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Looking beyond "the tool itself": Towards a political systems understanding of e-participation

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Abstract: In this paper, we argue that e-participation research is at a crossroads as its theories and empirical scope are increasingly detached from the contemporary relationship between information technology and political participation. We illustrate this challenge through two developments: (1) the dissolving boundaries between online and offline spheres of political participation and (2) the growing dissociation between ICTs and democracy. In light of these developments, we present a potential path forward for the field, inspired by the so-called "systemic turn" in research on deliberative democracy and democratic innovations. We argue for a perspective that emphasises the relationship between e-participation and the political system in which it is enacted. In our conclusion, this allows us to present alternative potential directions for future research within the field.

Keywords: Deliberative systems, Democratic bias, E-participation, Hybridity, Political systems

1. E-participation research at a crossroads

Electronic participation (e-participation) research emerged from the era of techno-optimism, prevalent during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. This optimism fuelled expectations regarding the potential of digital technologies to instigate the democratisation of non-democratic states and reinvigorate "stale" systems of representative democracy in the direction of direct-, participatory- and deliberative democratic ideals (cf. Lewin, 1970; Dutton, 1992; London, 1995). As the internet and ICTs in general diffused across the developed world, visions for how these technologies could aid and even

revolutionise democratic practices materialised through processes that took advantage of novel ICTs to assist citizens' participation in politics (OECD; 2003; UN, 2003). Some of these simply transferred "offline" models of political participation into the digital sphere, while others created new forms of political participation (Oser et al., 2013).

In concurrence with the increased utilisation of ICT-enabled/aided citizen participation processes, a new academic field arose related to the conceptualisation of e-participation. Through the analysis of these novel processes of citizen participation aided by ICTs, researchers could transition from speculation and theorisation to empirically testing the envisioned promises of the new technology. Consequently, the new field of research focused on e-participation was primarily imbued with optimism regarding the democratic potential of ICTs. We propose that this optimistic outlook lies at the heart of the field of e-participation research and is manifested in two core relationships that define the field:

(1) the distinction between online and offline spheres of political participation

First, e-participation research builds on the assumption that digital and physical spheres for political participation are meaningfully distinct and separated. In other words, e-participation stands apart from other forms of political participation. This assumption is necessary for the ambition to organise this research in a distinct field with its theories, concepts, conferences, networks, and journals. Only if the phenomenon of study meaningfully diverts from similar phenomena is the development of a new field of research motivated. This assumption has also been the focus of extensive research, not least studies of differences and similarities in what groups of citizens take part in e-participation compared to other forms of citizen participation (cf. Oser et al., 2012: Liina-Jensen, 2013; Tai, 2019).

(2) the supportive relationship between digital technology and democracy

Second, the relationship between ICTs and democracy has also been of substantial importance for the field. As has been discussed above, the prospects of democratic revitalisation flowing from the development and spread of ICTs were arguably central to the uptake of e-participation processes by governments as well as public institutions, and likewise for the research interest in those practices. According to Kabanov (2022), the assumption that e-participation adoption is linked to democratisation has been foundational for much e-participation research. From this, e-participation was initially viewed as a sub-field of e-democracy (Macintosh, 2004) and was closely tied to normative democratic ideals (Grönlund & Susha, 2012).

In this article, we present developments that indicate that both these core assumptions have grown less accurate. In the next section, we discuss hybridisation between online and offline spheres as a challenge to the assumption that online and offline spheres of political participation are meaningfully distinct. The subsequent section of the article turns to the relationship between ICTs and democracy as we discuss various signs of disassociation between the two. We ultimately argue that a more agnostic perspective should be attained regarding the political consequences of digitalisation and e-participation adoption.

After that, we turn to our suggested remedy for the mismatch between underlying assumptions of e-participation research vis-à-vis contemporary conditions. Our recommendation to the field is to take inspiration from the so-called "systemic turn" in research on deliberative democracy and democratic innovations - and shift the focus of research from what Misnikov and Filatova (2022) call "the tool itself", meaning e-participation platforms and processes, to the political systems in which e-participation occurs. Such a political system-oriented perspective focuses on e-participation's functions and dysfunctions within the political system. This perspective is adaptable to varying political systems (e.g. national, regional, local, or democratic and non-democratic). Further, a systemic perspective demands a view of e-participation as part of a broader repertoire of participatory methods and channels. Hence, questions related to what specific functions (and dysfunctions) electronic participation performs and how they relate to other forms of participation are put into focus. This section of the article aims to develop an understanding of how a political-system-oriented perspective could be implemented in e-participation research. In the article's concluding section, we apply such a perspective to three areas of e-participation research and present prospective directions for future research.

In this article, we broadly define e-participation as encompassing all formal and informal political participation processes supported by ICTs. Such definition includes what Kersting (2013) has coined as "invited" and "invented" spaces of political participation. Invited spaces are top-down initiated, formal channels of political participation supported by ICTs, including e-petitioning, online deliberation, and online consultations. Invented spaces are bottom-up spaces for political participation online, such as flash mobs, online protests, and citizen information systems (e.g. openparliament.ca, a civil society initiative tracking the parliamentary votes of all Canadian MPs).

Our definition further rests on an understanding of political participation inspired by Van Deth (2014), seeing political participation as any voluntary action taken in the role of a citizen (rather than as a professional political actor) that either is located within the realm of the political process, targets political actors or institutions, addresses community issues, are placed in a political context or expresses political aims. This broad definition of political participation is at least as important for understanding informal e-participation (i.e. invented spaces) as formal e-participation is, by definition, within the realm of the established political processes.

2. Hybridisation of political participation

The pace of technological development within the area of ICTs is matched only by the speed with which these technologies inhibit more and more aspects of our lives and societies (Graham, 2019). One central dimension of this development is the blurring of the lines between online and offline spheres, not least facilitated by the advance and diffusion of mobile technologies. Diamankati (2014) has defined our current relationship with ICTs as a "post-desktop paradigm" characterised by a detachment of the internet from a specific place. As we no longer access the internet from a computer statically located at a definite place but rather "carry it with us" (de Souza e Silva & Sheller, 2014, p. 4), our transport between online and offline spheres are more frequent and less noticeable. According to Šimůnková (Šimůnková 2019, p. 49), this has blurred and undermined distinctions such as

"Absence/presence, here/there, close/far, public/private, real/virtual". At its essence, this relationship with technology presents a state of hybridity, as clear distinctions between online and offline are becoming harder to make and less valuable.

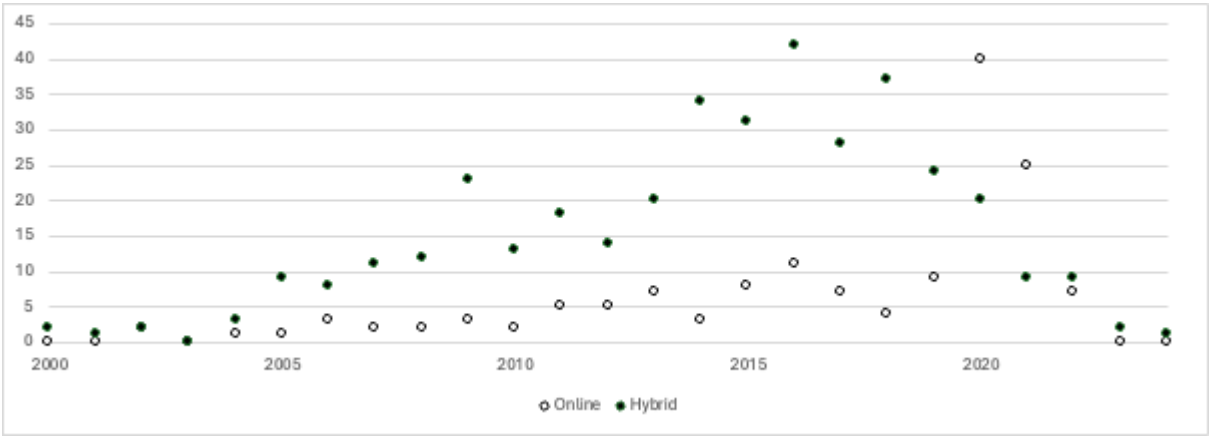
Hybridisation is not least evident in the political sphere. Today, information about political processes and developments, political debate and discourse, and political influence channels are often, if not primarily, found online (Karlsson, 2021; Šimůnková, 2019). Therefore, ICTs influence political behaviour on digital platforms and are an integral aspect of political participation in general. This hypothesis of a general influence of ICTs and ICT-mediated information, as well as communication on citizens' participation in politics, mirrors Postman's (1992/2011) stipulation (building on McLuhan's [1964] concept of media ecology) that technological change is ecological rather than additive or subtractive. Postman (1992/2011:18) writes, "A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. In 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a new, different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new colouration to every political campaign, foreign policy action or domestic economic decision, alongside becoming a central part of everyday American citizens' lives and culture. It permeated every aspect of life, political or not.

In the same way, the emergence of ICTs and the internet not only added new platforms and channels for participation to an otherwise consistent political landscape but also changed the political landscape.[1] Following the same logic, the influence of ICTs on political participation is not (exclusively) to be looked for in forms of participation that utilise ICTs. Instead, we should suspect all forms of political participation will be (directly or indirectly) affected by the onset of ICTs. In the same vein, multiple researchers have argued that it is impossible to isolate the effects of ICT-enabled avenues of political participation from offline participation channels (cf. Freschi et al., 2009; Kampitaki et al., 2008).

The state of hybridity in politics has been most authoritatively defined by Chadwick (2017), who investigates how political actors function within an environment hybridised between online and offline and tailor their repertoires of action based on this hybridity. For instance, Chadwick and others (e.g. Karpf, 2012) have studied the repertoires of action of what they call "new hybrid mobilisation movements". These political movements utilise new and old media logic to mobilise supporters and influence policy-making effectively. New media (meaning ICTs in general and social media in particular) is utilised to monitor the views of their member base and coordinate action. However, offline political protests or manifestations are often the forms of political action preferred by these movements, and old media is the target of these actions (Chadwick, 2017). Other movements, such as the "Fridays for Future" climate movement, organise localised offline political actions, not least "climate strikes", and utilise social media to boast the impact of such actions (Boulianne et al., 2020).

[1] With this ecological view of technological change as their starting point Misnikov and Filatova (2022) have suggested a ecological perspective in E-participation research, introducing the concept of information ecology. We propose a systems perspective rather than an ecological one, and will return to discussing the differences between the two in section 4 of this article.

While a focus on the hybridity between digital and offline politics is present in many adjacent fields, such as social movement and protest research, it is remarkably absent in e-participation research.[2] Misnikov & Filatova (2022) have therefore urged e-participation researchers to look beyond "the tool itself" (meaning e-participation platforms) and apply a broader understanding of the interplay between ICTs and politics. However, even research focusing exclusively on e-participation platforms is affected by this development of increased hybridisation - as there are also clear indications of a hybridisation of e-participation processes. This trend is first illustrated by analysing cases in the Participedia database (Fung & Warren, 2011) (Figure 1 below). Participedia consists of global reports on processes of political participation. While the database includes both top-down "invited spaces" as well as bottom-up "invented spaces" for political participation (Kersting, 2013), there is an evident skewness towards the former. In Figure 2, the number of cases in the database with instances of online participation is plotted by year from 2000 to 2024. The number of cases in the database has grown intensely over the last two decades. However, the growth is disproportionately leaning towards hybrid participation cases, meaning face-to-face and ICT-enabled participation combinations. At the same time, the number of participation cases exclusively facilitated online has been relatively stable. Seemingly, hybridity has increasingly become the norm in e-participation. The only exceptions to this rule are the years most clearly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies that accompanied the pandemic in many countries, which meant that participatory processes had to go online. Further, there is clear evidence of a lag in reported cases, as the number of cases for 2023 and 2024 is significantly lower than in preceding years.[3]



[2] There are, however, notable exceptions in individual research contributions analyzing hybrid cases of e-participation and engaging with questions related to this hybridization (cf. Thoneick, 2021).

[3] For the 1604 cases for which both the end date of the participatory process and the date of posting the case in the Participedia database are known, the median time between the end date and date of posting is 2 years and 10 months. Hence, figures for the last years of the time period should be interpreted with caution as they may be subject to change as more recent cases are reported into the database.

Figure 1: Number of cases of citizen participation characterised as "Hybrid" and "Online" in the Participedia database 2000-2024.

To the extent that the cases reported in the Participedia database are representative of the implementation of e-participation processes worldwide, this trend of increased hybridisation has strong implications for e-participation research. Most notably, it implies that an empirical focus on what plays out on digital platforms may be insufficient for understanding contemporary e-participation. Further, it questions how online and offline activities interact and influence each other in hybridised participation processes.

Further, there are examples of what could be termed legally compelled hybridisation of e-participation processes. One illustration of this is a recent decision by the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsmen that in 2023 criticised the local government of Nybro for hosting its petition system "Nybroförslaget" exclusively as an e-petition system; requiring citizens to use digital technology (including electronic identification) to be able to issue and support petitions. In their decision, the Parliamentary Ombudsmen argued that requiring citizens to use digital technology to participate in the e-petition process violated the impartiality principle of the Swedish Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900, section 5), as well as the principle of equality of the Swedish Local Government Act (2017: 725, chapter 2 § 3). In conclusion, the Parliamentary Ombudsmen recommended the municipal board of Nybro to create opportunities for citizens who "are not used to or distrust digital services" (Parliamentary Ombudsmen 2023: 528) to participate in the petition process, in essence, to hybridise the petition process. One source of hybridisation may thus be requirements of legal compliance with laws protecting equal rights and impartiality between services. Hence, one reason for increasing the hybridity of e-participation processes may be to safeguard pivotal democratic values of equality and inclusion. While the extent of similar legal challenges to purely online facilitated participation process is unknown to the authors of this article, earlier research has highlighted similar issues, not least about online voting (cf. Aichholzer & Rose, 2020: 109).

What we have illustrated and discussed above are separate developments converging in promoting the dissolving of boundaries between the online and offline spheres of political participation. As has been argued in the introduction of this paper, these boundaries have been pivotal for the emergence of e-participation research as an academic field - and remain necessary for the definition and practice of the field today. Hence, the development of hybridisation raises essential questions for e-participation research:

- How would e-participation research that is more sensitive to and focused on hybridity between online and offline spheres look?
- What conceptual and methodological tools are needed for such a focus?

We firmly believe that a political systems perspective on e-participation offers the tools (theoretical and methodological) necessary for e-participation research that is more sensitive to hybridisation. Section 4 of this article presents such a perspective in length. However, explaining the implications of hybridity for e-participation research is also important. Such implications, however, vary depending on the interpretation of the breadth of the field. Suppose we utilise a narrow understanding of e-participation as denoting only what Kerting calls "invited spaces" of political participation

that utilises ICTs - the challenge of increased hybridity entails developing theories and methods to analyse factors exogen of e-participation platforms that may influence, mediate, moderate or impede participation on such platforms. This would include studying aspects or parts of participatory processes that do not directly occur in online or digitalised contexts. One concrete example of this could be the case of e-petitioning in the municipality of Nybro in Sweden, presented above. The hybridisation of this process could be addressed by extending the empirical scope to include analyses of the impact of expanding routes for participation compelled by legal criticism. How is the participatory process influenced by adding options to issue and support petitions offline? Are the expected effects in terms of increased political equality researched?

However, suppose we utilise a more generous understanding of the boundaries of e-participation research to include any political participation process affected by ICTs. In that case, the consequences of hybridisation are much more vast. With this interpretation of the scope of the field - taking the "challenge" of hybridity fully into account would necessitate a substantial broadening of Eparticipation research (see Karlsson & Adenskog, 2023 for an extended discussion of this proposition) to include questions related to how digital technology and other mechanisms, channels, and processes intersect in shaping citizens participation in contemporary societies. A more extensive example of such a research strategy is presented in section 5 of this article.

Regardless of how the breadth of the scope of the field is demarcated, hybridisation presents significant implications for the role of e-participation research. Farrell argues that paradoxically, the increasing integration of ICTs into all aspects of political interactions will lead to fewer rather than more political scientists specialising in the Internet (Farrell, 2012).

As the intersections between the internet and politics become more plentiful and diverse, this relationship becomes the business of all political scientists rather than a specialised sub-field. However, according to Farrell, hybridisation requires more rather than less specialisation. As the internet becomes "both ubiquitous and invisible," its intermediating role risks being taken for granted (Farrell, 2012, p. 47). He argues that political science needs "unbundling the Internet into discrete (yet sometimes mutually reinforcing or undermining) mechanisms" Farrell, 2012, p. 47]. This call for unbundling the internet can be seen as naive given the pace and diversity of technological development and utilisation; however, it could potentially point to an important focus area for e-participation research. For the broader fields of research focused on political participation to fully understand participation in contemporary societies, there is a great need for better theorisation of technology-related mechanisms that affect participation.

3. The growing dissociation between e-participation and democracy

As discussed in this article's introduction, the field of e-participation research was arguably spawned in relation to hopes and expectations of the reinvigorating potential of new ICTs for democracy. Therefore, e-participation has had what Kabanov (2022) calls a "democratic bias" visible in the theoretical as well as empirical focus of the field. Theoretically, e-participation has predomi-

nantly been understood within democratic government and democratic theory. Its affordances, potential, and challenges have foremost been discussed and scrutinised against democratic ideals - not least normative democratic theories of direct democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy. In a review of early research on what was then called "teledemocracy", Dutton (1992) shows that the studies published in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s were predominantly speculative, that is, focused on rational deductions about the potential impact of new ICTs on democracy and citizen participation - rather than empirically analysing the extent to which such potential impact was realised. This conclusion is quite logical given the young age of the research field and the study phenomena. However, Randma Liiv (2023: 330) comes to a similar conclusion in reviewing contemporary research in the field of e-participation, stating that the predominant focus is on the potential benefits of digitalisation rather than scrutinising the actual implementation of e-participation initiatives. If we are to believe these accounts of our field, its tech-optimistic legacy is still very much alive.

Empirically, this bias is evident in the predominance of studies of e-participation in democratic contexts. Also, this aspect of the "democratic bias" is understandable. Suppose the primary potential of e-participation lies in a reinvigoration of democracy towards normative ideals of greater civic participation in and influence over political decision-making. In that case, it is easily deduced that e-participation in democratic contexts should be our primary object of study. However, there are clear indications that the association between e-participation and democracy has weakened over time. This leads us to discuss two developments that support such a conclusion: (1) the changing view of the democratic implications of ICTs and (2) the increased adoption of e-participation in non-democratic contexts.

3.1. The changing view of the democratic implications

The emerging "new media" was heralded in the last decades of the 20th century as offering avenues for realising a more direct-, participatory, and deliberative democracy (see Åström & Karlsson, 2022 for an overview). However, the empirical reality uncovered during the first decades of the 21st century has disproven some and nuanced many of such speculations.

First, one troubling pattern that has recurred in studies of political participation online is evidence of the absence of political impact on public policy and political decision-making. Even if citizens gained new opportunities to participate through new technology, the reluctance of political elites and established institutions to grant participating citizens the power to influence political outcomes remained (Cf. Bächtiger et al., 2014; Coleman & Sampaio, 2017; Karlsson, 2021). Further, citizens' willingness to participate has proven to be closely tied to their ability to influence political outcomes (cf. Åström & Grönlund, 2012).

Second, the vastly unequal distribution of attention and influence on the Internet counteracted prospects of increased political equality. While the near-universal availability of effective communication was believed to level the playing field, our attention to online communication proved not to be as equally distributed. For instance, Drezner and Farrell (2008) have found evidence of a highly skewed distribution of blog readers on the Internet - indicating that very few bloggers drew the

great majority of readers - while a long tail consisting of all other bloggers had few or no readers. Similar results have been found by Hindman (2011) and Gustafsson (2013), among others.

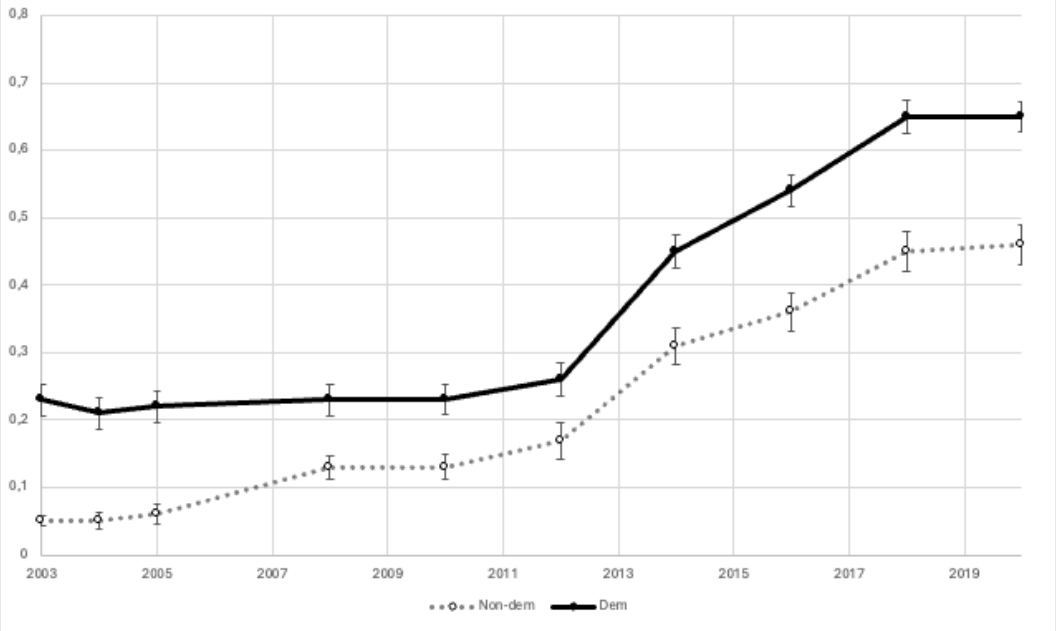
Third, the potential of ICTs to support a more deliberative democracy has been challenged by empirical studies indicating the dispersion of communication and networks online into political enclaves (cf. Sunstein, 2001; Edwards, 2013). In the worst case, such enclaved participation may lead to increased political polarisation, and even if that is not the case - it stands in the way of deliberative appeals for cross-fertilisation between divergent and opposing interests.

3.2. The rise of e-participation in non-democracies

When the internet was still in its infancy, tech-optimistic and realist ideas made out the opposing positions in theories about the role of ICTs in non-democratic states. Optimists believed that the spread and development of new ICTs would rattle the foundations of autocratic rule and prompt a wave of democratisation (Norris, 2001; Culver, 2003). Realists instead proposed that any democratising potential of new technologies would be mediated by pre-existing conditions (institutional, political, and socio-economic), resulting in "politics as usual" (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Kalathil & Boas, 2003). In the context of non-democracies, such politics as usual, would mean that autocratic states would hinder the domestic spread of ICTs and its potential circumventing effects.

However, empirical reality has subverted expectations of both these perspectives. Several studies have shown that many non-democratic states have put substantial efforts into, and in some cases outperform democracies in terms of e-participation (Åström et al., 2012; Karlsson, 2013) while retaining (and even strengthening) their non-democratic rule (cf. Linde & Karlsson, 2013). The eEparticipation development among democratic- and non-democratic countries over the last 20 years, through the lens of the UN e-participation Index (EPI), is presented in Figure 2 below. This figure depicts the mean value of the EPI among democratic and non-democratic countries, respectively, for each year that the EPI has been produced. As the figure shows, there is a persistent divide in general e-participation performance between democracies and non-democracies. However, the development within the two groups of countries follows a similar pattern: relative stability during the first decade followed by a substantial increase over the last decade (as well as signs of stagnation in the last years of the time series). The similarity in development patterns indicates that democracies do not exclusively engage in E-participation.

Further, there is little indication that this uptake of e-participation in non-democracies has coincided with any general trend of democratisation among these countries. Oppositely, the latest decades have instead shown indications of a wave of democratic backsliding and decline worldwide (c.f. Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Hence, the participatory potential of ICTs was not staved off by non-democratic regimes; however, neither did it instigate a wave of democratisation in these states. This surprising and puzzling development has inspired a wave of research devoted to deciphering the mechanisms of e-participation in non-democratic states. However, this research has, to a great extent, built on a "democratic bias" - and, in our opinion, lacked the necessary theoretical and methodological instruments to understand this development sufficiently.



Kabanov (2022), among others (cf. Hayes & Karlsson, 2024), argues that e-participation researchers have paid little attention to differentiation among non-democratic regimes. Rather than seeing this large group of countries as the broad palette of diverging societies and political systems as they are, e-participation research has often lumped them together (as in Figure 2 below) into one consistent category of non-democratic countries. Such a categorisation places focus on only one aspect of these political systems, the fact that they are non-democracies. While the field of comparative politics presents a multitude of different taxonomies and multi-dimensional frameworks for classifying and characterising non-democratic regimes (see Kailitz, 2024 for an overview), the uptake of such theoretical devices is sparse among e-participation researchers (Hayes & Karlsson 2024fc).

Figure 2: Average scores on the UN EPI among democracies and non-democracies 2003-2020.[4]

Together, these developments coalesce in a pattern of disassociation between ICTs and democracy. Therefore, we argue that e-participation research should adopt a more agnostic perspective. It is far from evident that the development and spread of ICTs have been (and will be) supportive of democratisation and democratic revitalisation. Rather than taking this assumption as a starting point, we propose that future research analyse what functions (and dysfunctions) e-participation processes perform in the political systems in which they are adopted. Such functions could be democracy-enhancing but could also be more instrumental (e.g. cutting costs or labour, avoiding protest actions, etc.). In the following section, we present a political systems-oriented understanding of e-participation.

4. The systemic turn - a potential way forward?

One central factor for understanding the rise of e-participation in the early 2000s is the participatory shift in normative democratic theory at the end of the 20th century. From the late 1960s onward, participatory, direct, and deliberative democracy arose as central normative ideals for democratic government. These ideals have heavily influenced research on political participation, not least on "invited spaces" for participation, often conceptualised as "democratic innovations" (Smith, 2009)

These ideals have also greatly influenced how democratic innovations have been evaluated. The normative democratic theories have created yardsticks for evaluation, leading to a value-driven assessment focused on how much a participatory process lives up to central values within a specific normative theory of democracy (Adenskog, 2018). One example is the discourse quality index, which evaluates how deliberative democratic innovations live up to deliberative values such as justification, universalism, constructivism, and respect (Steenbergen et al., 2003).

In recent years, value-driven evaluation and normatively driven research on political participation have been critiqued on two essential accounts. First, value-driven evaluation risks the development of a solely micro-level evaluation focus. As the central question of such assessment is the extent to which the participatory process lives up to normative criteria, its evaluation may be biased towards focusing on internal aspects of the participatory process (e.g. who participates, how participants communicate, and participants' satisfaction). Thus, broader consequences or effects of such processes (macro aspects) may be disregarded (Adenskog, 2018, p. 46). Second, value-driven evaluation has been criticised for not being context-sensitive enough. As general normative theories set the evaluation criteria, they are not developed or adapted in relation to the contextual setting in which the participatory process is implemented.

[4] Error bars represent standard errors of mean estimates. Categorization of democratic and non-democratic regimes are based on "Dichotomous democracy measure" of the QOG-dataset (Dahlberg et al., 2018). N=189-192 countries per year.

Concerning this criticism, there has been a systemic turn in research on political participation, spearheaded by the development of the concept of "deliberative systems" within research on deliberative democracy (Mansbridge et al., 2012). This research direction falls back on systems theory within political science, identifying political systems as the sum of all political actions and interactions related to a political unit's policy- and decision-making process (e.g., a nation-state or a local government) (Easton, 1957). A functional perspective on citizen participation characterises the systemic approach to political participation research. The central question in this research is what functions political participation performs within the political system. In this strand of research, the evaluation of political participation is functionality-driven and, hence, focused on the consequences or effects of participation on the political system.

4.1. Potential systemic functions of e-participation

Smith (2009) developed an evaluation framework focused on four functions, or "goods", that political participation can potentially perform in a political system: inclusiveness, popular control, judgment, and transparency. These will be presented as examples of potential systemic functions of e-participation rather than as a comprehensive list - as many other functions are possible to imagine. Further, these functions are all geared towards a democratic political system. For examples of potential functions in non-democratic systems, see section 5.1.

First, participatory processes may help give more and new groups of citizens access to the policy-making process. Critics of citizen participation, however, warn that participatory processes may instead give increased voice to resource-strong and politically affluent citizens - resulting in reduced inclusiveness and increased political inequality (Smith, 2009: 21). Efforts to analyse the extent to which e-participation processes perform the function of increased inclusiveness, should therefore be sensitive to (1) who is participating, and (2) the distribution of voice and influence in the political context in which it is implemented (see for example Hertting, 2024). Only if e-participation increases the inclusion of citizens who would otherwise be absent from the political process can we talk about genuine inclusiveness.

Second, participatory processes can perform the function of increasing popular control over political outcomes. They can do so by bestowing citizens with influence over one or more stages in the policy-making process: the definition of policy problems, the analysis of different policy options, the selection of policy options, or the implementation of policies. While a perennial criticism of participatory processes is that they do not impact policy decisions, earlier research has not sufficiently addressed the multitude of ways that participation may influence political outcomes (Tosun et al., 2022). This issue is discussed more extensively in section 5.4 below below.

Third, participatory processes may perform the function of increasing the knowledge base of political institutions and actors. For instance, citizens participating in such processes may bolster their knowledge about the policy issue in focus and about the interests as well as arguments of those holding opposing views. Further, the knowledge accumulated in these participatory processes may be fed to policymakers and public administrators, creating a more substantial knowledge base for political decision-making.

Lastly, Smith argues that participation may increase society's transparency by inviting citizens to participate in the policy-making process. One way of increasing transparency is by giving participating citizens access to policy documents and actors within political institutions. Further, such processes may also put policy-making processes in the spotlight of other societal actors (e.g., media and civil society).

4.2. Criticisms of a systemic perspective

A systemic perspective shifts the focus of research from the participatory process itself (or the "tool itself" in Misnikov and Filatovas [2022] words) to the macro level and the overall political system. As such, such a perspective also sees e-participation processes as individual pieces in a giant puzzle of interactions and mechanisms that shape the functioning of a political system - for instance, offline processes of political participation. Further, a political systems perspective can be normatively agnostic (for example, regarding democratic ideals and assumptions of democratisation) as it encourages an evaluation of e-participation processes adapted to the political system in which they are enacted.

While the systemic approach addresses central problems with the value- and normativity-driven approach, it raises new questions about how to analyse and evaluate a deliberative system. In a critique of the systemic approach, Bevir and Chan argue that deliberative systems "have not yet addressed the question of what sort of system a deliberative system is" (Bevir & Chan, 2023, p. 446). This, they argue, ends up in two significant problems: (1) what determines the boundaries of a "deliberative system"? Without clear distinctions of the boundaries of such a system, it is impossible to specify its extensions. (2) This vagueness of the system's boundaries creates issues for evaluation; how can we evaluate this system or its parts?

Mendonça and colleagues (2024) further argue that the deliberative systems risk falling into a linear and functionalist understanding of political systems. Therefore, they say that we need to move beyond the systemic approach and instead apply a notion of deliberative ecology (p.2). In a first attempt to specify this move beyond the systemic approach, Mendonça and colleagues argue that "[d]rawing from theories of complexity and from pragmatism, an ecological approach considers social entities according to the webs of interdependence that simultaneously support and constrain them at a given moment in time" (p. 2)

In their argument, Mendonça and colleagues posit six areas where these approaches can be compared and analysed. The comparisons are set in a dualistic manner in which "Functions of arenas and players in dynamic equilibria" is compared with a focus on "performances of actants in continuous metamorphoses"; "Transmission" to "articulations and translations"; "Pathologies and dysfunctions" to "vulnerabilities"; "design" to "practice"; "Linear temporality" to "diverse temporalities", and; "Organic analysis" to "hologram-based analysis" (p. 5-14). The core idea, thus, is to gain a more relational understanding of how societies evolve and what kind of roles deliberative institutions can have in such ecologies.

While both Bevir and Chan (2023), as well as Mendonça and colleagues (2024), add exciting arguments to the theoretical discussion about deliberative systems, we argue that the systemic approach, as it is understood in the current literature, is already positioned at a sufficiently high level of abstraction. We argue that we should not move beyond the systemic and functionalist understanding of how e-participation processes impact societies. In the empirical research of e-participation, we understand that we need to analyse institutions concerning outcomes that can be measured in some way. We know that political systems are complex and that we can only understand parts of such a system with such an approach, but what is the alternative? As we can see, it is almost impossible to conduct empirical studies when applying the conditions of an ecological approach.

4.3. The systemic turn and e-participation research

Critique of normative bias and value-based evaluation is, to some extent, echoed within the e-participation literature. Pratchett and colleagues (2009: 190) argue that "[m]uch of the literature focuses on exploring particular normative accounts of deliberative or representative forms of democracy". Grönlund (2009: 13) argues that e-participation research rests on the assumption that "direct democracy is the ideal value for eParticipation" and that e-participation processes may lead societies towards direct democracy. However, the necessary theoretical and methodological tools to transgress this normative orientation have arguably not been developed within e-participation research.

There are, however, constructive contributions that share elements of the system-oriented research on democratic innovations. For instance, Kubicek and Aichholzer (2016) argue for a "relativity theory" for evaluating e-participation processes, meaning that criteria and methods of evaluation should be tailored to the type of e-participation process evaluated rather than striving for a unifying, one-size-fits-all, evaluation framework. This constitutes a step in the right direction, as it facilitates an adaptation of evaluation frameworks to the character of the e-participation process. However, the systemic perspective offers a second important insight: the characteristics of the political system in which e-participation processes are implemented must be considered to understand what systemic functions this process can and does play. Åström and colleagues (2013) offer one example of such an analysis. A comparative study of e-participation processes in Sweden, Estonia, and Iceland illustrates that institutional and circumstantial factors in political systems strongly influence the role and impact of e-participation processes.

We believe that e-participation research could benefit from a "systemic turn," with a greater focus on macro aspects of e-participation processes and a functionality-driven evaluation. Such a direction of research could help overcome the critique of normative bias and facilitate a better understanding of the functions e-participation performs in political systems. In this article's next and concluding section, we present three potential avenues for such political systems-oriented e-participation research.

5. Conclusion: Three potential research directions for political systems-oriented e-participation research

We have argued that e-participation research is at a critical juncture in its development, as the field's core assumptions can be questioned. In support of this argument, we have presented two broad developments that challenge the status quo of e-participation research. First, we have discussed signs of increased hybridity between online and offline spheres of society in general and political participation in particular. This hybridisation puts into question the assumption that online and offline channels for political participation are meaningfully distinct. As ICTs inhibit more and more aspects of our lives and our societies, it is becoming more complex and less essential to determine what political actions take place online versus offline. We posit that this hybridisation demands a changed perspective of e-participation researchers in turning our focus from the e-participation platforms and processes themselves towards the broader contexts in which they function - to see them as parts of a more extensive system.

Second, we have discussed indications of reevaluating the relationship between ICTs and democracy. E-participation research has historically rested on the implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption that the development and spread of ICTs will lead to democratisation and democratic reinvigoration. However, much research puts this assumption into question. Little of the envisioned revitalisation of representative democracies prospected in the last decades of the 20th century seems to have come to pass. Broad uptake of e-participation in persistently non-democratic regimes seemingly disproves hypotheses of a democratisation effect of the spread of ICTs worldwide. We see these developments demanding reevaluating the normative basis of e-participation research. We propose to analyse and evaluate e-participation more agnostically - focusing on the functions and dysfunctions that such processes produce in divergent political systems.

5.1. A functionalist analysis of e-participation in divergent political regimes.

As discussed earlier in this article, comparative e-participation research has found strong evidence of a steady increase in e-participation adoption among non-democratic regimes (Åström et al., 2012; Lidén, 2015). While this development has garnered much scholarly attention in the field of e-participation, critics of this research argue that the "democratic bias" of the e-participation field has stood in the way of a sufficient understanding of this puzzling phenomenon (cf. Kabanov, 2022; Hayes & Karlsson, 2024). Earlier studies have either understood this development as a sign of potential democratisation (cf. Norris, 2001) or as diversions - as non-democratic regimes putting up democratic facades to gain legitimacy and avoid criticism (Åström et al., 2012; Karlsson, 2013)

One pressing question is, therefore, how this development should be understood. From a political systems perspective, the answer is found in e-participation's functions within these (non-democratic) systems. Such functions may reasonably deviate from the expected functions of e-participation in democracies. A functionalist analysis would focus on attempting to disclose these functions and how they vary across different regime types. Adopting a more fine-grained understanding of the differences among non-democracies is necessary to make such research possible. In this regard,

e-participation research may draw inspiration from the rich field of comparative politics and its many theoretical instruments for regime classification and characterisation. Empirically, such research should focus on analysing the use and utilisation of e-participation, how these processes are enacted, used and communicated by the regimes that initiate them, the citizens that participate in them and other stakeholders in the political system in which they take place.

Earlier research on the implementation of deliberative democratic processes in various non-democratic regimes can function as inspiration for such studies. Researchers such as He (2014) and Wagenaar (He & Wageenar, 2018) have shown that deliberative processes initiated in intensely undemocratic political systems can perform several important functions for different actors in such systems. For example, introducing deliberative practices can shield the regime from pressure to initiate a process towards regime-level democratisation (p. 625). e-participation may perform other potential functions in non-democratic contexts, such as regime legitimacy (Maertz, 2016; Schlaufer, 2021) and regime survival (Takeuchi, 2012).

5.2. A hybridity-sensitive analysis of e-participation processes

Research on social movements and political protests shares an interest in political participation with the e-participation field. However, these fields are widely diverging in many aspects. While e-participation research has arguably been primarily focused on the platforms and processes of participation, social movement and protest research are more actor-oriented. These fields place greater focus on the participants, their organisations, and their networks. If e-participation research is to take the challenge of increased hybridisation between online and offline spheres to heart, these fields of research can stand as examples.

The field of hybrid social movements (referenced above in section two) focuses on how social movements navigate online and offline communication channels, organisation and action to bolster their efforts' reach, impact and significance (cf. Karpf, 2012). Similarly, protest research has emphasised the importance of understanding the interplay between online and offline protest politics (Van Laer, 2010). Further, these fields utilise more ethnographic (and ethnographic) methods, not seldom following social movements and protest groups for extensive periods.

The type of research described above is arguably lacking in e-participation research. We, therefore, see the need for research focused on how participants in e-participation processes utilise resources and networks in online and offline spheres to serve different functions in their participatory efforts. Further, we see the need for research to better understand these citizens by engaging in efforts to follow their political action over greater periods of time, extending past the duration of any specific e-participation process.

5.3. Identifying routes of indirect impact of e-participation

E-participation processes seldom give citizens the power to make binding political decisions directly. Instead, such processes are, at best, expected to indirectly impact decision-making by recommending courses of action to policy-makers. Policy impact is often evaluated through analysis of the

congruence between participant's recommendations and policy decisions taken by elected representatives (Åström & Grönlund, 2012). However, it is possible to overestimate the policy impact of e-participation, as research has proven that policy-makers often "cherry-pick" recommendations that agree with their prior policy positions (Font et al., 2018). Further, it is also possible that such methods of assessing policy impact underestimate the impact of e-participation, as it disregards other paths from e-participation to public policy. For instance, e-participation processes may function as a channel for mobilising civil society around a specific issue or influence the policy agenda of a political institution. Such impact may not directly influence policy decisions, but it still leads to incremental policy change that, over time, amounts to transformative policy impact.

Recent research on the impact of citizen initiatives raised through the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) (Tosun et al., 2022) has demonstrated a method for identifying and measuring the indirect policy impact of e-participation processes. The ECI has been criticised for its lack of direct policy impact, as no successful initiatives (gathering more than 1 million signatures) have thus far led the EU Commission to propose any new legislation (Karlsson, 2021). However, Tosun and colleagues (2022) investigated each successful citizen's initiative to trace its impact on the policy agenda at the EU, national and subnational levels. They find that most, if not all, initiatives have had some policy impact - in some cases transformative impact. However, they find that the path between policy recommendation from e-participation to impact on policy is not straightforward. Policy impact may take the form of influencing the agenda of policymakers, who then form the coalitions necessary to enact policy change. They also find that e-participation may influence policy on a different political level, I.e., even if the ECI was a supranational process, initiatives have influenced policy in nation-states and on the regional and local levels.

The lesson from this research for e-participation scholars is twofold: (1) straightforward policy impact may result from cherry-picking by policy-makers; (2) e-participation may influence policy unexpectedly over extended periods and on multiple political levels. Therefore, our recommendation for e-participation research is to take inspiration from policy researchers and investigate the policy impact of e-participation processes through qualitative and in-depth research over extended periods. Such research may give a more nuanced and fair understanding of the impact of e-participation.

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