhabitants had connected to the Internet at least once in the last three months, with mobile devices being the most common type of connection

used (96.2 per cent). Madrid has traditionally ranked above average in e-government comparative studies (Pina et al., 2007). Madrid also has long experience in neighbourhood-based associations that collaborate with the municipality in the co-production of public services (Sánchez and Pastor, 2018) and in participating in networks that foster citizen participation at the local level (e.g. Sustainable Cities Platform, Local Governments for Sustainability and the Covenant of Mayors). *Decide Madrid* is the first e-participation practice involving direct citizen participation in Madrid where, traditionally, citizen participation has been carried out offline and mainly through associations. In 2016, Madrid joined the Subnational Government Pilot Program of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and has been a formal member of this organization since 2017, promising to develop participatory budgets and collaborative and efficient legislative mechanisms and expand the policy of citizen participation (OGP, 2018).

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

According to institutional theory, a primary determinant of organizational structure and behaviour is the pressure exerted on the organization to conform to a set of expectations to gain legitimacy and secure access to vital resources (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Following institutional theory, the adoption of citizen participation initiatives can be viewed as a process of formal compliance with the wishes and expectations of the external environment and stakeholders, although different levels of development depend on the real commitment of different organizations (Royo et al., 2011).

The main objective of e-participation initiatives should be to obtain stakeholders' input and include it in decision-making processes. Therefore, stakeholder theory can play a role in explaining the adoption and development of these initiatives (Royo et al., 2011; Sæbø et al., 2011). According to stakeholder theory, organizations should identify their stakeholders and fulfil their needs and expectations in order to succeed. However, the level of interest in e-participation initiatives differs among stakeholders and changes over time (Sæbø et al., 2011). Previous literature has found that most citizens do not use e-participation tools or mainly use them to access information, whereas those who seek to influence decision-making processes usually reduce their participation over time (Sæbø et al., 2011). Voluntary participants have high expectations of their participation and the same reasons that mobilized them can lead to disappointment (Font and Navarro, 2013). Citizens can also participate to a greater extent at specific moments when e-participation tools deal with policies that affect them more directly. The commitment to e-participation from other stakeholders usually depends on their role. For example, Sæbø et al. (2011) found that politicians show higher commitment to participation before elections.

The behaviour of citizens in e-participation can also be explained by networked individualism, which describes how people connect and communicate in the new social system of online relations (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Networked individualism describes a 'new pattern of sociability' whereby people build and manage multiple sets of personalized, mutable networks and identities to meet their needs (Castells, 2001). According to this theory, people tend to participate in many groups, but with reduced levels of commitment to any of them (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). The application of this theory to e-participation anticipates that citizens will be easily involved in various e-participation initiatives. However, sustaining citizen com-

mitment to long-term e-participation processes will be more difficult than in offline processes (Pina et al., 2017; Yetano and Royo, 2017).

Several authors have proposed evaluation criteria and theoretical models to analyse e-participation initiatives (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016; Nam, 2012; Porwol et al., 2016; Wirtz et al., 2018). They usually assess the following perspectives: democratic (transparency and objectives), project (organizational change and stakeholders) and sociotechnical (topics, tools and monitoring). The analytical model used in this case study (see Figure 2.1) covers these three perspectives and consists of five main elements of analysis: context, e-participation initiative, organizational factors, individual factors (actors) and evaluation of the initiative in terms of performance indicators, democratic legitimacy, transparency of the process, influence on policy design and external collaboration.

The methods used for this case study include desk research and semi-structured interviews. The former consists of content analyses of *Decide Madrid*, the website and open-data portal of Madrid municipality, and relevant legal documents, governmental reports, official statistics and other reports prepared by third parties. The latter is made up of nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with three senior managers (two politicians and one senior civil servant), two civil servants in charge of technical issues and four users of the platform. The interviews, carried out in December 2018, lasted for around 1.5 hours and were recorded for further analyses. The combination of data sources has allowed us to triangulate data and assess the success of the initiative according to varied points of view.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Spain belongs to the Napoleonic public administration tradition, characterized by its bureaucratic structures and legalistic philosophy grounded in administrative law. Municipalities are the third layer of the Spanish public administration, next to the central and regional governments. Municipalities manage around 14 per cent of the country's public expenditure (Eurostat 2019).

Citizens' right to participate in public affairs is enshrined in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Law 57/2003 on Measures for the Modernization of Local Governments introduced specific ICT procedures to facilitate the effective participation of citizens at the local level and Law 40/2015 introduced the requirement for all Spanish public administrations to carry out online public consultations during drafting regulations.

The digitalization of administrative processes has been a priority in Spain since the 1990s (European Commission, 2015). The Spanish Certification Authority, created in 1996, has received numerous international prizes (CERES, [www.cert.fnmt.es/en/que-es-ceres/premios](http://www.cert.fnmt.es/en/que-es-ceres/premios)) and is highly valued by citizens (8.2 out of 10 in 2017). In 2006, the electronic identity card was launched. Law 37/2007 on Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services improved the development of e-government infrastructure and e-services for citizens and businesses (European Commission, 2015). Spain was ranked 16th in the e-government development index in 2001 and 17th in 2018 and it came 5th in e-participation in 2018 (UN and ASPA, 2001; UN, 2018). Furthermore, Spain has been a member of the OGP since its inception in 2011. Data from Transparency International España (TIE, 2017) shows very high transparency scores for the websites of the biggest 110 Spanish municipalities (89.7 per cent, on average). The average score in the area 'website, relationships with citizens and society and citizen participation' is



90.7 per cent; with 43 municipalities, including Madrid, scoring 100 per cent. Data for regional governments (TIE, 2016) are even higher: 94 per cent, on average, and 95.6 per cent in the website and citizen participation area (the highest score of the six areas analysed).

The 2008 financial crisis and numerous cases of corruption lowered citizen trust in public institutions and politics. Issues related to politics (e.g. the behaviour of politicians or the activities of political parties) and corruption have been important problems perceived by Spanish citizens in the last ten years (CIS, 2018). One of the requests of the ‘15M’ movement that emerged in 2011 was the improvement of democratic procedures. New political parties emerged, Podemos being the most popular in Spain. In Madrid, Podemos was associated with other left-wing political parties through Ahora Madrid, which governed the city from May 2015 to May 2019, with citizen participation being one of the flagships of its electoral programme.

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF *DECIDE MADRID*: BACKGROUND, AIMS AND SCOPE

In September 2015, Madrid city council created *Decide Madrid* to fulfil the commitments to e-participation established in the electoral programme of Ahora Madrid. New local regulations for citizen participation and initiatives to reduce the digital divide were also developed. Lessons were learned from other citizen participation experiences, such as Iceland (Better Reykjavik), Brazil (Porto Alegre) and Switzerland.

Through *Decide Madrid*,

the City Council of Madrid aims to encourage citizens to participate in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals in order to improve their quality of life. It is a strong commitment to bring management closer to citizens, which will allow the city council to receive their proposals and create direct communication channels with citizens, helping to make the most appropriate decisions for the general interest. (Translated from *Decide Madrid*)

Participation in *Decide Madrid* comprises five types of activities (or modules of the platform):

- *Debates*: Citizens express concerns, views and ideas. Citizens can post, comment or state their agreement or disagreement with the main idea of the debate and/or the comments made by participants.
- *Proposals*: Users make a request that can be complemented by supporting documents and/or audio-visual materials. Verified users can support these requests. Proposals with the support of 1 per cent of Madrid residents aged 16 and over (27,662 inhabitants in 2018) are voted on in the polls section.
- *Polls*: Polls are carried out when a proposal receives 1 per cent support or when the city council wants citizens to decide on an issue. They can be open to all citizens or to the citizens of a specific district.
- *Processes*: The city council obtains citizen input on a pre-defined topic (e.g. development or modification of local regulations, definition of strategies or priorities). *Processes* can take different forms depending on the information the city council needs (e.g. specific debates, surveys, requests for proposals).

- *Participatory budgeting*: Annually, citizens can decide directly on how a part of the next year's budget will be spent (100 million euros in the 2019 edition, representing 2 per cent of the municipal budget and around 30 euros per inhabitant). The projects can cover the whole city or specific districts and can affect current expenditures, subsidies or public investments.

The platform allows citizens to participate in three phases of the policy cycle: (1) agenda setting; (2) policy analysis and preparation; and (3) policy formulation and, to some extent, policy monitoring; in the participatory budgets, citizens can check the status of the approved projects (technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, processing, in execution, ended). In all cases, the topics eligible are only those under the competence of Madrid city council.

The platform is open to everyone without registration, but participation is limited according to the type of activity. In general terms, everyone, including associations, non-governmental organizations and companies, can be registered in the platform, create debates or proposals and make comments in all sections. However, only registered citizens of Madrid aged 16 and over can verify their accounts and therefore create proposals for participatory budgeting and support and vote proposals. Organizations can make proposals, but only individual citizens can vote.

Verification processes and almost all participation activities can also be carried out offline in any of the 26 citizen attention offices. Support for the projects can be collected using a printed signature form. However, the online platform must be used to participate in debates and almost all activities in the abovementioned *Processes* module.

#### 4.1 Legal Framework and Technical Features

Citizen participation in Madrid is regulated by a local regulation approved in May 2004 with subsequent modifications. Some previous municipal regulations about citizen participation existed (adopted in 1988 and 1992) even before the legal requirement for participation was established by Law 57/2003. This regulation establishes the right of citizens, entities and collectives to participate in local governance, with no specific reference to e-participation. Therefore, the existence of *Decide Madrid* is not guaranteed by any law and depends on political will. The guidelines and procedures that support the functioning of *Decide Madrid* were approved by various agreements of the governing body of Madrid municipality since October 2015.

*Decide Madrid* is based on Consul, an open-source software developed by the city council. It is also accessible to people with disabilities. The Consul code, freely available on the Internet, allows any organization to use and adapt the platform to its own needs, as long as it complies with the Affero GPL v3 license. This type of license protects developers' rights by securing the authorship and gives users and developers the opportunity to copy, modify and distribute the software. Moreover, this license encourages other developers to make subsequent software modifications available for reuse. This way, the improvements made by any organization using Consul can be exploited by others, fomenting collaboration between them. Even if later governments of Madrid decided to terminate *Decide Madrid*, it would be easy to implement it again. Madrid is the partner that is the most significant driver of Consul at the moment, but, according to the interviewees, the further development of Consul is expected to be more decentralized in the future.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

### 5.1 Organizational Characteristics and Human Resources

Madrid city council owns *Decide Madrid*. The creation and implementation of and operational costs associated with *Decide Madrid* are funded by the city council's budget. All of the interviewees state that financial sustainability is guaranteed. The platform was originally managed by the General Directorate of Citizen Participation (GDCP), whose competences included citizen participation and social innovation programmes. This directorate belonged to the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area, which was subordinate directly to the Mayor's Office.

The GDCP had 40 full-time civil servants at the time of the empirical research in December 2018, including administrative staff, lawyers, social workers, computer scientists and communications staff, together with three senior managers and advisors from different backgrounds (software companies, academia and public administration). Their performance is evaluated through annually defined targets. They have the typical restrictions of this type of employment, such as fixed schedules, but they adapt their schedules to citizen participation, diffusion and collaboration activities, sometimes doing overtime. There are 130 civil servants from other units who occasionally participate in the analysis and evaluation of proposals. In addition, there are approximately ten interim civil servants with various competences (depending on the projects in implementation phase) who work temporarily in the Participatory Budget Execution Office of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area. The interviewees highlighted the importance of the knowledge of legal matters, advanced technology, languages and skills in dealing with citizens, indicating that the most lacking aspects were languages and advanced technology. Sometimes, occasional staff were contracted for specific aspects (e.g. platform development). Interviewees emphasized that the limited number of employees was one of their problems, along with restrictions in contracting out, which made it difficult to recruit staff with knowledge of the most advanced technology.

Staff came from other units because this area of government was new. In order to recruit them, an open selection process for the city council personnel was established, with individual interviews to ensure that the candidates were motivated and could adapt smoothly to the organizational culture the managers wanted to develop. The Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area organized training courses on citizen participation for their own and other staff areas. According to the interviewees, *Decide Madrid* has made progressive change in the perception of other staff areas on direct citizen participation and the use of open-source software.

The GDCP followed the regular organizational processes as part of the city council. However, it showed some differences in decision-making processes and generated a particular subculture within the city council, given the greater autonomy of its staff, the looser definition of jobs, the increased teamwork within this unit and staff commitment to citizen participation.

*Decide Madrid* is embedded in formal policy-making processes because other units use the platform to carry out public consultations and public audiences. In this sense, *Decide Madrid* acts as an intermediary between citizens and the other administrative units of the city council. The large quantity of proposals for participatory budgeting increases the workload of the other areas of government. Sometimes, citizens' proposals change the planning, priorities and ways

of working of other areas. Consequently, according to the interviewees, at the beginning of *Decide Madrid*, there was some resistance, as well as complaints, from the other units because they had to do extra work with the same resources and because citizen participation changed the way they worked. By December 2018, staff from other areas had adapted to the new organizational culture.

The Service of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy was particularly relevant to promote the participation of groups at risk of social exclusion. Medialab Prado, a citizens' laboratory that belongs to a city council-owned company (Medialab, [www.medialab-prado.es/en/medialab](http://www.medialab-prado.es/en/medialab)) also plays a key role in the development of the initiative, as some innovation projects in citizen participation related to *Decide Madrid* are developed there. The city council also contracts external companies to comply with data protection regulations (e.g. encryption of votes to ensure anonymity).

## 5.2 Internal Collaboration

The other directorates of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area participated in relevant processes of *Decide Madrid*, involving their continued collaboration (e.g. data protection, quality, evaluation and management of the official website of the city council and the citizen attention offices where citizens can participate offline). Specific collaboration with other units occurs, for example, when citizens verify their accounts, as the GDCP compares this information with the register of inhabitants in the Economy and Finance Area. Similarly, when run in parallel to *Decide Madrid*, offline activities were managed in collaboration with the Territorial Coordination and Public-Social Cooperation Area of Government. This area was in charge of city council management at the district level and coordinated and promoted sectoral councils, local forums and other participatory groups. However, *Decide Madrid* does not always include information about the offline citizen participation processes managed by other units.

Other types of collaboration depend on the will of each area, staff motivation and the accountability structure. All governmental areas and administrative units of the city council collaborate by proposing topics for consultation and evaluating the proposals made by citizens. According to the interviewees, this collaboration in the evaluation of proposals (e.g. costs, technical and legal issues) is critical since specialized units have the relevant knowledge. When *Decide Madrid* first started, the GDCP sent the information of the debates and processes to other units affected, but they got used to revising them directly.

The GDCP contacted the other areas quite often, as continuous communication is necessary in order to monitor projects and ensure that other areas implement the results of consultations carried out through *Decide Madrid*. In response to citizen concerns about delays in the execution of participatory projects, the city council set up a Participatory Budget Execution Office to improve the monitoring of the implementation of approved projects and, as a result, collaboration with other areas became more formal.

## 5.3 Leadership and Individual Characteristics

The political leaders who opted for the creation of *Decide Madrid* and the following selection of the relevant managers and staff were the mayor, the councillor responsible for the Citizen

Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area and the director of *Decide Madrid* (an executive advisor). Other leaders were the general director of Citizen Participation, who was responsible for the day-to-day operations as administrative leader, and the head of the institutional extension unit, who focused on the promotion of *Decide Madrid* among other organizations.

The city council decided that the results of polls and participatory budgeting were binding, so all areas were expected to adopt the proposals accepted and collaborate with the activities of *Decide Madrid*. However, this agreement had no legal basis, so the application of the results of citizen participation through *Decide Madrid* was only ensured because all areas were subordinated directly to the Mayor's Office, which acted in cases of disagreement.

The highest political leader of this initiative was Mayor Manuela Carmena, who has a long career in the judicial system as a judge. She played an important role in the promotion of the initiative and the coordination of the areas involved. The councillor responsible for this area of government has vast experience in programming and has previously created and managed software companies. The executive advisor and director of *Decide Madrid* holds a PhD in theoretical physics and is one of the creators of Incoma, a software programme that allows debates between many people. According to the interviewees, their role and leadership was crucial in ensuring resources, internal support, motivating staff and solving conflicts between different areas of government.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

According to the managers interviewed, the concept of success varies depending on the type of activity. Successful debates and *processes* are those that generate ideas to improve regulations or services provided by the city council. Debates which evolve into specific proposals and projects, and proposals that receive enough support to go to vote, are also considered a success. In polls and participatory budgeting, success is achieved when the related projects are executed. Sometimes, the actions carried out can differ to some extent from those initially proposed by citizens, but the civil servants interviewed also consider these cases successful, as some projects need to be specifically defined, further developed or limited in order to fall under the competences and capabilities of the city council. In all cases, a high level of participation can be considered a success.

### 6.1 Performance Indicators

*Decide Madrid* presents aggregated statistics (support and number of votes, percentage of participation by gender, age group, district and via web or offline, where appropriate) for both the first polls (up to 2017, inclusive) and the participatory budgets. Disaggregated information on debates, proposals, processes, participatory budgets and website statistics is not available on *Decide Madrid* but on the open-data platform, without any direct link or mention to *Decide Madrid*. These data are not contextualized and there are no references to the goals of the initiative. Interviewees said that the GDCP has more information as well as their own indicators, which are revised monthly for internal purposes.

All interviewees agree that there is a growing trend in terms of users, participation and the impact of participatory budgeting, although some citizens think that participation in proposals

has decreased. The first participatory budgets took place in 2016, where 60 million euros was assigned to 206 projects. There were 45,529 participants (including those that proposed, supported and/or voted); 5184 projects were initially proposed and 32,725 citizens voted in the final phase. In subsequent editions, the amount devoted to participatory budgeting was increased to 100 million euros, and 75,619 citizens participated in 2019.

Until the end of 2019, 27,309 proposals had been made, but only two obtained enough support to move forward to the voting phase. In total, 13 polls at the city level and 22 polls at the district level have been carried out in four voting periods. In the first voting period, 214,076 citizens participated and 963,887 votes were counted (one citizen could vote in more than one issue). There were more participants by post (54 per cent) than through *Decide Madrid* (35.1 per cent) and ballot boxes (10.9 per cent), but more votes were cast through the platform (49.3 per cent). In subsequent voting periods, participation has decreased: 92,829, 9854 and 275 votes, respectively. The third and fourth voting periods were only at the district level and not all districts had projects. Furthermore, the topics being decided on had less importance (e.g. the names of a kindergarten and a cultural centre in the last voting period) and, in the last voting period, offline voting was only allowed for a few hours.

According to data from the open-data platform (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2020), 5706 debates had been started by the end of 2019, with a decreasing trend in the number of debates started per day (37.8, 1.5, 1.1, 0.7 and 0.2 in the last four months of 2015 and the years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, respectively) and comments on debates (151.5, 21.9, 7.2, 6.5 and 0.5). Ninety processes have been initiated in *Decide Madrid* (6, 7, 36, 27 and 14, respectively). Information on the number of participants in debates and processes and the number of comments on processes is not available.

## 6.2 Democratic Legitimacy

The GDCP promoted *Decide Madrid* using advertising posters (on buses, bus stops and street lamps), press releases, e-mail, social media, informative sessions for districts and associations working with groups at risk of exclusion, local forums and, in some cases, letters to all citizens of Madrid. The GDCP had a communication unit that collaborated with the General Directorate of Communication for these tasks. The platform provides detailed information on how the different sections work and allows citizens to visualize the contents of each module, prioritizing the most active, highest rated or newest content.

A positive unexpected consequence of the platform that contributed to its legitimation was the high level of participation at the beginning of the initiative. The participatory budget of 2016 (held from February to June 2016) and the first poll (February 2017) saw more participation than expected and more resources for the organization of offline participation were needed according to the civil servants interviewed. As these were the first processes with visible results in the city, their high participation rates were critical in gaining the confidence of citizens in subsequent processes.

All of the citizens interviewed agree that the most important motivating factor is the possibility to see their contributions implemented or taken into consideration. However, the interviewed citizens note that they do not have enough information on the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects approved and that, sometimes, it takes a long time to see the result of their participation. They indicate that they do not perceive any gratitude

for their participation and also express the difficulty of following the dialogue in the debates. Some of the citizens interviewed note that many of the debates and proposals are used by citizens to make punctual criticism without any real contribution or argumentation. In some cases, the low participation and the potential for external influence puts the legitimacy of the results into question and demotivates citizens' participation. Interviewees also have concerns about the security of the platform and the difficulties of the verification processes. One of the citizens interviewed thinks that the methodology of participation through the platform does not allow effective direct participation: 'It does not achieve its objectives ... because a lot of citizens get lost in the website'. Interviewees also express their concern about the high cost of some participation processes for the city council.

The politicians and civil servants interviewed state that the platform has had three main detractors: major media outlets, which have systematically tried to delegitimize the platform, and two right-centre political parties. One of them was against 'direct democracy' and so opposed everything related to this platform, and the other criticized some of the methods of participation of *Decide Madrid*, e.g. the reliability of the method of obtaining support for proposals and the confidentiality of the postal vote (Europa Press, 2017).

### 6.3 Transparency of the Process

The users of *Decide Madrid* determine what is discussed on the platform in most cases, with the exception of public consultations and activities in the *Processes* module. The politicians and civil servants interviewed gave a lot of importance to free communication among users, so there was only slight moderation before the comments were published to avoid illegal comments (e.g. incitement to violence). Citizens can select other citizens' activities as inappropriate and moderators can revise them.

Citizens are provided with information in several formats (e.g. pdf documents, images or videos) to facilitate their participation (e.g. technical reports or related laws). In the *Processes* module, the text of the document open to consultation is very often embedded in the platform so that citizens can make their comments directly in the text and other citizens can see them easily. However, citizens indicate difficulties in supporting some proposals due to the lack of a detailed plan and estimated cost.

Citizens can only follow up their contributions in participatory budgets, as they have a monitoring section on the platform. In the other sections, citizens can only see other users' reactions (supports, assessments and votes). No summaries based on proposals or comments from participants are disclosed. The citizens interviewed complained that they lacked information about the outcome of public consultations, the impact of their contributions and the reason some debates, comments and proposals are excluded/cancelled or some winning projects are modified. Moreover, the citizens interviewed think that there is not enough information on the internal working of the city council (i.e. organization, procedures and competences) to give a correct evaluation on the impact of their contributions.

### 6.4 Influence on Policy Design and External Collaboration

According to the civil servants interviewed, more than 1000 actions have been decided by citizens. The proposals in the polls and participatory budgets that go to vote and win are carried

out by the city council if they pass the same controls and additional analyses as the rest of the projects of the city council. For debates and processes, the respective unit of the city council analyses citizens' comments and decides what to do.

According to the citizens interviewed, *Decide Madrid* has increased citizen participation in Madrid (both online and offline). The platform has channelled associations' initiatives to implement online participation in debates and processes, defend associations' values and present projects and proposals previously carried out offline. However, some citizens interviewed are concerned that they can put less pressure on the municipal government online than they can offline.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The development of ICT and changes in the economic, political and social environment in the new millennium have increased interest in new methods for citizen participation. The commitment of *Ahora Madrid* to establish an online 'direct democracy' led to the implementation of *Decide Madrid* in 2015, creating new direct relationships between citizens and the city council, as in Madrid, citizen participation was traditionally carried out offline and mainly through associations. A high level of participation has been reached on some occasions, with participatory budgeting being the most successful participation option. The lesser role attributed to the traditional participation stakeholders in Madrid municipality (i.e., associations) may be the reason behind less continued participation, because online participants are usually less committed than offline participants, according to networked individualism theory (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Although most of the activities carried out through the platform can also be carried out offline, offline participation is not integrated in the online platform. Including information about activities carried out offline on the platform could also be a useful measure to ensure continued participation.

The stakeholder theory, with some modifications, helps to explain the adoption and evolution of *Decide Madrid*. The main objective of this platform is to obtain stakeholders' input and include it in decision-making processes. The adoption of the platform was motivated by political will rather than institutional pressure. The commitment of politicians and civil servants has been high after the elections and after implementation of the platform.

Spanish legislation requires that software developed by any public administration is made available on an official website of the central government to be used for free by all other Spanish public administrations. The decision to make *Decide Madrid* readily available as open-source software beyond Spanish public administrations and to create an active network of public-sector entities interested in online citizen participation has promoted international collaboration among various institutions and guarantees that improvements by other entities are easily shared. As a result of this, the platform's reputation has increased among governments around the world. This wide adoption of the software by other institutions seems more related to an informed and rational decision to adopt proven and freely available technology rather than an example of institutions imitating leading organizations' practices to achieve recognition, as only a limited number of entities have copied the full design of *Decide Madrid* (Royo et al., 2020).

Three factors have been particularly relevant to the success of *Decide Madrid*: the high commitment of the city council to citizen participation, the use of individual interviews in the



recruitment of staff in charge of running the platform and the knowledge of senior managers on citizen participation and ICT. The role of the mayor has been crucial in launching *Decide Madrid*, improving coordination among council areas and ensuring sufficient financial, political and managerial support. Therefore, this initiative shows that continued political will is a key factor in introducing digital innovations that affect the way citizens participate in municipal life.

Although the local legislative framework does not define or promote e-participation, except for public consultations, several agreements adopted since the creation of *Decide Madrid* regulate participation in this platform. They assume the results of the polls and participatory budgeting are binding, provided that the proposals meet the general requirements for new projects approved by the city council.

*Decide Madrid* required the transformation of the organizational culture and structure of the city council in order to incorporate citizen participation in decision-making processes. All citizens interviewed agree that their most important motivating factor is the possibility to see their contributions implemented or taken into consideration, although they note that they do not have enough information on the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects approved. Managers agree that the transformation of the organizational culture turned out to be a slow process. This has caused some delays in the implementation of winning projects and insufficient communication with citizens regarding the impact of their participation.

The high level of Internet use in Madrid and the possibility of offline participation in the most significant activities carried out through the platform foster the participation of various user groups and reduce the possible negative impacts of some factors that could discourage participants, such as the digital divide, lack of trust in the security of online systems or perceived complexity of online verification processes.

However, the analysis carried out shows that even in successful e-participation initiatives, there seems to be substantial room for improvement in terms of transparency and due process (in this case, in the *Proposals* module). The citizens and some civil servants interviewed state that there is a problem with proposals: only two of them have obtained enough support to move on to the voting phase and many of them expire after receiving a lot of support (e.g. 'Massive planting of trees in Madrid' with 20,602 supporters). Furthermore, some citizens seem to be using participatory budgets to present unsuccessful proposals in order to avoid the minimum support requirement.

Previous research shows that most of the barriers to effective citizen participation are directly linked to poor provision of information and failure to influence the decision-making process (Sæbø et al., 2008; Font and Navarro, 2013; Yetano and Royo, 2017; Falco and Kleinmans, 2018). These concerns cause limited legitimacy among citizens and could also negatively influence e-participation levels. Public administrations should provide citizens with the necessary information at each point (before, during and after participation). Feedback is key for citizens to perceive the value of their contributions and encourage their continued participation. However, in *Decide Madrid*, citizens can only monitor participatory budgets. A system should be put in place to summarize and give visibility to the comments made by citizens on the different modules, with indications on whether they have been taken into consideration or the reasons the input provided has not been incorporated. In addition, the lack of moderators or other ways to organize debates, proposals and comments seems to have had some negative

effects in the debates and processes modules of *Decide Madrid*. This pushes many citizens to participate on an ad hoc basis when polls and participatory budgets are carried out.

The economic, social and political context that caused the ‘15M’ movement also increased the interest of many citizens in new opportunities of participation in public life, which explains the high levels of participation in the initial stages of *Decide Madrid*. The high expectations of citizens combined with the lack of transparency they perceive in some e-participation processes contribute to explaining the decreased citizen interest in some of the sections of *Decide Madrid* after their first participatory experiences.

In conclusion, although citizens have some complaints and proposals for improvement, and they sometimes question the levels of participation and effectiveness of *Decide Madrid*, both citizens and the staff of the city council consider *Decide Madrid* necessary. This agreement shows the motivation for e-participation and direct citizen participation of both the city council and the citizens. Improvements to *Decide Madrid* based on the feedback from the initial experiences could help increase citizen trust, participation levels and the legitimacy of this platform among citizens. Maintaining the level of commitment to e-participation of the present and future government of the municipality will also be crucial to assure the long-term sustainability of this initiative.

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## 12. The pursuit of legitimacy as a learning process: A case of local e-participation in Sweden

**Alina Ostling**

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The e-participation debate has been setting hopes to broaden and deepen civic engagement for around 20 years (e.g. Macintosh, 2004). Using digital tools enables the involvement of a greater number of people in policy making than what is possible in an offline setting. By involving more people, e-participation is also expected to strengthen government legitimacy and citizens' trust in public institutions. However, public involvement in politics does not automatically lead to stronger democratic legitimacy. The aim of this case study is to analyse the implications of the local e-participation initiative in Sweden – the Gothenburg Proposal – for input, throughput and output legitimacy. In particular, the focus lies on the empirical relationship between the normative framing of e-participation and the actual political and administrative context in which the initiative is carried out.

Sweden is a compelling context in which to study e-participation. The use of the Internet and digital devices is very widespread, e-government practices are well developed and voter turnout is very high. At the same time, the range of e-participation initiatives is limited in Sweden. Most of them take place at the local level, which bears promise for strengthened local legitimacy. However, these local e-participation initiatives also involve potential pitfalls when policy makers address various types of legitimacy aspects – such as inclusiveness, transparency and policy effectiveness – at the same time.

### 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

To examine the Gothenburg Proposal in Sweden, the concepts of input, throughput and output legitimacy are applied (Scharpf, 1997, 1999; Schmidt, 2013; see Table 12.1). Scharpf (1997) argues that democratic legitimacy refers to the inputs and outputs of a political system. First, on the input side, legitimacy requires mechanisms to connect political decisions with the preferences of citizens (Scharpf, 1997). To achieve a higher quality of input legitimacy, public participation needs to be inclusive and representative, i.e. involve the people affected by a political outcome (Barber, 1984; Lieberherr et al., 2012). The participants of decision-making processes are important; if certain groups dominate, they might promote issues that are not as relevant for the population as a whole.

Second, throughput legitimacy, coined by Vivien Schmidt, complements Scharpf's dimensions by emphasizing the process between input and output (Schmidt, 2013). Throughput

Table 12.1 An overview of the main normative criteria for input, throughput and output legitimacy

Input legitimacy	Throughput legitimacy	Output legitimacy
Public participation	Process	Performance
Representation of citizens' preferences	Transparency of procedures and decisions, and oversight forums	Policy outputs/outcomes/impact

Source: Based on Scharpf (2003); Schmidt (2013); Doberstein and Millar (2014).

legitimacy highlights important normative standards, including the accountability of policy makers and the openness of governance processes (Schmidt, 2013; Schmidt and Wood, 2019). When throughput legitimacy is limited (i.e. the participatory process and policy decisions are closed to scrutiny), it can put into question both political input and output (Schmidt, 2013). If, in contrast, the participants perceive the process as transparent and fair, they might even accept outcomes they do not favour in the first place (Schmidt, 2013; Carman, 2010; Christensen et al., 2015).

Third, output legitimacy refers to results and performance, emphasizing that institutions are legitimized based on their effectiveness (Lieberherr and Thomann, 2018). This can take the form of outputs (i.e. the results of policy implementation), outcomes (i.e. the change in actors' behaviour in response to the implementation) and impacts (i.e. the physical/material consequences of the outputs on e.g. service delivery) (Scharpf, 1999; Sager and Rüefli, 2005 in Lieberherr and Thomann, 2018). Output legitimacy is operationalized in this chapter only as policy output, since the other two dimensions fall outside the scope of this case study. In the case examined in this chapter – the Gothenburg Proposal – even proposal outputs (not mentioning outcomes and impacts) can require a long implementation time. For example, one of the Gothenburg proposals, about something as seemingly uncomplicated as a bicycle park, took over two years to implement (Sveriges Television, 2019a).

The case study puts particular emphasis on throughput legitimacy since at the core of the book lie the political and administrative institutions at which the e-participation initiatives are carried out. Throughput legitimacy focuses on the quality of the processes that shape decisions (Iusmen and Boswell, 2016) and is hence particularly apt for examining the institutional and organizational characteristics of the Gothenburg Proposal. The notion of throughput legitimacy has been used to assess the implementation of different democratic (online) innovations, such as the crowdsourcing of legislation (Christensen et al., 2015) and public participation in policy making regarding infrastructure development (Fraune and Knodt, 2017).

The first key normative standards stressed in throughput legitimacy are the transparency and accountability of policy makers (Schmidt, 2013; Schmidt and Wood, 2019). Transparency and accountability standards can be intersecting depending on the definition of different authors. According to Schmidt and Wood (2019), accountability implies that public actors must give an account of their actions to citizens and that public actors can be held to account by oversight bodies or other forums for the process (Schmidt and Wood, 2019). Bovens et al. (2008) elaborate on accountability, asserting that it involves the provision of information by public actors about (1) the process, (2) the decision regarding citizens' proposals (e.g. documentation on the decision-making criteria) and (3) deliberation on citizen input. Hence, in this chapter, transparency and accountability will be treated as a joint criterion of legitimacy, operational-

ized as: (1) the provision of information by public actors about the participatory process and the decisions taken regarding citizens' proposals; and (2) the possibility to hold public actors to account by oversight bodies or other forums for the participatory process. Throughput legitimacy also includes the standards of inclusiveness and openness, conceptualized as the extent of opportunities for non-state organizations and individuals to become involved in the governance process of participatory initiatives (Schmidt and Wood 2019). However, these two dimensions were not analysed in the framework of this case study due to the scope and extent of this chapter.

This case study was carried out via desk-based research and interviews with the key public official involved in the coordination and implementation of the Gothenburg initiative. The case is well documented (both in terms of qualitative information and statistics) by the city administration, the evaluation committed by the city administration and in the media. The interview process focused only on one official because of the limited resources available to the author, which represents a limitation given that it only illustrates the perspective of a single (although important) stakeholder. However, the wide availability of existing documentation somewhat compensates for this caveat.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Sweden is a compelling case for studying e-participation. The use of the Internet and digital devices is very widespread, e-government practices are well developed and voter turnout is very high. At the same time, the range of institutionalized channels – online and offline – where citizens can voice their opinions is limited (Mechkova et al., 2016, p. 8). There are strong institutional barriers for democratic innovations and the potential of e-participation has yet to be realized (Åström et al., 2013).

In terms of digitization, Sweden has the highest level of Internet usage within the European Union (EU), with 98 per cent having access to the Internet in their home (statistics from 2019). Internet usage is at 95 per cent of the population (of all people aged 12 or over) and 87 per cent use the Internet on their smartphones on a daily basis (Swedish Institute, 2020c). Sweden also has an ambitious digitization strategy, aiming to become the best country in the world in using the possibilities of digitalization (Government Offices, n.d.). e-Government indicators show that Sweden is considerably above the EU average in terms of Internet usage for obtaining information from and interacting with public authorities (European Commission, 2019).

Sweden has very high voter turnout in national elections. In the last parliamentary elections, 87 per cent of eligible citizens voted (Swedish Election Authority, 2020), and turnout has not been below 80 per cent since the 1950s (Swedish Institute, 2020a). Sweden also ranks high in terms of civil liberties and political rights: these freedoms are guaranteed in the legal framework and enforced in practice (Freedom House, 2020). Many Swedes are involved in civil society organizations (CSOs) and Sweden has a strong civil society which is also routinely consulted on policy issues by the government. Concerning democratic participation, Sweden has near top scores on all of Varieties of Democracy's democracy indices (electoral, deliberative, egalitarian and liberal democracy), except for the participatory dimension (Mechkova et al., 2016, p. 8).

In fact, institutionalized channels for citizen engagement in politics outside of elections are limited (Mechkova et al., 2016, p. 8). At the national level, the key options are referendums

(albeit infrequent at the national level – the last national referendum was held in 2003 on the introduction of the Euro; Swedish Institute, 2020b); parliamentary bills based on suggestions put forward by the parliament or by citizens, interest groups and public authorities; and government consultations. The latter consultation mechanism is an institutionalized referral process called ‘remiss’, which enables the government to ask relevant stakeholders for written comments on its proposals. However, this mainly targets public authorities and organized interest groups (private and non-governmental organizations), not individual citizens. At the local level, the main channels are citizen proposals (*medborgarförslag*) and citizen initiatives. More novel forms for civic participation, such as citizen dialogues, e-petitions and participatory budgeting, are limited to, and are almost exclusively implemented at, the local level. One of the few inventories of public participation initiatives in Sweden, a crowdsourced map created by the CSO Digidem Lab, shows only 16 initiatives across the country, all of them taking place at the local level (<https://demokratiskastader.se/karta/>).

Given the strong tradition of local self-government in Sweden, the supply of participatory mechanisms is quite diversified. Some local governments use this type of initiative extensively, while others only to a limited extent (Åström et al., 2013). Around half of the 290 Swedish municipalities run citizen proposals (*medborgarförslag*) (Swedish Radio, 2020), while around 40 municipalities and counties have e-proposal/e-initiative systems in place (Gothenburg City, 2019). At the same time, more than 30 municipalities have abolished citizen proposals over the past five years.

There is no notable e-participation project at the national level. A demo of a national e-participation platform – ‘Your Parliament’ ([www.dinriksdag.se/?locale=en](http://www.dinriksdag.se/?locale=en)) – has been developed by an informal network of activists called Civic Tech Sweden. It aims to provide a platform that citizens can use to debate, submit proposals to members of parliament and contribute to the development of laws. The platform is currently dormant, in search of human and financial resources.

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE GOTHENBURG PROPOSAL

The Gothenburg Proposal (*Göteborgsförslaget*) is an initiative launched by the City of Gothenburg. Gothenburg is a city of 579,281 inhabitants ([www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/kommuner-i-siffror/#?region1=1480&region2=00](http://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/kommuner-i-siffror/#?region1=1480&region2=00)), with circa 28 per cent of them born abroad. Voter turnout is slightly below the national level but still high in comparison with many other European cities: 84.3 per cent of the city’s population voted in the last parliamentary elections and 81.1 per cent in the last municipality elections (Lydén, 2020b).

The Gothenburg City Council decided to introduce e-proposals in April 2014 and issued guidelines for how it should work in practice in May 2016 (Gothenburg City, 2016). The platform was launched in January 2017 (Vårt Göteborg, 2019) and is currently active (May 2020). The Gothenburg online proposal platform enables citizens to suggest ideas to politicians as well as comment and vote on proposals made by other users. Any individual interested in Gothenburg City’s development may submit an e-proposal: both resident and non-resident citizens, while legal persons such as companies, non-profit organizations and associations are precluded from submitting proposals. There is no age restriction, which means that children and young people can also submit and vote on proposals.

The key platform statistics are illustrated in Box 12.1. To date (April 2020), as many as 37,200 users have registered an account on the platform, which corresponds to approximately 6 per cent of the city's population (Lydén, 2020b). The majority of proposals fall within the responsibility of the Traffic Committee and the City Council (Gothenburg City, 2019).

### BOX 12.1 PLATFORM STATISTICS OF THE GOTHENBURG PROPOSAL

- 37,200 have registered an account.
- Circa 3000 comments.
- 674 published proposals.
- 121 proposals have received 200 or more votes.
- 81 proposals have been considered by a city committee (23 of these were implemented fully or partially).

*Source:* Based on Lydén (2020b, 2020c); Gothenburg City (2019).

In practical terms, the proposer needs to log in to an account where they are registered with their name and contact details. In order to help users make clear and structured proposals, there is a template with ready-made headings. This helps ensure that proposals are shaped in a similar way and that the most important information is included, such as the name of the proposer, topic area (predefined by the city government), title, summary of the proposal, links, attachments and deadline for voting on the proposal. The initiator is otherwise free to decide what the proposal should contain. The process of voting for a proposal is similar to creating one: a login is required through a registered Gothenburg Proposal account and the user must indicate their name and contact details.

Proposals can only be submitted digitally, not on paper. Those who lack digital skills can go to the city's civic office (*medborgarkontor*) to get support for a digital submission. Citizens can also get practical support for the content of their proposal, e.g. to ensure that each proposal only suggests one issue (and not several) or to formulate the proposal in a way that facilitates its processing for the administration (Lydén, 2020a).

A 'moderator' from the city administration reviews the proposals before they are published. Proposals that violate the law or the city's policy, or proposals that do not fall under the responsibilities of the city, are not published. In the latter case, the moderator usually tries to provide information to the submitter about how to contact the relevant authority or organization.

The proposer and the relevant city committee are informed as soon as the proposal is approved and published online. The Gothenburg Proposal guidelines emphasize that the city must publish the submitted proposals promptly. If they are not published within two weeks, the proposer should be given feedback on what is happening to their proposal. A published proposal is open for dialogue and signature for 90 days. After 90 days, proposals are put in a searchable archive on the platform. The municipality sends messages to the proposer when a proposal has reached 50, 100 and 150 votes to encourage the proposer and to keep them updated. After 200 days following the publication of the proposal, all users that have voted also get a message about the state of the proposal.



After 90 days, the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee (*Nämnden för konsument- och medborgarservice*) gives feedback to the proposer on how the proposal is going to be processed. If the proposal is assigned to another committee, this committee takes over the responsibility for the continued feedback to the proposer. The relevant committee of the city government considers a proposal that has received 200 votes or more in 90 days and either adopts or rejects it. Often, the proposed issue needs to be investigated further before a final decision is made (FCH, 2019). Proposals which are likely to affect the city budget are handled in the ordinary budget process of the city government. Once the processing is ready, an e-mail is sent to the proposer about the decision taken regarding the proposal. The decision is also published on the Gothenburg City website. Twice a year, the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee presents the proposals to the City Council.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Council of Gothenburg City decided to introduce e-proposals with the aim of increasing citizens' opportunities to influence decision-making processes and to open up e-democracy solutions in the city. The proposals are intended to provide the elected representatives with ideas and give them a better understanding of the issues that engage the public (Gothenburg City, 2016). 'The proposals give us a great deal of knowledge about what engages and worries people in their everyday life, what they talk about in their workplace or at the dinner table', says Stefan Lydén, a public official with overall responsibility for the Gothenburg Proposal (Sveriges Television, 2019b). The Gothenburg Proposal is aspiring to be a channel where citizens can express their opinions between elections. However, the coordinator of the platform underlines that 'it is not a direct democracy tool and is not supposed to replace the political process' (Lydén, 2020b). In the long term, the aim of the e-proposal mechanism is to develop and deepen democracy at the city level (Gothenburg City, 2016).

Gothenburg City has put an emphasis on openness and public participation over (at least) the past five years in one of its key documents, the city budget (Gothenburg City, n.d.). The idea of the Gothenburg Proposal was born at the beginning of the 2010s in response to the reform that reduced the number of city districts from 20 to 10. One of the aims of the Gothenburg Proposal was to address the concern that the new districts, containing a high number of inhabitants, would widen the distance between local politicians and citizens. The political parties in the City Council were rather unanimous about the decision to implement the proposal mechanism, although some appreciated the idea more than others (Lydén, 2020a).

The unit in charge of the administration and development of the Gothenburg Proposal is the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee, which has a permanent budget for running the Gothenburg Proposal (no external funding is available). The key person responsible for the Gothenburg Proposal is its coordinator, Stefan Lydén. At the committee, his responsibilities include the development of opportunities for citizen participation in Gothenburg and support for the various city committees in developing accessible services and opportunities for citizen participation. He is working with a communicator from the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee, which is in charge of communication related to the Gothenburg Proposal. They both dedicate a few hours a week to the Gothenburg Proposal, although occasionally more, e.g. when awareness-raising and communication activities are scheduled.

In addition, the Gothenburg Proposal relies on a moderator from the City's Contact Centre, who reviews the proposals on the platform and archives those that have been decided upon. This takes around 20 per cent of her full-time job. The coordinator and the moderator hold 35-minute meetings every two weeks to update each other and solve any potential issues. These three key people for the Gothenburg Proposal all have permanent positions within the city organization. Administrators across different city committees and services also give input to the running work on the Gothenburg Proposal when necessary (Lydén, 2020a). According to the coordinator, this is a very cost-effective setup for managing a participatory mechanism (Lydén, 2020a).

The coordinator emphasizes that some of the most important competences for this work include having a thorough knowledge of the city organization ('who is doing what') and being able to maintain tactful relationships with city committees, administrators and politicians (Lydén, 2020a). It is not always easy to ensure that the proposals get to the responsible unit or person promptly, as there are many committees in the large city administration. A critical point emphasized by the coordinator is that proposals are sometimes juggled across committees or administrative units (Lydén, 2020a). Proposal handling times can be very long: 11 proposals registered before 2018 were still awaiting a decision in December 2019. The city is aware of this issue and has drawn up revised internal guidelines to speed up the process (Gothenburg City, 2019).

The technical work on the platform is outsourced to a private company (Lydén, 2020a). In terms of the technical and visual characteristics of the Gothenburg Proposal, the platform is rather simple and straightforward and could even be perceived as outdated according to Stefan Lydén, the coordinator of the proposal system. The proposals are shown on a long list, which has recently been complemented with pictures to make the layout more appealing. Gothenburg City is currently working on improving the user friendliness and accessibility of the platform (Göteborg Direkt, 2020).

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

This section uses the concepts of input, throughput and output legitimacy to assess the Gothenburg Proposal. Input legitimacy focuses on the extent of citizens' participation and on the inclusiveness and representativeness of the affected citizens (see Table 12.1). Throughput legitimacy, with its emphasis on processes and institutions, is at the core of the case study analysis. It is operationalized as the provision of information about the participatory process and policy outputs as well as the availability of an oversight mechanism that holds public actors to account. Output legitimacy is assessed by examining policy output (i.e. the results of policy implementation based on citizens' preferences). These theoretical concepts are operationalized based on Scharpf (1997, 1999), Barber (1984), Schmidt and Wood (2019), Lieberherr et al. (2012), Lieberherr and Thomann (2018) and Sager and Rüefli (2005).

### 6.1 Input Legitimacy

Starting with examining the input legitimacy and the standard of inclusiveness, the scope of the Gothenburg Proposal mechanism is very inclusive. Anyone interested in Gothenburg City's development may submit e-proposals: both resident and non-resident citizens. Moreover, there

is no age restriction, which means that young people can also submit and vote for proposals. To facilitate access for people who are not familiar with digital technology, the city's civic office (*medborgarkontor*) offers support for the submission of proposals. The city administration has also taken into consideration the needs of the substantial share of foreign-born population living in Gothenburg (circa 28 per cent) by publishing manuals for proposal submission in nine foreign languages. Occasionally, if needed, the administrators of the Gothenburg Proposal also translate proposals into Swedish before publishing.

The level of public interest in the Gothenburg Proposal is rather impressive. To date (May 2020), as many as 37,200 users have registered an account (Lydén, 2020b), which corresponds to approximately 6 per cent of the city's population. The registration system does not use any advanced identification method (such as eID) but only verifies the e-mail address of the users that sign up. Hence, it is probable that the actual number of unique registered users is less than 37,200. Around 33,000 of these users have also voted for at least one proposal (Lydén, 2020d). These active users could – in line with previous theories (e.g. Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Rosanvallon, 2008) – be considered an active minority that is demanding meaningful interaction with the government between elections.

Only a minor share of registered users has ever published a proposal (629 proposals published in total) or made a comment on others' proposals (circa 3000 comments in total). Collecting the necessary votes for policy makers to consider the proposal has also generally been challenging, with only around 18 per cent of proposals succeeding to get the minimum 200 votes (i.e. 121 of 674 proposals). The top three proposals in terms of votes have gathered 1410, 1023 and 835 votes, respectively (Gothenburg City, 2019).

In terms of the representativeness of the different groups populating the city on the Gothenburg platform, the available demographic data show a mixed picture. The gender balance is slightly skewed towards men: 61 per cent of proposers identify as men (38 per cent identify as women, 1 per cent as other) (Lydén, 2020b). However, in some age groups (i.e. among the 21–30- and 41–50-year-old proposers), women are somewhat more numerous. Among the 21–30 year olds, there are 33 women compared with 25 men; among the 41–50 year olds, 66 are women versus 62 men. The majority of the proposers are aged between 40 and 60 years, while a very small share originates from people under 20 (Lydén, 2020b). The official administering the Gothenburg Proposal thinks that this could also depend on the lack of awareness-raising activities about the tool targeting young people (Lydén, 2020a).

Concerning geographic representativeness, various city districts are involved to a different extent. Most submissions originate from the central neighbourhoods Majorna/Linné and from the City Centre, while the least proposals come from the neighbourhoods Angered (a neighbourhood with residents from over 100 different countries) and Eastern Gothenburg (Sveriges Television, 2019b). The city administration is aware of this issue and is planning to work on reaching out to the less represented neighbourhoods with more information and involve more inhabitants (Sveriges Television, 2019b; Mynewsdesk, 2019). The coordinator of the Gothenburg Proposal also stresses that some of the neighbourhoods that are underrepresented among proposers (such as Angered) mobilize the necessary signatures for their proposals much more rapidly compared with other neighbourhoods that generate more proposals (Lydén, 2020a). It is also worth noting that circa 10 per cent of proposers are not representative of the city population, as they live outside Gothenburg (Lydén, 2020b).

## 6.2 Throughput Legitimacy

In this section, throughput legitimacy is assessed by examining the transparency of the participatory process and the resulting decisions as well as the availability of oversight forums that hold public actors to account for the participatory process.

At first glance, the information about the participatory process is straightforward and clear. The City Council guidelines for the Gothenburg Proposal specify how the city should handle proposals and clarify the submission process to citizens (Gothenburg City, 2016). All submitted proposals are shown on the online platform; displaying the name of the proposer, the area of competence to which the proposal belongs, the number of votes collected and the end date for the closure of the proposal. The list is searchable and can be filtered (by the date of registration in the system, the end date and the title). Citizens can also access the proposal archive, where they can read the decisions made by the relevant city committee and see the responsible persons in the city administration. This means that it should be relatively easy for an interested citizen to locate a proposal in the system and understand what stage of the process it has reached.

After 90 days, the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee is obliged to give feedback to the proposer on how the proposal will be processed, including what committee it will be assigned to and whether the proposed issue needs to be investigated further before a final decision is made. The City Council guidelines stress that proposals need to be dealt with promptly at the subsequent committee meeting. Once the processing is ready, an e-mail is sent to the proposer explaining the decision made regarding the proposal.

The author of this chapter has examined some of the proposal decisions and infers that some of the written decisions, which regard practical and local initiatives (e.g. funding for a hut where people can exchange second-hand things), are relatively short and straightforward. Other decisions concerning more political issues, such as the proposal for Gothenburg to join the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, appeal to cities to take the lead in nuclear disarmament, include comments by the political parties represented in the City Council and can be relatively complicated to read for a lay citizen.

When the Gothenburg Proposal was last evaluated, the surveyed users suggested enhancing the feedback to proposers and improving the information about how the proposals are handled by the city (internally) (Gothenburg City, 2019). The coordinator of the Gothenburg Proposal stresses that the city has to improve the transparency of the process and explain more clearly to citizens why some proposals are approved while others are rejected (Lydén, 2020b). 'It is important to dedicate time and resources for communication with citizens,' Lydén emphasizes in one of his presentations (2020b). Citizens also underlined that city decisions have to be formulated in comprehensible Swedish rather than in bureaucratic terms (Vårt Göteborg, 2019), with clarification for users on what exactly was decided on their proposal and why it takes a considerable amount of time from the officials involved in the day-to-day running of the Gothenburg Proposal. Improving the transparency of the process also requires considerable work with politicians and public officials in order to make their work routines, communications and language more accessible (Lydén, 2020a).

In terms of oversight forums that hold public actors to account for the participatory process, the Gothenburg Proposal is regularly evaluated by an external organization. The last evaluation was based on interviews with elected representatives and public officials and an online

survey with the users of the system (Gothenburg City, 2019). This evaluation shows that there is a lack of clear internal guidelines and a limited consensus within the city administration on how proposals should be handled as well as a need for clearer rules on what type of proposals citizens can submit (Lydén, 2002c). The city is currently working on improving both the internal and the outward-facing processes, e.g. when a proposal concerns different areas of responsibility in the city administration, the Consumer and Citizen Service Committee and the City Management Office jointly appoint a responsible committee that will be in charge of coordinating the handling of the proposal and the feedback to the submitter. Furthermore, the proposal guidelines have been updated and the feedback to citizens has become more regular and clearer (i.e. formulated in plain language).

### 6.3 Output Legitimacy

To assess the output legitimacy, i.e. the results of policy implementation based on citizens' proposals, the Gothenburg platform statistics are the most tangible starting point. Of the 121 proposals that have received 200 or more votes, the city has considered 81 proposals. Of those 81, only 23 proposals (circa 28 per cent of the total) were implemented fully or partially (Lydén, 2020d). The implemented proposals are of different magnitudes and cover a variety of issues, such as the development of Sweden's largest solar cell park (Vårt Göteborg, 2019), a bicycle park proposed by youngsters (Sveriges Television, 2019a) and the cancellation of a procurement contract on Easter bird feathers by Gothenburg City due to ethical considerations (Vårt Göteborg, 2018).

The rate of success of proposals can seem rather low at 28 per cent. However, it is important to keep in mind that the proposals are generally written by lay citizens with limited knowledge of the competencies and the remit of the City Council as well as the budgetary and legal considerations that their proposals would implicate. Additionally, as the coordinator of the Gothenburg Proposal underlines, 'the result can be seen from different perspectives: some might think that the (success rate) is low but in comparison with the number of parliamentary motions that are successful – less than 2% – this is a high rate' (Mynewsdesk, 2019). He also emphasizes that even proposals that are not implemented or do not reach 200 votes can generate new ideas that lead to future developments, e.g. several Gothenburg proposals have been considered in the wider city planning processes (FCH, 2019; Gothenburg City, 2019).

Finally, the coordinator of the Gothenburg Proposal stresses that the performance and sustainability of the mechanism has benefitted from the fact that the initiative to launch it was taken by city politicians. Political commitment has helped drive the process within the city administration and prompted the concerned politicians and public officials to assume their responsibility when it comes to consideration of proposals and feedback to citizens (Lydén, 2020a).

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

This chapter has analysed the implications of a local e-participation initiative in Sweden for input, throughput and output legitimacy. Through the lens of input legitimacy, the case study examined the extent of citizen participation as well as the inclusiveness and representativeness of the affected citizens. On the one hand, the scope and the intentions of the Gothenburg

Proposals are very inclusive and citizen interest in the participatory mechanism is high. On the other hand, similarly to many other e-participation initiatives, some socio-demographic groups seem to be underrepresented among users.

Anyone interested in Gothenburg City's development may submit e-proposals – both resident and non-resident citizens – and age is not a limit. The city also offers support for submitting proposals to people with limited digital skills, has recently simplified submission guidelines and publishes manuals in nine languages for the foreign-born population of Gothenburg. The level of public interest in the Gothenburg Proposal is also rather impressive; counting the 37,200 registered platform users, of these circa 33,000 have voted for proposals. However, deliberation is rather limited, with only a minor share of users having ever made a comment on others' proposals. Collection of the necessary votes for policy makers to consider the proposal is also generally a challenge, with only around 18 per cent of proposals succeeding over the years.

In terms of the representativeness of the different groups populating the city on the Gothenburg platform, the available demographic data on proposers show a mixed picture. The gender balance is slightly skewed towards men (61 per cent) and most of the proposers are aged 40–60 years, while people under 20 are underrepresented. Geographically, some city districts – in particular, the central and presumably more well-off ones – are involved in making proposals more often than others.

In examining throughput legitimacy, the focus has been on the transparency of the participatory process and the resulting decisions as well as the availability of oversight forums that hold public actors to account for the process. The transparency of the Gothenburg Proposal mechanism has improved over time but still has some gaps. Information about the participatory process provided by the city administration is well structured, and user guidelines have been developed and updated over time. All submitted proposals and the related city decisions are shown on the online platform, on a searchable list, which makes it easy for citizens to locate the relevant proposal and its progress in the process. The city administration also provides regular updates to users about their proposals.

However, the internal process of proposal handling remains rather obscure to many citizens and the language of the final decisions is sometimes too bureaucratic and complex for a lay reader. The people behind the proposal system have learnt over the year that making the process more transparent not only involves communicating with citizens but also 'coaching' politicians and public officials in order to make their work and language more accessible to the general public. This is also where the oversight function – a regular evaluation, including surveys of both the public actors and the users of the Gothenburg Proposal – serves a purpose. The evaluations help the city improve throughput legitimacy by indicating which aspects of the process and user feedback need to be further developed.

In terms of output legitimacy, the rate of implementation is moderate, with around 28 per cent of considered proposals implemented fully or partially. The implemented proposals are of different magnitudes and cover a variety of issues, some of which are quite significant, such as the development of Sweden's largest solar cell park. When considering the success rate of proposals, it is important to keep in mind that proposals are generally written by lay citizens with limited knowledge of the budgetary and legal considerations that their proposals implicate for the city. Moreover, the coordinator of the proposal system suggests that even proposals which do not reach the minimum number of votes needed for consideration or which politicians reject

sometimes generate new ideas that are implemented in the city in one form or another. This finding is in line with previous research emphasizing that democratic innovations can perform different political functions, including having an agenda-setting role for politics (Adenskog, 2018).

The case study analysis also suggests that one of the factors that contributed to the implementation of citizens' proposals over the years is that city politicians, rather unanimously, ideated and initiated the Gothenburg Proposal. Gothenburg City has put an emphasis on openness and public participation over (at least) the past five years in one of its key documents, the city budget, and one of the aims with the Gothenburg Proposal has been to strengthen the relationship between local politicians and citizens. The Gothenburg Proposal also has a permanent budget that covers its running costs. These political and financial commitments help drive the process within the city administration and prompt concerned politicians, as well as public officials, to assume their responsibility when it comes to the consideration of proposals and feedback to citizens.

Overall, the case study analysis shows a mixed picture concerning the input, throughput and output legitimacy of the Gothenburg Proposal. When considering these results, it is useful to refer to previous research on legitimacy, which argues that it is challenging to balance the different types of legitimacy against one another in order to uphold decision-making processes that reflect citizens' concerns, have transparent processes and are effective. As a case in point, bringing citizens into decision-making can undermine delegated agents' direct responsibility to their 'principals' (Schmidt, 2015, pp. 25–26). In fact, the case study analysis shows that public officials are sometimes unclear about why they should dedicate resources to responding to 'Gothenburg proposals' when they are primarily accountable to the city administration and politicians.

Overall, the Gothenburg Proposal comes forth as a valuable and cost-effective mechanism for engaging citizens at a time of increasing citizen dissatisfaction with and disaffection from governments and policies, while being a continuous 'work in progress' and a learning process for both government and citizens.

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# 13. Citizens' engagement in policy making: Insights from an e-participation platform in Leuven, Belgium

**A. Paula Rodriguez Müller**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the boost in information and communications technology (ICT) in the public sector, there is growing interest in the collaboration between the government and citizens, especially regarding e-participation in decision-making processes, both in academic and governmental practice (cf. OECD, 2011, 2015; European Commission, 2013; Open Government Partnership, 2014). The adoption of ICT can potentially extend and transform citizen participation in a democratic process, empowering citizens to have a real impact on public policies (Viale Pereira et al., 2017). E-Participation is expected to improve the quality and achievements of policies (Christensen et al., 2015), enhance public trust (Warren et al., 2014) and increase the legitimacy of democratic processes thanks to the mobilization of a larger group of citizens (Karlsson, 2012).

However, while e-participation is associated with high expectations and promises, e-participation initiatives have been facing issues in delivering a real impact to democratic processes (Wirtz et al., 2016), particularly to policy making (Porwol et al., 2016). As observed by Toots (2019), e-participation platforms tend to fail in achieving the expected outcomes and obtaining a certain level of use.

Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the critical success factors of the first large-scale e-participation initiative in Leuven, Belgium, named *Leuven, co-create it*. The initiative gathered more than 2000 citizens' proposals in six weeks, of which more than 300 were included in the city's multi-annual strategic plan 2020–2025, defining the future of the city.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the analytical framework as well as the method and data of the study. Section 3 provides an overview of the national context of Belgium. Section 4 presents the overview of the *Leuven, co-create it* case, while Section 5 explores the e-participation initiative's critical success factors derived from the desk research and interviews. Next, Section 6 discusses the identified critical success factors. Finally, Section 7 highlights the lessons learned and concludes the chapter.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Public administrations around the globe have been increasingly investing in ICT applications that lead to the transformation of governments into e-governments. The implementation of ICT via e-government policies was expected to bring added value, such as increasing public efficiency and effectiveness and improving government services (Bannister and Connolly, 2018; Cordella and Paletti, 2018). e-Government has also been considered as a way towards the restoration of political trust (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006) and the enhancement of government decision-making processes and democratic participation (Macintosh, 2004).

Particularly, the implementation of ICT to engage citizens in policy-making processes has involved transformative changes at both national and local levels (Chadwick and May, 2003; Panopoulou et al., 2014). In this context, e-participation emerged as a key concept of e-government and is defined as 'the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends' (United Nations, 2014, p. 61).

Technology-enabled participatory platforms represent a new wave of mechanisms that enable citizens to engage actively in local issues (Desouza and Bhagwatwar, 2014). Citizens' engagement via e-participation efforts promise to influence the quality of governmental decisions, empower citizens and increase citizen satisfaction (Kim and Lee, 2012; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013).

Although e-participation has captured a great deal of attention, both academically and in practice, the success of e-participation initiatives has been limited (Wirtz et al., 2016). Scholars attribute this phenomenon to the prevalence of the techno-centric focus in e-participation research, while socio-organizational factors are overlooked (Porwol et al., 2013). The particular context in which e-participation is developed as well as the characteristics of the actors responsible for its implementation are likely to influence the development and outcomes of the initiative (Luna-Reyes and Gil-Garcia, 2011; Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016). Other factors that might condition the implementation and results of e-participation initiatives were identified by e-government studies, such as lack of technical skills, lack of cooperation, organizational culture (van Veenstra et al., 2011), political pressure and resilience (Meijer, 2015).

Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the critical success factors of a local e-participation initiative by following the analytical model proposed in Figure 2.1. This framework includes an overview of the supply-based contextual success factor of e-participation platforms, including the characteristics and evaluation of the e-participation initiative as well as the contextual, organizational and individual factors, overcoming some of the limitations of techno-centric approaches (Porwol et al., 2013).

In the *national and local context*, the authors discuss the critical success factors related to the politico-administrative level, the socio-economic context, legal factors and the development of digital governance. The *individual factors* are related to the role of the external and internal actors involved in the e-participation initiative. The *organizational level* covers the analysis of factors related to the ownership and administration of the platform, internal collaboration, resources, human resources and organizational processes. The *e-participation initiative* explores aspects related to the goals, scope, chronology and technical characteristics of the initiative. Finally, the analytical model discusses the *evaluation of the e-participation*

*initiative*, based mainly on performance indicators, the influence on policy design and external collaboration, transparency and democratic legitimacy.

This chapter employs an in-depth single case study design in order to explore the critical success factors that play a role in the e-participation project *Leuven, co-create it* in Leuven, Belgium. A single case study design can be employed to explore complex phenomena through a variety of sources of evidence. Moreover, this case study design allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomena while considering its contextual conditions (Yin, 2014).

*Leuven, co-create it* adopted an existing e-participation platform outsourced to CitizenLab, a Brussels-based SaaS (cloud-based software as a service) start-up in civic tech. The online platform can be adopted to engage citizens through diverse e-participation tools, such as participatory budgeting, surveying and polling, voting, ideas collections and citizen initiatives. Since the launch of the start-up in 2015, it has been considered one of the top European social impact start-ups (2019, DT50 awards at the TechCrunch Disrupt conference, Berlin) and the top 'Digital and Inclusion' start-up, awarded by VivaTech Paris and Métropole du Grand in 2019 (CitizenLab 2020).

In Belgium, several local governments, such as Kortrijk, Brussels, Hasselt, Lommel and Ostend, adopted the platform to involve citizens in participatory processes. These cities involved their citizens in a wide array of topics, ranging from the future of the city's green areas to crowdsourcing the city's strategic plan. Also, the platform has been adopted by local and federal governments from the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, Canada and Chile. However, the Leuven case has set a new precedent in Belgium, as it was one of the first Belgian municipalities to achieve extensive active participation by citizens. It was also the first municipality to provide personal feedback to the participants in each of the e-participatory phases. Therefore, one can argue that *Leuven, co-create it* is a relevant case for identifying and analysing the critical success factors of e-participation initiatives.

In order to achieve the research aim, data were gathered through desk research and semi-structured interviews. First, desk research included a variety of data sources, such as the exploration of the online platform (<https://leuvenmaakhetmee.be/>), administrative information, project and policy documents and media coverage. Second, to gain first-hand insight from the project's participants, we performed 15 semi-structured interviews with key actors between April and November 2019, following the interview protocol provided by Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid (2019). The interview protocol includes a set of open and closed questions concerning the organizational context and the e-participation initiative characteristics, among other related topics. The selection of the interviewees was made following a purposive sampling, including various key stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the e-participation initiative *Leuven, co-create it*. The shortest interview lasted 30 minutes, while the rest of the interviews lasted between 45 and 125 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to aid analysis. As shown in Table 13.1, and in order to guarantee anonymity, an anonymous code was assigned to each interviewee, including the area/department but without specifying the functions of the interviewees.

Table 13.1 Interviewees in the Leuven case

#	Actor	Area/unit	Role
11	Civil servant	Neighbourhood-oriented services	Working group
12	Private actor	Project manager	Platform provider
13	Technical staff	Communication	Working group
FI1	Civil servant	Neighbourhood-oriented services	Working group
15	Civil servant	Neighbourhood-oriented services	Working group
16	Civil servant	Communication	Working group
17	Senior civil servant	General directorate	Steering group
18	Civil servant	Communication	Working group
19	Politician		Steering group
I10	Civil servant	Mobility	Sounding board group
I11	Civil servant	Buildings	Sounding board group
I12	Politician		Steering group
I13	Civil servant	Elderly and care	Sounding board group
I14	Civil servant	Neighbourhood-oriented services	Working group
FI2	Civil servant	Neighbourhood-oriented services	Working group

Note: FI indicates a follow-up interview.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Belgium is a small country (32,000 km<sup>2</sup>) with a relatively small population (11.4 million inhabitants). Verdonck and Deschouwer (2003) describe Belgium as a federal country with a dual bipolar centrifugal asymmetric state structure. In Belgium, the decision-making power lies in communities and regions, rather than with the federal government and federal parliament. Belgium has three communities based on language: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German Community. Moreover, the country comprises three regions: the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region. The legislation decreed in the regions and communities is situated at the same level as the federal legislation (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

In terms of participation, in 2012, the Flemish government defined the Flemish Policy Priorities for the period 2014–2019, promoting cooperation between the Flemish government and local authorities of the Flemish Region. It specifies the local government's participation forms with external stakeholders. One of the policy requirements was the organization of local participation for certain policy areas, including development cooperation, youth, sport, culture and the accompanying education policy, through an advisory board (Flemish Government, 2013). For other policy domains, such as culture, social policy and integration, participation is required for the preparation of the strategic multi-year plan. As indicated by a respondent (I12), this reform, including participation as a part of the integral plan of the city of Leuven, has played a role in implementing new ways of involving stakeholders, including citizens, in the policy formulation process. Moreover, in the Local Government Act (2017), the Flemish government reinforced the relevance of citizen participation as of 2019. Yet, there are no

indications of the implementation of digital solutions to engage citizens (Flemish Government, 2017).

This chapter examines a local e-participation initiative in Leuven, a medium-sized Belgian city and the capital of the province of Flemish Brabant. With more than 100,000 inhabitants, it has become the tenth biggest Belgian city and the fourth biggest city in Flanders. It is also the biggest student city of Flanders, with approximately 60,000 during the academic year. International migration has been an important factor of Leuven's population growth, with 18.1 per cent of non-Belgian inhabitants in 2017 (8.6 per cent in Flanders) (Heijlen and Crompvoets, 2019; City of Leuven, 2020a).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF *LEUVEN, CO-CREATE IT*

### 4.1 Formal Goals and Scope

*Leuven, maak het mee!* (LMHM) is the Dutch name of the main participatory process organized by Leuven, Belgium, which has a two-fold meaning: 'experience' and 'co-create' Leuven. The primary aim is to involve citizens in the preparation of the new government's city strategic plan (2020–2025).

The key goal behind LMHM was to give the citizens, visitors and non-profit and for-profit organizations of Leuven a voice in the development and future of the city. The project aimed to establish a quadruple helix model, involving the government, academia, business and citizens. In this way, a dynamic collaboration could be incorporated to overcome the city's challenges by grasping the opportunities and strengths provided by different stakeholders.

LMHM aimed to involve external stakeholders in the formulation of the city's strategic multi-annual plan for the following six-year term from 2020 to 2025 (City of Leuven, 2020b). Citizens, visitors and organizations of Leuven could provide their ideas on the future of the city, which, after a thorough selection process, could be included in the city's strategic plan. In order to reach as many citizens and visitors as possible, the city launched an e-participatory platform in May 2018 as the principal tool of the project. Although online participation was supported by offline citizen participation initiatives, a respondent (I9) defined the e-participatory platform as the 'heart of the project'.

### 4.2 Chronology and e-Participation Phases

The implementation of LMHM was part of a larger political process. Before the 2019 elections, a working group with the same name as the initiative started planning the project. This group included, among others, the heads of the communication unit and the neighbourhood-oriented services unit, as well as the current general director of the city. The neighbourhood-oriented services unit focuses on neighbourhood management, involvement and active citizenship in order to make a qualitative contribution to the quality of life in Leuven. In the context of active citizenship, the unit stimulates and supports citizens to take an active and constructive role in their neighbourhood (Flemish Government, 2020). As of 2019, the unit is also responsible for external stakeholders' participation in the city.

After the elections, LMHM was welcomed by the new government and the first steps of the participatory process were therefore initiated with the definition of the policy memorandum in

Table 13.2 City's ambitions for the period, 2020–2025

#	Programmes
1	A connected, involved and participative city
2	Affordable housing
3	A reachable, accessible and traffic-safe city
4	A safe and attractive city with welcoming residential areas
5	An inclusive and caring city
6	A sustainable, climate-proof and circular city
7	A bustling city, with jobs for everyone and a breeding ground for talent
8	A healthy and sporty city
9	A vibrant city, for every taste
10	An innovative and performing city that cooperates

April 2019. In the policy memorandum entitled 'Ground-breaking Leuven', the city council established ten ambitions (see Table 13.2) in consultation with experts and civil servants and with a budget of 450 million euros.

Following the presentation of the city's memorandum, LMHM started to collect ideas between the period 30 April–9 June. Both citizens and visitors of Leuven could submit their ideas through the online platform or postcards. Each household received one postcard in their post box. Although there were no pre-established clusters on the platform, the ideas should fit the ten ambitions defined in the city's policy memorandum. Moreover, to target a more diverse group of citizens and reach a wider group beyond the usual suspects' organizations and neighbourhood associations have also been mobilized to engage (11) (City of Leuven, 2019). In addition, to motivate and inspire citizens to participate with potential ideas, the city of Leuven organized an LMHM festival on 12 May, which included lectures by external experts and partners of Belgium on a variety of topics, among other activities. The aldermen and the mayor were also present to exchange ideas with citizens.

After receiving more than 2000 ideas, a sounding board group (see Section 5 for details on the LMHM working groups), formed by the city's domain experts, made the first evaluation based on the topics and priorities defined in the city's strategic multi-annual plan. In the first phase, the sounding board group decided whether the idea could advance to the next evaluation phase based on the city's memorandum priorities. If the idea did not fit any of those priorities, it got rejected. Otherwise, the idea could advance to the next evaluation phase. If an idea was already implemented by the city, the idea was categorized as 'implemented' on the platform. In the three cases, citizens received personal feedback from the working group, which provided sufficient information concerning the implementation.

In the second evaluation phase, the sounding board group decided on the technical and financial feasibility of the idea. This process took longer than expected and was considered the most challenging process since some ideas entailed the discussion and collaboration of different areas of the city. In some cases, a technical evaluation had to be carried out by the domain experts for final feedback. The criteria for such an evaluation varied depending on the city's policy unit responsible for that idea (e.g. mobility, education). Yet, the evaluation was mainly based on feasibility in terms of cost and budget and, to a lesser extent, on the align-

ment with the unit policy objectives. In this stage, the units' experts were responsible for the prioritization of ideas.

Finally, in the third evaluation stage, the city's strategic multi-annual plan was finalized, including a final selection of 373 new ideas to be implemented from the beginning of 2020 until 2025. Nevertheless, the platform remains active for new citizen e-participation initiatives inspired by LMHM.

### 4.3 The e-Participation Platform

In order to participate in the e-participatory platform, citizens should register on the platform by providing their name, city district, e-mail address and an indication of whether the user is a student, a citizen, a visitor or an organization. Users can also log in through Google or Facebook accounts. No other personal information is requested, as the project coordinators aim to keep the threshold to participate as low as possible. Later, users can update their profile including a picture, further personal information and language preference. In the users' profile, they can also manage their e-mail notifications (e.g. notifications linked with their own input, mentions, official messages). The platform is offered in both Dutch and English, as are the city's official websites.

On the platform, citizens find background information about each participatory project. Concerning LMHM, citizens can check the timeline of the process and find out the current stage of the project. There is also an information tab where brief background details are provided, such as a link to the city's policy memorandum and information on the idea evaluation process. They can filter the ideas based on date, votes and policy area.

When submitting an idea, citizens can include a picture or a preliminary design of the proposal, the location and tags of the city's policy unit related to their ideas. Then, all citizens and organizations can consult the ideas and locate them on a map of Leuven as well as follow the decision-making process and feedback. Yet, citizens, visitors and organizations need to be registered in order to vote or comment. Currently, the list of ideas is filtered based on the evaluation stages, i.e. all, implemented, in progress or planned.

The majority of interviewees encountered some technical barriers, such as issues with the platform's back office and the lack of a ticketing system, which entailed a great mobilization of last-minute resources to manage the evaluation of ideas. Also, they reported a lack of automatic clustering of ideas to facilitate the examination of the citizens' proposals and promote discussions between citizens with similar ideas. Interviewees identify the inclusion of natural language processing as a possible solution for future e-participatory projects.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

### 5.1 Ownership and Administration

The administration and management of LMHM are done by three pre-established groups defined by the project's coordinators to set up and run the initiative. First, the *LMHM working group* is the main responsible party and owner of the initiative, setting up the trajectory and managing and operating content continuously. This leading team includes members from the communication and neighbourhood-oriented services units. Second, the *steering group*



consists of the political and administrative level, at the highest decision level, and the project leaders of the working group. This group only meets at key moments for strategic decisions. The project lacks a formal position within the city, and the final decisions concerning the potential inclusion of citizens' ideas on the city's strategic multi-annual plan as well as the feedback given to citizens' participants require the approval of the City Council.

Finally, the *sounding board group* is formed by domain experts responsible for giving advice when called for by the working group. This domain expert group is dynamic as it differs depending on the project's phase.

## 5.2 Formal and Informal Partners

CitizenLab, as the provider of the online platform, is one of the most relevant formal partners of LMHM. They also collaborate by training the administrators of the project's platform and supporting all of the phases of the project. Moreover, within the city, all of the administrative units are considered partners since they contribute with the evaluation of the ideas related to their policy units (i.e. sounding board group).

Nevertheless, working group members are the major internal actors of the project. The communication unit has been essential throughout the process of LMHM. This unit is the main responsible party behind communication with different stakeholders. They defined the communication strategy and were responsible for its execution. The neighbourhood-oriented services unit is involved in the substantive process of the project and is mainly responsible for the analysis and (offline and online) mobilization of stakeholders and the participation policy of the city.

LMHM has involved external stakeholders in three phases of the project. This involvement was named 'stakeholder mobilization'. First, in the preparation phase during the co-creation of the city's policy memorandum, a variety of stakeholders from academia, business and the city were invited to a debate concerning the city's ambitions. Second, during the collection of citizens' ideas as an effort to reach a wider range of citizens, the working group contacted different policy units of the city (e.g. youth, elderly, diversity) as well as organizations and neighbourhood associations in order to activate different sectors of the city. Third, during the evaluation of the ideas, domain experts (i.e. sounding board group) were engaged.

## 5.3 Internal Collaboration

The interviewees (I1, I2, I6, I8, I14) stated that LMHM has increased the scope of the internal collaboration between formal actors. The project has also increased the awareness of the civil servants and staff on the city's strategy, the work of other units and the possibilities behind citizens' participation.

Concerning internal collaboration, the civil servants and staff of each city's policy unit were involved from the beginning in the co-creation of the memorandum. Later, they evaluated ideas as domain experts (i.e. sounding board group). Sometimes, ideas involved more than one unit; therefore, the experts collaborated with other units and provided a common motivation for accepting or declining. However, domain experts (I13, I11, I10) stated that, in the beginning, it was unclear how much influence the ideas were going to have on the decision-making process and policy formulation.

In respect of the formality of internal collaboration, the participatory project has not changed formal structures. The different policy units of the city had no formal guidelines for engaging in the project and an Excel file was the only tool utilized. Using the documents, the units that received ideas needed to evaluate them and indicate whether the idea should be approved and go to the next evaluation stage or whether the idea should be dismissed.

Finally, the intensity of the collaboration significantly differs according to the number of ideas domain experts obtained from citizens. The units that received the largest number of ideas (e.g. the mobility unit received approximately 600 ideas) needed the support and coordinating efforts of the working group in order to analyse and provide feedback in a timely manner. Members of the working group stated that the deadlines in the evaluation stage have also been more flexible for the respective units.

The working group started as a sub-culture within the administration, aiming to stimulate participation in the city. Although the former mayor was critical of citizen participation (see Tobback, 2019 for more details), the city's general director at that moment was the head of the neighbourhood-oriented services unit and a promoter of citizen participation. Thus, the working group started building the roots for these participatory initiatives many years ago. Now, the current mayor has established participation as one of the priorities of his mandate. Furthermore, his ambassador's role in the project, such as participating in the LMHM offline events, has encouraged the government and administration of Leuven to move towards a more open vision of participation and collaboration.

#### **5.4 Human Resources**

The working group of LMHM consists of approximately ten civil servants, including technical staff. Of this group, only four administer the platform. For most of them, the LMHM project is a side task, except for two staff members who were hired in the context of the project, mainly due to the unexpected number of ideas and the resulting high amount of work.

The heads of the units highlighted that different skills are important for setting up and running the project, such as empathy, flexibility and communication skills. Data analysis skills, on the other hand, were lacking in the LMHM working group. Moreover, there is a lack of staff exclusively dedicated to participation projects. Concerning the latter aspects, the working group is considering recruiting personnel for a permanent e-participation position in order to be able to coordinate the e-participation efforts of all administrative units, to network and learn from successful practices abroad (I1, I2).

There are approximately 68 civil servants that integrate the sounding board group, with the responsibility to analyse and examine the suitability with the vision of the city and the feasibility of each idea. For most of them, the project is a side task.

#### **5.5 Financial Resources**

The operational costs and implementation associated with LMHM are mainly funded by the communication unit's budget. All administrators of the project stated that LMHM has obtained sufficient resources to carry the project through all of its phases, which ensured the e-participation initiative's financial sustainability. Nonetheless, the necessary resources for the implementation of the ideas depend on the evaluation process of the proposals in terms

Table 13.3 Results of 'Leuven, maak het mee!', 2019

Indicator	Total
Registrations	3022
Ideas	2208
Comments	2308
Votes	30,328
• Positive votes	27,000
• Negative votes	2800

of technical and financial feasibility and the city's budget allocated for the area of the idea. For certain ideas, the city plans to build partnerships with external actors and organizations in order to coordinate resources. For instance, one of the citizens' ideas on sustainable development is the adoption of shared renewable energy for owners of small houses where solar panels are not an option. This idea will be implemented with the support of the energy cooperative LICHT Leuven, supported by private companies, knowledge centres, non-profit organizations and intermunicipal cooperation. Another citizens' idea calls for night shelters for the homeless. To this end, the city established a partnership with Housing First Lab Leuven, which aims to support and inspire a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

### 6.1 Active Participation

The first results of LMHM after the collection of ideas, including the number of proposals, ideas, registrations and comments (see Table 13.3), were made available through the city's magazine and on the e-participation platform. LMHM did not report data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, as this information is not requested during registration. Some interviewees reported disagreements concerning this decision, but a low-threshold identification was prioritized.

More than 3000 citizens have registered and actively participated in the online platform (3 per cent of the population), posting more than 2000 ideas during six weeks in 2019. Around 22 per cent of the ideas were collected through postcards and later added to the platform by the working group. The ideas covered most of the ambitions defined in the city's policy memorandum (see Table 13.2). Moreover, 96 per cent of the ideas received official feedback from the city. Citizens could also vote or comment on ideas, promoting peer discussion. In total, the city reported 31,492 votes and 2253 comments. Of the total votes, 91 per cent were in favour of an idea. Nevertheless, the working group decided not to consider the votes when selecting the ideas as some citizens and organizations with larger networks could have an advantage. In that way, every idea had the same possibilities to be considered for the city's strategic plan. Concerning the results, all interviewees reported their surprise, stating that the number of ideas was completely unexpected by the working group, the city in general and the private partner.

## 6.2 Democratic Legitimacy

The working group of LMHM has made substantial efforts to engage a diverse range of participants, including citizens, visitors and organizations:

- *Stakeholder mobilization.* LMHM has contacted and mobilized different groups and neighbourhood centres to involve a diverse ‘public’. For instance, the Dutch Language School in Leuven activated students that could not yet speak the language properly to fill out their ideas via the postcards and send them back to the city. Other groups include Leuven 2030 (a non-profit association working towards a climate-neutral future for Leuven), Voka (Flanders’ Chambers of Commerce and Industry) and the School for Refugees.
- *Language.* The platform and communication material have been delivered in Dutch (the official language in Flanders) and English. Interviewees highlight that this has been advantageous in making the project more inclusive, since Leuven is characterized as an international city.
- *Offline alternative.* All citizens in Leuven received a postcard that they could send back to the city for free with their ideas on the future of Leuven. With an offline alternative to the e-participatory platform, LMHM could reach the elderly and citizens with lower digital skills. Yet, they have not determined indicators to evaluate the extent to which these efforts have worked.
- *Communication campaign.* The working group has planned an all-embracing campaign to activate citizens and engage them during the different phases of the project. The campaign took place before, during and after the ideas were collected. The unit promoted the project through the city’s magazine, newsletters, press releases, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), personalized coasters in the city’s coffee bars, and the city website, among others. They also provided the different units of the city with personalized e-mails and communication material to target their public more efficiently.

## 6.3 Transparency

The online discussion tool was available during the six weeks when citizens could post ideas, vote, or comment. Only slight moderation was carried out by the platform administration in the case of a racist or offensive comment or idea. Still, the administration stated that only a few cases required intervention.

Unlike the majority of the cities that implemented the CitizenLab platform, the City of Leuven provided public and personal feedback to each citizen who posted an idea. The feedback was added below the idea and contained extra information based on the evaluation process. In the case that an idea was already implemented, links to the related websites and documents were also provided. Besides, citizens received an update on their idea evaluation by e-mail and, if subscribed to the newsletter, they would have received a personalized e-mail based on their idea area and interests. Citizens who voted or commented on an idea also received notifications via e-mail concerning the idea at issue so that they could follow the evaluation process.

Table 13.4 Examples of citizens' ideas included in the city's strategic multi-annual plan

Theme	Brief description	Status
Community development	A permanent participation platform to share ideas and suggestions with the city, either online or offline	<i>Implemented.</i> The current e-participation platform will remain active at least until 2025
Health and welfare	Free potable water in the city, through fountains, to reduce the consumption of bottled water	<i>In progress.</i> The city will install 16 water-tap drinking points around the city with the collaboration of the largest water private company in Flanders
Social inclusion, housing	Co-housing for young refugees in the city as a great opportunity for housing and integration	<i>Planned</i>
Mobility	Involvement of residents in the decision-making process of unsafe traffic situations together with traffic experts	<i>Planned</i>
Culture, sports and events	Moving Neighbours: a social exercise project	<i>Implemented.</i> With the financial support of the Sport Agency of Flanders

#### 6.4 Influence on Policy Formulation and External Collaboration

Interviewees reported that the number and quality of ideas were unexpected. This has been a critical point in processing ideas and the timeline previously established. If success is defined by the number of ideas, mobility is leading the group (n = 640), followed by streets and squares (n = 259) and nature and biodiversity (n = 213). The topics with less citizen proposals are technology (n = 35), service provision (n = 54), citizenship (n = 61) and employment, economy and trade (n = 64). However, the quality of ideas should also be considered. Interviewees claimed that, in general, the quality was high, except for the ideas received via postcards, where the content was limited. Another point remarked by interviewees was that most of the proposals were on the operational level, while a few ideas were on the policy level (12). Also, the ideas that affect people closely, such as mobility or nature in the city, were the most popular. Finally, only 10 per cent of ideas were discarded due to unsuitability with the political vision of the city and evaluated by the sounding group based on suitability with the city's ambitions and feasibility in terms of budget.

The influence of LMHM on policy formulation in the context of Leuven's strategic multi-annual plan is shown by the inclusion of 373 ideas to be implemented in the period 2020–2025. As of January 2021, 25 ideas have been implemented, 102 ideas are in progress and 248 ideas have been planned for the period 2021–2025 (see Table 13.4).

Some ideas were taken by the unit responsible for the idea's area, while some ideas were selected for co-creation with external stakeholders. The working group selected a limited number of ideas clustered in 25 themes to be discussed during 'dialogue evenings' with experts and citizens for the potential co-creation of ideas. The aim was to implement those ideas through co-creation efforts. Some clusters included citizen participation, smart city Leuven, sharing economy and animal welfare. Two dialogue evenings took place in October 2019 as part of the efforts of LMHM in order to implement a hybrid approach, including online and offline solutions, and involve citizens in policy formulation. During these events, groups

of citizens and an expert in the field would discuss potential avenues to materialize ideas. This way, LMHM aims to involve citizens through both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

The LMHM initiative has also influenced the adoption of external collaboration in different units of the city. In the previous administration, efforts to implement the participatory process were limited; the city mainly utilized surveys and forums to gather citizens' opinions (I6, I1). However, after the outcome of LMHM and the current government's support, different units of the city have launched other e-participation projects. One of these projects concerns the inclusion of Neighbourhood e-Hubs around the city. This project is developed in the context of the city's ambition to become climate neutral. For this initiative, citizens are invited to provide their opinions on the location preferences for the neighbourhood mobility point. Another project invites external stakeholders (including citizens, hospital and transport industries, among others) to provide their ideas on the redevelopment of the square where the bus and train station is located. Participants could post their ideas on pre-established themes, such as interaction, landscaping and mobility.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the insights gathered from data analysis, the relevant success factors were identified as critical in the case study. In addition, barriers conditioning the implementation and outcomes of the e-participation initiative were also found to be relevant. Concerning the critical success factors, four factors were particularly relevant for the success of *Leuven, co-create it*: the support of the politico-administrative level, the offline-online approach implemented to engage citizens, the substantive communication organized to inform and motivate potential participants and the transparency efforts.

The support of the higher-tier political and administrative actors is related to the local context level. This factor not only empowered the LMHM working group, but also increased the legitimacy of the process internally. At the individual level, both the mayor and the general director of the city are recognized as ambassadors of LMHM, which interviewees consider the backbone of the project. This context has facilitated cooperation between the operational and strategic level behind the initiative, which was fundamental to the accomplishments of LMHM.

At the organizational level, the stakeholder analysis and mobilization carried out by the working group of LMHM is considered another critical success factor. This process allowed the identification of the key actors and bridge figures who promote the e-participation initiative among a diverse group of citizens and organizations. The activation of a wide array of stakeholders also increases internal collaboration, crafting new organizational dynamics, such as neighbourhood associations, academia and domain experts, among others.

Moreover, although the online platform is the main tool implemented in the context of LMHM, alternative offline solutions accompany the process. This hybrid approach is believed to increase the democratic legitimacy of the process by engaging a more diverse group of citizens. By offering offline alternatives, instead of a 'digital-by-default' approach, the city overcomes certain limitations in terms of digital exclusion. Moreover, the e-participation initiative benefits from offline initiatives where ideas can be further discussed (e.g. dialogue evenings).

The hybrid approach implemented on *Leuven, co-create it* was also reinforced by another relevant factor at the initiative level: the communication campaign that enabled citizen par-

ticipation by increasing awareness and ownership of the process. Elements such as detailed information, personalized feedback and data on the decision-making process are considered relevant enablers of the process. These efforts were based on the principal value of the project, which is transparency in the decision-making process. In the e-participatory process, this seems to be an essential value, creating a positive perception of the e-participation initiative. However, this positive perception only becomes sustainable if it leads to action.

As for the barriers, the factors related to the organizational level were the most critical for *Leuven, co-create it*. The interviews revealed that the working group underestimated the citizens' participation and the needed resources. Concerning the former, there were no expectations on the number of qualitative ideas on the slight moderation required during the e-participation process. This output revealed to the city the potential value behind the involvement of external stakeholders in the decision-making process. In the same vein, internal collaboration was another key organizational factor in overcoming resource limitations and evaluating more than 2000 citizen ideas.

Yet, the unexpected results became a critical situation for the project's planning, leading to challenges in terms of managing expectations internally and externally as well as the need to rethink the process to be able to evaluate all citizen proposals. Related to this barrier, another factor at the organizational level which obstructed the implementation of the e-participation initiative was the managers' background, particularly the lack of specific skills, such as data analysis, to deal with the number and quality of citizen ideas.

This study aims to identify the critical success factors of an e-participation initiative in Leuven, Belgium, at the contextual and organizational level. The initiative is based on the offline and online involvement of external stakeholders, including citizens, visitors and organizations, in the formulation of the city's multi-annual strategic plan (2020–2025).

Factors related to the contextual and organizational level of the e-participation initiative have been identified as the most critical for its success. In line with previous studies (Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid, 2019; Porwol et al., 2013), the present chapter suggests that contextual, organizational and individual factors, beyond technological aspects, need to be considered when engaging external stakeholders in policy-making efforts.

In light of the different critical factors identified in the case study, the actual role of citizens in the policy-making process will be determined by how these challenges are tackled by the city government and administration. Nevertheless, most interviewees agreed that LMHM has been a *game changer*; it is not only about how many ideas can be checked as 'implemented', but the potential impact the entire process will have in the long term. While LMHM has allowed citizens to impact the formulation of the city's strategic annual plan by including more than 300 ideas to be implemented in the coming years, the actual impact will depend on the sustainability of the participatory process in the city.

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# 14. The implementation of e-participation platforms in Ireland: The case of OpenConsult

**Bernadette Connaughton**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Putting the ‘e’ factor into governance through e-participation represents attempts to actively involve citizens in deliberating the policy process so that ‘they can raise issues, modify agendas and change government initiatives’ (Davies, 2015). And yet, while e-participation is an important vision of e-governance, it is referred to as a disappointing concept (Bannister and Connolly, 2012) given the gaps between its aspiration of higher rates of citizen engagement and its actual impact. Using the framework of e-information, e-participation and e-decision-making, the United Nation’s e-participation index indicates that Ireland’s performance in this area is improving, rising from a ranking of 39/193 in 2016 to 29/193 in 2020 (<https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/81-Ireland>). The question arises as to whether and how the public administration gives effect to all stages of this framework with the introduction of e-participation platforms?

This chapter discusses emerging e-participation practices in Ireland and argues that, while the introduction of digital platforms in local authorities offers much potential, they remain at a nascent stage of development and are largely grafted onto pre-existing policy-making approaches. The initiative explored is OpenConsult, a platform designed by the research organization CiviQ to support involvement in online consultation processes and make them more transparent. The portal was introduced as a pilot initiative in 2014 and was used in 2020 by a number of Irish public service organizations, including 14 local authorities. The purpose of the discussion is to explore the implementation of OpenConsult and whether the introduction of a technologically enabled engagement approach has led to more meaningful participation with citizens and stakeholders and adaptation within the public administration. Despite its background in a new model of deliberative democracy (Liston et al., 2013), it would appear that the initial e-participation practices in local authorities via OpenConsult have been implemented as a by-product of e-consultation, i.e. making fragmented consultation processes in local government more streamlined and efficient. To date, it is not possible to observe e-participation initiatives which comprehensively affect collaborations both within the government and with non-governmental actors and which link e-participation practices with decision-making to demonstrably influence the policy-making process.

The chapter commences by outlining the adoption of a stagist approach to present the spectrum of interactions between government and citizens arising from the expansion of e-government to e-participation and acknowledging the importance of contextual influences

and organizational and individual factors in understanding the introduction of e-participation projects in public administration. The discussion moves to review the public administration context in Ireland for e-government/e-governance, which aligns with the Anglo-Saxon tradition in promoting public-sector reforms. From the late 1990s, the Irish government began to undertake investment in information and communication technology, and since then, the term e-government has generally been interpreted to straddle both efficiency and effective public administration systems – with more participatory decision processes seemingly tagged on. A background description of CiviQ’s development of OpenConsult is provided to present its mission and goal intentions in the delivery of the platform. The final section seeks to evaluate the platform’s impact by outlining how the platform is utilized as an instrument to improve policy-making processes, how its implementation is influenced by organizational factors within local authority settings and whether this is leading to more innovative and transparent participatory methods.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Promoting citizen participation in public decision-making is an important cornerstone of representative democracies and is reiterated as a principle of good policy making in local, national and European strategies. But these intentions have not translated satisfactorily into practice and have weak effects on broad citizen participation and process legitimacy (Liston et al., 2013). This gap is also emphasized from a public administration perspective, whereby the inclusion of citizen participation in various narratives of public service reform has not yielded meaningful cultural change (Strokosch and Osborne, 2020).

Although closely linked with the emergence of New Public Management and the implementation of internal information technology systems, early e-government expansions indicated that putting government services online and enhancing their delivery could also be directed towards improving the overall quality of policy-making processes. The emergence of Web 2.0 technology from the early 2000s, followed by social media, was an important enabler of citizens’ engagement in information exchange, public consultations and the formation and evaluation of policy (CEC, 2009; Komito, 2005). e-Governance is regarded as ‘ushering in a new era of democratic involvement’ through e-participation and digital democracy (Davies, 2015). In particular, e-participation promotes transparency, whereby adequate public access to information is provided in conjunction with the timely provision thereof, institutionalized accountability to ensure that governments can be held responsible for their actions and building trust in government (Wirtz et al., 2016; Kim and Lee, 2012). The impact of digitalization in general has also led to a changed environment, whereby elected representatives and public administrators are expected to respond to and engage citizens and other stakeholders more than ever.

A second component to acknowledge is the stages in policy design or e-participation ‘ladders’ to decision-making as a way of improving policy-making processes. Public participation provides a widely accepted spectrum of interactions between government and citizens, incorporating categories of information, consultation, involvement, collaboration and empowerment (Wirtz et al., 2016). In line with expanding e-government to e-participation, the United Nations e-Government Survey extends its own analysis by incorporating an e-participation index to capture how citizens are gaining access to information and public services and

whether the effective participation of citizens in public decision-making is being achieved in practice (<https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb>). This is illustrated in an e-Participation Framework composed of three levels. The first level is e-information, with governments providing citizens with information through information and communications technology (ICT) channels. The second level is e-consultation, whereby citizens are engaged in the process of shaping new policies or services through providing contributions to enable governments to better respond to public demands. Governments are not necessarily obligated to use these inputs and it is really at level three of e-decision-making that citizens are empowered through the co-design of public policies and/or co-production of service delivery. Achieving the third level of the e-participation model – e-decision-making – remains a serious challenge (United Nations, 2018; CEC, 2009) and requires adaptation within public-sector organizations to embrace new approaches from elected representatives and public administrators themselves and how they engage with citizens in policy making.

To understand this involves not just observing how ICT has configured traditional democratic functions, such as participation in the policy-making process, and/or viewing this against ideals of deliberative or discursive democracy. Rather the focus is on contextual influences, individual and organizational factors to uncover ‘the otherwise obscured institutional dynamics’ that facilitate or impede e-participation in public administration settings (Chadwick, 2011, p. 23). These also include strategy documents, political ambivalence among elected representatives, individual actor motivations, suitability with pre-existing participatory mechanisms, resources and leadership (Chadwick, 2011). Arguably, the starting point for an e-participation initiative is its alignment with organizational strategy and legislation, whereby it contributes to the achievement of identified goals or objectives. Since citizens and community groups often have minimal involvement, it is more likely to be an idea generated internal to the organization and assessed accordingly. The process is owned by the department, or local council, and is almost exclusively internally negotiated, with a strong measurable focus. Evaluations of e-participation initiatives therefore need to account for specific internal strategic and organizational factors as well as external influences, such as international and national policy contexts.

The analytical framework illustrated in Figure 14.1 is used to frame the key factors influencing the introduction and application of the e-participation platform and to assess its impact on increasing levels of participation. It is acknowledged that e-participation is generally considered as part of e-government, whereby participation initiatives are mediated through ICT (Le Blanc, 2020). Transparency, accountability and trust are key principles for underpinning citizen engagement in decision-making and public service delivery. In order to understand the implementation of the e-participation platform and the level (e-information, e-consultation, e-decision-making) of the e-participation ladder achieved, the receptiveness to developments in e-government and e-participation need to be explored. This is in terms of national and local policy contexts, organizational factors, e.g. features facilitate or impede e-participation activities, such as performance and resistance to change or ICT capabilities, and whether individual factors, i.e. support from elected representatives to encourage citizens’ direct participation in decision-making, or the existence of ‘digital champions’ in the public administration organization, have any bearing on the success of the initiative.

The research approach taken in this study employed desk research using academic and grey literature sources to present an overview of Ireland’s experience of using digital technology

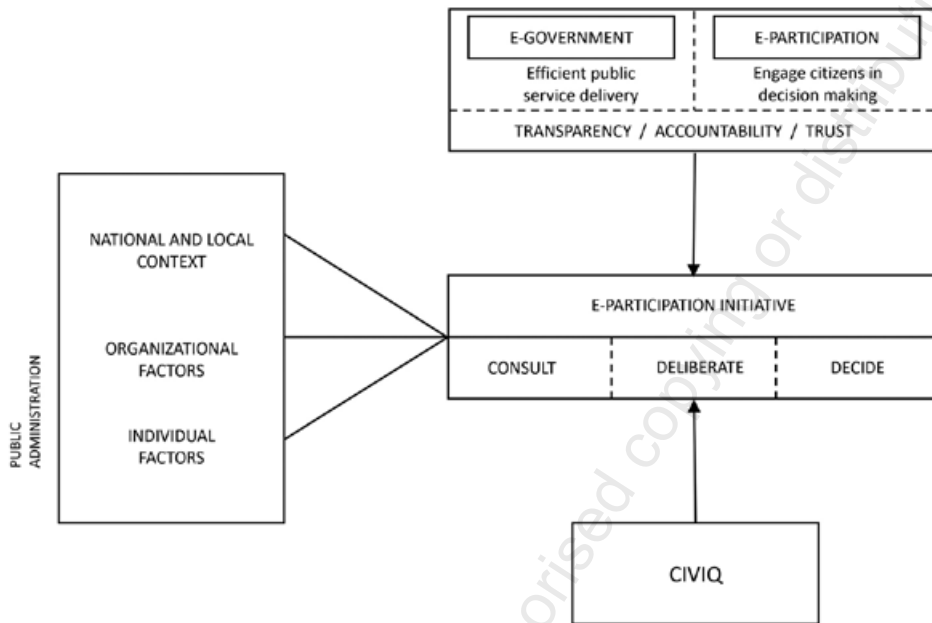


Figure 14.1 Analytical framework for analysing the Irish case

in public administration and how e-participation initiatives have developed in a somewhat divorced fashion to the larger e-government agenda. The platform selected is the online consultation portal OpenConsult offered by the company CiviQ. The case study details were obtained from six interviews conducted between July 2019 and July 2020 with the developers of the platform and public service officials in a central government department and three local authorities involved in its operation. The interview protocol focused on addressing the origins and description of CiviQ/OpenConsult, the structures and processes that enable and/or hamper the functioning of the platform and its influence on the democratic legitimacy, transparency and efficiency of the policy-making process.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Traditional interpretations of how policy is made have changed in Ireland, as they have elsewhere, as a result of an externally influenced environment which has developed beyond a legislative process to include, for example, regulatory processes, opportunities for public participation in policy formation and reforms to accountability relationships and instruments. Ireland has a strong tradition of public consultation based on informality and social partnership (Government of Ireland, 2005) and more recently through membership in the Open Government Partnership, which is based on strengthening and deepening a programme of wide-ranging democratic reform (Government of Ireland, 2016). Furthermore, one of the aims of the Civil Service Renewal Plan is to 'promote a culture of innovation and openness by involving greater external participation and consultation in policy development' (Government

of Ireland, 2014). Public-sector reforms for open and inclusive policy making have included efforts to improve consultation processes in policy development and regulating lobbying activities by increasing transparency.

Despite the European Union (EU) and international policy discourse on e-democracy since the mid-2000s, Irish public administration was not proactive in embedding e-participation practices in policy and procedural frameworks. Ireland's experience of introducing digital technology into public administration can be traced back to the introduction of the Information Society Unit in the Department of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) in the late 1990s. Its aim was to ensure that Ireland developed as a 'fully participative, competitive, knowledge-based information society' (McCaffrey, 2007). In addition, an Information Society Commission made up of representatives from business, social partners and government was established in 1997 as an independent advisory body to report directly to the Taoiseach. Its role was to shape an evolving public policy framework to promote an e-business rather than an e-democracy agenda in particular. The first primitive portals emerged in around 2000 and consultants reported that while integration improved, there were major problems with underlying silo systems (Bannister and Connolly, 2012). The public-sector implementation approaches were largely unstructured and unmanaged and for citizens and community groups the advances in ICT would change little in terms of e-participation.

e-Participation should be of particular interest at the local government level, which, although subordinate to the central government in policy influence, conveys a strong tradition of localism, easy access to public representatives and well-rooted community development practices. Yet, it performs poorly in international assessments of local government's relative strengths, competencies, representation and democratic structures (Callanan, 2018). There are currently 31 local authorities – 26 county councils, three city councils and two city and county councils. This corresponds to just one city or county council for every 148,507 citizens in Ireland, which is far fewer than similar-sized European countries.

From the local authority perspective, a driver for the introduction of e-participation platforms is their requirement to comply with legislative frameworks that decree public consultation in policy making. A prime example is the Planning and Development Act 1963 (and various amendments), which makes it mandatory for multi-annual development plans prepared by local authorities to be informed by a public consultation process (Callanan, 2018). Planning is a contentious local policy area and, in steering the planning process, local government is expected to manage potential conflicts through accountable democratic procedures, allowing public involvement in all stages of plan-making. This has become more complex for local authorities over time and is coupled with actions such as the introduction of the Aarhus Convention which establishes a number of rights for citizens, including public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (Connaughton, 2019). More recently, the Local Government Act 2014 established Public Participation Networks (PPNs), which are formal structures through which community groups can engage with local policy development.

The adoption of e-participation approaches in national/local frameworks and procedurally across the Irish public administration are not, however, expansively developed. This is illustrated in the *National Digital Strategy for Ireland* (DoCCA, 2013) which did not reference e-democracy or e-participation. (There was a consultation process in 2018 but the strategy did not materialize. A digital strategy is now referenced in the new programme for government

2020 entitled 'Our Shared Future'. The government will 'commence a public consultation on the NDS with a view to completing and publishing the strategy within 6 months'.) It did include a strand called 'More Citizen Engagement' and this focused entirely on getting citizens online, through digital skills training, with the objective of reducing the cost of government services. It is currently unclear whether a successor strategy will be any more explicit about e-participation. At the local level, *Putting People First* (DoECLG, 2012) outlines the reform priorities for a revitalized local government and pledges to use approaches to ensure citizen engagement in local authority policy formulation and service design. Technology is suggested as a means to offset the challenges to proposed new citizen engagement mechanisms by employing 'appropriate, effective and economical means of engagement, including the use of the latest media and technology' (DoECLG, 2012). An action of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce established to improve connectivity across Ireland, however, is the development of Local Digital Strategies in every city and county council in the country. Following a tendering process, Indecon International was selected by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) to work on this. The Local Digital Strategies developed by local authorities incorporate seven areas, including digital skills, digital economy and employment, community and culture, digital services, transitioning to digital, infrastructure and innovation and entrepreneurship. DRCD administers a digital innovation programme and provides funding to local authority-led projects that support digital development. To reiterate, while citizen engagement strands may be included, the strategies mainly concentrate on skills for connectivity, employment and infrastructure and appear to encourage local-led projects that will facilitate the implementation of a national broadband plan.

Two observations can be made. Firstly, Irish public administration's engagement with digital technology is characterized by an increased range of e-government projects, whereas a corresponding e-governance/e-participation approach to policy making has lagged behind. The tenets of the national digital strategy and its emphasis on infrastructure to underpin economic growth aligns with Objective 1 of the Strategy Statement of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Initiatives to inform citizens include the major rebranding of government websites to [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie), which acts as a central information point where both public servants and the public can obtain information. A consultation portal is available on [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) and this provides information on public consultations held by government departments and local authorities, including links to their consultation sites. As such, it acts as a repository of information on consultations and as a guide rather than an instrument for interacting with citizens. It is unclear if any user feedback is possible (apart from 'Is this page useful? Yes/no') and no indication of collaborative decision-making processes is provided.

Secondly, using technology is linked with challenges in promoting confidence in existing consultative structures and encouraging citizen engagement at the subnational level more than at the national level. With reference to the goals of open and inclusive policy making at the national level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008) report on the Irish public service noted that survey responses from Irish officials highlighted the priority of improving government efficiency and social cohesion and referred to improving citizen compliance. It was noted that in most other OECD countries responding to the questionnaire, the emphasis was placed on increasing citizen trust and improving transparency and accountability (OECD, 2008, p. 224). The strategy documents of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform do, however, indicate that an open government agenda with aims

of fostering accountability and trust is an objective. The remit of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in digital innovation is driven by open government data and delivering public services with greater efficiency. Its digital strategies include the Public Sector ICT Strategy (2015), the eGovernment Strategy (2017), Action 1 of the current Public Service Reform Plan: Accelerate Digital Delivery of Services (2017) and the Public Service Data Strategy 2019–2023 (2018). Yet, the use of digital technology to engage the public needs to be navigated properly by the political-administrative system; grand visions do not equate to effectiveness or increased trust. For example, e-voting was introduced in 2003 with the purchase of machines from Dutch firm Nedap for use in the 2004 European and local elections. Due to a campaign of opposition, the government deferred electronic voting and the machines were eventually scrapped. The crux of the problem was that the system was poorly implemented without any consultation with citizens, who rejected the imposition of technology, and issues concerning proper auditing also arose (Bannister and Connolly, 2007).

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF OPENCONSULT

The initiative featured in this study is OpenConsult, which is an interactive online portal designed to make the consultation process more transparent. Although there are alternative e-consultation portals, such as the Citizen Space ('we asked, you said, we did') by Delib (with Dublin City Council being one of its clients), OpenConsult has a larger and growing presence within the Irish local government landscape. By 2020, it had been introduced to 14 local authorities and aligned with a model called Social Web for Inclusive and Transparent Democracy (SOWIT), which is designed for integration into policy-making processes (Liston et al., 2013). OpenConsult is a product of the private research organization CiviQ, whose mission is to 'transform public engagement towards quality consultation and advanced understanding of the nuance and shared perspectives in public opinion' (<https://civiq.eu>).

CiviQ was founded in 2012 with the objective of using technology to improve the democratic process. It offers cloud-based public consultation and opinion analysis. Its genesis lies in the chief executive officer's experience completing a PhD on the impact of democracy strategy and participatory processes in Kenya in addition to her background in web technology and management consultancy. Collaboration with fellow researchers led to the formulation of ideas to underpin an 'experimental deliberative format that aims to bridge the gap between normative deliberation theory and the information and communication capacities of the web' (Liston et al., 2013). The group presented its research to a Dublin local authority – Fingal County Council – to inform them of the potential of new Internet capacities aligned with the development of online civic engagement platforms that were not being considered within standard face-to-face deliberation formats (Interview 6). The model SOWIT was designed by researchers and developed in consultation with citizens, civil society organizations and representatives in the local authority.

Using Q-methodology, the SOWIT model is based on the implementation of Dryzek's (2010) deliberative system and includes a stagist approach with feedback loops between each sequential stage:

- *Stage 1: Collaboration:* entailing a collaborative space for bringing in public knowledge and discussion. The objectives are enabling citizen discourse and inclusion in the



policy-making process, supporting views of other citizens' input and developing 'a technical, experiential and context learning environment' to inform policy development.

- *Stage 2: Deliberation*: between elected representatives and public officials that are technologically assisted in order to progress policy proposals.
- *Stage 3: Policy development*: whereby the local council considers the proposals of the deliberation domain incorporating input from citizens. (Liston et al., 2013, pp. 472–480)

What distinguishes this from other deliberative forums is its 'systemic impact': it includes public representatives and officials, uses Q-methodology, supports all types of communication in expressing opinions and emphasizes accountability and transparency through ongoing feedback and communication (Liston et al., 2013, p. 472).

The motivation to address gaps in Irish local democracy led to the launch of CiviQ, which took part in the National Digital Research Centre Launchpad 7 programme for start-up digital companies and received incubation hub funding. During this time, CiviQ began to develop the portal and in 2014 won a tender with Fingal County Council for OpenConsult, which was used in public consultation for its development plan (Interview 5). Other early councils to join were Kilkenny County Council and South County Dublin Council from 2015. The company introduced a second product called OpenInsights and began to acquire other clients in the public sector, including the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, trade unions and housing associations. What is important to emphasize is that CiviQ's approach is the creation of a deliberative public space for engagement, one that is underpinned by a distinct methodology and aims to contribute public value – as distinct from traditional, routine forms of public participation.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Irish local authorities do not have formal ownership of the initiative which resides with CiviQ and the councils have a contract with CiviQ for technical provision, maintenance and training. Interviews with public officials indicated that the key organizational factors responsible for introducing the portal to the councils are legislative and strategic, linked to departmental leadership or individuals acting as 'digital champions'. This includes leadership from the chief executive and information technology managers who realized that consultation processes were suboptimal from a systems evaluation standpoint and/or lacked ambition to deliver for the local authority as its organizational culture moved more towards technology and embedding an online presence.

All interviewees cited the Local Government Act 2014 as an important legislative driver in tandem with amendments to the Planning and Development Acts. 'Putting People First' (2012) and the 2014 Act create a vision for a new type of governance at the local level, which is community led and council supported. Local digital strategies also have an influence, though many local authorities' strategies emphasize connectivity, enterprise and skills training to a greater degree than building participation. An instructive example is Limerick City and County Council's (LCCC) 'Building Ireland's First Digital City' Digital Strategy 2017–2020 and Smart Limerick Roadmap 2017. The LCCC strategy supports the economic, spatial and social planning ambitions for Limerick 2030 and includes *Engagement and Participation (consultation and collaboration)* as its first pillar. The development of 'MyPoint' using

CiviQ's technology and the development of digital platforms for engagement suggest that new levels of collaboration with the public are central to the strategy.

The OpenConsult platform captures text- and map-based submission data and enables responses to consultations to be shared, thus making the process more transparent. CiviQ's second product OpenInsights is a platform and method for capturing and finding structure in public opinion on policies/plans and was used by Fingal County Council to identify key public perspectives on the future of Dublin Airport. From the viewpoint of CiviQ, the technology is enabling the open inclusion of opinion and their mission is to promote every voice in public decision-making (Interview 6). The use of OpenConsult in local councils contrasts with the offline methods of consultation traditionally used, such as placing advertisements in newspapers or holding public meetings, since it is linked to their websites and is accessible.

The local authorities that have adopted OpenConsult have a common template linked to their website and there are three main ways in which views can be captured. Any citizen can visit the online collaboration portal, potentially discuss the issue and submit their views directly. There is a separate feature for surveys. LCCC's portal is customized as 'MyPoint' ([www.mypoint.limerick.ie](http://www.mypoint.limerick.ie)) and is integrated with Limerick.ie ([www.limerick.ie](http://www.limerick.ie)), which is an official guide to Limerick City and an early output from the city's local digital strategy. Consultations can vary from housing developments, conversions of former fire stations or forward planning initiatives driven by the local authorities to Limerick's public consultation on the election of its first directly elected mayor with executive functions. The latter was linked to a specific website 'Your Mayor – Your Voice!', providing information and encouraging engagement on the introduction of a directly elected mayor in 2021. The approach of linking the portal with a dedicated website was also used successfully in Dublin South County Council for consultation on a new planned town called Clonburris, which was granted planning permission in 2019. A website for the Strategic Development Zone was linked to the consultation on the planning application for the town and planners considered this effective (Interview 4). As noted, CiviQ developed a relationship with Fingal County Council at an early stage in order to address accountability concerns and ensure more discussion around planning. What originated as functional concerns within the councils concerning the capability to deliver consultations has moved on to using the technology to engage in multi-disciplinary projects, such as 'Unheard Voices' (Smart Dublin/Enterprise Ireland), 'Your airport views' and 'Our Balbriggan' (all with Fingal County Council).

The number of consultations run by local authorities is variable according to their size and demographic profile and there is an uneven response rate from citizens. Numerous consultations may receive zero or few submissions as they are very technical (e.g. painting yellow lines on a rural road) and are unlikely to garner much interest even though legislation requires that a consultation be held. In contrast, submissions on transport plans or development plans can run into the thousands, particularly if they are controversial (Interview 5). The information about the plan or proposed scheme is published in chapters/sections and separate documents on the dashboard for ease of access.

In order to make a submission, users must register with the portal (username and password). Although the system can support anonymous submissions, it is obligatory to register and all submissions are visible. This requires individuals to take ownership of their input but it may also be a deterrent for potential contributors (Interviews 2, 3, 6). One public official commented that the public need to be assured that their submission does not go into a 'black hole'

and is responded to in the system. This is a bonus in contrast to what is traditional offline, where ‘You might never find out what the decision is. For years, people made submissions to things and never knew what the outcome was’ (Interview 3). Interviewees commented that the portal provides the opportunity for more ‘balanced engagement’ from the public and there is room for additional commentary to be added to individual submissions. The LCCC ‘MyPoint’ platform is mobile ready and access from mobile phones is the principal means of access to the council website.

Every submission is posted on the portal and there is a live count so that the public can see how many submissions come in. Council officials find this more effective as, in some councils, members of the public were emailing random submissions to different council departments (Interview 2). The submissions are moderated individually as part of the process by administrators, and the local authorities have a moderation policy which is typically available to view on the homepage of the portal. A moderation team is responsible for each consultation (Interview 3), for viewing submitted comments and approving them, and some information may need to be redacted for General Data Protection Regulation compliance. An amendment to the Planning and Development Act 2000 Section 11 3A introduced in October 2019 mandates that submissions must be posted on the website of the authority within ten working days of their receipt. Training for managing the platform is provided by CiviQ to council staff and the platform is regarded as technically straightforward for public officials to use (Interview 4). After the statutory closing date, the submissions are channelled into a dedicated system/database to be categorized, all submissions are released to councillors who can ‘click in’ to read any individual submission and officials prepare an executive report, which is a form of summary posted on the council website. In one local authority, an official commented that several councillors initially complained about using the portal but adapted to using it over time (Interview 3).

What may be gleaned from this overview of the introduction of the portal is that there is information provision and there is scope for the points raised in this deliberative space to be incorporated in the decision-making process.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

By 2020, a total of 14 local authorities were working with CiviQ and using their products to host public consultations, predominantly on planning processes. CiviQ offers an additional (digital) channel through which citizens can engage with local councils and participate in policy developments, impacting on their own communities from their own homes (Interview 4). Their ability to reach out to local authorities has been successful and they appear to have acquired a ‘brand awareness’ for the portal (Interview 3).

As CiviQ provides a centralized platform for consultation, this is an advantage for the councils’ activities; previously, different service delivery sections operated in silos and, as one interviewee commented, ‘did their own thing’ (Interview 3). Local authorities wanted to move away from their ‘hard copy’ public consultation processes and were cognisant of members of the public finding it difficult to access the different consultations presented as links buried on separate pages of their websites (Interviews 2, 3, 6). Spatial information could not be accessed either and any comments made outside the terms of reference of the consultations were inaccessible, and this could be up to 35 per cent of the commentary. One of the interviewees opined

that a risk associated with excluding comments is a decline in trust, since citizens lose faith in a process to which they had contributed (Interview 6).

In the local authorities consulted, the department most central to the utilization of OpenConsult is Forward/Strategic Planning. As noted, development plans must be produced every six years and, as a reserved function, their adoption must be approved by the elected council, whereas local area plans may be approved at the municipal district level. The adoption of development plans requires several stages of consultation and planners acknowledge the challenge of securing as wide a demographic population as possible to engage in broad visionary development plans. Local planning and local infrastructural consultations are deemed more straightforward since they relate to issues local citizens can directly identify with and are referred to as ‘things people could get their teeth into’ (Interview 3). The benefits of using technology to involve more people and viewpoints in a democratic process was emphasized in interviews. But efficiency advantages were mentioned more frequently (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4), as was the tendency to refer to e-consultation as ‘e-planning’ (Interview 2). A sense of frustration was highlighted around the difficulties of those so-called ‘e-planning’ projects ‘grinding along’ during the economic recession from 2008 to 2012 when consultancy services folded and, as the economy recovered, the services of technical experts and consultants were difficult to obtain (Interview 2). Timing is also a pressure in planning, as plans and decisions must be delivered within specific deadlines as prescribed in the legislation.

Planning may be the main stakeholder in the e-participation initiative, but internal collaboration has broadened to include architects, housing officials, traveller accommodation strategy ownership, environmental initiatives and city regeneration sections, and many of these areas have the same legislative background to address. In some local authorities, the platform is used in every department and, while engagement originated with Forward Planning, it ‘percolated’ other departments within six months (Interview 6). In terms of external collaboration, engagement on the portal is largely from ‘prescribed’ stakeholders within the Irish administrative system, such as Irish Water, regulators or government departments. There are no established collaborations with non-governmental organizations or businesses, though resident associations and voluntary/community and heritage groups do submit comments to consultations. Official engagement with PPNs is evident for some projects through the portal, though a more typical approach mentioned by interviewees was PPN briefings via meetings and traditional formats.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

e-Participation provides opportunities to develop tools for both more participatory decision-making as well as more efficient public administration. In Ireland, this presents alternative ways to involve citizens in collaborative policy making at local levels as well as introduce more streamlined processes for statutory and non-statutory public consultations. This is pertinent at a time when the governance reforms delivered in the past decade are deemed to have diminished the role and functions of local government (Callanan, 2018) and, as argued by some commentators, deemed to have replaced ‘citizen’ with ‘consumer’ in order to champion ‘efficiency over democracy and achieve neither’ (Quinlivan, 2019). This chapter has outlined the Irish setting for e-participation and explored OpenConsult developed by CiviQ, which serves as an e-participation platform in 14 Irish local authorities.

The demand for this technology from local public administration is stimulated by the necessity to address the burdens of legislative change, organizational challenges, resource and staffing constraints and the desire to renew public engagement processes. Although the public officials interviewed emphasized increased efficiencies in running consultations as the main advantage of OpenConsult, it was also evident that they did not resist the logic of transparency and openness associated with using the portal and are willing to try new approaches in consultation. The way in which the portal may be used in deliberation is continually developing and is an example of how the introduction of technology may indirectly nudge an adaptation in how local authorities manage policy processes and promote legitimate engagement with citizens. Currently, it is evident that the public administration does not give effect to all stages of the e-participation framework, notably the third stage of e-decision-making.

Three points to note when considering the experience of implementing the platform in local authorities are measurement, communication and the elected representatives' engagement. First, the use of performance indicators is somewhat crude in that interviewees referred to traffic counts on the numbers of submissions at the end of a consultation period as the principal measurement, i.e. how many people reach the documents and how many submissions are made. For technical planning projects, this can be low, and many projects have zero submissions. An alternative viewpoint is that the qualitative nature of these submissions enables a wider number of views to be captured, and those people who submit to the portal 'have a say', lending to greater trust in the process (Interview 6). Second, citizens' awareness of the platform needs to be addressed and local authorities' public communication efforts need to be sustained. In the words of one public official, 'it is not really going out there and getting people really aware of projects, it is more facilitating the people that are aware' (Interview 3). Third, there is a 'missing link' in terms of an active input from elected representatives in this part of the policy-making process. Although Irish elected representatives actively communicate with citizens on policy issues at the local level, the formal engagement is driven by the officials who are guided by the legislation. For example, once a plan is drafted, they present it to councillors. What this suggests is that, in e-participation processes, the roles of officials, councillors and the public are not well linked. The change agents championing the technology that enhances more direct participation in public consultations are planners and information technology personnel.

In conclusion, the experience of using OpenConsult for public consultations is generally positive. Its application is steadily gaining a foothold in local authority e-participation initiatives but it is currently underutilized by the citizens to whom it has been introduced. Although it has the potential to promote public value through a more engaged policy approach supporting citizens, the platform serves as a means of introducing technological solutions in order to facilitate the challenges public servants encounter in meeting the statutory requirements of policy making to run cost-effective consultations, address transparency and foster inclusiveness

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# 15. How organizational factors shape e-participation: Lessons from the German one-stop participation portal *meinBerlin*

**Andree Pruin**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Germany, governments at all levels aim to expand electronic citizen participation processes (e-participation) (Große, 2018). In the German capital Berlin, the state government has laid down the promotion of e-participation as an objective. The one-stop e-participation portal *meinBerlin* is the main instrument to implement this goal, representing the ‘central hub’ for the online citizen participation of all administrative units. It merges several tools for collaborative decision-making, ranging from simple opinion polls to more complex discussion formats. The instrument is used by several administrative units characterized by various responsibilities, organizational history and political leadership, but also by different socio-spatial and organizational-cultural characteristics, which makes the Berlin example particularly interesting.

Information and communications technology (ICT) use in participation processes aims to expand and simplify joint decision-making between citizens and governments in order to foster more democratic, efficient and effective policy making (Macintosh, 2004). In these processes, the role of (local) government organizations and their socio-organizational characteristics is crucial, since it is usually the public sector that initiates, moderates, evaluates and possibly implements the results of e-participation (Medaglia, 2012, p. 351). However, despite initial empirical results, the understanding of how public-sector organizations implement e-participation solutions in practice is still underdeveloped. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this chapter aims to answer the following questions:

1. What organizational responses to e-participation occur in the administration of Berlin?
2. Are they suitable to achieve the normative objectives of e-participation?

To answer these questions, theoretical assumptions regarding e-participation and its implementation in organizations will be explained. After that, an in-depth description of the e-participation platform *meinBerlin* will follow before the organizational setup of *meinBerlin* is illustrated. Then an evaluation of the instrument will follow: first, regarding the effects of e-participation on the legitimacy of decision-making. Second, regarding the effects the organizational setup has on the implementation of the instrument. Finally, conclusions and lessons will be drawn from the Berlin case.

## 2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

e-Participation can be described as ‘the process of engaging citizens through ICT in policy and decision-making to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends’ (United Nations, 2014). Following this definition, the use of e-participation is thus intended to achieve two different yet interconnected objectives: first, e-participation aims at the greater and more equal quantitative and qualitative participation of citizens to increase the input legitimacy of decision-making processes. Second, the output and throughput dimension of democratic legitimacy is also expected to increase by utilizing the everyday knowledge of citizens or ‘the wisdom of the crowds’, especially regarding their respective living environments. Gathering this information is intended to contribute to formulating more appropriate and therefore effective and efficient policies (Macintosh, 2004; Kim and Lee, 2012).

Whether these objectives can be achieved depends largely on the socio-organizational setup – the conditions of e-participation practices, since e-participation does not take place in a vacuum but within particular contexts (Rowe and Frewer, 2000). Empirical studies show that the respective organizational context provides important drivers and barriers for the use of e-participation (Steinbach et al., 2019). In recent years, several authors proposed frameworks and models that attempt to examine e-participation practices systematically. These models range from characterization frameworks (Macintosh, 2004) and domain models (Kalampokis et al., 2008) to analytical frameworks for the evaluation of e-participation (Smith et al., 2008). However, many of these frameworks have fallen short in examining the organizational factors which contribute to the implementation and use of e-participation.

Contrary to most existing research on e-participation, Toots (2019) has developed an analytical framework that deals with failure regarding e-participation practices with a special emphasis on organizational and institutional barriers. This chapter roughly follows the factors described by Toots (2019):

- *Organizational complexity*: Many e-government projects assume the collaboration of various actors (Dwivedi et al., 2013; Sarantis et al., 2010), bearing the risk of inter-organizational barriers (Janssen and Klievink, 2012). Moreover, ambiguous and competing objectives’ structural and legal complexity (Anthopoulos et al., 2016; Osborne and Brown, 2011; Rashman et al., 2009) can influence the ability of governments to include citizens in the decision-making process (Voorberg et al., 2015) and thus implement e-participation (Medaglia, 2012).
- *Change agents*: In the public sector, it is often individuals who act as pioneers to promote innovation in the public sector (De Vries et al., 2016; Panopoulou et al., 2014); similarly, the shortage of such committed and competent individuals may prevent the use of e-participation instruments.
- *Political support*: Strong support from public-sector managers and politicians is a key success factor for e-participation projects (Council of Europe, 2009; Glencross, 2009; Panopoulou et al., 2014). In this context, studies point to a ‘middleman paradox’ (Mahrer and Krimmer, 2005). It is not necessarily the top level of an organization that opposes citizen participation, but rather those who are responsible for implementation. Reasons for this can be related to a potential redistribution of power (Arnstein, 1969).



- *Cultural factors*: The tendency towards risk-averse organizational culture in the public sector (Voorberg et al., 2015), fears of change (Chadwick, 2011) and institutional resistance (Panopoulou et al., 2014) are considered barriers to e-participation.
- *Regulations and policies*: On the one hand, regulations and policies can restrict e-participation (Sarantis et al., 2010), but on the other hand, they can also facilitate e-participation (Berntzen and Karamagioli, 2010).
- *Promotion*: Citizens should be aware of the existence of e-participation opportunities (Voorberg et al., 2015), which is why e-participation initiatives should be actively promoted to targeted user groups (Glencross, 2009; Panopoulou et al., 2011).

For an empirical analysis, an explanatory case study of the German e-participation platform *meinBerlin* was conducted. *meinBerlin* represents a particularly interesting case since a total of 44 different and to some extent independently operating administrative units are expected to use the platform. Therefore, *meinBerlin* represents an empirically rich case, characterized by a potentially high variance between various units, due to the units' organizational characteristics. Moreover, the platform as a 'one-stop participation portal' potentially leads to more sustained effects on organizational processes since they can or must be used constantly. Empirical information comes from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted with employees responsible for the platform in the administration and at the place of the technical service provider, employees of the district administrations responsible for implementing e-participation projects and political decision-makers. The respondents were mostly identified by desk research on the platform. The interview guideline largely follows the joint case study protocol used by all authors of this book. The transcribed interviews were analysed by applying a structured qualitative content analysis (Mayring and Fenzl, 2004), following the framework described above. In addition, a document analysis of the respective media coverage, official documents, press releases and website content was conducted.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

#### 3.1 Administrative Structure and Modernization

The political and administrative system of Germany is shaped by the federal distribution of competences and the strong role of local self-government. The country consists of 16 federal states with hundreds of local governments (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, p. 73). Berlin, as one of the three city states in Germany, represents both a federal state and a municipality. The state government (the Senate) thus fulfils both state tasks and municipal responsibilities. Districts have very limited legislative power and no real budgetary and financial sovereignty (Hoffmann and Schwenkner, 2010).

Traditionally, German administration has been regarded as the prototype of a Weberian bureaucracy, characterized by professional training, fixed competences, division of responsibilities and hierarchical subordination (Holtkamp, 2009, p. 65). This paradigm is eroding though, especially since the budget crises of many German municipalities in the mid-1990s when public management-inspired reforms (*Neues Steuerungsmodell* (NSM)) were introduced in many German municipalities (Bogumil and Holtkamp, 2006, pp. 80–101). These reforms were implemented in order to fulfil public tasks more (cost) efficiently. In Berlin, since the early 2000s, various structural reforms of the city districts have been implemented (Hoffmann

and Schwenkner, 2010). Following NSM, these changes were mainly aimed at increasing the efficiency of administrative services (Schedler and Proeller, 2011, p. 5). During these reforms, the number of staff was reduced; however, later, a reversal trend was observed (Hoffmann and Schwenkner, 2010).

In recent years, the focus of German municipalities on cost efficiency was partially replaced by the idea of greater effectiveness and democratic legitimacy through the increased political participation of citizens. This paradigm shift is exemplified by the concept of the *Bürgerkommune* (citizen municipality), which focuses on collaborative forms of decision-making with citizens (Holtkamp, 2009, p. 66). In Berlin, this includes, for example, residents' meetings and question times (Hoffmann and Schwenkner, 2010). Although the opportunities for citizens to influence local politics have increased in recent years, the actual scope of political intervention is rather limited, for example, due to prior privatization of public services and the budget crises of many municipalities (Bogumil and Holtkamp, 2006, pp. 114–125). Also, citizen participation is mandatory in very few legal areas. For example, the German Federal Building Code formally stipulates that urban land use planning processes must be open to public inspection.

### 3.2 Political Culture and Participation

Political culture in Germany was initially characterized by the *Obrigkeitsstaatlichkeit* (the authoritarian state). Thus, even in the post-war era under Chancellor Adenauer, Germany's political culture can be regarded as rather passive with citizen participation reduced to attending elections. Since the 1970s, the proportion of citizens who actively participate in the political process, for example, in political parties, has stabilized at a standard level for comparable parliamentary democracies. Also, non-conventional forms of participation have increased substantially since the 1970s (Ismayr, 2003, pp. 471–472). Especially on the local level, there are thousands of citizen initiatives in fields such as public infrastructure, transport, housing or education (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017, p. 297).

### 3.3 Digital Governance

Concerning digital governance in general, Germany's performance is average in the e-government benchmark of the European Union. Particularly regarding the penetration of e-services, Germany is underperforming (European Union, 2018). The most frequently used administrative services are still mainly carried out in person, not digitally. Regarding e-participation, there is a discrepancy between general willingness to participate online and actual participation rates. Fifty-six per cent of Germans aged 18 years and over who use the Internet privately can imagine participating online in policy-making processes (Krcmar et al., 2016). However, numerous examples show that the actual demand for such formats is low (Zepic et al., 2017).

According to the German Index of Digitalization 2019 (*Deutschland-Index der Digitalisierung*), Berlin ranks among the top federal states. Berlin is one of the three federal states in which citizens have the most frequent digital contact with public authorities. The topic of e-participation is covered by a sub-index – 'Openness'. This index is composed of the possibility of direct online citizen participation, the availability of a digital defect management

system as well as the provision of open administrative data. Berlin, together with the other two city states Hamburg and Bremen, takes first place here. In the overall index, including not only digital citizen services but also indicators such as ‘digital infrastructure’, ‘digitization of everyday life’ or ‘digitization of the economy’, Berlin ranks first among all German states (Opiela et al., 2019).

Berlin adopted an eGovernment Act in 2015, which also stipulates the promotion of e-participation as an objective in political and administrative action. However, no binding measures have been adopted regarding the actual implementation of e-participation (Land Berlin, 2015). Yet, the coalition agreement of the parties in government envisages using *meinBerlin* as the central e-participation platform for the State of Berlin (SPD, Die Linke and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2016, p. 174). In addition to *meinBerlin*, there is another permanent online participation platform in Berlin: the participatory budget of Lichtenberg. However, this service is limited to one district (Bezirksamt Lichtenberg von Berlin, 2020).

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF *MEINBERLIN*

*meinBerlin* is the e-participation platform of the state of Berlin. The citizen participation processes of all administrative units can be realized via this platform, which makes *meinBerlin* the central ‘point of contact’ for all online participation processes in Berlin (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 6). Various types of e-participation can be conducted on the platform, including participatory budgeting, public surveys, open debates, open idea collections and statements on development plan processes (Land Berlin 2020). Often, these e-participation processes are carried out in addition to existing ‘classical’ citizen participation outlets, such as planning cells and citizen juries. *meinBerlin* therefore does not aim to replace traditional citizen participation, but to supplement them (Interviews 1, 2, 3).

The platform gives citizens the opportunity to exert influence on policy formulation in the different districts and at the state level (Bezirksamt Treptow-Köpenick von Berlin, 2015; SPD, Die Linke and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2016, p. 174). However, the topics are determined by the administration, and users cannot initiate their own topics. Currently, 44 authorities and subordinate organizations can conduct consultations on *meinBerlin* (Interviews 1, 2). These include the Berlin Senate Chancellery (*Senatskanzlei*), the State Departments (ministries), the district administrations, the subordinate authorities of the districts and state-owned companies (Bezirksamt Treptow-Köpenick von Berlin, 2015). This chapter particularly focuses on the district level. Establishing the platform as a central point of contact for citizen participation is intended to motivate administrative units that have not yet conducted any or have conducted only a few participation processes to integrate online citizen participation into their planning processes (Interviews 1, 2). The administrations are also expected to benefit from the elimination of format differences as well as from a uniform system for data storage (Interviews 1, 2). Through centralization, citizens would benefit from a uniform presentation of all processes, which should make it easier even for inexperienced users to participate online (Interviews 1, 4).

Another objective is to attract new user groups who have so far participated less frequently in citizen participation processes. This applies not only to people unable to attend face-to-face events due to lack of time or reduced mobility and citizens who have a high affinity for online processes, but also to socially disadvantaged population groups who inherently participate less

frequently (Albrecht, 2006; Lidén, 2013) (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8). This is in accordance with the principle of the Berlin Senate that marginalized social groups should play a greater role in political decision-making.

The development of the platform began in 2013 when the Senate Department for Urban Development and the Senate Department for Environment (*Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt*) planned the digitalization of legally required citizen participation processes in urban land use planning. The Federal Building Code (*Baugesetzbuch*) stipulates that land use plans must be available for public inspection. At the same time, the district of Treptow-Köpenick was planning an online platform for informal citizen participation processes. Under the supervision of the Senate Chancellery, which is primarily responsible for citizen participation in the state of Berlin, these two activities were merged in 2015. Thus, both legally prescribed processes and informal processes are carried out on the platform (Bezirksamt Treptow-Köpenick von Berlin, 2015). Since then, the project has been financed by the budget of the Senate Chancellery. The budget amounts to 244,800 euros per year (Land Berlin, 2018).

The preparation of *meinBerlin* was carried out by a steering group recruited from interested employees of various administrative units at state and district levels volunteering to participate. The group was relatively autonomous in its scope of action as there was little administrative or political influence. Rather, the project received diffuse support from the governing parliamentary groups in the Berlin House of Representatives (Interview 2). The steering group decided to outsource the technical implementation of the project to a service provider. The decision was made for Berlin-based non-governmental organization Liquid Democracy e.V., which developed *meinBerlin* based on their in-house open source software Adhocracy. The service provider advised the steering group not only on technical issues, but also on issues of citizen participation to create an integrative solution (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5). However, after the launch of the website, Liquid Democracy regards itself primarily as a technical service provider for the state of Berlin (Interview 4).

During the development phase, some aspects of similar web portals existing in other larger German cities, such as Frankfurt on the Main and Munich, and the Austrian capital of Vienna were taken as examples. Some members of the steering group also participated in a congress on e-participation, where participants shared their experiences in initiating and operating similar platforms (Interview 2). In addition to the development of the platform, a study on citizen participation in Berlin was commissioned from the Centre for Developments in Civil Society at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Freiburg. Among other aspects, this study identified the basic requirements for the establishment of a central e-participation platform, which were considered in the planning process (Bezirksamt Treptow-Köpenick von Berlin, 2015).

Due to the composition of the steering group, which initially excluded any full-time employees with formal responsibilities, the initiation process lasted until 2017 when the platform was finally launched and entered the beta phase (testing). At that time, *meinBerlin* was available to all administrative units. With the relaunch of the website in April 2019, the key findings of the testing phase were taken into consideration (Interviews 1, 2).

Although the platform was established at the same time as the general e-government legislation in Berlin, the eGovernment Act only contains a declaration of intent to promote e-participation but no binding measures. Instead, online participation continues to be a volun-

tary task of state administrative authorities (Land Berlin, 2015). Nevertheless, for the project manager responsible for *meinBerlin*, the eGovernment Act serves as a non-binding basis for legitimation vis-à-vis the decision-makers in other administrative units (Interviews 1, 2). Furthermore, *meinBerlin* is mentioned in the coalition agreement of the government in power at the time of writing in 2020:

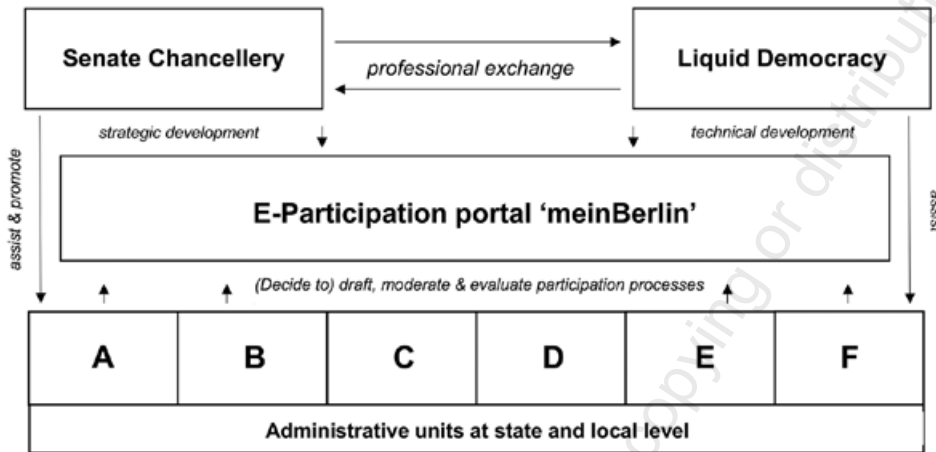
In the future, all participation processes in the state of Berlin will be bundled on the Internet platform *meinBerlin*. These range from the participation of citizens in the planning of infrastructure projects, the possibility of direct influence through elements of direct democracy and ensuring that residents share responsibility for shaping their neighbourhoods. (SPD, Die Linke and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2016, p. 31)

The specific participation processes are set up by the responsible administrations at the state or municipal levels. The respective employees can choose the type of consultation from an instrument box and create processes themselves (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8). All citizens of Berlin can participate in *meinBerlin*. However, whether the respective users are residents of Berlin is not checked as the one-time registration only requires an e-mail address and a user name. Engagement of private companies or non-governmental organizations is not addressed but their involvement is also not explicitly excluded (Interview 1; Land Berlin, 2020). Just like the drafting of the participation processes, moderation is the responsibility of the administrative unit accountable for the respective subject of consultation (Interviews 1, 2, 6; Land Berlin, 2015). After a consultation, the results will be handled by the administrative unit responsible. How the unit processes the results in practice is their sole responsibility and is therefore not specified (Interviews 1, 2, 6). As a rule, administrative units should make the results of the participation publicly visible (Interviews 1, 2, 6).

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Berlin Senate Chancellery is formally responsible for the operation and further development of *meinBerlin*. However, the platform is administered at two levels: the technical implementation and strategic development of the platform are centrally organized at the state level, while the organization, moderation and evaluation of the actual e-participation processes are decentralized and taken over by the administrative units either at the state or district level (see Figure 15.1).

Despite the decentralized nature of the platform, two people are employed with tasks related to *meinBerlin* on a full-time basis: first, a project manager at the Senate Chancellery and, second, a project manager at the information technology (IT) service provider Liquid Democracy. Within the Senate Chancellery, the responsible project manager for e-participation is located at the Press and Information Office (Land Berlin, 2019). Besides the strategic development of the platform, the Senate Chancellery's project manager advises the public officials of individual administrative units on questions regarding e-participation on *meinBerlin*. They also observe participatory processes in Berlin at state and district levels in order to proactively propose *meinBerlin* as an instrument for citizen participation. They also maintain contact with the relevant decision-makers in the parliamentary arena and regularly report on the platform's state of development to the responsible committee in the Berlin House of Representatives.



Source: Own illustration based on interviews; [www.wien.gv.at/digitaleagenda/prozess.html](http://www.wien.gv.at/digitaleagenda/prozess.html); [www.partizipation.wien.at/de/consultation/digitale-agenda-wien-2020?page=1](http://www.partizipation.wien.at/de/consultation/digitale-agenda-wien-2020?page=1).

Figure 15.1 Operation of *meinBerlin*

The closest partner for the Senate Chancellery is the project manager at IT service provider Liquid Democracy. Liquid Democracy is responsible for most of the technical support to both the administrative staff and the users (Interview 4). The Senate Chancellery and Liquid Democracy work closely together on the further development of the platform. In addition to a monthly meeting, e-mail and telephone communication is involved in day-to-day collaboration (Interviews 1, 4).

The practical operation of the e-participation processes, such as the setup, moderation and evaluation, is decentralized to the administrative units responsible for the respective domain. Within these units, in most cases, the employees responsible for the respective subject in general take care of carrying out participation processes. Most authorities in Berlin do not employ staff exclusively responsible for citizen participation (Interviews 1, 2, 8). An exception to this general practice is the Mitte district, which has bundled all citizen participation processes into one office since 2017. The office promotes citizen participation and the use of *meinBerlin* in the administrative units of the district. It also provides technical support and prepares descriptions of the respective e-participation processes (Interview 6). All in all, there is no uniform structure as to how e-participation is organized in single units (Interviews 1, 2, 6).

*meinBerlin* is regularly financed from the budget of the Senate Chancellery. A project manager is also financed directly from the budget of the Senate Chancellery. Since the platform is administered in a decentralized way, the personnel costs that arise indirectly from its operation are irregular and cannot be derived directly. However, in the administrative units that make use of the platform, opportunity costs have incurred due to the increased workload of the employees.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

After describing the platform, its genesis, the institutional context and the organizational factors, the performance of the platform in terms of its effects on the input, throughput and output dimension of legitimacy will be evaluated. Publicly available performance indicators, such as the number of e-participation processes published on the portal and the number of contributions received, are taken into consideration. These are also the figures the administration uses as a benchmark to determine the performance of the platform (Interview 1). In addition, the project manager responsible for *meinBerlin* monitors the number of registered users (not publicly accessible) (Interview 1). Against this background, the organizational factors that influence the performance of the platform related to the objectives of e-participation will be discussed.

### 6.1 Input Legitimacy

*meinBerlin* has slightly more than 9000 registered users as of 2020 (Interviews 1, 2, 3). In relation to Berlin's population, however, this number is very low (approximately 0.24 per cent). The registered users have contributed more than 19,000 proposals, ideas and comments as of May 2020 (Land Berlin, 2020). Although there is no data on the awareness of *meinBerlin* among the population (Interview 1), all respondents claim that the website is not well known. According to their observations, almost nobody outside the administration knows about the platform (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Regarding the composition of the users, a non-representative and non-public user survey on the platform suggests that the users are by no means a representative sample of the Berlin population. Users of *meinBerlin* are relatively old on average, live disproportionately often in inner-city districts and have a better-than-average education. Other indicators relevant to empirical participation research, such as gender or income, were not asked (Interviews 1, 4, 5, 8). Even though most interviewed experts state that the primary goal is to collect good ideas and identify potential conflicts, they find it necessary to address the interests of all social groups in the participatory processes (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Thus, the governments' objectives to make citizen participation processes more inclusive and representative using e-participation seem to fail. In addition, far too few people participate in most participatory processes. However, the quality of citizens' input is generally regarded as rather high. Comments that occur more frequently would especially help to identify possible difficulties but also opportunities in participatory projects (Interview 9). Overall, the effect of *meinBerlin* on the input legitimacy of decision-making in Berlin can be regarded as rather low.

### 6.2 Throughput and Output Legitimacy

Regarding the throughput and output dimension of legitimacy, experience with handling the results of e-participation processes by the administration of Berlin are still rare, which interviewees think is due to the novelty of the platform (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 8, 10). From the start of the platform in 2017 until February 2020, 85 e-participation processes were conducted on *meinBerlin* by district administrations (Interviews 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10; Land Berlin, 2020). In addition, there is a rather large gap in the implementation of e-participation within the city's

Table 15.1 Distribution of e-participation projects conducted on *meinBerlin* from 2017 to February 2020 among districts

District	Population	Population share (%)	e-Participation projects (N; share (%))		Difference population share/projects
Mitte	384,172	10.23	19	21.11	+10.88
Tempelhof-Schöneberg	351,644	9.37	17	18.89	+9.52
Treptow-Köpenick	271,153	7.22	14	15.56	+8.34
Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg	289,762	7.72	9	10.00	+2.28
Lichtenberg	291,452	6.16	6	6.67	+0.51
Spandau	243,977	6.50	5	5.56	-0.94
Reinickendorf	265,225	7.06	5	5.56	-1.5
Pankow	407,765	10.86	6	6.67	-4.19
Neukölln	329,691	8.78	4	4.44	-4.34
Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf	342,332	9.12	4	4.44	-4.68
Marzahn-Hellersdorf	268,548	7.15	1	1.11	-6.04
Steglitz-Zehlendorf	308,697	8.22	0	0.00	-8.22
<i>Total</i>	3,754,382	100	85	100	0

districts. Some districts use the platform regularly (e.g. Mitte), while other district administrations make little or no use of the platform (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6, 9; for an overview of distribution across various Berlin districts, see Table 15.1). Also, it is often solely information on offline participation, not e-participation processes, which is published on the portal. This kind of content does not represent an interactive form of joint decision-making, but rather the simple sharing of information (Interviews 2, 6, 8, 9).

According to interviewees regularly using the platform, one advantage of *meinBerlin* compared with conventional citizen participation is that the results of participation processes could be processed automatically (Interviews 2, 8, 10). However, administrators responsible for implementing e-participation state that the willingness to include results of citizen participation in decision-making is often quite low. Depending on the personal attitude and workload of the employees responsible for the participatory process, some would refuse to include the results of e-participation in decision-making processes (Interviews 2, 6). Without exception, all interviewees state that e-participation is only suitable as a complementary measure to ‘traditional’ offline participation (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11).

According to respondents with experience in implementing e-participation, a participatory process attracts more attention and is more likely to be implemented if the subject of the process is clearly defined and limited in scope (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 8, 9). Also, a strong local connection is mentioned as a factor for success since people feel more affected by administrative and political actions which are close to them (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 8, 9). An example of a successful process is a consultation on bicycle boxes and car-sharing stations in the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district. An open collection of ideas, in which more than 30 suggestions for potential locations were submitted, was combined with a survey. According to the respondents, this process was particularly successful since the question was asked very precisely and concretely. The limitation to one neighbourhood within the district was also crucial



for success (Interview 2). In contrast, fewer citizens participate in participation processes if the question is too diffuse and open (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 8).

Transparency is another dimension of throughput legitimacy, which is why the results of e-participation and explanations on how they have been incorporated into decision-making should be published. However, most interviewees agree that this is not always the case (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 6). In most cases, only a standard formulation would indicate that the results of the participation processes be considered. The results of participation and the impact of these results on the final decisions are often not documented. As a result, the transparency of the decision-making process remains quite limited.

### 6.3 Organizational Factors Influencing the Performance of *meinBerlin*

Based on the analytical framework described above, the organizational factors that affect implementation in the administration will now be analysed.

#### 6.3.1 Organizational complexity

An important obstacle to the implementation of *meinBerlin* is caused by the two-stage administrative structure of the state. Since citizen participation cannot be forced ‘from above’ (the state level), the sanction and control mechanisms of the state government over the district administrations are lacking. Since the state government can only promote e-participation but cannot make it compulsory, the public official responsible for the operation of *meinBerlin* in the Senate Chancellery has no formal authority. Because of such horizontal collaboration challenge, e-participation depends strongly on the engagement and motivation of individual public officials in the respective district and state administrations (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10).

Many interviewees argue that central ‘hubs’ or offices for citizen participation in district administrations and ministries – as already exist in the district of Mitte – could promote the platform within the administration as well as offer support and advice (Interviews 2, 6, 8, 10). However, most districts do not employ staff responsible for e-participation or citizen participation in general (Interviews 1, 2). Therefore, only few employees feel liable for e-participation in general and the use of *meinBerlin*; more specifically, existing staff can hardly cope with the additional tasks that arise from e-participation due to capacity limits. There has been a general overextension of the administration due to personnel shortages in the past decades (Hoffmann and Schwenkner, 2010). Therefore, it is difficult to add the staff necessary for citizen participation (Interviews 1, 2, 5). In addition, even if enough staff were available, employees in most administrative units are often not familiar with citizen participation (Interviews 2, 5). It is therefore also (personnel) resources and clear responsibilities that are crucial for the successful implementation of an e-participation instrument.

Another reason for the rather seldom use of *meinBerlin* is that several district administrations delegate citizen participation processes to external service providers. These partly ignore the existing public ICT infrastructure. The outsourcing of these processes is, nonetheless, necessary in view of the administration’s personnel situation (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5).

#### 6.3.2 Change agents

In many cases, it is public decision-makers’ norms, values and perceptions of costs and benefits that either facilitate e-participation or – more frequently in this case – restrict it. In

units which (frequently) use e-participation, there are often individuals who as ‘pioneers’ or ‘entrepreneurs’ promote e-participation (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6). As a result, there is great variety regarding the implementation of e-participation across administrative units (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 6, 9).

### 6.3.3 Political support

It occurs that e-participation is not prioritized for many decision-makers. The interviewees state that a general lack of awareness of the usefulness of citizen participation could be a possible explanation. Therefore, many authorities do not take the opportunity to conduct e-participation processes on *meinBerlin* (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 6). Thus, it is not necessarily the top-level management of the administration who is sceptical about e-participation, but also those administrators responsible for conducting participatory processes.

### 6.3.4 Regulations and policies

To overcome the deficient implementation of *meinBerlin*, some districts plan to issue guidelines for citizen participation to provide the administration with a ‘checklist’, but also to signal a certain predictability to citizens. In autumn 2019, the state government adopted guidelines for citizen participation, which promote the use of *meinBerlin*. Such guidelines could be a step towards a stronger commitment to e-participation in the respective administrations. This could be achieved, for example, by making citizen participation compulsory for more decision-making processes or even by making the implementation of certain results mandatory. However, most of these discussions are still ongoing at the time of conducting this study (Interviews 1, 2, 6).

### 6.3.5 Promotion

Concerning the rather low number of participants on *meinBerlin*, some respondents criticize the lack of advertising activities by the Senate. They argue that it would be necessary to increase awareness of the platform among the population by means of large-scale advertising campaigns (Interviews 2, 5, 6, 10). This does not only apply to Berlin’s population, but also to the administration. In many parts of it, the platform is largely unknown. Advertising measures within as well as outside the administration could contribute to an increase in the awareness of the platform. This could potentially foster the administrative units’ use of *meinBerlin* (Interview 10).

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

*meinBerlin* is still a new instrument for e-participation in political and administrative decision-making. At the same time, it is a relatively ambitious project aiming to bundle together all online participation processes in a city-state with around 3.6 million inhabitants. A closer look at the performance of the platform reveals that organizational factors play a role in the relatively modest and varied adoption of e-participation in Berlin. Given that single administrations initiate, moderate and evaluate e-participation processes on the platform, organizational features seem crucial in order to achieve the intended objectives of *meinBerlin*.

It is often individual attitudes towards e-participation or citizen participation in general that constitute an important obstacle to the use of e-participation. Politicians and adminis-

trators often see no need to integrate e-participation in their decision-making processes. This has become particularly clear, as there are 44 administrations that could potentially use the platform but only a minority really do. It is because mostly single actors actively promote the usefulness of the platform. Prevailing values and norms related to cost efficiency prevent the implementation of e-participation to a larger extent. The recent efforts of several administrations to issue binding guidelines on citizen participation may help to overcome such resistance to change.

Another relevant aspect for the use of *meinBerlin* is the internal affiliation of responsible employees as well as the availability of skilled and sufficient personnel. Administrations with a central point of contact for citizen participation use *meinBerlin* more frequently and presumably more effectively. Further citizen participation is often desired, but the opportunity costs for implementation are often too high since parts of the administration are already exposed to a considerable overload. Moreover, administrators of e-participation vary in their knowledge of participation in general and the virtues and variation of its use.

Although the empirical evidence shows that *meinBerlin* suffers from a lack of visibility inside and outside the administration, participation processes that deal with concrete local issues tend to attract more interest. On the one hand, this is because the results of these processes are easy to implement; on the other hand, it is because citizens have a special interest in playing a decisive role in shaping their own local area.

In a nutshell, some of the prerequisites for successful implementation of e-participation conflict with the existing values, norms and ideas of rationality that prevail in the administration. Also, the administrative structure, the lack of (personnel) resources and the potential opportunity costs hamper the effective use of *meinBerlin*. Large parts of the administration react by insufficiently implementing e-participation processes or refusing or simply ignoring the platform in general. Therefore, the effects of the platform on the legitimacy of decision-making processes in the administration are limited, suggesting that the way the organization and its actors deal with the instrument is inadequate to achieve the goals associated with the use of e-participation.

Based on these findings, the following lessons can be drawn:

1. The characteristics of the core unit responsible for the e-participation platform are a decisive factor for the successful implementation of e-participation initiatives. Therefore, this unit should be provided with formal authority and legitimacy. This applies even more if various administrative units are involved in the operation of the platform. The capacities of the central unit responsible for e-participation should be sufficient to cope with the additional coordination and collaboration efforts that arise.
2. If the platform is managed in a decentralized manner, sufficient personnel resources and explicit responsibilities in the respective organizational units are necessary for successful implementation.
3. To achieve transparency and predictability for citizens, binding guidelines should be laid down on how the input from e-participation should be processed and how the results of the decision-making process should be published.
4. Advertising measures should ensure that the platform is promoted effectively to make the platform well known in various segments of the population and the administration itself.

5. Finally, various tools for e-participation in one city could lead to confusion among citizens. Therefore, all organizational units should agree on a joint e-participation instrument that is easily accessible for private service providers collaborating with the administration.

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# 16. e-Participation in Austria: Digital Agenda Vienna

**Noella Edelmann and Bettina Höchtel**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Politics and public administrations, companies and private individuals must all react to the new paradigm of digital change in an increasingly complex world (Perez, 2004), and this requires appropriate framework conditions and infrastructure. The idea of a ‘Digital Agenda’ was introduced at the European Union (EU) level in 2010 (by the European Commission) to help European countries and regions define their information technology (IT) strategies. The first countries to respond were Sweden (2011), Germany (2014) and Finland (2015) and, at a municipal level, the German cities Düsseldorf (2010) and Freie Hansestadt Bremen (2014). Austria’s national digital agenda, the Digital Roadmap, was published in 2016 (Bundeskanzleramt & Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft) and, in the same year, the Digital Agenda Vienna (Digitale Agenda Wien, DAW) was published by the City of Vienna (Stadt Wien, 2016).

Participation projects have been successfully implemented in Austria for many years and, in recent years, these projects increasingly use digital technology. Technological advances offer new opportunities in this context, but this means that the aims and implementation of participation projects must be reconsidered and redesigned, as it is not a matter of replacing analogue forms of participation with digital ones or adding digital components to participation processes. Rather, the focus should be on the selection and combination of digital methods and instruments, instruments that need to be adapted according to the questions set, the topics, the target group, the purpose and objective of participation processes. The City of Vienna has a special role in this context: it is known as a pioneer of innovation in several digital areas, such as open government data, and was the first municipality in Austria to develop a digitalization strategy on the basis of a multiphasic public participation process (Heissenberger, 2016). The case study presented here is an analysis of the e-participation initiative organized and administered by the City of Vienna that led to the publication of its digital strategy in 2016.

The aim of this study is to evaluate Digital Agenda Vienna, an e-participation initiative where the public administration works directly with the public throughout the policy-making process to ensure that public concerns and ideas are understood and taken into consideration. The chapter begins with the analytical framework and methods used to study this particular initiative. In the sections that follow, the focus is first on e-participation in the Austrian context, then a description of the e-participation initiative Digital Agenda Vienna organized by the City of Vienna, the organizational characteristics and its evaluation and discussion according to the

Integrated Strategic e-Participation Framework developed by Wirtz, Daiser and Binkowska (2018) and, finally, the discussion, containing the lessons learned from this initiative.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Public participation is participation and involvement by citizens in decision-making processes. It encompasses all citizens' activities that aim to influence the decisions taken by governments and public administrations (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014) and can range from collecting signatures or signing a petition, to participating in a demonstration or boycotting products (Van Deth, 2012). Participatory processes should not only be conducted for the purpose of gaining acceptance for policies or decisions, but also to make the values and value systems of the participants, their interests, and needs visible (Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft et al., 2011, p. 23): 'Public participation means the opportunity for all affected and/or interested persons to represent or raise their interests or concerns in the development of plans, programmes, policies or legal acts'.

Such participatory processes help achieve qualitatively better, more robust and more sustainable decision-making processes and results in the long term, for example, by enabling public administrations access to citizens' knowledge and experiences. All forms and uses of participation, especially where there is no legal obligation to participate, have numerous potentials, such as (Parycek, 2020):

- increasing the effectiveness, capacity and legitimacy of public decision-making processes;
- the modernization of state service provision;
- greater interaction between public administration and citizens;
- the increased involvement of citizens in networks and dialogues;
- access to new ideas and know-how;
- a deeper understanding of the issues and, consequently, greater acceptance by citizens of the decisions taken; and
- public benefits through collaborative work between public institutions, the private sector, community groups and citizens.

The Internet and digital technology help shape the various opportunities for political engagement, enable government agencies to restructure their interactions with citizens and to include citizens' perspectives in the development of policies and public services (Archmann and Iglesias, 2010; Fountain, 2004). e-Participation is seen as a means to broaden the basis for decision-making from different perspectives (Parycek and Edelmann, 2009; Toots et al., 2016; Vinkel and Krimmer, 2016), raising public interest and strengthening citizenship (Avdic et al., 2007; Panopoulou et al., 2009), modernizing government service delivery and increasing the efficacy and quality of the services (Åkesson and Edvardsson, 2008; Heijlen et al., 2018; Trischler and Scott, 2015; Wiewiora et al., 2016). At the same time, governments and public administrations have been aware for several years that they must not only know their citizens' needs but also access citizens' expertise in order to develop adequate policies and solutions (Huijboom et al., 2009; Schuler, 2010).

In more recent years, public participation in the digital age has been characterized by the integration of digital and analogue methods (Wirtz et al., 2018). As the Digital Agenda Vienna is a multiphase e-participation initiative that draws on both analogue and digital



methods, the integrated strategic e-participation framework developed by Wirtz et al. (2018) is applied in this current study. This framework was selected for two reasons. First, Wirtz et al.'s (2018, p. 3) definition of e-participation as a 'participatory process that is enabled by modern information and communication technologies, includes stakeholders in the public decision-making processes through active information exchanges and thus fosters fair and representative policy-making' reflects the City of Vienna's view of e-participation, how it is to be implemented and what the outcomes should be (Wien, 2013). Second, the framework provides a 'strategic roadmap for the implementation of e-participation initiatives by conceptually considering important strategic and environmental drivers' (Wirtz et al., 2018, p. 2). As described in Section 4, the e-participation initiative Digital Agenda Vienna was implemented for strategic reasons, for example, to develop a new IT strategy for the City of Vienna and for the City of Vienna public administration to adapt to the digitalization of its environment. The integrated strategic e-participation framework considers the following dimensions: targets, forms of e-participation, strategies, instruments, demand groups and drivers of participation.

Wirtz et al. suggest that there are six possible key targets that can be pursued with e-participation initiatives: to increase overall participation, enhance information provision, improve the quality of public policies, strengthen public trust, improve and share responsibility for policy making and raise public awareness and understanding of policy issues. They draw on the International Association for Public Participation's 'Spectrum of Public Participation' (IAP2, 2018), which defines the public's role in public participation processes: to provide objective information to the public, to consult and obtain public feedback and expertise, to involve and consider public concerns by working directly with the public, to collaborate, that is, to incorporate public input by partnering with the public and, finally, to empower, that is, to leave the final decision to the public. There are three strategies an e-participation initiative can follow: the isolated strategy characterized by low integration and the independent coordination of instruments, the combined strategy which addresses some synergies between the instruments used, and the integrated strategy in which all instruments used are coordinated within the initiative. Wirtz et al. argue that the instruments selected must consider both the goals and the users of the initiative. These users, the 'demand groups', are the 'target directly involved in and addressed by e-participation initiatives' (p. 6) and the initiative depends 'on the behaviour and perception of demand groups' (p. 6). As to the drivers of e-participation, Wirtz et al. point out that these can be transparency, accountability, all forms of technology, and information and communication technology (including the Internet and social media) and the stakeholders. Transparency is seen as part of a 'democratic ideal' able to 'reduce government misconduct' (p. 6) and enhance public trust by providing information and supporting interactivity between government and citizens.

This study draws on all available public project documents in addition to two unpublished internal documents as one of the authors of this case study was directly involved in the project (see Table 16.1). In addition, expert interviews were conducted with a select number of people in order to access those experts with the knowledge and experience gained from their organizational function (Bogner et al., 2009). The Digital Agenda Vienna e-participation initiative consisted of a very small team, and each team member had to fulfil more than one role. Thus, only a small number of expert interviews led to extensive insights into the initiative. The expert interviews were conducted with two senior managers from the Municipal Department at the City of Vienna responsible for Process Management and Information and Communications

Table 16.1 Selection of documents used for analysis in Vienna

Name of document	Type of document	Public access	Location
Digital Agenda Vienna	Website	Yes	www.partizipation.wien.at www.wien.gv.at/digitaleagenda
Digital Agenda Vienna	First version (2015)	Yes	Stadt Wien, 2015 or www.wien.gv.at/digitaleagenda/english.html
Digital Agenda Vienna	Final version (2016)	Yes	Stadt Wien, 2016
Die partizipative Entwicklung einer digitalen Agenda in einer öffentlichen Verwaltung mit IKT-Unterstützung - Vorgehensempfehlungen für die öffentliche Verwaltung	Master's thesis	Yes	Heissenberger, 2016
Zwischenergebnisse der Arbeitsgruppe 'IT in Bildung und Forschung'-ENTWURF	Unpublished project documentation	No	Parycek, Rinnerbauer and AG IT in Bildung und Forschung, 2015
Internal project documentation	Unpublished project documentation	No	Rinnerbauer, 2015
Digital Agenda Vienna 2020 Online discussion	Website	Yes	www.partizipation.wien.at/de/consultation/digitale-agenda-wien-2020

Technology (ICT) Strategy Development (PIKT, 2020). Ulrike Huemer, at the time Chief Information Officer (CIO) of the City of Vienna and responsible for the initiative, has since left the team, although she has provided insights into the initiative in other interviews and media coverage (DigitalCity.Wien, 2017; Magistrat Linz, 2020; OÖ Nachrichten, 2016). It was possible to gain extensive insights into the initiative as one of the authors was a member of one of the project advisory partners (the Danube University Krems) to the initiative, responsible for the working group 'Education and Research' in the second offline participation phase of the initiative (see Figure 16.1) and directly involved in all other phases of the initiative. Project advisory roles were also held by Professor Alfred Taudes (Vienna University of Economics) who, with Hannes Leo, is the founder of the private company Community Based Innovation Systems (c-based), the company that provided the platform for the online phases of the project. Their insights regarding the initiative were gained from their published work on the initiative (May et al., 2015) as well as reports available on the c-based blog. Following Krippendorff (2018), document analysis was used to analyse both the documentation and the interview transcripts.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Austria is a democratic republic and the fundamental values of the Austrian state are enshrined in the constitution: its laws stem from the people (Article 1 of the Federal Constitutional Law, 2020 (B-VG)). It is a federal state formed by nine autonomous provinces (Art 2 B-VG). The Austrian constitution includes participation rights and provides for direct democratic procedures, but there is no legal framework regulating citizen participation specifically. Certain legal prescriptions limit the activities of the public administration, such as Article 18 B-VG

providing that the entire public administration is based on law; thus the Digital Agenda Vienna made clear that while the initiative encouraged participation, brainstorming activities, and the input of innovative ideas, the City of Vienna is not bound to the implementation of these ideas.

Austrian public administration is sometimes associated with an excess of bureaucracy, implying complicated spheres of competencies and forms for officially contacting public administration. Some of the familiar procedures, such as the regulations regarding the processes for dealing with files and administrative transactions within federal ministries were developed during the Austrian monarchy and were enforced for more than 200 years. These procedures were replaced in 2004 when the electronic file was introduced in public administration at the federal level (Bundeskanzleramt, 2004). Politicians as well as high-ranked officials from the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry for Digital and Public Affairs are important drivers for such e-government measures. The legislator is well aware of the need for cooperation, so all federal levels (Bund-Land-Städte-Gemeinden; Stadt Wien, n.d.k), that is, the federal regions, provinces, cities and municipalities, the Platform Digital Austria, those responsible for strategic e-government in Austria, and the interministerial Task Force of the Chief Digital Officers, are entrusted with the coordination of digitalization issues between ministries and nationwide (Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs, 2020). Recently, the Digitalisation Agency (DIA, 2020; see also: FFG Digitalisation Agency, n.d.), founded by the federal government and located at the Austrian Research Promotion Agency, has been linked to the Austrian economy by supporting small to medium-sized enterprises tackling digital transformation challenges (for more information on the organization of e-government in Austria see Höchtel and Lampoltshammer, 2019). The Austrian Working Group on e-Democracy and e-Participation, with members from all public administration levels and a range of Austrian public-sector organizations, differentiate between the levels of e-participation in terms of information, consultation, cooperation and co-decision. Their white paper 'e-Democracy and e-participation in Austria' (2008) provides basic definitions and sees e-participation as complementing representative democracy and fostering civil society participation to achieve the ideal interactive state. Together, these expert committees provide recommendations for IT infrastructure, standards and implementation in Austria.

This shows that the Austrian e-government landscape is characterized by the voluntary cooperation of relevant actors rather than by compliance and mandatory provisions. One of the main reasons for this is the limited influence of the legislators at different federal levels which results in a dependence on other actors when aiming to achieve the required uniform e-government approach. This cooperation between the federal government and the provinces is necessary in order to avoid parallel activities, promote user friendliness and save costs (Kooperations-Vereinbarung zwischen Bund und Ländern, 1998), and the Heads of the Austrian federal regions are committed to working together on all e-government matters (Beschluss der LAD-Konferenz, 2000).

Commonly developed strategies can influence not only internal but also external e-government, that is, communication between the government and citizens. A specific type of such communication is e-participation. Despite the lack of concrete legal provisions focusing on e-participation, each e-participation initiative must fulfil general legal requirements and principles, such as the e-Government Act, the Federal Act on Electronic Signatures and Trust Services for Electronic Transactions (2018), the Data Protection Act and the Re-Use of Information Act (2005), which may impact the way e-participation initiatives are organ-

ized. Another dimension which needs to be considered is the results-oriented management system that has been in use in the Austrian federal administration since 2013 and follows the logic of the policy cycle (Bundeskanzleramt and Bundesministerium für Arbeit, 2011). The policy cycle is a model, based on systemic foundations, for the analytical structuring of a political-administrative process. It provides a suitable basis for evidence-based policy making secured by monitoring and evaluation, and supports multiperspective approaches through transparent decision-making processes. The policy cycle has been used previously for e-participation, for example, for the e-engagement matrix (Macintosh, 2003 in Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016), in the Austrian federal administration and in some of the provinces, too.

e-Participation can occur at a policy or legislative level, for planning activities, programme development or specific projects. Austrian e-participation projects are often triggered top down by government or political decisions and events such as national elections. Examples of the top-down approach are the online platform *wahlkabine.at* (polling booth) introduced during the national elections in 2002, or the online platform *meinparlament.at* (My Parliament) initiated in 2008 to facilitate direct contact between citizens and their representatives in parliament (Aichholzer and Allhutter, 2009a). The Unibrennt Movement, kick-started in 2009 by students in response to political decisions about higher education in Austria on the other hand, represents a bottom-up initiative (Edelmann et al., 2011). Aichholzer and Allhutter (2009b), however, note that ‘eParticipation is becoming a subject of public policies in Austria; however, the upswing of supportive initiatives for public participation and eParticipation goes together with ambivalent attitudes among politicians and administration’ (p. 1).

The federal government launched the Digital Roadmap Austria (Bundeskanzleramt and Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft, 2016) in order to address EU-wide goals, such as those listed in the eGovernment Action Plan 2016–2020 (European Commission, 2016). The Digital Roadmap sees digitalization as involving the public administration, social partners, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, political actors, research institutions and civil society. It also points out that digitalization is understood as going beyond mere access to new technology, online information or digital technology and focuses on enabling participation and engagement for all in society. At the national level, the e-government strategy of Austria (Bundeskanzleramt & Plattform Digitales Österreich, 2017) describes e-participation as: ‘Interactive administrative processes (that) facilitate participation and citizen involvement. The administration encourages citizens and businesses to contribute ideas and feedback and to collaborate in the organization of administrative tasks’ (p. 14).

At the local level, participation processes are typically bound to individual strategic guidelines, such as Austria’s IT strategy (Kompetenzzentrum Internetgesellschaft, 2013), the Council of Ministers of the Austrian national government (see Republic of Austria Parliament, n.d.) and the Smart City framework strategy (Smart City Wien Rahmenstrategie; Stadt Wien, n.d.g). There are also several guides containing recommendations for implementing e-participation initiatives, such as ‘Masterplan Partizipative Stadtentwicklung’ (Magistrat der Stadt Wien MA 21 – Stadtteilplanung und Flächennutzung, 2017), ‘Praxisbuch Partizipation. Gemeinsam die Stadt entwickeln’ (Magistrat der Stadt Wien Magistratsabteilung 18 – Stadtentwicklung und Stadtplanung, 2003) or ‘Standards der Öffentlichkeitsbeteiligung Empfehlungen für die gute Praxis’ (Bundeskanzleramt and Bundesministerium Nachhaltigkeit und Tourismus, 2008).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF DIGITAL AGENDA VIENNA

The City of Vienna is constantly expanding its range of services for its citizens and for the business sector using digital technology in order to improve quality of life for people. In Austria, the City of Vienna has a somewhat special role: it is the capital of Austria, a municipality and a region. The e-participation initiative Digital Agenda Vienna was to address all these levels.

The Digital Agenda Vienna was launched by the then CIO of the City of Vienna, Ulrike Huemer, who wanted to establish a new IT strategy for the Viennese public administration driven by digital transformation, to innovate public participation, and to remove barriers to public participation and citizen engagement. Within the first online phase, participants should be encouraged to share their ideas on how the use of technology could further improve quality of life in Vienna with no limits to their creativity. The public was engaged in the discussion to uncover any possible blind spots that may arise when only public officials write the strategy text, and to understand how issues are prioritized. This involvement helps participants gain a deeper understanding of the background information and decision-making processes. Another central aim of the City of Vienna is to use e-participation processes to impact policy. Within the policy cycle, Digital Agenda Vienna contributes to agenda setting and monitoring, but especially to the analysis and preparation of policies. According to interviewed Expert 2, the latter 'is usually the first step when we want to create a new strategy, a new strategy paper that we actually start with, that we usually call up an online participation and get input via public brainstorming, get best practice examples'.

Based on an idealized strategy formulation process, a three-step process, involving (1) ideation, (2) organizing of ideas and document drafting, and (3) validation of the arguments contained in the document, was set up for the initiative (May et al., 2015). The e-participation process consisted of five phases, two were exclusively online, two offline and the final phase included both analogue and digital methods. Figure 16.1 provides an overview of the five phases of the process.

The first online phase aimed to collect ideas by asking the following questions (Heissenberger, 2016):

- How should the IT infrastructure be designed in Vienna in the future?
- How can the business location of Vienna be further developed with IT?
- How can the city administration better support the citizens with IT in all life situations?
- How will IT change public administration in the future?
- What concerns arise for you through the increasing digitization of the Viennese public administration?

In this first phase, 478 people registered to contribute 172 ideas, 296 comments and 2451 ratings (like or dislike). These ideas and comments were clustered into six topics (Heissenberger, 2016):

1. trust, protection and security;
2. services for citizens;
3. education and research;
4. Vienna as an IT location;
5. digital infrastructure and technology; and
6. IT governance.



Figure 16.1 Overview of the participation process

In order to further engage with those citizens who had contributed their contact details, they were invited to join six working groups corresponding to the topics from the first online phase. Each working group submitted a report to the organizer in order to provide a basis for decision-making at a later stage in the process. A summary of all of the reports was published and discussed during the second online phase held in April 2015. An editorial team processed the results, which were then published and presented at a public event in June 2015 that included the participants, political actors, experts from academia and the public administration. The final version of Digital Agenda Vienna contains six chapters largely congruent with the six topics assigned to the working groups (Heissenberger, 2016). It also includes the key priorities and five fields of action: connected with security, donate time to the people, city of digital competence, I like IT – Digital City Vienna and digital infrastructure.

The technical features of the online phases of Digital Agenda Vienna were developed by the technical partner of the project, c-based. The *discuto.io* online platform was designed specifically for Digital Agenda Vienna following the three-step strategy formulation process mentioned above. Phase 1, that is, the ‘ideation’, and phase 3, the ‘validation’, were held online on the platform. These phases were combined with offline deliberations and events with the aim to involve different groups and reap the benefits of real interactions. There were no problems with the technical implementation of the process, and the system was able to support the City of Vienna address the three core challenges: to understand the current state-of-the-art implementations, to use crowdsourcing activities, and to implement the initiative in a cost-effective, timely and effective way (c-based, n.d.). No further online or mobile applications were developed and used for this e-participation initiative.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Apart from the Chief Executive Office, the City of Vienna Court of Audit and the 16 municipal district offices for 23 districts, the Vienna City Administration is divided into administrative groups and within these groups into municipal departments and enterprises (Stadt Wien, 2020b). Since 2020, there has also been an administrative group responsible for urban planning, traffic and transport, climate protection, energy planning and public participation. In 2014, the year of the initiation of Digital Agenda Vienna, Vienna had no such administrative unit with ‘participation’ in its name. This stresses the strong manifestation of participation in the City Administration on the one hand and, on the other hand, shows the direct impact of the experiences gained from using participation and the conviction that the results gained from participation.

The initiator of the project was Ulrike Huemer, at the time CIO of the City of Vienna. This role is located within the Chief Executive Office and the Executive Group for Organization and Security as the head of the subunit responsible for process management and ICT strategy, the control unit in all areas of future-oriented information and communication technology as well as future-oriented process management for the City of Vienna. In 2014, this subunit bought the license for *discuto.io* from c-based, an online platform that allows a broad range of users to share their knowledge, visions and ideas, in order to develop the digital strategy for the City of Vienna.

The administrative unit, headed at the time by Ulrike Huemer, was responsible for and administered the e-participation initiative. The Digital Agenda Vienna had a very small core

project team and each team member had to fulfil a variety of roles. The project management board consisted of a core team supplemented with external advisors (including c-based, the Vienna University of Economics, and the Danube University Krems). This board met regularly to inform all members about current developments.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

### 6.1 Stakeholder Engagement

One of the main aims of the Vienna City government is to increase citizen participation in general. As digitalization is seen as a topic that affects everybody, motivating participation was seen as more important than deciding on who should be included in the initiative: 'The idea was to involve the general public, i.e. not to select a specific target group now because digitization affects everyone' (Expert 1). To ensure stakeholder engagement, there were no restrictions: the only requirement was registration on the website with an e-mail address and a (nick)name. This type of registration was selected to ensure low participation barriers, but also to ensure a minimum of quality assurance and to be able to contact people at a later stage.

Although there were concerns about the use of social media, in order to ensure that people knew about the e-participation initiative, several online and offline announcements using both social media and traditional media were made to address and attract a range of participants. These announcements provided information on what to expect, and the language chosen to describe the initiative was decidedly non-technical. While a range of participants was to be involved, such as citizens from Vienna and other Austrian regions, commuters, students, businesses, industry, city councillors and members of public administration, wide representation could not be achieved and the majority of users who registered were those with a particular interest in IT.

### 6.2 Providing Information

Providing information, exchange and feedback during the e-participation process is seen as an important aspect of the strategy, e.g. regular e-mails to registered users regarding the current status of the initiative (Heissenberger, 2016). The information in the e-mails sent to participants throughout the process differed according to the phases, and rather than respond with automatic responses, members of the team replied to each email they received. Participants provided feedback in terms of content, but they also often used the communication channel with the public administration to express their satisfaction with the opportunity to be involved.

While the initiator of the participation process made positive experiences in terms of engaging with the public the experts interviewed had differing opinions about the necessity of such an initiative. Technically, a strategy can be formulated behind closed doors, as had been the custom in public administration for years. However, as one expert admitted, originally he had been very sceptical, but his involvement in the Digital Agenda Vienna made him a clear supporter of such participation initiatives.

Other efforts to provide information included the online publication of performance indicators, providing information and personalized feedback to users and allowing registered users



to see the discussions. The provision of this kind of information was seen as contributing to the aims of openness and transparency.

### 6.3 Transparency

Given the City of Vienna's general interest in open data, openness and transparency, several efforts were made to ensure the transparency of the project. The initiative implemented the 'Viennese principles of openness and transparency in public administration' (Stadt Wien, n.d.h; see section 'Technical features'), which aims to ensure trust and security, transparency, openness and participation, inclusion, solidarity and social sustainability, gender equality and a focus on the citizen to strengthen Vienna as a business location and achieve consolidation of the results that lead to innovation, flexibility and learning.

The initiative itself was initiated by Vienna's CIO, but the topics to be addressed during the process were entirely open. The process included transparent moderation that did not impose restrictions on which topics were discussed, but was limited to ensuring that there was no inadequate behaviour as well as transparent processes during the phases. Participants were informed that their contributions represent ideas and suggestions, not a wish list or a 'shopping list' where everything suggested is then implemented (Expert 2). Three to four people were given moderator rights, which allowed them to remove adverts and follow the discussion in order to ensure that there was no insulting or inadequate behaviour. Only two ideas were removed as they could not be implemented by the City of Vienna (one idea was to abolish the euro, the second to build helicopter landing pads in the city).

### 6.4 Performance Indicators

The Digital Agenda Vienna platform and website provided a certain number of performance indicators and these were regularly kept up-to-date. These performance indicators were visible to all registered participants; they included the number of likes, dislikes, comments and ideas, the most active users and the most popular contributions. These particular indicators were selected because they were provided by the platform used. A pop-up window allowed registered users to follow the hot topics, that is, the ones discussed most. The performance indicators were, and still are, available on the website (Stadt Wien, n.d.j):

- 5450 likes and dislikes;
- 622 registrations;
- 609 comments;
- 172 ideas; and
- 8 flagship projects (Leuchtturmprojekte; see Stadt Wien, n.d.c).

Only the project owners were able to view other indicators, such as the ratio of likes to dislikes, and to correct statistical errors.

The Digital Agenda Vienna led to eight flagship projects that the City of Vienna has implemented or is in the process of implementing (Stadt Wien, n.d.c): they address data security (project 1), a citizens' portal (project 2), a City of Vienna app (project 3), the use of QR codes (project 4), digital education for children (project 5), coding (project 6), the Vienna Smart City initiative (project 7) and digital mobility (project 8). These projects are the result of

the outcome of the working groups as summarized by the editorial team. The editorial team double-checked with the leaders of the working groups if any important topics were missing, which ensures the connection of all the working groups' results with the final strategy.

The Digital Agenda Vienna website is kept up to date with information about the implementation or completion of the flagship projects, but also lists other impacts and further digital projects that address e-participation, digital apps, open government data, digital public libraries, cloud computing and new ways of working digitally.

## 6.5 Policy Impacts

The Digital Agenda Vienna contributes to several aspects of the policy cycle, including setting the agenda, the analysis and preparation of policies and, to some extent, monitoring. The platform initially aimed to foster external collaboration (citizens – public administration), but its implementation led to collaboration within the departments of the public administration too. The extent to which the Digital Agenda Vienna influences policy making can be seen, as it impacts the internal organization by providing a basis for the discussion of the implementation of political decisions and the development of the unit PACE (FastLane Digital Innovation), which is responsible for fast testing and the implementation of digital ideas and solutions, and follow-up e-participation initiatives (DigitalCity.Wien, 2017). In addition, the Digital Agenda Vienna was used for:

- agenda setting (Stadt Wien, n.d.j);
- policy formulation (Stadt Wien, 2019);
- policy implementation (Stadt Wien, n.d.c); and
- policy monitoring (<http://digitaleagenda.wien/stand-der-umsetzung.html>).

The new participatory culture in the administration has not only had internal impacts, but external ones, too, which are visible by including 'public participation' in the City's organization chart (Stadt Wien, 2020a).

The Digital Agenda Vienna is understood as a 'living document', a strategy that is constantly updated. This promise can be seen in the maintenance of the website that is kept up to date (e.g. with the status of the implementation of flagship projects) and further follow-ups such as the chatbot 'Wienbot' (Stadt Wien, n.d.i) and 'Mein Grätzl' (Stadt Wien, n.d.d), as well as the development of a Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (Stadt Wien, n.d.b). However, it has also influenced the development of further policies, such as:

1. Vienna is to be a digital capital: as pointed out by the mayor, this is again a participatory process involving the citizens and addressing seven fields of action: security, service, knowledge, working environment 4.0, economy, infrastructure and control. Leading projects are defined for each field of action, these are to be implemented in the coming years. In addition, there are a number of short- and medium-term priorities which are to be developed with the relevant institutions of the City of Vienna (APA, 2019).
2. On 26 September 2019, the Vienna Municipal Council agreed to kick off preparations for the next Digital Agenda for Vienna – 'Digitale Agenda Vienna 2025' (Stadt Wien, 2019).
3. The development of more specific digital strategies and guidelines for the areas of artificial intelligence (Stadt Wien, n.d.b) or data excellence (Stadt Wien, n.d.a), among others.

4. The development of the Smart City Strategy for the period 2019–2050 (Stadt Wien, n.d.g): the strategy summarizes the goals that Vienna wants to achieve by 2050 in order to become the Smart City Vienna. It describes the development towards a city in which the topics of energy, mobility, buildings, infrastructure and technology as well as health, education, social affairs and equal opportunities are considered as a whole and are developed in an innovative way. The basis for this is digital education and qualification as well as targeted training and further education for people of all age groups.

The relevance and impact of the initiative is reflected in the prizes it has received: the eGovernment Award ‘Trend-Setting Project for the Design of the Modern Administration’ (2015) and the Stiftung Lebendige Stadt ‘Die digitalste Stadt’ (‘The Most Digital City’, 2018). But more importantly, the online platform is now used by several departments within the City of Vienna as a tool to communicate internally and with citizens. The platform *discuto.io* continues to be used for municipal e-participation initiatives offered by the City of Vienna. The platform, originally intended only for the Digital Agenda Vienna, has been made available to all public administration offices in the city for use under the domain *partizipation.wien.at*. As a result, follow-up strategies focusing on specific areas of digital transformation such as artificial intelligence have been developed, the Digital Agenda Vienna itself has been updated and the tool has been used for discussing other topics.

The result achieved has kicked started the use of e-participation processes for digital agendas in other Austrian cities. The platform is active and continues to contribute to the development of the digital strategy and other topics, but the Digital Agenda Vienna itself has had an impact beyond strategic IT, as digital technology increasingly plays a role in several aspects of urban life. How the Digital Agenda Vienna influences policy making is apparent by the development of some apps, such as ‘Meine Amtswege’ (Stadt Wien, n.d.e) for administrative services, ‘Sag’s Wien’ (Stadt Wien, n.d.f) for reporting problems and uploading pictures and location data, and the chatbot ‘Wienbot’ (Stadt Wien, n.d.i), which handles services such as applying for a parking permit. The service ‘Mein Grätzl’ (Stadt Wien, n.d.d) (a Viennese expression describing a person’s neighbourhood) provides targeted, up-to-date information about the area surrounding their own home or workplace.

In 2019, the municipal council agreed to update the Digital Agenda Vienna, which was published as ‘Digitale Agenda Vienna 2025 Wien wird Digitalisierungshauptstadt’ (Stadt Wien, 2019). The title of this digital agenda clearly states the aim of the City of Vienna: to be the digital capital.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

We consider the results gained from the evaluation of the e-participation initiative *Digitale Agenda Wien* in terms of Wirtz et al.’s (2018) *Integrated Strategic e-Participation Framework*. The Digital Agenda Vienna addressed all six dimensions of the framework to a certain extent, but in particular, the aims were to increase overall participation, to provide information and to raise public awareness both about the implementation of e-participation and for understanding the policy issue. Providing information, exchange and feedback during the e-participation process was seen as central, and the development of the PACE testing lab, the apps and the flagship projects highlight the importance of understanding the issue addressed. The Digital

Agenda Vienna's key target of increasing participation in general is linked to identifying Wirtz et al.'s 'demand groups' (2018, p. 6) as they are the focus of the initiative.

In the online phase, the lack of representativeness was not noted – and providing an e-mail address and a nickname was regarded as sufficient – but became obvious during the Open Space Day, which attracted participants with a particular interest in IT. Following the first online phase, only those who had registered and provided an e-mail address could be reached, so those who did not participate (register) in the first online phase were excluded during the subsequent phases. While representativeness could not be achieved, and the majority of users who registered were those with a particular interest in IT, the administrators of the initiative were surprised that the quality of the ideas collected was predominantly high. The reason Vienna's (then) CIO came to this conclusion was that the ideas collected were seen as having been well thought through and described in detail and supported with expertise or practical experience. The ideas were discussed as a disciplined debate with no insulting behaviour.

As described above, the City of Vienna has great interest in open data, openness and transparency, so several efforts were made to ensure the transparency of the project. The footnotes in the Digital Agenda Vienna linking the strategy text to the ideas collected support transparency, but during the offline phases a limited number of participants summarized the ideas and developed the strategy text. The exclusion of the general public from this phase could be viewed as poor transparency, resulting in gaps in the traceability of the development from the discussion to the final strategy text. However, it must be noted that, before finalizing the text, the working groups were asked to comment on the draft summary of their topic, so important issues could not be lost through summarizing. For organizational reasons, involving the general public in the offline phase would likely have caused difficulties.

Other drivers of e-participation are the stakeholders besides the participants involved who provide input. These are understood by Wirtz et al. (2018) as entities who provide services, public officials, politicians and political parties. The interviewees found the participatory process of the digital agenda effective, but in terms of the necessity of using e-participation, experts' opinions diverge. The e-participation initiative allows diverse and broad opinions to be gathered, can include people with limited mobility, does not rely on time and location, and leads to a better discussion culture and collaboration between citizens and public administration. Discrepancies between how the participation process is presented to the participants and how it is perceived by the decision-makers or between expectations about the outcomes should be avoided. When the public is involved, it will also support the initiative, which leads to higher acceptance and can strengthen public confidence.

The online platform is now used by several departments within the City of Vienna as a tool to communicate internally and with citizens as well as to offer further municipal e-participation initiatives by the City of Vienna. The platform originally intended only for the Digital Agenda Vienna has been made available to all public administration offices in the city for use under the domain [partizipation.wien.at](http://partizipation.wien.at). The result achieved also kick-started the use of e-participation processes for digital agendas in other Austrian cities and led to the development of some municipal apps for reporting problems or receiving up-to-date information.

Another driver is the use of technology, which is a central element in e-participation and administrative reform (see e.g. Fountain, 2004; Macintosh, 2004). The online phases involved a platform developed by the technical partner of the project, c-based. The [discuto.io](http://discuto.io) online platform was designed specifically for the Digital Agenda Vienna following the three-step

strategy formulation process mentioned above. The website was partly designed according to the Web Accessibility Initiative criteria (W3C, 2021), which can set design limitations. However, the public administration received no feedback regarding the complexity of the process or difficulty in using the tool: 'I never heard that the platform was difficult to use' (Expert 2). In a certain way, technical knowledge is associated with the participation threshold: although public participation should certainly involve as many citizens as possible, when discussing the digitalization strategy, it is inherent to the topic that the users should know how to use the Internet.

The main success of this e-participation initiative is that it was seen as a positive experience by the initiators: not only was it effective and cost-saving, but also, and more importantly, it led to an outcome with an extensive impact on the public policy, the policy cycle, the internal organization of the administration, and the way ideas are implemented. It represented the first time this online platform was used but strengthened both the administration's and the public's confidence in using the platform for further e-participation initiatives that focus on digital and technology issues in addition to other topics. The public administration also received positive feedback from the participants. The agenda was supported by the public administration and political figures and, in 2019, the municipal council agreed to an update of the Digital Agenda Vienna.

Aichholzer and Allhutter (2009b) noted that politicians and administrators have ambivalent attitudes towards e-participation. Guides on public participation and e-participation initiatives suggest setting and communicating the goals, setting, participation process, interim and final results, resources required (including the time and competencies of all actors involved), rules of the game (the design), the type of questions that will be asked, the roles and responsibilities of the persons involved and the selection of the participants (e.g. Bundeskanzleramt & Bundesministerium Nachhaltigkeit und Tourismus, 2008; Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft et al., 2011; Scherer et al., 2010) at an early stage. The launch of Digital Agenda Vienna shows that administration can be driven in order to achieve digital transformation, innovate public participation, remove barriers to public participation and citizen engagement and successfully link it to both policy and political activity.

The Digital Agenda Vienna case study presented here illustrates what e-participation can achieve and how it can provide policy makers with suggestions on how to run an e-participation process that is able to impact policy making. The lessons learned from such initiatives are important because social and digital participation are increasingly central issues, as can be seen in the Tallinn Declaration on e-Government (Council of the European Union, 2017) and, more recently, in the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Government (European Commission, 2020).

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# 17. Connecting participation and e-participation: The use of ICT in the participatory initiatives of Brno

**David Špaček**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Participation is often emphasized as an instrument for solving democratic deficit and low public trust in government. It is also considered a necessary component of democratic public governance. Ideas to use information and communications technology (ICT) for improving the quality of governance and enhancing participation have been discussed in literature and translated into practice intensively in the last two decades (Royo et al., 2011). However, while ICT may promise great advancements and opportunities for governments, the effective adoption and implementation thereof require various additional efforts.

Previous research on the factors that drive the implementation and adoption of e-participation has been interdisciplinary (Qi et al., 2018) and has used various theoretical models (Medaglia, 2007, 2012; Sæbø et al., 2008; Susha and Grönlund, 2014; Royo et al., 2020). Literature suggests that the adoption of participative technology may facilitate interaction and collaboration between government and citizens, but also indicates that interaction does not necessarily mean achieving higher levels of e-participation and citizen empowerment. Naranjo-Zolotov and Oliveira (2018), for instance, pointed out that citizen empowerment is one of the key ingredients for more successful citizen participation over time in consulting and decision-making processes. According to them, empowering citizens means allowing them to influence the decisions made by the government. Since participatory initiatives and e-participation are usually led by public administration (Sæbø et al., 2011; Medaglia, 2012; Steinbach et al., 2019), it is necessary to study whether they actually empower citizens. Public administrations often struggle with technological and organizational changes that may result in failures of e-participation initiatives (Steinbach et al., 2019) and it is still widely unknown to which extent, how and in which contexts local governments will adopt and implement e-participation as a new form of shared decision-making (Steinbach et al., 2020).

This chapter focuses on these issues by studying two outstanding participatory projects of the city of Brno in Czechia: Brno 2050 and participatory budgeting ('Dáme na vás – Participativní rozpočet'). The Brno 2050 project was initiated with the aim of making strategic planning more participatory and, as a result, external stakeholders were engaged to an extent that had not been experienced in the largest Czech cities before. Brno is also the only administratively subdivided statutory city that works with participatory budgeting on the city level

in Czechia (in the case of other administratively subdivided statutory cities, participatory budgeting has been implemented only by some of their districts and not on the city level). Both of the initiatives have been previously researched only partially and not with a primary focus on ICT-related aspects (e.g. Špaček, 2018b). The chapter attempts to address the following research question: To what extent, how and why were the two participatory initiatives leveraged through e-participation?

The chapter is organized as follows. It first summarizes the analytical framework and methodology on which the chapter is based. Then it outlines the national context and introduces the aims and main characteristics of the two participatory initiatives in Brno and their organizational characteristics. This is followed by a presentation of the main findings on the diffusion of e-participation in the two participatory initiatives. The chapter concludes with discussions and lessons learned.

## 2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

e-Participation can be defined broadly as the use of ICT to support democratic decision-making (Macintosh, 2004; Medaglia, 2012). Sæbø et al. (2008) pointed out that e-participation activities were not new, but rather an evolution of many existing activities that have been given an extra push by the widespread deployment of the Internet. This means that researching e-participation must tackle things related to participation and also the ‘e-’ – the use of new technology based on the Internet.

Available literature reviews indicate that participatory practices usually involve the ongoing and dynamic action of various actors which is coordinated and steered within some more or less formal structures (e.g. Kooiman, 2010). Therefore, two broad sides of (e-)participation that interact with each other can be differentiated: the side of those who may take part and are actually taking part (citizens and other external stakeholders) and the side of those who empower them – those who decide on their involvement, their tools and, most importantly, the use of input obtained (governors, public administrators) (e.g. Sæbø et al., 2011).

Most of the existing research on e-participation either takes a techno-centric focus or explores the demand side of e-participation (e.g. aspects related to the development of democracy, digital divide, adoption by citizens) (Randma-Liiv and Vooglaid, 2019). e-Participation literature points to the importance of the lack of demand determining the level of adoption of e-participation. This was stated, for instance, by Reddick and Norris (2013) with regard to municipalities in the United States. They referred to the lack of demand of public officials and citizens (although the latter could not be fully judged by their research because it focused on the perceptions of administrators, not citizens). Furthermore, Følstad and Lüders (2013), who concentrated on motivating factors and their impact on political engagement in Norway, suggested that four motivational factors with relevance to participation in online political debate were of importance: engaging topics, desire to contribute, frustration and reciprocal learning. In their research, the majority of participants answered that the online environment for political debate could make them more politically engaged. These participants reported that such an increase in political engagement could be due to the online environment providing a sense of influence, access to political debate, a means for getting updated, a lower threshold for participation, motivating local political engagement and awareness concerning political events.

However, there is an increasing body of literature suggesting that (e-)participation is often determined by the side of public administration because participatory initiatives exist within formal structures and are therefore often formally approved, funded and led by public administration (Sæbø et al., 2011; Albrechts, 2012; Medaglia, 2012; Mack and Szulanski, 2017). Public administration also decides how the views of citizens will be incorporated in decision-making processes (Royo et al., 2011) and is therefore a central actor in the solicitation and organization of e-participation and in the process of diffusion of more democratic decision-making in government contexts (Steinbach et al., 2019). Similarly, according to Welch and Feeney (2014), outcomes of e-government are conditioned by technology use and capacity in local government and the organizational culture in which the technology is being implemented. In addition, Lev-On and Adler (2013) argued that trust is a crucial factor because most people they interviewed (and they focused on social workers) expressed the view that Internet forums and the Internet in general are not useful for and actually hinder the establishment of relationships and trust for a variety of reasons. The interviews they carried out suggested that face-to-face familiarity increases the level of trust even as the discussion moves online (because people need to know who the writer really is, who is sitting at the other end according to their research).

The analytical model used in this chapter is outlined in Figure 17.1.

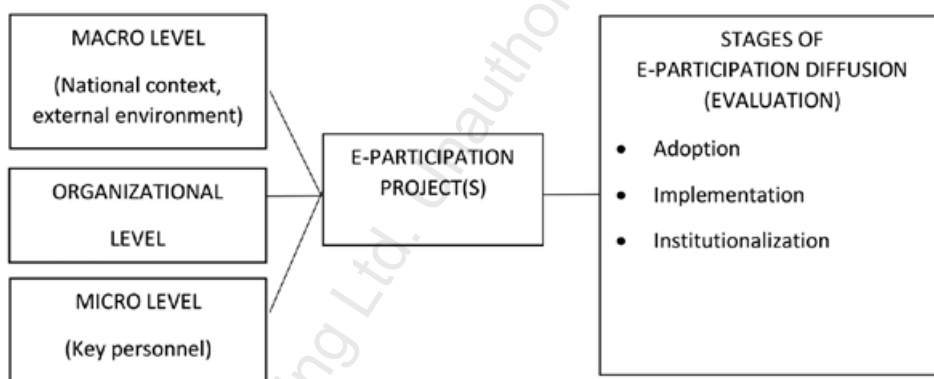


Figure 17.1 Analytical model for analysing the Czech case

The components of the analytical model define what is to be explored in order to identify the stage of diffusion of e-participation. It is based on a framework suggested by Steinbach et al. (2019), who differentiate between:

- three stages of diffusion of e-participation: adoption (organizations become aware of and learn about ICT, gather information to evaluate the potential benefits and make a decision on whether to acquire ICT); implementation (integration of innovations into organizational processes and structures); and institutionalization (ICT becomes integrated into organizational routines and structures); and
- three levels of analysis of diffusion stages – the micro level (actors such as employees and managers), the meso level (organization and its characteristics, such as organizational size,

organizational culture, practices); and the macro level (the external environment which includes factors such as national culture, regulations and societal norms).

This framework is similar to and can be supplemented by the analytical model suggested in Chapter 2, which differentiates the national context, organizational factors and individual factors that are to be studied alongside e-participation initiatives during evaluations.

Empirically, this study is based on desk research and semi-structured interviews. The desk research concentrated on documents and information related to the two projects published by the city on its web pages or on the web pages dedicated to the projects (<https://brno2050.cz/>; <https://damenavas.brno.cz/>) as well as in national e-participation and e-government policy and related legal and governmental documents. In addition, two sets of data were obtained through interviews. One data set was gathered based on interviews carried out from March to June 2018. These interviews focused on the perceptions of city administrators and 15 (out of 16) external experts assigned to the strategic values of the Brno 2050 strategy as their guarantors. They were not primarily focused on ICT use within the Brno 2050 initiative and, for this chapter, only data on perceptions regarding ICT use were employed. Additional data were obtained through three semi-structured interviews with the head of the strategic planning unit, the manager of the city strategy and the coordinator of the participatory budgeting project. These interviews focused on the use of e-participation tools in the two participatory projects. They were carried out in July 2019. The interviews lasted 1.5 hours on average and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

In Czechia, there has not been any explicit emphasis on e-participation in national public administration reform programmes, e-government policies and legislation so far. Although not explicitly specified in legislation, e-participation practices may evolve within existing law at the local as well as the national levels. In the case of legislation on self-governments, there is a general requirement that municipalities and regions must attend to the needs of their citizens. So, in order to get to know them, they should go beyond organizing a council meeting four times a year as required by legislation. Central authorities and self-governments are also required to follow legislation on public information as specified in Act 106/1999 on free access to information. This may bring about more informed discussions, but the general principle of the legislation is ‘to publish after it is decided’, and the *ex ante* publishing of documents which are supplementary to decision-making is voluntary (Špaček, 2014).

Obtaining feedback from the public is a compulsory component of the requirements prescribed for the regulatory impact assessment (RIA), which is especially imposed on ministries in Czechia. Although RIA guidelines have changed several times, they always require ministries to obtain feedback from the stakeholders impacted by their legislative proposals in order to obtain data for the evaluation of impacts. However, a form and a length have never been specified for consultations. Also, the RIA is not required for all legislative proposals of ministries. Various guides for the inclusion of external stakeholders for RIA purposes were prepared from November 2007 when the first RIA requirements came into effect. But although they have worked with the potential of ICT to engage with the public, they have dealt with the topic rather briefly. A special database of consulting organizations (DataKO) with consulting organization contacts was established where organizations that are willing to be included

can easily apply. However, there is no special national or non-governmental e-participation portal, nor have any such components been integrated into the two currently available national e-portals (portal.gov.cz and obcan.portal.gov.cz). Consequently, consultation practices may differ across central authorities.

The situation is similar in regional and local governments. Municipalities are rather fragmented (ca. 6250 municipalities exist) and small (most have less than 1000 inhabitants). This challenges any e-participation research and raises questions about where e-participation is more appropriate. Available research indicates that e-participation tools allowing e-consultations are used rarely in Czechia (Špaček, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2018a). ICT is used by some self-governments in order to obtain feedback through e-discussion fora, in participatory budgeting or in strategic planning. These findings indicated that ICT (including social media platforms such as Facebook) was used particularly for informing citizens, rather than for consulting citizens. As for the participatory budgeting, it is not regulated and its practice is determined by the decisions of political bodies of municipalities (their councils or board of councillors).

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE TWO PARTICIPATORY INITIATIVES OF BRNO

### 4.1 Brno 2050 Project

The Brno 2050 project, whose aim is to make strategy planning more participatory, was initiated in 2016 based on a decision of city bodies and with the support of the leading coalition and co-funding from the European Union. Its beginning combines a certain spontaneity and certain experiences with a former approach to city strategic planning that was perceived as more top down and not so inclusive. The project is perceived by its coordinators as an instrument for the entire city and its community that was launched to involve various external stakeholders in dialogue on future visions, values and milestones and their ways of implementation. The project was supposed to support more evidence-driven policy making and improve the coordination of strategic planning across the departments of the City Office and between the city bodies and city organizations and the bodies of 29 city districts which exist as semi-autonomous public authorities within the city of Brno (Špaček, 2018b). The project was to have the following phases:

- a strategic phase with an aim to prepare a vision of the city for 2050 and agree on the related values, goals and new (revised) indicators for evaluation;
- a programming phase with an aim to specify short-term (five to ten years) priorities, goals and measures; and
- a phase of action plans to anticipate further specification for the coming three to five years.

When the interviews were conducted, the project was in its programming phase. The strategic phase ended with the formal approval of the 2050 vision and strategy by the City Council in December 2017. It was expected that the programming phase would end during summer 2018, but due to changes in the City Council after elections in October 2018 when the former coalition was replaced with a completely new one, the implementation of the Brno 2050 was almost stopped for nearly two years.

Available information and the interviews indicate that there were three main groups of external participants involved in the preparation of the 2050 vision and strategy: members of the so-called 'City Ecosystem' platform, guarantors and members of the general public. The City Ecosystem can be considered an informal consultation and advisory platform because no formal rules and procedures were approved for its functioning. It consists of six main groups of stakeholders (businesses, research organizations, non-governmental organizations, national and European Union authorities, the Brno smart city community and Brno city management members) that meet on an annual basis. For each group, an 'ambassador' was elected for a period of two years. Ambassadors are expected to promote the 2050 project, help disseminate information to their contacts and have discussions with city politicians.

The ambassadors were not the main formulators or coordinators of preparation of the 2050 strategy. Activities were divided between project administrators from the City Office and the so-called 'guarantors' – experts appointed to formulate the specific values of the 2050 strategy during March and April 2017. Although it was not explicitly stated in the project, two groups of guarantors can be differentiated: internal guarantors (senior civil servants from the City Office or members of political bodies of the city) and external guarantors (experts outside the city bodies). The guarantors were the main formulators of texts under the specific values of the 2050 strategy (their descriptions, goals and indicators). However, they were not decision-makers. Decisive powers were assigned to city bodies.

The general public was invited to participate in the Brno 2050 initiative. Various channels, either face to face or online, were used in order to obtain comments from the public (see more below). Interviews indicate that similarly to working with the guarantors, especially external guarantors, the inclusion of the public was a kind of experiment.

## 4.2 Participatory Budgeting Project

The participatory budgeting project of Brno ('Dáme na vás – Participativní rozpočet') was launched in 2017. In comparison with other statutory subdivided cities, participatory budgeting in Brno was implemented on the city level. The project was initiated separately from the Brno 2050 project. Participatory budgeting was initiated within the Smart Brno initiative with an aim to attract citizens to decision-making. Later, it became part of the value 'Participatory administration' of the 2050 Strategy.

A document entitled 'Principles of the participatory budget of statutory city Brno' was approved by the City Council and guides the related processes. The participatory budgeting process starts with the announcement of a new round by a board of councillors. A call for projects is then announced, which is open from mid-February to mid-June. During this time, a project proposal is required to receive sufficient support from citizens and its feasibility is approved by city bodies or bodies of impacted city districts. This is also supplemented by public meetings with citizens. Throughout November, citizens can vote on project proposals.

## 5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Both the participatory initiatives were initiated, launched and implemented by the city. Their practice must consider that Brno is territorially subdivided into 29 city districts, each with their own self-governmental bodies. The Brno 2050 project was communicated to the representa-

tives of city districts and special campaigns for meeting with their citizens were organized by some. In the case of the participatory budgeting, not only city bodies but also bodies of city districts impacted by project proposals are required to decide whether the project is relevant and feasible.

The Brno 2050 project was initiated by the Department for Strategic Planning – a special unit of the City Office directly subordinated to a deputy of the city mayor, who also supports the project actively and participates in various events organized within the project. The project is coordinated mainly by two employees – the head of the unit and the project manager – who have been in close contact with the guarantors of the values of the 2050 strategy, heads of other departments of the city and politicians and civil servants of city districts.

The employees of the Department for Strategic Planning were guiding and coordinating the guarantors during the preparation of the 2050 strategy and also organized their meetings, the goals of which were to specify, interconnect and finalize individual values. They also organized various initiatives for involving the public. This was done especially during the strategic phase of the 2050 project, where input obtained from the public was then communicated by the project coordinators to the guarantors who were required to provide feedback.

It was also anticipated that other strategic documents prepared by the bodies and organizations of the city and city districts would comply with the values and strategic priorities of the Brno 2050 strategy. However, in Brno, development of the strategy for its metropolitan area began in 2014 separately from the Brno 2050 strategy and was coordinated by the Department for Integrated Territorial Investments Management and Metropolitan Cooperation. Since the Brno 2050 strategy was launched, close coordination between the two responsible departments has been anticipated. Another four development strategies were under preparation while the Brno 2050 project was in its strategic phase (for culture, housing, healthcare and sport), the preparation of some of which started even earlier. Coordinators from the strategic planning unit admitted that they sometimes struggled with those who prepared some of these strategies and, although they were supported by the deputy of the city mayor, they did not feel that their unit was perceived as strong by some departments. They had to explain intensively that the 2050 strategy is a corporate strategy and that other strategies should be prepared in line with it, otherwise it would be meaningless. Also, as they admitted in the interviews, they had to communicate the project to representatives of political parties outside the governing coalition (in order to overcome potential problems caused by changes in the city's political leadership after the elections in autumn 2018). The project received financial support from the European Social Fund.

In the case of the participatory budgeting project, the Office for Participation was established within the City Office. This Office for Participation is responsible for the organization of the participatory budgeting processes – submission of project proposals, their evaluation, voting and realization of the winning projects. It also communicates with other city and city district bodies. Two coordinators were employed for the project. In addition to its head, the office also has a lawyer and an investment manager. The coordinators were also responsible for the content of the web pages dedicated to participatory budgeting, but more complex matters, including voting on projects and administration functionalities, were contracted out to a private company. The civil servants involved in the participatory budgeting were not included in the team coordinating the Brno 2050 project, nor did they serve as guarantors of the 2050 strategy. As indicated in the interviews, in the beginning, the two initiatives were



rather separated, while the responsible units for both projects mostly coordinated promotion activities.

## 6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

### 6.1 The Brno 2050 Project

The use of ICT channels was perceived as inevitable and as the standard that should be followed by the coordinators of the 2050 project. The head of the coordinating unit stressed that ‘public administration cannot omit ICT today’. However, interviews suggested that ICT was not used much in the 2050 initiative except for project promotion.

Available information and interviews suggest that the general public was actively invited to participate in the Brno 2050 initiative through various channels – either face to face during various events or online. It was emphasized in the interviews by the head of the coordinating unit as well as the project manager that no sophisticated information technology system for e-participation was developed and used for the initiative. The project web page (<https://brno2050.cz/>) and Facebook page ‘Smart Brno’ (Chytré Brno) were the main ICT tools used. Information was usually ‘paired’, i.e. the same information was published on the web pages or Facebook pages of other projects or on the general city website or the Facebook pages of the city. This pairing strategy did not follow any formal communication policy of the city as no such policy existed. Some information was published on the Twitter account of the city. Edited videos of meetings and seminars organized within the 2050 project were also published on YouTube. Some ICT tools were incorporated in the project web pages later on, which allowed people to submit their comments or vote for pre-listed values by giving ‘likes’. Simple Microsoft Excel sheets were used for calculating the results of this voting. During the strategic phase of the project, it was also possible for citizens to use the tool ‘Takové chci město’ (I want the city like this), where ten pairs of pictures were presented to them and, based on their selection, the final image was presented. A similar visualization tool was used also in face-to-face street campaigns and events. Feelings maps were used to indicate places where changes would be required, where citizens would like to spend their time, what they don’t like, where they would like to live, etc. Various public opinion polls were organized through the project web pages.

Interviews with project administrators and external guarantors clearly indicated that the use of ICT for engaging external stakeholders was determined by individual phases of the project, reflected the content of the project communication strategy and was different in the three project phases (the strategic phase, the programming phase and the phase of action plans as outlined in Section 4.1):

- Engagement of the public was more intensive during the strategic phase where a set of strategic values and their descriptions (including goals and indicators) were being created. During this phase, the feelings map was used (project web pages mention the 780 participants who used this instrument online), and votes and comments were collected by the City Office on individual strategic values and their descriptions on the project web pages during summer 2017. Values were organized into three areas for this purpose – quality of life, administration and resources. Citizens could choose up to five values. The case was

similar during summer 2018 when the ability to vote on priorities and measures anticipated in draft plans prepared for a ten-year period was made available online to citizens.

- From the interviews as well as information on the project web pages (including archived information on events announced), it is evident that ICT was not used in the following project phases for the more focused collection of input from citizens. The vast majority of events promoted on project web pages refer to meetings in streets and city districts, face-to-face public debates and related cultural events. Interviews indicated that the programming phase and the phase of action plans of the project were more about specific projects and activities as suggested by individual departments of the City Office and city organizations and also by the guarantors of individual strategic values. As was pointed out during the interviews by the head of the project coordinating unit, 'Action plans are focused on concrete projects, the concrete activities of individual departments or city organizations. Here, we actually do not need the public and therefore also digital instruments. But this does not mean that we will not inform them using electronic instruments'.

The head of the project coordinating unit was rather surprised at the low number of comments received from the public, as he admitted during the interview, 'I expected more comments. We obtained about 150'. The project manager spoke of about 170 comments on the draft 2050 vision and 150 comments obtained during the voting period in the programming phase (the city of Brno has almost 380,000 inhabitants, commuters excluded). This issue was also later subjected to a short survey which discovered, according to the head of the coordinating unit, that 'We based the campaign on kids. People know more than these kids and kids do not link their comments to the initiative of the city and its aim to create a city strategic document'. Later on he added,

In the long term perspective, it is evident that when you create a document (strategic plan) for a long time, people are interested much less than when you create projects. With the latter, people have a real opportunity to influence the projects. They can also suggest them and realize them if they obtain support. When they cooperate on the Brno 2050 project, it is a longer process, it is more abstract and complex – the 2050 strategy is also a bit long.

Some external guarantors noted in the interviews that the number of people participating online was rather lower than they expected. One of them pointed out that this could be determined by the fact that the voting was organized during summer. One of the guarantors also noted that the City Office relied on Internet-based channels too much and that it could have worked more with other channels.

In overall terms, ICT was considered by public administrators as an alternative channel for the inclusion of citizens or guarantors in the co-creation of the 2050 strategy (vision and strategic plan). Interviews with civil servants from the City Office and external guarantors suggest that in the 2050 project, the project web pages and Facebook pages have been used especially for one-way informing, rather than for e-consultations. The head of the coordinating unit admitted that,

We use FB [Facebook] especially for informing. If there are comments, we try to react. The number of people that have followed us for a longer time is not high. But it also depends on the campaign we are doing. When we started the campaign 'Where are you heading Brno?', the number of followers

raised significantly, but FB is not an instrument for consultation, we do not want to use it for this purpose.

This approach was further explained by the project manager as follows:

We did not want to conduct a more complex discussion on Facebook or the project web pages. You know what the electronic space looks like. When we aimed to have a more serious debate with people, we told them to come to events where we could meet in person: all can be explained, argued and talked out more easily during such meetings. And we preferred it like this. That is also why we try to organize events where we can meet in person. And although a smaller number of people usually come, these people are willing to devote themselves and their time to the topic much more ... and the more complex the instrument, the more difficult it is for people to get to the end.

Similarly, the head of the coordination unit stated the following:

For a long time, discussions on social networks are raw and I do not think it is possible to cultivate them. We can delete messages, but then we are accused – there cannot be a fully-pledged discussion there ...

You need a simple instrument to attract more people. We use more complex tools particularly in order to attract those people who really care and are willing to put in the effort. ICT can make it easier for them. They also read documents in advance. But we do not expect ICT to be used by the masses. For such mass use, you need simple instruments such as liking and voting because you cannot go through issues with people online.

The interviews with the head of the coordinating unit and the project manager suggested that the participation of citizens can never be representative. However, its potential to reach the public more (in comparison to street events and meetings) was clearly emphasized.

Some types of activities were perceived as unsuitable for public participation in the interviews with the head of the project coordinating unit:

Our experience suggests that there are certain activities in which you cannot engage the public. You can involve people in the beginning where you need to collect input but cannot involve them in preparation of a recipe book. This is the aim of the meetings with guarantors ... It is important to clearly point out activities in which the public will participate ... it is perfect to connect them with a map, a specific project or an output ... we want to co-create with them in this way in order to get their support, to get them to buy in.

Interviews suggested that the level of controversy of values determined citizen perceptions and the number of votes the values obtained. As explained by the project manager: 'Some of the values are so controversial, so problematic. Typically, most comments are submitted to themes from areas like transport and social services. Also, this is sometimes multiplied by existing affairs and causes'.

Although the project web pages encouraged citizens to comment on a preliminary set of values, the interview with the project manager indicated that the eventually incorporated values in the 2050 strategy reflected public voting only partly:

I cannot say we use them 100%. If a value received a low number of votes, it did not mean that we deleted it. There was an agreement on their importance between the experts and the city. However, when we know that people do not consider a value as important, this indicates that we have to argue and further explain the meaning, the impacts on the city, why the city wants to deal with it.

Interviews suggest that input from the citizens was not intended to shape the content of the strategy. As was explicitly stated by the project manager, it was used ‘as a means of identifying what should be better explained’. However, it was pointed out during the interviews with the head of the coordinating unit and external guarantors that, in one case, when a person inserted a new value, she later became a co-guarantor of the value.

Interviews with employees from the City Office suggest that comments on strategic values obtained from the public went into the content management system of the project web pages. Before they were published on the project web pages, a responsible civil servant checked whether they were not discriminating or vulgar. This was announced prior to voting in the information presented on the form for voting available on the project web pages. The project manager explained this as follows: ‘It was not about making something secret, hiding it. If people provided us with their contact details, we wrote to them and informed them that their comment will not be published for a certain reason’. The comments were also sent to the guarantors of the strategic values – they were required to provide project coordinators with a response, which was then published. It must be noted that information on the project web pages is not transparent – it only mentions the number of votes and the number of comments received, but individual comments are not published, nor are the responses from the guarantors of values published.

Moreover, communication between the City Office and the external guarantors of the strategic values combined electronic and face-to-face means. In the strategic phase, the external guarantors were required to work with Google Drive and Google Docs. During the finalization of the 2050 strategy and during the following programming phase, the e-communication between the project coordinators and the external guarantors of the strategic values was based on e-mails. The interviews emphasized that this was also determined by the computer literacy of some guarantors. For obtaining input on the projects that were proposed for the phase of action plans, SurveyMonkey was used to obtain input from the guarantors and other participating persons. Organization of citizen participation was not decentralized to guarantors. The project coordinators played a key role in deciding on (e-)participation practices with the deputy of the city mayor because they were responsible for the project and its outputs and, as such, accountable to city bodies and the donor.

Interviews with some external guarantors suggested that (e-)participation may face another barrier – some external guarantors commented that the preparation of the 2050 strategy was too participatory at any cost and that too many debates were organized. During the interviews, it became apparent that some external guarantors were slightly annoyed by the participatory nature of the Brno 2050 project, which may determine their later involvement in the project. This also challenges the way the project was being managed and coordinated – as it was clearly criticized in several interviews by the external guarantors, participatory meetings were not managed and, as such, were not heading anywhere. Therefore, the external guarantors clearly required clearer leadership of participatory and follow-up activities, which may also be relevant for ICT use in obtaining input from the public.

## **6.2 The Participatory Budgeting Project**

Interviews with the project coordinator from the Office for Participation of the City Office as well as the information available on the web page (<https://damenavas.brno.cz/>) and Facebook

page ([www.facebook.com/damenavas/](http://www.facebook.com/damenavas/)) of the participatory budgeting project indicates that it has been supported by ICT more in comparison with the 2050 project. However, as was explained by a coordinator, ‘the extent of ICT use in the participatory budgeting project depends on its phase’. ICT was not only used for informing citizens, like in the Brno 2050 project, but also for the submission of project proposals and final voting on the project proposals.

A project proposal could be submitted either online (a special e-form is available on the project web pages) or in paper format (in this case, applicants were required to visit the Office for Participation and fill in a special form). According to the participatory budgeting rules, a project proposal receives sufficient support if it obtains at least 50 signatures in the case of the paper form and at least 300 likes online. This is followed by the approval of the project’s feasibility by the City Office or bodies of impacted city districts. For this, no special ICT tool is used and the process is not transparent – it is only required in the participatory budgeting rules that the applicant is informed about the process on a continuous basis and about the final decision if their project is considered feasible. The rules also anticipate that an applicant has the possibility to revise their proposal in order to comply with the feasibility requirements.

Voting was organized online through the project web pages and it was also possible for citizens to vote in person during public meetings and at the Office for Participation. To vote, only a permanent address (citizenship) in Brno was required (project proposals can be submitted by anyone). In the case of online voting, citizens had two possibilities – to authenticate using their date of birth and national identification number or using their Brno identification for authentication if activated (use of this card is voluntary, it is used now by ca. 164,000 people; the card can be used for public transport, waste disposal fees, library access, tourism, residential parking, services related to city cemeteries and some polling). In 2018, ca. 14,500 citizens voted, in 2019 this number was 13,200 (Zuziaková, 2020).

It was also noted in the interviews that how to attract foreigners with a permanent address in Brno was discussed. Still, for the last vote organized in November 2020, only the Czech versions of web pages are available. For these foreigners, a specific number is generated at the City Office, but during the voting phase, they can be assisted by employees of the City Office or by friends who understand Czech. This was commented on by project administrators as follows: ‘Most of them have a Czech friend who help them. They usually focus on a concrete project they want to vote for. They know Czechs who have submitted a project proposal and ask them to vote for it’.

Interviews suggest that the Facebook pages of the participatory budgeting project were used similarly to the 2050 project, especially for one-way informing. The reasons behind this were similar – according to the coordinator of the participatory budgeting project:

People who discuss on Facebook do not want to have things explained. Facebook is used more by people that want to attack, express their hate ... When the discussion is accelerating and when projects are being approved, people start yelling and are not interested in explanations. That is why we prefer to organize live events where it is easier to discuss and explain things.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Brno 2050 initiative has made the strategic planning of the city more participatory thanks to the larger inclusion of the general public in strategic planning and cooperation with the

external experts included in strategy formulation as guarantors of the majority of strategic values of the 2050 strategy. Thanks to the participatory budgeting project, citizens can now determine, at least to some extent, the projects that will be implemented within the city.

This chapter analysed to what extent, how and why city administrators empower citizens through the use of ICT tools within the two projects. The research indicates that, in Czechia, local governments are rather free in deciding which e-participation instruments they use for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making. So, the supply of (e-)participation is determined by the support of local political leadership and the ways in which related projects are prepared, implemented and evaluated by public administrators. The findings suggest that the use of ICT within the 2050 project is leaning towards adoption – the first stage of diffusion of e-participation suggested by Steinbach et al. (2019). Thus, the diffusion of e-participation tools was limited and only simple ICT tools were used during the strategic and programming phases of the project. This is determined especially by micro- or individual-level factors, such as the perceptions and attitudes of the key personnel involved in project implementation and coordination. Lack of resources has not been noted by any of the city administrators interviewed. Although the project attempts to change organizational culture (the former top-down and not so inclusive approach to city strategic planning), the involvement of the public in decision-making via ICT is not a strategic priority. This is because ICT is not perceived by city administrators as appropriate for discussions with citizens because online discussions may be full of complaints, bad language, etc., and face-to-face channels are preferred because they are believed to allow for more constructive and information-based discussions. Similar attitudes may also determine the way input from citizens is used. As indicated in the interviews with the project manager, input from citizens obtained through ICT tools was not intended to shape the content of the 2050 strategy and was used ‘as a means of identifying what should be better explained’, rather than for arguing the importance of individual values and priorities.

These findings correspond to the summary made by Steinbach et al. (2019), who concluded that micro-level barriers of adoption (e.g. scepticism concerning e-participation by managers and employees) play a central role in whether e-participation is adopted and how it will be implemented, used or resisted. Similar findings were also published by Aikins and Krane (2010), who surveyed the opinions of chief administrative officers in some Midwestern states (United States) and concluded that city officials had not taken advantage of the Internet to bring citizens closer to their government because these officials strongly preferred traditional citizen participation to Internet-based participation. According to them, the deployment of resources to support online participation may be restrained by the low preference for Internet-based citizen participation.

This chapter indicates that the question of trust may not have played a central role in the case of the Brno 2050 initiative because the low diffusion of e-participation is determined by the rather strong preference of city officials for face-to-face instruments, and interviews suggest that the level of face-to-face familiarity is high. The findings presented in this chapter are thus in line with the opinion of Susha and Grönlund (2014), in that the overall restraint of governments towards a more direct form of e-democracy stems from both ideological beliefs regarding representation in general and the attitudes taking shape with regard to the role of the Internet in democratic affairs. This was clearly stated among the reasons why face-to-face interactions with the public were preferred. This was also stressed with regard to discussions on the Facebook pages of the participatory budgeting initiative.

The role of the lack of demand of citizens cannot be fully discussed in this chapter because citizens were not interviewed. However, taking into consideration the amount of feedback obtained through ICT within the Brno 2050 project (generally perceived as rather low by project coordinators as well as some external guarantors during the interviews), it may be concluded that the demand of citizens was not sufficient. According to city administrators, this was determined by the characteristics of the 2050 project – for citizens, it might be a bit abstract because of the values and the time horizon used. However, the findings on the low awareness of citizens about the Brno 2050 initiative that were noted by city administrators must be highlighted and the effectiveness of project marketing and the timing of the project commented on by the external guarantors must be discussed. This was not surveyed to a larger extent and therefore conclusions on this cannot be fully drawn. To deal more with the lack of diffusion and demand, it is essential to research perceptions of political leadership of the city (of councillors) and citizens. Still, e-participation can also be hindered by the perceptions of some external guarantors that Brno 2050 was too participative at any cost. This clearly emphasizes the role of project leadership and the related requirements for communication with the internal as well as external stakeholders of the city.

The interviews suggested that not only the nature of the projects but also the nature of the topics may be very relevant for (e-)participation. Only some topics were considered attractive to citizens during the preparation of the 2050 strategy, especially those that are more controversial. As shown in the theoretical discussions above, the importance of motivational factors was also confirmed by former research (e.g. Følstad and Lüders, 2013). More importantly, the participatory budgeting project was leveraged by e-participation tools as it was perceived as more ‘natural’, especially since it is not as abstract and therefore it seems that citizens are more motivated to participate.

Interviews also indicated that integration with other existing systems and communication platforms poses challenges to both participatory initiatives. Concerning both participatory projects of Brno, this is a case of the integration of the various Facebook pages that are established and organized on a project basis without a uniform communication policy of the city on the use of social media. The case of web pages of individual projects is similar; both participatory initiatives are also challenged by a strategy on the utilization of the Brno ID. It follows from the study that in the case of participatory budgeting, the authentication of citizens was better organized thanks to the Brno ID and the prior registration of citizens and enabled the better quantification of results.

Overall, this chapter draws three key lessons. First, the key personnel involved in the participatory initiatives must be convinced of the potential of ICT in the involvement of citizens and other external stakeholders. Second, the potential of more complex e-participation needs to be further explained and argued in order to convince city administrators to work more with ICT tools in participatory initiatives. And lastly, for e-participation to be more diffused, it seems necessary to start with more concrete and not so abstract and complex projects and to build e-participation from the bottom, e.g. starting with ICT use in participatory budgeting initiatives.

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## 18. Management and organization of e-participation: Synthesis from 15 European initiatives

**Tiina Randma-Liiv and Veiko Lember**

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This book aimed to contribute to existing knowledge on e-participation by exploring and systematizing the organizational and managerial factors within public administration that have an impact on the practical operation of e-participation initiatives. Following the calls for recent reviews on e-participation (e.g. Chadwick, 2011; Steinbach et al., 2019), the book focused on opening up the organizational and institutional ‘black box’ of e-participation and set out to provide new insights into how public administrations across Europe have facilitated the implementation of e-participation or how they have failed to do so. Whereas in previous research the exploration of such ‘supply-related factors’ was mostly approached under rather abstract labels such as ‘managerial aspects’, ‘project management’ (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008) or ‘programme management’ (Rose and Grant, 2010), the case studies in this book aimed to take a more detailed and systematized view at the organization and management of e-participation initiatives.

The e-participation initiatives presented in this book confirm that e-participation continues to be high on the agenda of governments across Europe. Central, regional and local governments continue to try out new e-participation platforms, which are more or less successful. The case studies show that governments can indeed improve the engagement of citizens through digital channels. Information and communications technology and Internet-based applications prove to be viable and complementary means to the participatory process in policy making. Opening up public-sector organizations to external stakeholders – citizens, residents, users, other governmental agencies, private and voluntary organizations – enables decision-makers to take advantage of available external knowledge. By creating interactive linkages between internal and external stakeholders, politicians and civil servants can subsequently come up with novel solutions to public policy challenges. These cases show that greater citizen engagement not only better informs government decision-making but also enhances democratic processes through contributing to the values of openness, innovation and collaboration in governance.

However, in addition to presenting a number of ‘success stories’ of e-participation, all of the cases in this volume highlight the important challenges and inherent limitations of e-participation. The Hungarian case stands out among others most dramatically by demonstrating what can happen when a populist government employs e-participation. On the one hand, the Hungarian government carried out one of the most extensive series of consultations in Europe measured by the share of citizens involved. On the other hand, due to the missing legal framework and transparency, poor procedural guarantees and the weakness of the

chosen technology to prevent abuse, the online version of the consultation eroded rather than enhanced the credibility of citizen participation. The methodology of the consultations was flawed since the questions led the respondent to pick the 'correct' answer. As there were no reliable identification procedures, the system was not protected against accidental or deliberate misuse, and no independent actor could verify the government's claims on the outcome of the consultation process. This led the authors to conclude that the exercise of citizen consultations in Hungary was used to confirm previously formed political decisions and thus could be seen as a dissemination tool for the government's political agenda rather than a will to genuinely engage citizens in decision-making. In an era of strengthening populist parties across Europe, the Hungarian case study serves as a cautionary tale for those who believe that e-participation practices always lead to positive outcomes. It shows that e-participation initiatives are in themselves never normatively neutral and can be used for partisan purposes that do not enhance democratic quality but seriously challenge the ideals of democratic decision-making and citizen participation.

The case studies indicate that a complex array of institutional variables contributes to explaining the implementation of e-participation initiatives. In this concluding chapter, the intention is to systematize organization- and management-related factors based on empirical findings from the multiple cases presented in the book. It is acknowledged that the evaluation of e-participation is contingent on specific contextual factors, situations and issues. Although the performance of e-participation initiatives is context and issue specific, there is reason to expect some general patterns across contexts and issues. For example, leadership, collaboration and transparency are important regardless of context. As Creighton (2005, p. 2) emphasizes, 'there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all public participation ... But there are critical issues which make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful programme'. The analysis of the collected case studies enables us to distinguish between three groups of critical factors in the organization and management of e-participation: (1) organizational design; (2) participatory process; and (3) management. All of these will be elaborated on by outlining the most important issues in each group. This does not pretend to be a finite list of organization- and management-related factors but rather a summary of the critical institutional aspects which have emerged from the analysis of the case studies in this volume. It is expected for such a framework of organization- and management-related factors to be addressed when establishing or further developing new or existing e-participation projects.

## 1 FACTORS RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

### 1.1 Ownership

The analysis of the selected e-participation initiatives indicates that, in several cases, the ownership and, accordingly, the responsibility for the development and running of the e-participation initiative is a crucial factor in explaining the adoption and actual functioning of the platform. It is possible to distinguish between three modes of ownership patterns. In the first mode, as exemplified by the Austrian, Croatian, Czech, Scottish, Slovak, Spanish and Swedish cases, the e-participation platform is developed and implemented under the leadership of one particular organization. In most of these cases, the technical solution of the platform has been contracted out under the direction of the 'owner' and contributing units for

running the platform are located within the same organization. Even more importantly, the end beneficiaries of the citizens' input – decision-makers – are also located within the same organization. This creates a rather straightforward set-up by which the ownership of the platform is clear to all stakeholders and the key units contributing to the implementation of the platform are all placed under the same organizational umbrella. Such an ownership pattern is likely to increase the opportunities for the inclusion of the input from the e-participation platforms in policy design since the proprietor of the platform/responsible organization itself is using the citizen input and is thus interested in the seamless functioning of the platform. Importantly, in some cases, such as the Spanish one, the software has been developed by the organization itself and has been made open for others to use, in turn making it possible for other public and private organizations to replicate and develop the platform further.

The second and third mode, however, demonstrate more ambiguous ownership patterns. In the second mode, illustrated by the Estonian and French cases, the technical provider of the platform partially holds ownership of the platform. This is more likely the case with platforms that have been developed bottom up rather than top down. It may ease the situations in which technical problems need to be addressed; however, in the long run, the complex ownership issues between the technical provider and core administrator of the platform are likely to cause problems of coordination, division of labour, accountability and further investments into the platform. Here, the Belgian and Irish cases provide a further variation, where the e-participation initiatives are owned and controlled by public authorities but use existing private participation platforms to implement the initiatives.

The third ownership pattern refers to situations where there is considerable 'distance' between decision-makers (the end beneficiaries of the platform) and the core administrator of the platform (e.g. the German and Latvian cases). Such 'distance' appears to be one of the most critical barriers to the functioning of the e-participation initiatives. It becomes problematic if, for example, the core administrator is a non- or quasi-governmental organization, and the end beneficiaries of the platform are either members of parliament or local politicians. Similarly, the 'distance' becomes critical if the core responsibility for running the platform is placed in a central unit (e.g. a ministry or a state chancellery), whereas the decision-makers expected to use the platform in policy design are located in very different units, e.g. in local governments, regions or districts (e.g. in Croatia). This creates a complex situation where potential coordination problems are coupled with the broader challenges of multilevel governance. The case studies demonstrate that, in such cases, the use of citizen input is often dependent on the motivation of individual units or persons due to the lack of institutional ownership by their organizations. Thus, the root cause of the often reported uneven adoption of e-participation in such cases (e.g. the German and Lithuanian cases) rests with the ambiguous ownership of the platform, especially if this is combined with a low degree of formalization of participatory processes. A high degree of formalization of participatory processes (e.g. making the consideration of input from e-participation platforms mandatory for decision-makers) may somewhat alleviate this problem as seen from the Estonian and Latvian cases.

Ownership issues are also linked to the presence of the formal authority, legitimacy and resources of the core unit of the e-participation platform. Platforms which were established bottom up tend to allocate the responsibility for the administration of the e-participation initiative to non-governmental actors. This may be beneficial in promoting the platform through the use of approaches which are appropriate for non-governmental organizations

and help to remove concerns about the possible manipulation of the participatory process by the government or the ruling party. On the one hand, this may increase the legitimacy of the platform, but on the other hand, the Estonian, French, German and Latvian case studies show that, in such cases, the core administrator may lack formal authority vis-à-vis governmental decision-makers and/or may become short on resources for running the platform. Problems of legitimacy, authority and resources were also reported in cases where the core units were based on a different governmental level than that of decision-makers, referring again to the complexity of multilevel governance.

## 1.2 Cross-Boundary Collaboration

Actors have been considered important for the success of e-participation initiatives since the very beginning of relevant research (Macintosh, 2004). However, in most studies on e-participation, actors are seen as individuals (politicians, civil servants, ‘champions’, experts, business or civil society leaders) rather than institutions. Mergel (2018) claims that not only intra- but also inter- and extra-organizational factors drive or hinder the implementation of open innovation practices. Previous research has shown that barriers for cross-boundary collaboration may include negative past experiences among actors, the lack of motivation of any actor, different interests among actors that prevent collaboration, the prevalence of mistrust and opportunistic behaviour, the presence of procedural uncertainty, the existence of incompatible cognitive and discursive frameworks, strategic uncertainty, the incomplete institutionalization of collaboration and communication failures (see Steelman and Mandell, 2003).

The case studies demonstrate that these potential challenges for the implementation of e-participation platforms have occurred on several occasions. Often, the administration of the e-participation platform requires a collaborative effort between a multitude of organizations and/or organizational units that are more or less loosely connected, which involves different regulatory contexts, interests, expectations, incentives and cultures. The characteristics of the actors expected to collaborate in the provision of e-participation platforms differ a lot, including actors from public, private or non-profit sectors, and thereby contribute to institutional complexity involving different institutional rules and procedures in the collaborating institutions. This leads to problems with responsibility and division of labour, where actors have different expectations of their own and their partners’ roles, responsibilities and tasks.

In addition, the important role that digital context plays in the administration of e-participation platforms is evident. It brings people into the public sector with rather specific skills and professional backgrounds, namely engineers and designers. That is, not only civil servants interact with different governmental and non-governmental actors but increasingly also professional groups of advisors and entrepreneurs-in-residence who have software engineering, digital design, data science and similar backgrounds. This contributes to the diversity of professional cultures, but also poses challenges for collaboration, possibly leading to substantive complexity, i.e. the presence of different perceptions of the nature of collaboration; solutions and values; varied knowledge and available information; and differences in the professional language used (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2014).

How can such a diverse group of actors be administered? The analysis of e-participation initiatives confirms previous findings that networks possess good potential for the inclusion of diverse partners, for learning to cope with dynamic and unstable environments and for

inducing innovation (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). However, networks also exhibit important disadvantages – difficult decision-making processes, lack of clear responsibility and enforcement capacity (Verhoest and Bouckaert, 2005) as well as limited scope of authority and the existence of power asymmetries (McGuire and Agranoff, 2011). The collected e-participation cases where the network is a dominant coordination mechanism (e.g. the Estonian, French and Latvian cases) provide empirical evidence for such findings. Often, however, different combinations of the basic coordination mechanisms are used, which represent options that are complementary rather than alternative. The collected cases show that networks are most often combined with hierarchy in the administration of e-participation platforms (e.g. the Belgian, German, Lithuanian, Scottish and Spanish cases). The use of such combinations reflects the need to counterbalance the shortcomings of one coordination mechanism with the strengths of the other. In both the strategic and operational management of e-participation platforms, the presence of some hierarchical elements in network administration may prove inevitable.

The collaborative capacity of the core unit running the e-participation platform is essential for ensuring both the strategic and operational management of network-based e-participation platforms. The core unit should thus have formal authority, organizational support, legitimacy and resources for administering the complex web of organizations involved in the supply of the e-participation initiative. The collected e-participation cases, however, demonstrate a large variety in institutional support. In some cases (e.g. Croatian, Czech, French, German), support to the core unit is insufficient, severely challenging the potential of the platform. Consequently, the centre of a network – the core unit of administering e-participation initiatives – is expected to be responsible for and to retain control over the most important issues, such as strategic decisions, setting key performance indicators, allocation of resources or ensuring the development of a technical solution for an e-participation platform.

### **1.3 Accountability**

e-Participation initiatives are likely to affect existing accountability relations – both political and administrative accountability. First, regarding political accountability, the analysis of e-participation initiatives suggests that traditional hierarchically oriented political accountability needs to be supplemented by more voluntary horizontal accountability relations in order to cover cross-cutting issues and activities transcending organizational borders (see also Bovens, 2007). The problem with the hierarchical approach to political accountability is that it assumes a clear division between politics and administration. In practice, however, much of the work of the public administration is political, which blurs the politics–administration divide. The use of e-participation platforms tends to blur it even further. For example, the creation of e-participation initiatives where citizens feed directly into parliamentary decision-making processes poses challenges for the executive branch of government concerning insight and information. This means that e-participation platforms may contribute to the emergence of grey zones in political–administrative relations. Citizen input into policy-making processes can be unpredictable and, in situations where clear (formalized) participatory processes are missing, this may lead to practising hands-on management with respect to politically salient issues. The political dynamics may also produce unstable trade-offs between accountability mechanisms. Moreover, collaboration within a multilevel governance setting in administering e-participation platforms (such as in the German case) makes accountability relations increasingly vague

as a result of the involvement of the political accountability principle of local self-government via the (mandatory) partnership arrangements with central government.

Second, network-based collaboration in administering e-participation platforms implies ambiguous or shared accountability relations among actors. It has been shown that partnerships and networks have made accountability relations more ambiguous (Olsen, 2010). Due to the wide use of networks and their various combinations with hierarchy, the collected case studies indicate several accountability challenges related to running the e-participation platforms, triggered by a number of engaged actors and their complex relationships. Some case studies indicate that it is not necessarily clear which actor is responsible for which output and to whom the unit running the e-participation portal is accountable. This is especially applicable to bottom-up and network-dominated e-participation practices (such as the Estonian, French and Latvian cases).

It is also possible that the existence of tangled accountability relationships in the development of e-participation initiatives makes it difficult to identify which actor is responsible for which outcome. This normally represents unstable, unsettled politics and unexpected situations which go beyond the more stable routine situations and business as usual (Olsen, 2014). The establishment of e-participation platforms can often be characterized as 'beyond business as usual'. In these situations, accountability processes affect the actual exercise and control of authority, power and responsibility, and the question of who has the right and capacity to call to account, question and debate the information given and to face judgement and consequences becomes important. This means that there is a need to go beyond the hierarchical principal-agent approach to accountability and to allow more dynamic multidimensional accountability relationships.

Accountability is about managing diverse and partly conflicting expectations (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987). In a multifunctional public sector, goals are often conflicting and imprecise. As can be seen from the case studies, even a straightforward activity such as the establishment of an e-participation portal can have different objectives, which, however, are often not specified and remain rather abstract, in turn forming a basis for potential conflicts. Accountability in such a system means being answerable to numerous stakeholders and responsible for the achievement of multiple and often ambiguous objectives. Network-based collaboration normally implies diffused or shared accountability relations among actors. This is especially the case when the tasks or outputs are difficult to separate and are highly interdependent, which is the case with e-participation. The problem with shared accountability is that it tends to become fuzzy. Accordingly, instead of choosing between accountability mechanisms, there is a need to treat them as supplementary and complementary, leading to a multiple accountability regime. New accountability regimes with more complex, dynamic and layered accountability forms are also reflected in the cases on e-participation. A key challenge is how to handle complex and hybrid accountability relations embedded in partly competing institutional logic. Ambiguous accountability relations not only affect the everyday functioning of the platforms but also their long-term strategic development and (financial) sustainability.

#### **1.4 Competition among Participatory Instruments**

The increasing popularity of e-participation platforms in government agendas and the business opportunities such popularity has created for civic-tech start-ups have led to a situation in

several of the studied countries (e.g. in Belgium, Estonia, France and Ireland) where there is a multiplicity of e-participation platforms which seek to influence the policy-making process. Some platforms are established top down by government units, while others bottom up by private entrepreneurs; some are set up for addressing individual issues or running single campaigns, whereas others target more permanent citizen engagement. The output from some participatory instruments can be mandatory for governments to consider, whereas it may remain voluntary in other cases. In addition, online engagement opportunities co-exist with more traditional offline participatory instruments. As a result, an increasing number of both online and offline participatory instruments is likely to crowd out the policy-making scene. Moreover, it may create confusion among citizens, civil servants and politicians alike. A few cases (e.g. Czechia and Estonia) within this study show that it is difficult for citizens and non-governmental organizations to understand when to use one or another platform, whether it is possible to combine them and which one is more likely to lead to an impact on the policy-making process.

Civil servants as primary administrators of participatory initiatives are likely to face problems related to a variety of types of citizen input in the policy-making process, leading to potential problems with giving feedback. Politicians may lose track of how to handle citizen input received through a variety of means. This points to competition as a factor of failure in e-participation (see also Dwivedi et al., 2013; Toots, 2019). As a matter of fact, all participatory instruments are essentially competing for the scarcest of resources – the attention of the government. The crowded-out situation of participatory instruments may thus even delegitimize participatory democracy as such.

It would be beneficial for the governments to thoroughly conceptualize several participatory processes and optimize the landscape of both offline and online participatory instruments. This assumes the development of a strategic view and commitment by the government, which would also indicate that the government takes citizen participation seriously. There is space for some complementary e-participation platforms, especially those established through bottom-up efforts from the civil society (see also Pirannejad et al., 2019); however, a greater number of platforms not only affects their sustainability but also reduces the likelihood that citizen input is given the attention it deserves. Here, the institutionalization and formalization of e-participation platforms becomes crucial. Where there is a multiplicity of platforms, it is likely that the participatory instruments prioritized by decision-makers are those which are institutionalized in existing legislative and/or organizational routines, offer integration with formal policy-making processes and formally ensure the consideration and feedback by decision-makers.

## 2 FACTORS RELATED TO PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

### 2.1 Level of Participation

Digital democracy is fraught with many of the same pitfalls as traditional democratic discourse. Democratic deliberation and public participation in the policy process are not easily achieved. The impact of citizen participation on policy design depends on many general country-specific variables, such as the cultural-historical context, the development of democratic institutions and civil society; however, the more ‘technical’ administration and organization of e-participation platforms can also influence the level of participation. While different



e-participation initiatives have been set up to enhance the opportunities for citizen participation in the policy-making process, the *level* of participation on the inform-consult-involve-collaborate-empower continuum (see Nabatchi, 2012) has not been explicitly outlined within the objectives of the selected cases. On the contrary, the term ‘citizen participation’ has been handled in a rather abstract way by governments. However, the level of participation is a key characteristic of the quality of participation. Moreover, as Macintosh (2004) argues, e-enabling, e-engagement and e-empowering each require different technology.

The collaborative and empowerment modes of participation are the most difficult for governments to achieve (compared with informing or consulting), since they involve changing existing power dynamics, which is decidedly more complex (Reddick, 2011). This explains why the level of participation through e-participation channels has remained by and large at the same level as the practices of ‘traditional’ offline participation. Although online platforms have sometimes managed to increase the number of citizens participating in policy-making processes, the quality of participation, i.e. the degree of shared decision-making with citizens, has remained on a rather modest level with some positive exceptions (e.g. the Spanish case).

As long as the target of e-participation platforms is generic ‘participation’, it is likely that the participation level remains modest (‘inform’ or ‘consult’), meaning that the government’s ambition is predominantly to keep citizens informed, to listen to them and to acknowledge their concerns rather than truly involve them in decision-making. In these situations, the citizens have virtually no shared decision-making authority or it is only minimal, as is evident in the French, German and Lithuanian cases. In the Croatian, Scottish and Slovak cases, citizens are expected to consult on policies that exist instead of proposing topics themselves. In order to fully benefit from e-participation initiatives, there is a need to systematically target higher levels of participation: collaboration and empowerment which ensure that citizens’ recommendations are incorporated into the decisions, as is evident in the Spanish case. The different levels of participation need to be kept in mind as early as in the planning phase of the e-participation platform so that the technical solution and the entire organizational and process design can support the achievement of the ambition behind participation.

Another issue critical for the level of participation is related to the optimal threshold of collected votes necessary for the consideration of e-participation proposals by the government. The selected cases demonstrate a large variety of thresholds for votes, calculated according to different algorithms. In a few cases (e.g. Estonia, Spain), the threshold is set at a rather high level which is difficult for the citizens to achieve, resulting in a relatively small number of proposals qualifying for the government’s consideration. This may result in both initiators and supporters of a proposal feeling that it is ‘a waste of time’, which may lead to citizens giving up and ultimately abandoning the platform. For the effective functioning of e-participation platforms, it is necessary to carefully analyse alternative thresholds in order to find an optimal one.

## 2.2 Feedback

e-Participation assumes that information provision and the interactivity between the government and citizens enhances the overall transparency of decision-making. Transparency is not only an important target, but also a driver of e-participation (Wirtz et al., 2016). Citizens are keen on knowing about the impact of their contributions, the results of their public engage-

ment, the progress of approved projects or the cancellation of debates and proposals. It can also be argued that, especially when citizens do not get what they asked for, it is imperative that the decision-making process is at least as transparent as possible. Otherwise, any negative decision made about any initiative might be corrosive for trust not only for the specific e-participation platform but also for participatory democracy in general. The lack of transparency makes it difficult to legitimize e-participation initiatives and it could also negatively influence citizens' future participation in policy-making processes.

Based on the selected case studies, it appears to be a wide-spread problem that citizens who contribute their ideas to the policy process do not know how their input is being dealt with. While the Belgian, Estonian, Scottish and Swedish cases can be characterized by deliberative communication and/or written feedback, in several other cases (e.g. the Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Slovak cases, and in most participatory options in the Spanish case), the feedback is missing, very abstract or provided on an ad hoc basis. Macintosh (2004) suggests that an increased number of stakeholders in the policy-making process risks complicating the questions of who 'owns' the results and who is responsible for communicating them. The collected case studies confirm that the bigger the number of organizations/units involved in the policy-making process and in the administration of the e-participation platform, the more the responsibility for giving feedback is diffused among the variety of actors involved.

e-Participation practices have their strengths and weaknesses in this respect compared with traditional participation. On the one hand, the online element of participatory policy making makes it easier to disseminate information about the follow-up phase. For example, it is possible to feed back through the same online instrument where citizens' proposals are initiated or to create e-mail notifications about any changes or news about the policy process under way. On the other hand, as the interviewees in several cases claimed (e.g. Belgium, Estonia and Sweden), the political and administrative processes are complex and vary in their degree of formality, which makes it difficult to design a follow-up phase that would be both accurate and user friendly. Feedback is not only about the creation of a technical tool to monitor the success or failure of a proposal. After all, the policy-making process is neither rational nor linear, which complicates the feedback phase in both offline and online participatory practices. 'User-friendly' feedback does not necessarily mean that it should be too generic or too simple.

Interestingly, the case studies demonstrate that although feedback is a critical component of the participatory process, it was also possible to detect implementation gaps in the feedback process. This refers to situations where feedback was prescribed by formal regulations but was not followed in practice or feedback was provided on an ad hoc basis. Therefore, it is questionable whether further formalization would be sufficient in addressing the lacking or minimal feedback. It could be more related to leadership and organizational culture in following the rules on giving feedback. This is of particular importance when trying to create a climate of transparency, trust and creative interaction in the government–citizen relationship. Government agencies need to build organizational capacity to adequately answer questions, facilitate online discussions and provide professional feedback to citizens. Without such capacity, the idea of citizen participation and investments made into creating technical solutions may prove not only useless but also detrimental to participatory democracy.

### 2.3 Formalization

Formal regulations may sometimes generate constraints on e-government systems (Sarantis et al., 2010), but they also shape the general information society infrastructure and determine the conditions for democratic participation, including access to technology and information, the right to participate and safeguards for participants (Toots, 2019). The failure of the Hungarian national consultations is partly related to the poor formalization of the participatory process, resulting in missing identification procedures in addition to inadequate formal control and transparency. A high level of formalization through cementing the process of e-participation in legislation, lower-level regulations or the organization's standard operating procedures is expected to increase the throughput legitimacy and ensure the predictability and transparency of the participatory process. Formalization ensures that the way citizen proposals are formed and handled by the government is transparent and independent of the individual discretion of decision-makers. This can be contrasted with cases where procedurally non-binding petitions are forwarded to decision-makers, who may simply decide to ignore citizen input because no procedural rules exist to structure the entire participatory process. There are also other options between these two extremes of formalization, such as the development of softer recommendations (see e.g. the Belgian, German and Lithuanian cases), for example, 'good practice of participation', 'common consultation methodology', 'checklists' for handling citizen participation processes or guidelines for citizen participation in order to signal a certain predictability to citizens as well as to politicians and administrators.

The collected case studies indicate varying degrees of formalization of e-participatory processes. In cases with a high degree of formalization (e.g. on the Croatian, Estonian, Latvian and Spanish platforms), the rules and processes of e-participation have been made clear and transparent, and the consideration of citizen input is made mandatory for decision-makers. A low degree of formalization occurs, among others, in the Austrian, Czech, French, German and Lithuanian cases, which have left the consideration of citizens' input voluntary for decision-makers. In most cases, the input side of citizen participation (i.e. how citizens' proposals are formed and submitted to government) is formalized, whereas the output side of the participatory process (i.e. feedback) remains insufficiently formalized.

Formalization makes it possible to handle citizen proposals in a standardized way instead of relying on the enthusiasm of individual organizations, units or individuals, which, as the collected case studies show, often leads to the uneven adoption and quality of participatory processes. This is particularly important in cases where there is considerable distance between core administrators of the e-participation initiative and decision-makers (especially in cases like the German one, where issues of multilevel governance come into play). Formalization and standardization would facilitate a similar quality of participatory processes across organizations, units or teams. On some occasions (e.g. in the Estonian and Spanish cases), the degree of formalization of the participatory process has contributed to higher levels of participation on the inform-empower continuum. However, the formalization alone does not lead to citizen empowerment as seen in some cases (e.g. Croatia, Slovakia), where highly regulated practices have not led to higher levels of citizen engagement.

Finally, when considering the formalization of e-participation practices, the question of whether it would be more effective to design e-participatory processes separately from the existing organizational and decision-making processes or in an integrated way arises. Again,

cases differ in this regard. As e-participation platforms can mostly be considered novel instruments for most governments, it may happen that they are designed as ‘islands’ compared with the rest of the administrative organization. Although this may grant special attention to the e-participation platform in the inception phase, it may create artificial barriers to the functioning of the platforms in the longer term. It could be argued that the long-term sustainability of e-participation and its actual impact on the policy-making process would benefit from their integration and institutionalization into existing organizational structures, cultures and decision-making processes. Formalization of e-participation is instrumental for linking the e-participatory process to the existing institutional framework. Formalization and integration of e-participation in an organizational ‘routine’ could also form a basis for considering e-participation part of organizational (or national) strategic development and for allocating financial and human resources for its implementation.

### 3 FACTORS RELATED TO MANAGEMENT

#### 3.1 Leadership

Public-sector innovation and e-government literature emphasize the importance of individuals as innovation champions and change agents (Panopoulou et al., 2014; Toots, 2019). The case studies confirm that leadership and professional project management are essential components for success (that being evident e.g. in the Belgian, Estonian, French, Irish, Spanish and Swedish cases), especially on occasions where e-participation platforms are established bottom up or function in a less institutionalized environment. The leadership of e-participation initiatives presents two challenges. First, there is a need for change agents from within the organization to embrace and internally promote the e-participation platform. Transformational leaders are typically seen as catalysts of change as their inspirational motivation helps other employees see the potential benefits of citizen participation (Yang and Pandey, 2011). Transformational leaders motivate behaviour by changing their followers’ attitudes and assumptions (Burns, 1978), which is crucial for administering citizen participation because participatory governance often means doing things differently from the bureaucratic tradition.

Second, the case studies show that most e-participation platforms are administered through networks (see e.g. Belgian, Estonian and French case studies), which poses specific expectations for leaders. Collaborative networks have to be steered and managed in ways that influence their processes and outcomes without reverting too much to traditional forms of command and control, thus leaving room for collaborative innovation (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016). This implies that individuals involved in the administration of e-participation platforms should not hold on too much to their own tasks, instructions and priorities, but rather seek more convergence with their partners’ skills, tasks and expectations in the search for collaborative advantages. As much is expected from network leaders, it is important to remember that their demanding roles are best implemented in a supportive institutional context, providing network leaders with centrality, legitimacy, access to resources and organizational back-up (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016).

Transformational leaders who are also able to fulfil the demanding roles of network leaders are still rare in the public sector. The cases indicate that several managers have turned out passive and reactionary, evidenced by the uneven adoption of e-participation practices (e.g. in

the Czech, German and Lithuanian cases). Public managers also tend to avoid experimentation since governments' existing culture constitutes a safe environment which does not support innovation and risk-taking (Mergel, 2018). Moreover, participation is an inherently political process where managers often have limited room to manoeuvre. It is therefore crucial that public managers' values and attitudes towards citizen participation are positive, which is seen to be of key importance in e-participation uptake.

### 3.2 Political and Top Management Support

Political and top management support is frequently mentioned as a critical factor in information systems and e-government projects. However, for e-participation initiatives, strong backing by politicians and public-sector managers is particularly important (Panopoulou et al., 2014; Toots, 2019). Without trust and support from elected officials, decisions based on citizen input are likely to be delayed, and consensus and changes are less likely to occur; strong support from politicians also brings funding, agency stability and agency autonomy (Yang and Pandey, 2011). All collected case studies confirm the importance of support from politicians and administrative leaders. In some cases, political or administrative leaders themselves have stepped into the shoes of a change agent or a 'champion' (e.g. in the Belgian, Spanish and Swedish cases).

At the same time, in other cases, respondents indicate a shortage of resources for running the e-participation platform, thereby illustrating insufficient political and/or administrative commitment and support (as in the Czech, French and German cases). Support from the top is also an important aspect for ensuring the cross-boundary collaboration and management of networks involved in the administration of e-participation. Backing by the top levels provides the political will to get several organizations and units to work together, essentially breaking down the silos of government. Interest and active support from top leadership has been shown, in the collected cases, to improve coordination and ensure enough financial resources to develop and run the platform.

Although the importance of political and administrative support to e-participation initiatives is unquestionable, the case studies still reveal a great deal of ambivalence among politicians and public-sector managers towards engaging the public online. This is evidenced by the uneven uptake of e-participation by individual managers, limited feedback to citizens, shortage of human and financial resources and modest levels of participation in the inform-empower continuum. Although many public administration scholars conceptualize citizen involvement as occurring in the administrative process, it is crucial to note that any administrative decision is political and, therefore, so are any involvement efforts (Yang and Pandey, 2011). e-Democracy studies have outlined the existence of a 'middleman paradox' (Mahrer and Krimmer, 2005), where decision-makers responsible for democratic engagement tend to oppose citizen participation due to fears of redistribution of power and loss of status and control. This supports the conclusion of Kraemer and King (2006), who believe that digital transformation has not been able to change organizations because information technology tends to reinforce existing power relationships rather than change them.

Support from politicians and top management is essential not only for the establishment and 'take-off' of e-participation platforms but also for ensuring the stable institutionalized backing necessary for further development and progress in advancing online democracy (see

e.g. the Lithuanian case). Change agents need to be backed up by an actual willingness of the organization to hold a government–citizen dialogue. Elected official support is argued to lead to organizational stability, which also facilitates better participation outcomes (Yang and Pandey, 2009). Support from the top is particularly important in the cases where e-participation platforms have been established in a bottom-up mode (as in the Estonian, French and Latvian cases) and where the participatory processes are not sufficiently formalized (as in the German and Lithuanian cases). Moreover, in order to minimize the risk related to situations where supportive politicians and/or top managers leave and get replaced by less supportive successors, the formalization and institutionalization of participatory practices may be deemed necessary in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the platform under the potentially less favourable top leadership. As the Slovak case showed, the replacement of a political change agent who initiated the platform led to its gradual degradation, and the platform was rescued only because non-governmental actors were able to streamline its usage by citizens.

### **3.3 Promotion**

There is a need to actively promote digital deliberation opportunities to reach out to various groups of citizens. It is assumed that organizations seeking legitimacy want to proactively present the e-participation instrument to citizens. However, marketing of new and innovative initiatives is not often undertaken. Consequently, despite the public sector's progress in the adoption of e-participation, a slow response by citizens could derail citizen participation (Yang and Pandey, 2011). Some cases (e.g. Czech and German) in this book demonstrate that citizens are not fully aware of the opportunities that e-participation platforms offer, which is evidenced by rather low participation rates in some cases as well as critical responses from stakeholders. The visibility and public awareness of e-participation platforms is particularly problematic in cases which can be characterized by a considerable distance between the core units in charge of the platform and the decision-makers because distant decision-makers do not necessarily take ownership of the platform, which, in turn, complicates its promotion (e.g. the German case). In some cases (e.g. French and Slovak), there are non-governmental actors which actively promote e-participation and which have created parallel structures to ease the use of the government platform by citizens. Low participation rates combined with the low formalization of the participatory process may lead to a vicious cycle where the results of e-participation processes are not used by decision-makers because too few citizens participate.

The case studies indicate that there is a need for professional communication to promote e-participation platforms (for positive examples, see the Belgian, Scottish, Spanish and Swedish cases). This is of critical importance when e-participation platforms are launched, but the cases show that marketing needs to continue throughout the existence of the platform. The core unit has to have sufficient resources for organizing and running advertising campaigns, and collaboration with the organization's communication or marketing units may prove beneficial. In particular, promotion strategies should include materials for citizens concerning the availability of e-participation opportunities and broader benefits from participating in the policy-making process. Digital marketing may significantly reduce communication costs for public organizations.

Problems are related to the low awareness of e-participation among citizens as well as among politicians and civil servants. This seems to be more critical in cases where e-participa-

tion platforms are designed and administered in other organizations than those which actually use the results of the participatory processes (as in the Estonian, German and Latvian cases). When decision-makers are distant from the units running the e-participation platform, it is not surprising if their knowledge of the platform remains insufficient. Consequently, the longer the distance between the core unit in charge of the administration of the platform and the decision-makers, the more marketing instruments should be targeted towards politicians and civil servants.

Finally, in order to avoid failure due to unrealistic expectations towards digital engagement opportunities, it is vital to explicitly define the purpose and address the potential limitations of e-participation initiatives from the outset (see also Susha and Grönlund, 2014). This assumes the elaboration of the specific objectives of the e-participation platform, including the question of which level of participation is targeted on the inform-empower continuum. Before any communication on a specific e-participation platform starts, it would be smart to analyse what could be realistically achieved considering the financial and human resources allocated for the administration of the platform. For example, should citizens expect regular feedback or is this beyond government capacity? Moreover, the communication and marketing strategies should consider stakeholder multiplicity characteristic to e-participation initiatives. This adds pressure to the administrators of e-participation platforms as they are expected to satisfy the interests of a number of stakeholders (citizens, interest groups, civil servants, politicians) simultaneously.

### 3.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

e-Participation platforms are still relatively new instruments, and as the collected case studies show, there is a large variety of organizational and procedural approaches in their administration, showing no isomorphism or convergence of institutional designs. Therefore, it is expected that the development of e-participation practices is a living process grounded in continuous innovation, learning and adaptation. In order to enable organizational learning, it is vital to examine which positive and negative, expected and unexpected outcomes they produce, what challenges they face and how they respond to these challenges. As e-participation initiatives often have to cope with the constantly changing demands of stakeholders and changing political and societal contexts, a classical management approach would not suffice because of complicated and time-consuming change management processes. Scherer and Wimmer (2012) suggest an agile approach, as this allows for the rapid integration of changing requirements and better prioritization in the process.

The case studies show, however, that only a minority of administrators of e-participation initiatives collect performance information on a regular basis (see e.g. the Spanish and Swedish cases). In most cases, there are no specific performance indicators in place that can be related to ambiguous ownership and accountability relations. In several cases, the main indicator available is the raw number of participants (e.g. the Estonian and Scottish cases). In a few exceptional cases, regularly published public information is not even available on the proposals submitted through the e-participation platform and the number of participants (e.g. the German, Hungarian and Lithuanian cases). This may be caused by the concern that publicly visible performance information, especially if it is below expectations, could reduce citizens' confidence in the instrument and in turn their perception of the legitimacy of the

instrument. Consequently, citizens and the leaders of the e-participation initiatives alike have very limited access to information on the platforms, their actual performance and the underlying trends. In most cases, there is a lack of a proper system to evaluate the impact of e-participation initiatives on policy making. This forms a very poor basis for organizational learning and continuous innovation.

In addition to the use of basic performance information on the platforms, the administrators of e-participation projects could consider asking for feedback from citizens and other stakeholders on the *process* of e-participation and on the practical functioning of the platform. This has been done in a few cases (e.g. the Scottish), where the administrators have asked participants about their experience of the participatory process itself and used the platform as a channel for feedback. This way, the administrators can gain insight into the potential problems early on and can efficiently customize the platform to fit its purpose.

### 3.5 Resources

The case studies demonstrate that resource dependence is an important pre-condition for e-participation initiatives. By and large, most of the e-participation platforms presented in this book are rather lightweight in terms of financial and personnel resources. Several cases, especially those where the initiatives have been established bottom up (e.g. the Estonian, French and Latvian ones), indicate a shortage of financial resources for administering the platforms. It is not always clear who is responsible for covering the operational costs of the platform referring to the consequence of ambiguous ownership and unclear accountability relations. When the responsible units for the administration of e-participation initiatives and the decision-makers are distant from each other, financial resources can be allocated on an ad hoc basis, leading to potential capacity problems in administering the platforms. Such cases indicate that the shortage of funding may jeopardize the performance of e-participation platforms. For example, lack of resources may prevent the recruitment of extra staff or lead to insufficient attention being paid to certain functions, such as promotion of the platform, giving feedback to citizens or the regular monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the platform. Less institutionalized platforms (e.g. French, German, Lithuanian) are particularly endangered, as they are more dependent on (potentially unstable) political and top management support.

The presence of stable and sufficient financial resources is a determining factor for the recruitment of personnel for running e-participation initiatives. Capable and motivated people are indispensable in coordinating the joint policy-making process with citizens and the other units involved in the participatory process. The case studies show that the human resources necessary to coordinate the multiple actors, and to keep track of the policy process as it spreads out through political-administrative structures, are often underestimated. Some cases (e.g. the French, German, Lithuanian), where the responsibility for e-participation is given as an extra task to existing employees, have led to the modest adoption of e-participation opportunities. It is not only a matter of the quantity but also the quality of personnel. In a few cases, specific recruitment methods are used for hiring talented personnel (e.g. the Spanish case) and civil servants receive specifically targeted training in order to become more acquainted with the digital forms of citizen participation and the ways of showing a more open attitude towards citizen involvement (e.g. in the Lithuanian case).



As several examples (e.g. Spanish) show, the decision to allocate adequate resources for online engagement is, first of all, a matter of political will. During the planning phase, not many initiators of e-participation platforms undertake a thorough *ex ante* analysis of the expenditure necessary for the everyday operation of platforms and investments into their further development. Although political will is usually present during the establishment of the platform, it needs to be acknowledged that for e-participation platforms to be successful in the long run, they need to be backed by sufficient coverage of running costs and investments into their further development. It can be assumed that well-prepared and motivated governments which are ready to provide sufficient resources for the administration and further development of platforms are more likely to adopt e-participation and thereby receive more positive effects from online engagement activities.

### 3.6 Sustainability

Despite the recent flourishing of e-participation platforms at all levels of government (Medaglia, 2012), previous research shows that such initiatives have often failed to deliver the expected outcomes (Ostling, 2010; Prosser, 2012; Toots, 2019), mobilize users (Epstein et al., 2014) and fulfil the hopes of engaging the disengaged members of society (Karlsson, 2012; Lidén, 2013). This has led to their gradual demise or abandonment. Although there are a variety of context- and demand-related aspects behind the failure of e-participation initiatives, such as political rights and civil liberties, socio-economic and cultural factors, global trends and crises, the number of Internet users, the digital divide and the development of civil society, the supply-related factors behind sustainability cannot be underestimated.

The e-participation platforms presented in this book are still rather new initiatives, but a few of them refer to problems related to long-term sustainability even now. The concern for sustainability seems to be particularly relevant for those initiatives that were established bottom up, such as the Estonian and French platforms, as they are more dependent on resource constraints as well as unstable political support. Furthermore, in cases which are characterized by ambiguous ownership and unclear accountability relations, such as the German platform, it is often uncertain which organization or unit holds the ultimate responsibility for the performance and continuing usage of the e-participation platform. This has to do with the hybrid organizations often involved in the administration of e-participation platforms, as the case studies show. On the one hand, the hybrid organizations are praised for their ability to meet the needs of citizens more effectively than traditional public-sector or private-sector organizations with innovative approaches. On the other hand, there are also doubts about their actual durability. While these organizational forms are often seen to offer an innovative solution to community needs, it is also vital to engage in the 'risk management' of e-participation platforms.

The development of a long-term vision for a platform is necessary to ensure its sustainability and further improvement. The lack of such vision not only indicates limited interest in the performance of the e-participation platform by politicians and administrative leadership but also increases the risks of failure. The best strategy for reducing the risk of failure and ensuring the continuous development of the platform is to constantly scan the performance of the e-participation platform and its surrounding context by conducting regular evaluations, setting clear development goals and making adaptations according to the results of regular monitoring exercises. This not only builds flexibility and adaptability into the system by

Table 18.1 Critical factors related to management and organization of e-participation

Group of factors	Critical factor
Organizational design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ownership</li> <li>• Cross-boundary collaboration</li> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Competition</li> </ul>
Participatory process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of participation</li> <li>• Feedback</li> <li>• Formalization</li> </ul>
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Political and top management support</li> <li>• Promotion</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation</li> <li>• Resources</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> </ul>

design but also presupposes the presence of a clear ownership and accountability framework for the development of the e-participation platform backed by continuous political and top management support.

All in all, the collected case studies form an empirical basis for systematizing the organizational and managerial factors which have an impact on the practical implementation of e-participation practices. The empirical research allows us to distinguish between a number of organizational, process-related and managerial factors that should be considered by governments for the administration of e-participation initiatives (see Table 18.1).

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

This book shows that the impact of technology on policy making is strongly mediated by the institutional context that frames the ways the public sector interacts with citizens and other governmental and non-governmental units. After citizens use their voice, whether and how that voice affects the actual policy-making process depends on the characteristics of the organization, process and management. Institutional arrangements determine what information organizations seek, how they process the signals and how they act on their perceived reality. Thus, citizen involvement is embedded in existing institutional arrangements and constrained by political, administrative, organizational and procedural factors. If the participatory process is not carefully designed or implemented, it may delay decisions, increase conflict, disappoint participants and lead to more distrust (see also Yang and Pandey, 2011). Although most governments as well as academic studies assume that participatory instruments employed by governments genuinely seek to ensure public involvement in decision-making, in cases such as the Hungarian example in this book, e-participation can be used for partisan or hidden purposes, thereby eroding rather than enhancing democratic decision-making and the credibility

of citizen participation. Despite the positive connotation of the term 'digital democracy' and the high expectations policy makers have with regard to the potential of digital democracy tools, in reality, it takes a lot of time and effort and the adaptability of the governance systems to incorporate digital democracy processes into existing organizational, procedural and managerial routines.

The case studies in this book demonstrate that the organization of public administrations is an important determinant for the implementation of e-participation initiatives. The organizational set-up, process design, managerial quality and allocated resources play a crucial role in the collaborative efforts ensuring the functioning, continuous improvement and eventual sustainability of e-participation platforms. Multifaceted organizational structures and processes combined with the complexity of the surrounding societal and political context make e-participation systems prone to failure and require them to be managed as a process of learning and adaptation rather than as a static technological product. The case studies show that due to barriers in the institutional framework and relevant processes, e-participation systems may end up struggling with low demand and acceptance. There is a need to rethink how governments should be vertically and horizontally integrated in this era of fast-changing technology in order to constantly adapt the system to contextual changes.

This book also demonstrates that the understanding of citizen involvement should be practical, balanced and realistic so that we are able to build 'a theory that has much more practical value for public managers than either the pure enthusiasm of the proponents of public involvement or the scepticism of its critics' (Thomas, 1995, 30). The analysis of the European cases led to the development of a framework of critical factors for the organization and administration of e-participation initiatives. In order to achieve success in e-participation, these supply-related factors need to be complemented by other factors targeting democratic (demand-based) and technological variables. However, the supply-related success factors are the ones over which the government has direct influence. This volume has outlined the practical challenges faced by public administrations in the organization and management of e-participation platforms in order to provide a systematic framework for addressing them in the future. Such framework of organization- and management-related factors should be considered when establishing or further developing new or existing e-participation initiatives.

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# Index

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- '15M' movement (Spain) 155, 164
  
- Aarhus Convention 200
- accelerated legislation procedure (Slovakia) 8
- acceptance status of comments (Croatia) 92, 99, 100, 101–2
- accessibility
  - Scotland 29
  - Slovakia 72
- accountability 264–5, 273, 274, 275–6
  - Austria 227
  - Estonia 115
  - Ireland 197–8, 201–2, 203, 204
  - Scotland 30, 35
  - Slovakia 86
  - Sweden 167–8
- action plan phase (Czech Republic) 248, 251–2, 254
- Action Plan for Strengthening the Rule of Law in Slovakia in 2015 80
- active participation
  - Belgium 189
  - Slovakia 72
- Adenauer, K. 212
- Adhocracy software (Germany) 214
- Adler, O. 246
- administrative factors 4, 18, 271, 276
  - Belgium 181, 186–7
  - Croatia 97
  - Estonia 110
  - Germany 211–12, 221
  - Lithuania 138, 143–4
  - Slovakia 73
  - see also* politico-administrative context; public administration
- administrative units
  - Austria 233
  - Belgium 187
  - Germany 215–16, 221
- administrators 19
  - Germany 221
- adoption procedures 4
  - Croatia 96
  - Czech Republic 246
- advancement stage (Croatia) 95
- advertising measures (Germany) 221–2
- age restrictions 34
  - Sweden 169, 173, 176
- agenda setting
  - Austria 231, 236
  - France 46
  - Spain 156
  - Sweden 177
- Ahora Madrid (Spain) 155, 162
- Aichholzer, G. 19–20, 230, 239
- Aikins, S.K. 256
- Albright, M. 78
- Allhutter, D. 230, 239
- ambassadors (Czech Republic) 249
- analysis of management and organization of initiatives 11–23
  - description 15, 16
  - evaluation 19–20, 21, 22
  - individual factors 19, 22
  - national context 15–16, 17, 22
  - organizational factors 16–19, 22
  - overview of research design 11–14
- analytical framework and methodology *see under* specific countries
- anti-corruption policy (Croatia) 94, 98, 101
- Antonova, K. 131
- Arnstein, S. 72, 73
- artificial intelligence (Austria) 45, 54, 236–7
- austerity 27, 35, 124
- Austria: Digitale Agenda Wien (DAW) 13, 20, 225–39, 261, 269
  - analytical framework and methodology 226–8, 231, 236
  - description 231–3
  - discussion and lessons learned 237–9
  - evaluation 234–7
    - information provision 234–5
    - performance indicators 235–6
    - policy impacts 236–7
    - stakeholder engagement 234
    - transparency 235
  - national context overview 228–30, 232
  - organizational characteristics 233–4
- authentication (Czech Republic) 255, 257

- authority 263, 265  
 awareness of e-participation, low 272–3
- background information (Belgium) 186  
 backsliding democracies 57, 58  
 Barber, B. 172  
 barriers 4, 15, 16, 260, 262–3, 270, 277  
   Austria 231, 234, 239  
   Belgium 186, 192–3  
   Croatia 92  
   Czech Republic 256  
   France 41, 45, 46, 47, 49  
   Germany 210–211  
   Latvia 121, 131  
   Lithuania 136–8  
   Scotland 34  
   Slovakia 73, 77, 84, 87  
   Spain 152, 163  
   Sweden 168  
   *see also* Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP)
- Belgium: *Leuven, co-create it* (LMHM) 13, 20, 180–193, 262, 264, 266, 268–72  
 analytical framework and methodology 181–3  
 description 184–6  
   ambitions for 2020–25 185  
   chronology and phases 184–6  
   e-participation platform 186  
   goals and scope 184  
 discussion and lessons learned 192–3  
 evaluation 181–2, 185–6, 188–92  
   active participation 189  
   democratic legitimacy 190  
   ideas included in strategic multi-annual plan 191  
   policy formulation and external collaboration 191–2  
   transparency 190  
 national context overview 181, 183–4  
 organizational characteristics 186–9  
   financial resources 188–9  
   formal and informal partners 187  
   human resources 188  
   internal collaboration 187–8  
   ownership and administration 186–7  
   results 189
- binding regulation (Estonia) 113  
 Binkowska, B. 226  
 Blaus, K. 124  
 Borman, M. 14, 105  
 bottom-up approach 262, 265, 266, 270, 272, 274, 275  
   Austria 230  
   Belgium 192  
   Czech Republic 257  
   Estonia 104, 107, 114  
   France 40  
   Lithuania 138  
   Scotland 28, 30
- Bovens, M. 167  
 brainstorming (Austria) 231  
 Brno participatory initiatives *see* Czech Republic:  
   Brno participatory initiatives
- Buckwalter, N.D. 102  
 budgeting and finance 18  
   Belgium 188–9  
   Estonia 111  
   Germany 214, 216  
   Spain 157  
   Sweden 171, 175, 177  
   *see also* participatory budgeting; resources
- 'Building Ireland's First Digital City' Strategy 203–4
- c-based (Austria) 233, 238  
 Carmena, M. 159  
 Chadwick, A. 121  
 challenges of e-participation 1–6  
 change agents (Germany) 210, 219–20  
 characteristics of project 14  
   Belgium 181  
   Germany 210
- Christie Commission 26, 30, 35  
 chronology of establishment 16  
   Belgium 181, 184–6
- citizen dialogues (Sweden) 169  
 citizen initiatives  
   Belgium 182  
   Estonia 110, 112  
   Germany 212  
   Latvia 120, 122, 124–5, 125, 126–33  
   Sweden 169
- Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area (Spain) 157, 158–9  
*Citizen Space* (Scotland) 30–31, 32, 35, 202  
 CitizenLab (Belgium) 182, 187, 190  
 CitizenOS app (Estonia) 110  
 'City Ecosystem' (Czech Republic) 249  
 Civic Tech Sweden 169  
 civil liberties and political rights (Sweden) 168  
 civil society 15, 17  
   Lithuania 138, 141  
   Slovakia 87–8  
   Sweden 168
- civil society organizations (CSOs) 12  
   Estonia 116  
   France 45, 50

- Ireland 202
- Latvia 122, 128–9, 132
- Slovakia 78
- Sweden 168
- CiviQ (Ireland) 196–7, 199, 202, 203–4, 205, 206
- Civitta (Lithuania) 139, 141–2, 143
- Clonburris (Ireland) 204
- co-creation efforts (Belgium) 187, 191
- coal energy dependency exit strategy (Estonia) 109, 110
- Cobb, R. 5
- Code of Practice in Public Consultations (Croatia) 95
- collaboration 1, 4–6, 11–12, 14–15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 260–261, 263–5, 267, 270–272, 276
  - Austria 227, 236, 238
  - Belgium 180–182, 184–5, 187–8, 191–3
  - Croatia 96, 101
  - Czech Republic 244
  - Estonia 115, 117
  - France 40, 44
  - Germany 210, 216, 219, 221
  - Hungary 57, 65–6
  - international 162
  - Ireland 196–7, 202–4, 206
  - Latvia 121, 128, 132
  - Lithuania 138, 141, 144
  - Scotland 6–30, 32–3
  - Slovakia 72
  - Spain 152, 154, 156–8, 161–2
  - see also* external collaboration; internal collaboration
- collective addresses
  - Estonia 108, 110
  - Latvia 124, 133
- collective comment (Slovakia) 78
- Common Case Study Protocol 15
- communication 268, 272
  - Belgium 190, 192–3
  - Ireland 203
  - see also* e-communication (Czech Republic)
- communication unit (Belgium) 187
- communicator (Sweden) 171–2
- competition among participatory instruments 265–6
- compliance with existing organizational processes 18
- composition of users (Germany) 217
- Consul (Spain) 152, 156
- consultation
  - Czech Republic 248
  - France 44
  - Ireland 201, 203
  - Lithuania 148
  - Scotland 34
  - Slovakia 72
  - see also* e-consultation
- content editor (Latvia) 129
- content management systems (Czech Republic) 254
- content manager (Latvia) 133
- content requirements (Latvia) 120
- contextual factors 261
  - Belgium 181, 193
  - Croatia 92–3, 101
  - Estonia 104, 105
  - Ireland 198
  - Latvia 121, 133
  - Slovakia 73
  - Spain 154
- coordinating unit (Czech Republic) 251, 253–4
- coordination issues 262
- coordinator
  - Czech Republic 250–251, 255
  - Sweden 171–2, 173, 174, 175, 176
- core administrators 262–3, 269
- core units 262–4, 272–3
- cost efficiency
  - Germany 221
  - Slovakia 72
- ‘Create Lithuania’ 139, 143, 145
- Creighton, J.L. 261
- critical factors 15, 22, 261, 276, 277
  - Belgium 181, 193
- Croatia: e-Consultations 13, 20, 91–103, 261, 262, 264, 267, 269
  - analytical framework and methodology 91–3
  - description 95–6
  - discussion and lessons learned 101–3
  - drivers 92
  - evaluation 95, 99–101
  - national context overview 93–4
  - organizational characteristics 96–8
- cross-partisan initiative (France) 47
- crowdsourcing platform *see* Latvia: *MyVoice*
- CSO Digidem Lab 169
- cultural factors 34
  - Germany 211
- cultural-historical contexts 15, 17
  - Estonia 106
  - Lithuania 140
- Czech Republic: Brno participatory initiatives 13, 20, 244–57, 261, 264, 266, 268–9, 271–2
  - analytical framework and methodology 245–7
  - description 248–9
  - Brno 2050 Project 248–50
  - participatory budgeting project 249



- discussion and lessons learned 255–7
  - evaluation 251–6
    - Bruno 2050 Project 244, 251–4, 257
    - participatory budgeting project 244–5, 248, 250, 254–5, 256–7
  - information and communications technology (ICT) 244–8, 251–7
  - national context overview 247–8
  - organizational characteristics 249–51
- Daiser, P. 226
- database of consulting organizations (DataKO) (Czech Republic) 247–8
- Dawes, S.S. 12
- Dean, R.J. 105
- debates 268
  - France 45
  - Spain 155, 159–62, 163–4
- Decide Madrid* *see* Spain: *Decide Madrid*
- decision-making processes 2, 262, 264, 273
  - Belgium 181, 186, 193
  - Czech Republic 246
  - Germany 210, 220
  - Sweden 166*see also* decision-making (Ireland)
- Delib (Scotland) 28, 30–31, 32, 202
- deliberation on citizen input (Sweden) 167
- deliberation (Ireland) 203
- deliberative democracy 2
  - Ireland 196, 198, 202
- Delna (Latvia) 122
- demand groups (Austria) 227
- demand-side perspective 3, 277
  - Croatia 92
  - Czech Republic 245
  - France 40–41
- democracy
  - deliberative 2, 196, 198, 202
  - digital 197, 277
  - direct 57, 104, 162
  - discursive 198
  - see also* e-democracy; participatory democracy; representative democracy
- democratic deficit 1
- democratic governance (Lithuania) 136
- democratic innovation 3
- democratic legitimacy 21
  - Belgium 182, 190, 192
  - Estonia 112
  - France 50, 51
  - Germany 210, 212
  - Hungary 66
  - Latvia 121, 131
  - Lithuania 148
  - Spain 154, 159–60
  - Sweden 166
- democratic participation
  - Slovakia 72
  - Sweden 168
- democratic perspective 14
  - Croatia 102
  - Scotland 29
  - Spain 154
- Deschouwer, K. 183
- description 15, 16
  - see also under* specific countries
- design of processes 15
- development phase
  - Croatia 95
  - Germany 214
- ‘dialogue evenings’ (Belgium) 191, 192
- diffusion stages (Czech Republic) 246–7
- digital culture (Estonia) 113
- digital defect management system (Germany) 212–13
- digital democracy 277
  - Ireland 197
- digital divide 3
  - Lithuania 141
  - Scotland 27
  - Spain 163
- Digital Economy and Society Index 122
- digital governance 17
  - Estonia 107
  - Germany 212–13
  - Lithuania 138, 141
- digital identification system (Estonia) 107, 108, 113–14
- digital platform 64, 196, 204
- Digital Roadmap Austria 225, 230
- digital solutions (Estonia) 113
- ‘Digitale Agenda Vienne 2025’ 236, 237
- Digitale Agenda Wien (DAW) *see* Austria: Digitale Agenda Wien (DAW)
- digitalization 16
  - Croatia 91
  - Ireland 197
  - Sweden 168
- direct democracy 57
  - Estonia 104
  - Spain 162
- discursive democracy (Ireland) 198
- discussion and lessons learned *see under* specific countries
- discuto.io (Austria) 233, 237, 238–9
- distribution of projects (Germany) 218
- domain experts (Belgium) 187
- domain models (Germany) 210

- drivers 4, 15
  - Austria 227, 229, 238
  - Croatia 91–2
  - France 41, 45, 46, 47
  - Germany 210
  - Latvia 121
  - Lithuania 136–7
  - see also in particular* Scotland: *We asked, you said, we did*; Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP)
- Dryzek, J.S. 202
- due process (Spain) 163
- Dunleavy, P. 27
- Dzurinda government 78
- E-Citizen platform *see* Lithuania: E-Citizen platform
- e-Citizens (Croatia) 96
- e-Citizens service portal (Croatia) 94
- e-communication (Czech Republic) 254
- e-consultation
  - Czech Republic 248
  - Ireland 196, 198, 202, 206
  - see also* Croatia: e-Consultations
- e-Consultations Portal (GOCS) (Croatia) 93, 94, 99
- e-decision-making (Ireland) 196, 198, 207
- e-democracy 271
  - Czech Republic 256
  - Estonia 104
  - France 41
  - Ireland 200
  - Latvia 121, 122, 133
  - Lithuania 136–7, 139, 140, 141, 142
  - Sweden 171
- editorial team (Austria) 233, 236
- Eelnõude Infosüsteem (EIS) (Estonia) 107, 108
- e-empowerment 27, 73, 267
  - Slovakia 86
- e-enabling 27, 73, 267
  - Slovakia 86–7
- e-engagement 27, 73, 267
  - Austria 230
  - Slovakia 86–7
- e-Estonia infrastructure 106–7
- effectiveness 1
  - Austria 226
  - Belgium 181
  - Croatia 92
  - Czech Republic
  - France 44
  - Germany 212
  - Latvia 129
  - Lithuania 137, 141, 146–8
  - Slovakia 72, 74, 84
  - Spain 164
  - Sweden 166–7
  - see also in particular* Scotland: *We asked, you said, we did*
- efficiency 1, 27
  - Belgium 181
  - Germany 212, 221
  - Hungary 56
  - Ireland 197, 199, 201–2, 206
  - Slovakia 72–3, 74–5, 81–4, 85, 86–8
- e-government 269, 270
  - Austria 229
  - Belgium 181
  - Croatia 101
  - Czech Republic 246, 247
  - Estonia 104, 107, 117
  - Germany 210, 212
  - Ireland 196, 197–8, 201
  - Latvia 122
  - Spain 154
  - Sweden 168
- e-Government Action Plan 2016–2020 (EU) 230
- e-information
  - Ireland 196, 198
  - Latvia 122
- e-initiatives (Sweden) 169
- EIS portal (Estonia) 114–15
- Electronic Public Administration Operational Programme (2007–2013) (Hungary) 59
- employees (Estonia) 111
- empowerment 267
  - Austria 227
  - Croatia 92–3, 102
  - Czech Republic 244
  - Slovakia 85–6
  - see also* e-empowerment; Lithuania: E-Citizen platform; inform-empower continuum
- enabling *see* e-enabling
- engagement *see* e-engagement
- environmental initiatives (Estonia) 109, 110
- e-Participation Framework (Ireland) 198
- e-participation opportunities, increase in (Croatia) 99, 100
- e-petitions
  - Estonia 114
  - Sweden 169
- e-planning (Ireland) 206
- e-platform 72–3, 74, 76, 80, 83, 87
- e-portals (Czech Republic) 248
- e-proposals (Sweden) 169
- Erts, J. 124
- e-services

- Germany 212
- Latvia 122
- e-signing (Estonia) 113–14
- establishment stage (Croatia) 95
- Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP) 13, 20, 104–17, 262–70, 272–5
  - analytical background and methodology 105–6
  - description 108–10
  - discussion 113–17
    - barriers 104–5, 113–16
    - drivers 113–14, 116
    - lessons learned 116–17
  - drivers 104–5, 113–16
  - evaluation 111–13
    - democratic legitimacy 112
    - policy making, influence on 112–13
    - transparency 112
  - individual level 116
  - institutionalization 106–7, 112, 116–17
  - national context overview 105–8, 116
  - organizational characteristics 110–111, 116
- 'Estonian paradox' 104, 117
- Etherpad (Estonia) 109
- European Social Fund (ESF) 143–4, 250
- European Union 57, 59, 77, 78, 225, 248
- European Union DESI Index 94
- European Union e-government benchmark report 122
- European Union financial support for e-democracy (Lithuania) 136
- Europeanization (Croatia) 91–4, 98, 101
- evaluation 19–20, 21, 22, 261, 273–5
  - see also under* specific countries
- evolution of platforms 4
- e-voting
  - Estonia 104, 107, 113, 117
  - Ireland 202
- executive level (Slovakia) 71
- executive report (Ireland) 205
- expertise (Austria) 227
- explanatory approach 11
  - Estonia 105
- exploratory approach 11
  - Estonia 105
- external collaboration
  - Belgium 5, 181, 182, 191–2
  - Latvia 121, 132
  - Scotland 26
  - Slovakia 78
  - Spain 154, 161–2
- external push factors (Slovakia) 73
- external stakeholders 3
  - Belgium 184, 193
- extra-organizational factors 263
- failures 14, 21, 277
  - Germany 210
- FastLane Digital Innovation (Austria) 236
- feedback 266, 267–8, 273, 274
  - Austria 227, 234, 237
  - Belgium 185, 186, 188–9, 190, 193
  - Czech Republic 247, 250, 257
  - Estonia 115, 116
  - Ireland 202, 203
  - Spain 163
  - Sweden 170–171, 174–5
- feelings maps (Czech Republic) 251
- Feeney, M.K. 246
- Fidesz 56, 57, 58–60, 65, 66
- fields of action (Austria) 233
- filtering (Latvia) 126, 133
- financial independence (Latvia) 129, 133
- Finland 225
- flagship projects (Austria) 235–6, 237
- follow-up phase 268
  - Estonia 111, 112, 116
- Følstad, A. 245
- forced co-editing mode (Estonia) 109
- formal authority 19, 262, 264
- formal ownership 18
  - Belgium 187
  - Lithuania 143
- formalization 262, 266, 269–70, 272
- forms of e-participation (Austria) 227
- forwarding initiative to competent institution (Estonia) 109
- fragmentation within e-participation 2–3
- France: *Parlement & Citoyens* 13, 20, 40–51, 54–5, 262–72, 274–5
  - analytical background and methodology 41–2
  - barriers 46
  - consultations conducted 54–5
  - description 44–5
  - discussion and lessons learned 50–51
  - drivers 46
  - evaluation 49–50
  - organizational characteristics 45–9
    - citizens' participation 48
    - impact on policy design 49
    - parliamentarian involvement 46–7
  - overview of national context 42–4
- From Heart to Latvia 123
- functional review (Slovakia) 78
- Fung, A. 1
- gender balance (Sweden) 173, 176

- geographic representativeness (Sweden) 173, 176  
 German Index of Digitalization 212  
 Germany: *meinBerlin* 13, 20, 209–22, 225, 262–4, 267–9, 271–5  
   analytical background and methodology 210–211  
   description 213–15  
   discussion and lessons learned 220–222  
   evaluation 215–16, 217–20  
     change agents 219–20  
     distribution of projects 218  
     input legitimacy 217  
     organizational complexity 219  
     organizational factors 219–20  
     political support 220  
     promotion 220  
     regulations and policies 220  
     throughput and output legitimacy 217–19  
   national context overview 211–13  
     administrative structure and modernization 211–12  
     digital governance 212–13  
     political culture and participation 212  
   organizational-level factors 211, 215–16, 217, 219–20  
 goals and scope 16  
   Belgium 181, 184  
   Slovakia 73  
 GOCS (Croatia) 95, 97, 98, 101  
 Gothenburg Proposal *see* Sweden: Gothenburg Proposal  
 ‘government windows’ or one-stop shops 59  
 Grönlund, A. 256  
 ‘Ground-breaking Leuven’ memorandum (Belgium) 185  
 guarantors (Czech Republic) 249, 250, 251–2, 254, 256, 257  
 holistic approach 11  
   Estonia 113  
   Slovakia 84  
 Hot Bills (Latvia) 122  
 Housing First Lab Leuven (Belgium) 189  
 Huemer, U. 228, 231, 233  
 human resources 18  
   Belgium 181, 188  
   Estonia 116  
   Spain 157–8  
 Hungary: National Consultations 13, 20, 56–66, 260–261, 268, 269, 273, 276  
   analytical background and methodology 56–8  
   characteristics 60  
   description and online component 59–63  
   discussion and lessons learned 65–6  
   evaluation 64–5  
   national context overview 58–9, 65  
   organizational characteristics 63–4  
   Protection of the Family National Consultation 59, 60, 61–3  
   Soros Plan National Consultation 59–65  
   hybrid organizations 190, 192–3, 275  
 Iceland: Better Reykjavik 155  
 ICO (Croatia) 94, 95, 97, 98, 101  
 ideation (Austria) 231, 233  
 immaturity of e-participation 2–3  
 impact  
   Austria 231, 236–7  
   France 49  
   Ireland 203  
   Lithuania 139, 148  
   Scotland 35  
   Sweden 167  
   *see also* regulatory impact assessment  
 implementation 1, 3–6, 11, 14, 16, 19, 260–263, 268, 270, 276–7  
   Austria 225, 227, 229, 233, 236–7  
   Belgium 181, 184–5, 188, 192–3  
   Croatia 91–3, 95–8, 100, 101–2  
   Czech Republic 244, 246, 248, 256  
   Estonia 105  
   Germany 209–10, 213–15, 217, 219–21  
   Hungary 59, 63  
   Ireland 196–8, 200–202  
   Latvia 123  
   Lithuania 136–8, 142–4, 148  
   Scotland 28, 31, 36  
   Slovakia 72–3  
   Spain 157–8, 162–3  
   Sweden 16–17, 172, 175–7  
 inception phase 270  
 inclusiveness  
   Croatia 101  
   Ireland 200, 201, 207  
   Sweden 166, 168, 172, 175  
 Incoma (Spain) 159  
 incubation period (Estonia) 109  
 Indecon International (Ireland) 201  
 individual-level factors 5, 19, 22, 270  
   Belgium 181, 192, 193  
   Croatia 102  
   Czech Republic 247, 256  
   Estonia 105, 106, 113, 116  
   Hungary 65  
   Ireland 198  
   Latvia 121, 128, 133

- Lithuania 137, 139
- Spain 154, 158–9
- influence on collaboration with external stakeholders 21
- influence on policy design 21
- influence on policy making (Estonia) 111, 112–13
- influential and capable leaders 19
- inform-empower continuum 269, 271, 273
- informal actors 12, 19
  - Belgium 187
  - Latvia 133
- information
  - Austria 237
  - Belgium 193
  - Slovakia 72
  - see also* e-information
- information and communications technology (ICT) 1, 4, 14, 17
  - Austria 227, 233
  - Belgium 180–181
  - Estonia 104
  - Germany 209–10, 219
  - Hungary 56
  - Ireland 197, 198, 200
  - Latvia 121, 133
  - Lithuania 136, 138
  - Scotland 27–8
  - Slovakia 71–3, 74, 77–8, 83–5, 88
  - Spain 152, 154, 162–3
  - see also* Czech Republic: Brno participatory initiatives
- information officer (Croatia) 97
- information provision
  - Austria 227, 234–5, 237
  - Latvia 133
  - Spain 163
- information reliability (Slovakia) 82
- Inglehart's post-material and material value scale 131
- initiation process (Germany) 214
- innovation 260
  - Ireland 199
- input legitimacy 166, 167, 172–3, 175, 177
  - Estonia 117
  - Germany 210, 217
- inside initiatives 5
- institutional factors 5, 23, 261
  - Estonia 105, 115
  - France 40–41, 50
  - Ireland 198
  - Latvia 121
  - Sweden 172
- institutional theory (Spain) 153
- institutionalization 4, 12, 15, 19, 263, 266, 270, 272
  - Czech Republic 246
  - Lithuania 143, 147
  - see also* Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal (ECIP)
- Integrated Strategic e-Participation Framework (Austria) 226, 237
- intensity of collaboration 5
- intentions (Sweden) 175–6
- interaction-rich design (France) 48
- internal collaboration 18
  - Belgium 181, 187–8, 192, 193
  - Spain 158
- internal organization (Austria) 239
- International Association of Public Participation: Spectrum of Public Participation 227
- international collaboration (Spain) 162
- inter-organizational factors 263
  - Croatia 97
- intra-organizational factors 263
- Ireland: OpenConsult 13, 20, 196–207, 262, 266, 270
  - analytical framework and methodology 197–9
  - description 202–3
  - discussion and lessons learned 206–7
  - evaluation 205–6
  - national context overview 199–202
  - organizational characteristics 203–5
- IT strategy (Austria) 230
- Jacquet, V. 41
- Janssen, M. 3, 14, 105
- JASPI platform (Slovakia) 78, 79, 80
- Jho, W. 121
- King, J.L. 271
- Kitsing, M. 107
- Kraemer, K.L. 271
- Krane, D. 256
- Krippendorff, K. 228
- language
  - Belgium 186, 190
  - Sweden 173, 174, 176
- large-N surveys 4, 14
- Latvia: *MyVoice* 13, 20, 120–133, 262–5, 269, 272–4
  - analytical framework and methodology 121–2
  - background, aims and scope 124–8
  - citizen initiatives 124–5
  - collection of citizen signatures 127

- key performance indicators 125
- legal framework 125–6
- quality test for submitted initiatives 126–7
- submission to parliament 127–8
- description 124–8
- discussion and lessons learned 133
- evaluation 130–132
  - democratic legitimacy 131
  - performance indicators 130
  - policy design and external collaboration 132
  - transparency 131–2
- national context overview 122–4
- organizational characteristics 128–9
  - financial independence 129
  - leadership and individual characteristics 128
  - organizational processes and collaboration 128–9
- Latvija.lv (Latvia) 123
- law-making
  - Croatia 91, 94–5, 101
  - Estonia 112
  - France 40, 43–6, 51
  - Latvia 121
  - Lithuania 146–7
  - see also in particular* Slovakia:
    - Slov-Lex
- leadership 128, 261, 270–271
  - Lithuania 139, 144–5
  - Spain 158–9
- legal factors 16
  - Belgium 181
  - Croatia 92
  - Estonia 114
  - Latvia 125–6
  - Lithuania 140
  - Spain 156
  - Sweden 175
- Legal Information Portal (LIP) (Slovakia) 78, 79, 80
- legislative context 17
- legitimacy 262–3, 264, 272, 273
  - Belgium 180, 192
  - Croatia 101
  - Estonia 111
  - France 44, 46
  - Germany 221
  - Ireland 197
  - Latvia 132
  - Spain 163–4
  - see also* democratic legitimacy; input legitimacy; output legitimacy; Sweden: Gothenburg Proposal; throughput legitimacy
- Lemaire, A. 51
- Leo, H. 228
- lesson-drawing 17
- Leuven 2030 (Belgium) 190
- Leuven, co-create it* (LMHM) *see* Belgium: *Leuven, co-create it* (LMHM)
- Lev-On, A. 246
- liberal democratic values 72
- Lieberherr, E. 172
- limitations 260, 272–3
- Liquid Democracy (Germany) 214, 215–16
- Lithuania: E-Citizen platform 13, 20, 136–49, 262, 264, 267–9, 271–4
  - analytical background and methodology 137–9
    - individual level 139
    - methodology 139
    - national level 137–8
    - organizational level 138
  - description 141–3
  - discussion 147–8
  - evaluation 145–7, 148–9
    - impact 147
    - outcome 146
    - output 145–6
  - lessons learned 148–9
  - national context overview 140–141
    - civil society 141
    - cultural-historical context 140
    - digital governance 141
    - policy and legal context 140
    - politico-administrative context 140
  - organizational characteristics 143–5
    - administration and resources 143–4
    - formal ownership 143
    - leaders, presence and role of 144–5
    - organizational culture 144
    - partnerships 143
- LMHM working group (Belgium) 186, 187, 189, 191, 192, 193
- Local Digital Strategies (Ireland) 201
- local level 260
  - Austria 230
  - Belgium 181, 192
  - Czech Republic 247, 248
  - Ireland 198, 200–201, 202, 203, 204
  - see also* Sweden: Gothenburg Proposal
- Lüders, M. 245
- Lydén, S. 171–2, 174

- Macintosh, A. 14, 27, 73, 267, 268
- macro-level factors  
 Czech Republic 247  
 Lithuania 136
- management and organization of e-participation  
 15, 20, 22, 260–277
- management factors 270–276  
 leadership 270–271  
 monitoring and evaluation 273–4  
 organizational design 276  
 participatory process 276  
 political and top management support  
 271–2  
 promotion 272–3  
 resources 274–5  
 sustainability 275–6
- organizational design 261–6  
 accountability 264–5  
 competition among participatory  
 instruments 265–6  
 cross-boundary collaboration 263–4  
 ownership 261–3
- participatory process 266–70  
 feedback 267–8  
 formalization 269–70  
 participation, level of 266–7
- Margetts, H. 27
- mass surveillance (Hungary) 57
- Mečiar regime 78
- Medialab Prado (Spain) 158
- medium-term strategies (Lithuania) 140
- ‘Mein Grätzl’ (Austria) 236, 237
- meinBerlin* see Germany: *meinBerlin*
- ‘Meine Amtswege’ app (Austria) 237
- meinparlament.at (Austria) 230
- Mergel, I. 263
- meso-level factors  
 Czech Republic 246–7  
 Lithuania 136
- micro-level factors  
 Czech Republic 246, 256  
 Lithuania 136
- ‘middleman paradox’ 210, 271
- moderation  
 Germany 215–16  
 Ireland 205
- moderation team (Ireland) 205
- moderator rights (Austria) 235
- moderators (Sweden) 170
- modernization (Germany) 211–12
- monitoring 273–4  
 Austria 231, 236  
 Spain 156
- ‘More Citizen Engagement’ (Ireland) 201
- motivational factors (Czech Republic) 257
- multi-annual strategic plan (Belgium) 193
- multilevel governance 262, 269
- ‘My Government’ webpage of Office of the  
 Government (Lithuania) 136, 142
- ‘MyPoint’ by Limerick City and County Council  
 (LCCC) (Ireland) 203–5
- MyVoice* see Latvia: *MyVoice*
- Naranjo-Zolotov, N. 244
- National Consultations see Hungary: National  
 Consultations
- national context 15–16, 17, 22  
 see also under specific countries
- National Development Strategy Lithuania 2030  
 140
- National Digital Research Centre Launchpad 7  
 programme (Ireland) 203
- National Digital Strategy for Ireland* 200
- national indicators (economic, social and  
 environmental) 29
- national-level factors 5, 260  
 Austria 230  
 Belgium 181  
 Croatia 102  
 Czech Republic 247, 248  
 Estonia 113, 115, 116  
 France 40  
 Ireland 198  
 Lithuania 137–8, 139, 147
- Neighbourhood e-Hubs (Belgium) 192
- neighbourhood-oriented services unit (Belgium)  
 184, 187–8
- networked individualism (Spain) 153–4
- Neues Steuerungsmodell* (NSM) (Germany)  
 211–12
- New Public Management (NPM) 72, 197
- normative bias 2, 5  
 Estonia 105  
 Hungary 57
- normative theory 4
- Norris, D.F. 11, 245
- Norway 245
- number of contributions received (Germany) 217
- number of internet users 14
- objective information (Austria) 227
- objective and non-ideological approach (France)  
 46
- obligatory dispute procedure (Slovakia) 78
- offline-online (hybrid) approach (Belgium) 190,  
 192–3
- Oliveira, T. 244

- 'one-stop participation portal' *see* Germany: *meinBerlin*
- Open Data Maturity Report (Latvia) 122
- open government 1, 3
  - Croatia 94, 101
  - Scotland 29, 35
  - Slovakia 86
- Open Government Initiative
  - Lithuania 141, 143–4
  - Slovakia 80
- Open Government Partnership (OGP)
  - Croatia 94, 95, 97–8, 101
  - Estonia 110
  - France 40, 43
  - Ireland 199
  - Lithuania 136, 141, 143
  - Scotland 30
  - Spain 154
- OpenConsult *see* Ireland: OpenConsult
- OpenInsights (Ireland) 203–4
- openness 260
  - Austria 225, 235, 238
  - Croatia 91, 94, 101
  - France 44
  - Germany 212–13
  - Ireland 199–200, 201–2, 207
  - Latvia 133
  - Lithuania 137
  - Slovakia 72
  - Sweden 167–8, 171, 177
- operating environment 14
  - Estonia 105
- operational level (Belgium) 192
- operational management 264
- opportunity costs (Germany) 221
- Orban, V. 58
- organization *see* management and organization of e-participation
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 57, 72, 73, 99, 141, 201
- organizational characteristics *see under* specific countries
- organizational complexity (Germany) 210, 219
- organizational culture 4, 18
  - Czech Republic 246, 256
  - Lithuania 138, 144
  - Spain 163
- organizational design 14–16, 22, 261–6, 276
  - Estonia 106, 110, 114, 117
- organizational set-up 277
- organizational support 264
- organizational-level factors 5, 15, 16–19, 22, 276
  - Belgium 181, 192, 193
  - Croatia 92, 102
  - Czech Republic 247
  - Estonia 105, 106, 113–14, 116
  - France 41
  - Ireland 198
  - Latvia 121, 128–9, 133
  - Lithuania 137, 138, 139, 147
  - Spain 154
  - see also* Germany: *meinBerlin*
- organizing of ideas and document drafting (Austria) 231
- Osale.ee (Estonia) 107, 108, 114–15
- 'Our Balbriggan' (Ireland) 204
- 'Our Shared Future' (Ireland) 201
- outcomes
  - Lithuania 139
  - Sweden 167
- output legitimacy 166–7, 172, 175–7
  - Germany 210, 217–19
- outputs
  - Lithuania 139
  - Sweden 172
- overall participation, increase in (Austria) 227
- oversight forums (Sweden) 174–5, 176
- overview of research design 11–14
- ownership 261–3, 273, 274–5
  - Belgium 181, 186–7
  - Estonia 110, 115
  - Lithuania 138
  - see also* formal ownership
- PACE (Austria) 236, 237
- pairing strategy (Czech Republic) 251
- Pál, E. 62
- Panopoulou, E. 14
- Parlement & Citoyens see* France: *Parlement & Citoyens*
- participation.wien.at (Austria) 238
- Participatory Budget Execution Office of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area (Spain) 157
- Participatory Budget Execution Office (Spain) 158
- participatory budgeting 2, 12
  - Czech Republic 249, 254–5
  - Germany 213
  - Spain 156, 159–64
  - Sweden 169
- participatory democracy 2, 3, 268
  - Estonia 104, 112–13
  - France 41, 49
  - Hungary 56
- participatory process 2, 15, 20, 22, 260, 262–4, 266–70, 272–4, 276



- Austria 226–7, 236, 238
- Belgium 182, 184, 192–3
- Estonia 105–7, 110, 112, 115–16
- Germany 171–8, 215, 220
- Hungary 58
- Ireland 202
- Lithuania 144
- Spain 155, 159–60, 161–2, 164
- Sweden 167–8, 172, 174, 176
- see also under* management and organization of e-participation
- partners of core unit 18
- partnerships (Lithuania) 138, 143
- performance indicators 21, 264
  - Austria 234, 235–6
  - Belgium 182
  - Germany 217
  - Ireland 207
  - Latvia 121, 125, 130
  - Spain 154, 159–60
- personal attitudes (Croatia) 93
- petitions
  - France 44
  - see also* e-petitions
- Petitsioon.ee (Estonia) 107, 108, 115
- Pirannejad, A. 3
- planning phase 267, 275
- Platform Digital Austria 229
- Podemos (Spain) 155
- policy analysis and preparation (Spain) 156
- policy cycle
  - Austria 230, 231, 236, 239
  - Scotland 31
- policy design
  - Belgium 182
  - Latvia 121, 132
  - Spain 154, 161–2
- policy development (Ireland) 203
- policy formulation 5, 16
  - Austria 231, 233, 236, 239
  - Belgium 183–4, 187, 191–2
  - Croatia 95
  - Czech Republic 256
  - France 45–6
  - Germany 213, 219
  - Ireland 201–2
  - Lithuania 142, 146
  - Scotland 28, 31, 36
  - Spain 156
- political attention of authorities (Lithuania) 148
- political culture and participation (Germany) 212
- political efficiency (Lithuania) 138
- political engagement (Czech Republic) 245
- political neutrality (Latvia) 121, 132
- political participation (Latvia) 120
- political representatives (France) 41
- political support 271–2
  - Germany 210, 220
- political will 275
- politico-administrative context 5, 12, 15, 17
  - Belgium 181, 192
  - Croatia 92
  - Lithuania 137–8, 140
- politico-institutional factors (Croatia) 92
- polls
  - Czech Republic 251
  - Spain 155, 163–4
- populism (Hungary) 56, 57
- Porwol, L. 29
- potential of e-participation 1–6
- predictability 269
  - Germany 221
- preferences of citizens (Sweden) 172
- preparation
  - Austria 231, 236
  - Belgium 187
  - Czech Republic 256
  - France 46
- presentation (France) 44
- privacy (Hungary) 57
- private initiatives (France) 40, 48, 51
- procedural factors 276
- procedural guarantees, deficiency in (Hungary) 65
- procedural legitimacy (Croatia) 101
- process design 277
- process legitimacy (Ireland) 197
- Process Management and ICT Strategy Development (Austria) 227–8
- process-related factors 276
- programming phase (Czech Republic) 248, 251–2, 254, 256
- project administrators (Czech Republic) 249
- project coordinating unit (Czech Republic) 252
- project coordinator (Czech Republic) 250, 254
- project leadership (Czech Republic) 257
- project management board (Austria) 234
- project manager
  - Czech Republic 253–4
  - Germany 215–16
- project perspective (Spain) 154
- project phases (Czech Republic) 252
- project proposal (Czech Republic) 255
- project team (Austria) 234
- project view (Scotland) 29
- promotion 272–3
  - Germany 211, 220
- proposals 268

- Spain 155, 159–61, 163–4
- Sweden 167, 170–171, 176
  - see also* e-proposals (Sweden)
- Providus (Latvia) 122
- proximity principle 12
- public policy (Austria) 239
- public administration 1, 3–5, 20, 260, 264, 271, 277
  - Austria 225–31, 233–9
  - Belgium 181
  - Croatia 93–4, 97–8
  - Czech Republic 244, 246–7, 251
  - Estonia 105, 114
  - France 51
  - Germany 210
  - Hungary 58–9
  - Ireland 196–201, 206–7
  - Latvia 130
  - Lithuania 137–8, 140, 147
  - Scotland 27
  - Slovakia 71–2, 77–8, 80–81
  - Spain 152, 154, 157, 162–3
- public awareness raising and understanding of policy issues (Austria) 227, 237
- public concerns (Austria) 227
- public consultation administrators (Croatia) 97
- public consultation coordinator (Croatia) 97
- Public Consultation Methodology (Lithuania) 142
- public consultations
  - Croatia 94
  - Lithuania 141–2
- public engagement (Scotland) 29
- public interest
  - Estonia 109
  - France 50
  - Sweden 173, 176
- Public Participation Networks (PPNs) (Ireland) 200, 206
- public value
  - Ireland 203, 207
  - see also in particular* Slovakia: Slov-Lex
- public visibility and policy impact (Latvia) 120
- public-administration culture (Lithuania) 138
- Putting People First* (Ireland) 201, 203
- Q-methodology (Ireland) 202–3
- qualitative research 11, 14, 15
  - Austria 226
  - Belgium 184, 193
  - Croatia 91, 93
  - Estonia 106
  - Germany 209, 210, 211
  - Ireland 207
  - Latvia 121
  - Lithuania 139
  - Slovakia 73, 77
  - Sweden 168
- quality checks 277
  - Austria 227, 234
  - Latvia 126–7, 129, 133
  - Slovakia 73
- quantitative research
  - Croatia 91, 93
  - Germany 210
  - Hungary 58
  - Slovakia 73, 77
- question times (Germany) 212
- questionnaire methodology (Hungary) 65
- Radičova government 80
- Randma-Liiv, T. 121
- Reddick, C. 11
- registration/registered users
  - Austria 234–5, 238
  - Belgium 189
  - Croatia 97, 99, 100
  - Czech Republic 257
  - Germany 215, 217
  - Slovakia 77, 80, 82, 84
  - Sweden 173–4
- regulations and policies (Germany) 211, 220
- regulatory impact assessment
  - Croatia 94
  - Czech Republic 247
- rejection of proposal (Estonia) 109–10
- reliability (centrality) of data (Slovakia) 87
- ‘Report on the Pilot Monitoring of Public Participation in Public Governance Processes’ (Lithuania) 143
- report publication (France) 45
- representative democracy
  - Estonia 113
  - France 41, 44, 51
  - Ireland 197
  - Scotland 27
- representativeness (Sweden) 172, 173, 175–6
- reputation of platform (Spain) 162
- residents’ meetings (Germany) 212
- resolution of initiative ‘through other means’ (Estonia) 110
- resources 4, 262, 263, 264, 274–5, 277
  - Belgium 181
  - Estonia 115
  - France 47, 49, 50–51
  - Germany 221
  - Lithuania 138, 143–4
- response rate (Hungary) 64
- responsiveness (Slovakia) 72, 73, 81, 86, 87

- results published (Lithuania) 142–3  
 results-oriented management system (Austria)  
     230  
 Rezaei, J. 3  
 Ross, J.K. 5  
 Ross, M.H. 5  
 Rossi, J. 61–2, 66  
 Rüefli, C. 172  
  
 Sæbø, Ø. 153, 245  
 Sager, F. 172  
 ‘Sag’s Wien’ app (Austria) 237  
 satisfaction level with involvement (Croatia) 92–3  
 Scharpf, F. 166, 172  
 Scherer, S. 273  
 Schmidt, V. 166, 167, 172  
 scope of initiatives 5, 16  
     Sweden 175–6  
 Scotland: *We asked, you said, we did* 13, 20,  
     26–36, 261, 264, 267–8, 272–4  
     analytical background and methodology  
         27–9  
     Delib 28, 30–31, 32  
     description 30–32  
     discussion and lessons learned 35–6  
     drivers 28  
     Engage and Digital Engagement teams 32,  
         35  
     evaluation 33–5  
     multi-stakeholder steering group 30  
     National Standards for Community  
         Engagement 29  
     Online Communication team 33  
     organizational characteristics 32–3  
     overview of national context 29–30  
     Second Action Plan on Open Government 30  
*Scottish Approach* 26, 29, 30  
 secrecy, culture of (Croatia) 98  
 security  
     Austria 235  
     Spain 161  
 self-financing model (Latvia) 129  
 Service of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy  
     (Spain) 158  
 setup (Germany) 216  
 share of accepted comments (Croatia) 99, 100  
 signature collection (Latvia) 127  
 significance of e-participation 1–2  
 significant national importance (Estonia) 109  
 Skvernelis, S. 140  
 Slovakia: *Slov-Lex* 13, 20, 71–88, 261, 267–9,  
     272  
     analytical framework and methodology 72–7  
     description 80  
     discussion and lessons learned 86–8  
     efficiency and public value dimensions 74–6  
     evaluation 81–6  
     accessibility 84–6  
         additional non-formal actions by users  
             84  
         effectiveness 84–6  
         efficiency: from e-enabling to  
             e-engaging 81–4  
         perceived added value by users 83  
         public value 72–3, 74, 76, 81, 84–8  
         rate of use 85  
         responsiveness 84–6  
         transparency 84–6  
     law-making 71–3, 74, 76, 77–8, 79, 80, 82,  
         84  
     national context overview 77–80  
         consolidation of e-participation 78, 80  
         historical context and essential events  
             79  
         reform activities of  
             post-semi-authoritarian rule:  
                 information law access and  
                 transparency 78  
             semi-authoritarian post-communist era  
                 (1992–1998) 78  
     organizational characteristics 81  
     ‘smart city’ rhetoric 2  
     social media 1–2, 12, 17  
         Austria 227, 234  
         Czech Republic 248, 251–4, 257  
         Ireland 197  
         Scotland 27, 32–3, 35  
         Slovakia 82  
         Spain 160  
     socio-demographic groups (Sweden) 176  
     socio-economic context 3, 14, 15, 17  
         Belgium 181  
         Croatia 92  
     socio-organizational characteristics (Germany)  
         209–10  
     socio-technical aspects 14  
         Scotland 29  
         Spain 154  
     software status (France) 49–50  
 Song, K.J. 121  
 Soros, G. 60  
 sounding board group (Belgium) 185, 187–8  
 Spain: *Decide Madrid* 13, 20, 152–64, 261–2,  
     264, 267–75  
     analytical background and methodology  
         153–4  
     description: background, aims and scope  
         155–6

- legal framework and technical features 156
  - discussion and lessons learned 162–4
  - evaluation 154, 159–62
    - democratic legitimacy 160–161
    - performance indicators 159–60
    - policy design and external collaboration 161–2
    - transparency 161
  - national context overview 154–5
  - organizational characteristics 157–9
    - human resources 157–8
    - internal collaboration 158
    - leadership and individual characteristics 158–9
  - stakeholder analysis (Belgium) 192
  - stakeholder engagement (Austria) 234
  - stakeholder mobilization (Belgium) 187, 190, 192
  - stakeholder theory (Spain) 153, 162
  - stakeholder-centric approach 86
  - standardization 269
  - steering group (Belgium) 186–7
  - Steinbach, M. 246, 256
  - strategic decisions 264
  - strategic development (Germany) 215
  - Strategic Development Zone (Ireland) 204
  - strategic level (Belgium) 192
  - strategic management 264
  - strategic multi-annual plan (Belgium) 186
  - strategic partnerships (Hungary) 59
  - strategic phase (Czech Republic) 248, 250–251, 254, 256
  - strategic planning (Czech Republic) 244, 247–8, 250, 255–6
  - strategic roadmap (Austria) 227
  - strategic values (Czech Republic) 251, 254, 256
  - strategist approach (Ireland) 202
  - strategy
    - combined 227
    - formulation process 233
    - integrated 227
    - isolated 227
    - planning 248
  - structural reforms (Germany) 211–12
  - style of policy-making (Scotland) 35
  - submission to parliament (Latvia) 127–8
  - Subnational Government Pilot Program of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) (Spain) 153
  - success factors 19, 21, 260, 277
    - Belgium 180–182, 192–3
    - Lithuania 138–9
    - Scotland 28
    - Spain 162–3
    - Sweden 175
  - Sucha, I. 256
  - summary (Austria) 233
  - supply-side perspective 3, 5, 260, 277
    - Belgium 181
    - France 40–41
    - Scotland 26
  - sustainability 275–6
    - Sweden 175
  - Svence, A. 124
  - Sweden: Gothenburg Proposal 13, 20, 166–77, 225, 261, 268, 270–273
    - analytical framework and methodology 166–8
    - democratic legitimacy 166
    - description 169–71
    - discussion and lessons learned 175–7
    - evaluation 172–5
    - input legitimacy 166, 167, 172–3, 175, 177
    - national context overview 168–9
    - organizational characteristics 171
    - output legitimacy 166–7, 172, 175–7
    - statistics 170
    - throughput legitimacy 166, 167, 168, 172, 174–7
  - Switzerland 155
  - synthesis of lawmaker's answers (France) 45
  - Tambouris, E. 14
  - Tarabanis, K. 14
  - targets (Austria) 227
  - Taudes, A. 228
  - TechCountry (Latvia) 121
  - technical features 16, 264
    - Austria 233
    - Belgium 181, 185, 189
    - Estonia 113
    - Germany 215
    - Latvia 121
    - Spain 156
  - techno-centric focus 3
    - Czech Republic 245
  - telecommunications infrastructure index 42
  - testing phase (beta phase) (Germany) 214
  - Themis (Estonia) 107, 108
  - Thomann, E. 172
  - throughput legitimacy 166, 167, 168, 172, 174–7, 269
    - Germany 210, 217–19
  - timing of processes
    - Belgium 186
    - Scotland 36
    - Slovakia 86
  - Today I Decide (Estonia) 107, 108, 122

- Toots, M. 14, 180, 210
- top-down approach 266
- Austria 230
  - Belgium 192
  - Croatia 91, 92
  - Czech Republic 248, 256
  - Lithuania 138
  - Scotland 28, 35
- transformational approach 270
- Lithuania 137
- ‘Transforming into Open Innovative and Collaborative Governments’ (Estonia) 106
- transmitting initiative to Government (Estonia) 109
- transparency 21, 261, 267–8, 269
- Austria 227, 230, 235, 238
  - Belgium 182, 190, 192, 193
  - Croatia 91, 94, 95, 99, 101
  - Estonia 111, 112, 113
  - France 42, 44, 50, 51
  - Germany 219, 221
  - Hungary 66
  - Ireland 196, 197–8, 200, 201–2, 203–4, 207
  - Latvia 121, 122, 131–2, 133
  - Lithuania 148
  - Scotland 27–8, 30
  - Slovakia 72, 73, 77–8, 80, 84–5, 87
  - Spain 154, 161, 163–4
  - Sweden 167–8, 174, 176, 177
- trust 3, 14, 268
- Austria 227, 235
  - Belgium 180–181
  - Croatia 102
  - Czech Republic 244, 246, 256
  - Estonia 107, 113
  - France 44
  - Hungary 64, 66
  - Ireland 198, 201–2, 206–7
  - Latvia 121, 132
  - Lithuania 141, 148
  - Scotland 35
  - Slovakia 72, 86
  - Spain 155, 163–4
  - Sweden 166
- type of comments (Croatia) 102
- type of participant (Croatia) 102
- ‘Unheard Voices’ 204
- Unibrennt Movement (Austria) 230
- United Nations e-Government Development Index 94, 141
- United Nations e-government development report 2018 59
- United Nations e-Government Survey 197–8
- United Nations e-Participation index 42, 94, 99, 141, 196
- United Nations Public Service Award ‘Making institutions inclusive and ensuring participation in decision-making’ category 152
- urban land use planning (Germany) 214
- user friendliness (Slovakia) 83–6, 87
- validation of arguments (Austria) 231, 233
- value added (Slovakia) 82
- Varieties of Democracy’s democracy indices 168
- Verdonck, M. 183
- verification processes (Spain) 156, 161, 163
- VIA IURIS *How to Participate in Law-Making* 83
- visualization tools (Czech Republic) 251
- VOiCE – Vision and Outcomes in Community Engagement (Scotland) 35
- Voka (Belgium) 190
- voluntary cooperation (Austria) 229
- voluntary experts (Latvia) 120, 126, 129, 133
- Vooglaed, K.M. 121
- voting
- Czech Republic 255
  - Sweden 168, 169
- see also* e-voting
- wahlkabine.at (polling booth) (Austria) 230
- We asked, you said, we did see* Scotland: *We asked, you said, we did*
- website statistics (Spain) 159
- Welch, E.W. 246
- Whyte, A. 14
- ‘Wienbot’ chatbot (Austria) 236, 237
- Wimmer, M.A. 273
- Wirtz, B.W. 3, 226–7, 237–8
- Wood, M. 167, 172
- working groups
- Austria 233, 236, 238
  - Belgium 187–8

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