

A Tale of Six Countries: eParticipation Research from an Administration and Political Perspective

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Abstract. This paper presents a cross-national analysis of eParticipation research in the administrative and political domain. It covers eParticipation research in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden) focusing on several aspects of eParticipation research, including research questions, methods, disciplinary approaches, units of analysis, research findings. The paper also provides an overview of national research, and outlines overall research findings and future directions in eParticipation research.

Keywords: eParticipation; institutions; cross-national comparison.

1 Introduction

As the body of research knowledge on eParticipation keeps growing, a stronger need for outlining the current research scenario emerges. Although there are many different definitions of the concept, we will here refer to the definition of eParticipation as “the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives” [1]. Given the widely acknowledged interdisciplinarity of the field, contributions in eParticipation research have increasingly included not only a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, but also different methodological approaches and normative stances [2], [3], [4]. The diversity of overall values underlying eParticipation research, the wide range of methods adopted, and the different disciplines embarking in studies related to eParticipation initiatives, all make the current eParticipation research scenario difficult to picture as a whole. In fact, the eParticipation research reflects the institutional variety of the research objects (the social and political systems) as well as the different research focuses and backgrounds. Moreover, the recent growth of studies published in different languages is largely undervalued at international level, with the effect of limiting the circulation of these research

findings. Of course an analysis of different national literatures is not sufficient to set any comparative analysis, because of the classical methodological problems of cross-national comparison. Although diverse characteristics, traditions, and even “natures” of eParticipation initiatives seem to be linked to the institutional peculiarities of each country, this approach is still rarely taken into account. A discussion of the empirical findings in different contexts can be a preliminary step towards a more solid comparative effort.

Such features of the current eParticipation research scenario – its steady growth, and its fragmentation – call for an effort to systematize the existing body of knowledge about eParticipation. A comprehensive view is needed regarding the nature of the research questions dealt with, the methods used, the scientific disciplines involved, and the units of analysis adopted.

The international research on eParticipation has been analyzed in a number of papers [2], [3], [4], but these works are mainly focused on research published in English. This paper provides a cross-national analysis of the existing research on eParticipation in the institutional domain in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden). Such a coverage aims at valuing a wider set of eParticipation research contributions, which otherwise would often remain hidden to the eParticipation research community.

This paper provides the main results of an extensive analysis [5] of the current body of research on eParticipation adoption and use in public institutions (assemblies, governments, administrations, political parties) within their political, organizational and institutional contexts at different territorial levels (from local to national), focusing on the effects on the decision making process and its implementation, and the participation of citizens/ groups/ associations.

A summary of the main research findings is provided on the basis of the results emerged from a review of the empirical literature about the six national cases. The main research focuses, units of analysis, methods used, main findings, and promising future research directions are identified. This analysis has resulted in a set of five overall groups of findings emerging from the national research, and four categories of future directions of research on eParticipation.

In the conclusions, these findings and future directions are summarized and discussed, and further challenges for the development of eParticipation research are outlined.

2 Method

A total of 262 research items (journal articles, books, conference papers, policy documents, etc.) were analysed by researchers of each of the six countries in the study. The sources have been selected on the basis of their methodological consistency. The review was focused on main research issues, units of analysis, methods, main findings, promising research directions.

Table 1. eParticipation research items included in the review (journal articles, books, conference papers, etc.) analysed

Country	Research items (N)
Austria	53
Denmark	10
France	67
Germany	22
Italy	61
Sweden	49
Total	262

3 Findings

The findings from the analysis [5] are summarized in table 2.

The national eParticipation research is varied in shape but quite convergent in the contents. Within the large and interesting variety of research perspectives and outputs as far as eParticipation is concerned, at this stage it is possible to highlight a number of common research focuses, trends, and results. These can be considered as the current “core” features of the overall eParticipation scenario, around which a large variety of other, “outlier” specific focuses revolve.

At a more general level of abstraction we can clearly observe that, overall, the *main research question* tackled in the national research environments concerns *understanding the changing relationships between citizens and authorities/ the political elites, brought about by on-line participation*. While such a focus encompasses a wide range of research subjects, some peculiar focuses emerge in the national analyses. Some Italian and Swedish studies underline the contrast between the rhetoric of democratic renewal and eParticipation implementation. In Germany there is a specific focus on the role of specific demographic groups, such as ethnic minorities. Finally, the Austrian research is mainly related to design issues, and the way certain designs affect eParticipation processes.

The *unit of analysis* in the national research is the most homogeneous category, as the core/main focus is on eParticipation at the local level of government.

The *research themes* vary across the national cases. Many contributions focus on the changing interactions between citizens, politicians and administration introduced by eParticipation. However, many “outliers” emerge. French and Austrian research features a focus on eVoting practices, with the former highlighting the role of eDeliberation, and the latter focusing more on eInformation. eParticipation research in Germany is greatly concerned with digital inclusion as a research subject, while Italian studies show a shift from a focus on the impact of ICT on local politics to studies on the institutional and cultural contexts affecting eParticipation and participation processes together. In Austria, on the other hand, there is a great focus on usability and legal issues raised by eParticipation adoption.

A wide variety of *methods* is adopted. A general trend of integrating qualitative and quantitative research emerges, and is linked to the scale of research, with an increasing emphasis on reconnecting analyses of the online and offline domains. The methods used in the national contexts include action research and experiments,

Table 2. Overview of eParticipation research in the institutional domain

Question	Austria	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Sweden
<i>Main research focus</i>	Options, potentials and risks in using new ICTs to enhance participation in democratic processes. Scope of inclusion and impact of eParticipation. Design issues. Evaluation issues.	Does eParticipation change/improve citizens' interaction channels and levels of influence? What are the barriers for eParticipation?	The reshaping of traditional mediation systems and communication channels.	Scope of audience, specific user groups (e.g. youngsters, migrants). Combination of media, participation and communication about it, usage of governmental supplies, capacity building of governmental institutions regarding eParticipation. Interrelations between social context and technology in participation.	The impact of the new media on the relationships between political institutions and citizenship (individuals and organized). Relationship between political-social context and eParticipation models.	How do citizens, political parties and local government use the Internet?
<i>Units of analysis (institutional level)</i>	Political elites, grassroots movements, local communities. EU level.	Mainly local (municipal) level.	Political parties and all institutional levels. Local government-led initiatives dominate.	Mainly local (municipal) level. National level for state of the art, and user view	Civic networks, political parties, participation in public policies and practices.	Citizens, local government, political parties, and representatives.
<i>Methods</i>	N/A	Evaluation of eParticipation initiatives. Experiments.	Evaluation. Experiments with technology and	Case studies. Analysis of online communication	Case studies. Analysis of on-line communication	Exploratory and descriptive. Interviews, on-line

Table 2. (continued)

Question	Austria	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Sweden
<i>Main findings</i>	<p>eParticipation potential is not exploited. Legal and institutional barriers. Politicians are reluctant towards increased civic engagement. Existing participation patterns are reinforced. Recently, new impulses for public participation and eParticipation .</p>	<p>No significant change in citizens' involvement and influence. The new media supplement existing means of interaction and influence.</p>	<p>Local level: Internet used for information provisioning and services. Interactive potential not realized. Politicians hesitant towards new communication channels and increased citizen involvement. Socio-cultural resistance to eVoting. The new media supplements existing channels.</p>	<p>Different means of communication and media supplement each other (if considered in planning). Socio-cultural context influences participation in the democratic process. eParticipation often strengthens exclusion (gaps regarding gender, education, status).</p>	<p>eParticipation failures in promoting new participation. Political inclusion/exclusion. Trend to de-politicization in government-driven eParticipation. Active citizens develop their own fora. Initiatives by political parties lack attention to deliberation.</p>	<p>Citizens' eParticipation is still limited. Off-line patterns are repeated on-line. Parties use the Internet as a campaign tool but do not engage with citizens in on-line debate. Local governments provide information and receive questions and comments. Cost, size, and technological determinants impact local govt. web-adoption.</p>

Table 2. (continued)

<p>Question <i>Promising directions</i></p>	<p>Austria Lack of theoretical grounding and empirical analysis of eParticipation projects. Need for systematic analysis of wider impacts. Need of conceptual developments.</p>	<p>Denmark Research focus on government-initiated eParticipation. Need to focus on bottom-up citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives.</p>	<p>France The research is mainly based in the social sciences. Need for interdisciplinary research and industry-academia collaboration. Need to involve stakeholders (citizens) in research.</p>	<p>Germany Double role of researchers: initiators and evaluators of eParticipation initiatives. Need for more transdisciplinary research. There are enough case studies, it is now time for general implementation.</p>	<p>Italy Contextualization within the wider processes of transformation of democratic governance.</p>	<p>Sweden Few empirical studies. Need for more empirical research, contextual studies and better theoretical models. Focus on the role of the citizen. Need to move towards other institutional levels. Need of more comparative studies.</p>
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reviews, focus groups, ethnographies, web statistics and content analysis. Evaluation studies, independent or as part of an experiment, are quite common across all national research environments, together with the use of content and discourse analysis. The latter seems to be preferred in studies focusing on deliberation practices within eParticipation, as in France, Italy, and Austria.

Summarizing the findings from the national reviews, it can be observed that the current panorama of eParticipation research, however varied, is often fragmented and heterogeneous in nature. However, it suggests some core conclusions regarding eParticipation, that can be synthesized as follows:

- *eParticipation must be analyzed in the context of other forms of participation.* A shared assumption resulting from empirical research investigation in the different national scenarios regards the interaction between the new channels related to eParticipation activities and the traditional forms of participation. A common conclusion reached by a large share of the research contributions is that eParticipation is to be analyzed in the context of such other forms of participation, to be either considered as background, independent and/ or dependent variables of the processes included in eParticipation initiatives.
- *New media supplement traditional forms of participation.* A large number of research contributions from the different national cases reach the conclusion that new, eParticipation-based platforms prove to be complementary of traditional participation channels, rather than to replace them.
- *New media often reinforce existing off-line patterns of participation, rather than changing them.* When implemented and successfully operating, eParticipation processes seem to follow the path of processes occurring in traditional, off-line participation processes, as research has known them so far. Together with being complementary to the traditional channels of participation, eParticipation initiatives, especially those promoted by public institutions, seem to follow patterns that are largely overlapping with those found in traditional means of participation. These patterns include the way and the extent of the influence on the decision-making processes and the actor composition of participatory groups.
- *Information dissemination and gathering, rather than deliberation and debate, dominate digital platforms initiated by parties and institutions.* eParticipation initiatives promoted by institutional actors and political parties tend to focus on information-oriented implementation of eParticipation platforms, rather than on platforms enabling deliberation and debate. This is widely reflected, for instance, in the cross-country research contributions on the adoption of eParticipation features in institutional websites. Basically all analyses focusing on web adoption of participatory devices, especially at the local level of government, bring evidence of a common neglect of deliberation-enabling features in on-line platforms, to the advantage of information-based implementations.
- *Politicians are generally reluctant to embrace new possibilities enabled by eParticipation.* Closely related to the above mentioned phenomenon, there is evidence of poor support of advanced eParticipation adoption by politicians across different countries. Many research contributions highlight the fact that behind a slow, or absent take-up of participatory features through digital means, there is an underlying reluctance of political decision-makers to engage in such activities and to support

them. Evidence of such a weak support is distributed across a wide variety of national research scenarios, at institutional and administrative level.

The review of national eParticipation research benefits from both mapping the research areas which are still currently overlooked in the different national eParticipation research contexts, and from suggesting a sketch for a new, European-wide agenda for the future of eParticipation research.

The main future directions in the research in eParticipation emerging from the international and cross-national analysis can be summarized as follows.

Conceptual development. As this review is mainly focused on empirical research, it is hard to reach solid conclusions about the conceptual backstage. The fragmentation of the empirical research does not support solid and coherent theory development. Non-coordinated methodologies or case studies, for example, make comparisons between data and findings difficult. Small-sized studies can propose exploratory hypotheses, but there is a need for wider studies to test theories. The development of theory can derive only from more coordinated efforts in empirical research, especially in a new research field such as eParticipation, also because of the complexity of eParticipation as a research object.

Empirical studies. Wider cross-national studies are needed in order to recombine the fragmentation of the empirical studies. In fact, in this field of research, the problem is not the lack of empirical studies but their narrow scale and ambition. The comparison of the national reviews still highlights the insufficient number of empirically-based, rigorous research contributions. The growing number of eParticipation initiatives in different countries should be an opportunity for wider, deeper and cross-country empirical studies, as well as for the development of a specific European level of eParticipation research. It is worthy of attention that bigger and more ambitious studies also imply a better coordination of ongoing work and resources.

Focus on relevant institutional levels of eParticipation other than the local one. The dominating focus on the local level of government reveals a gap as far as all other levels of government are concerned. Due to the widespread development of local eParticipation projects, the national and especially supranational levels (EU) of government are currently under-investigated, despite the importance of fostering citizen participation that characterizes the higher levels of government as such. Initiatives regarding, for instance, the use of ICT to foster citizen participation as a reaction to the so-called EU “democratic deficit” are worth a closer attention by the eParticipation research community.

Transdisciplinary research. Lastly, the review of national eParticipation research brings evidence of a situation of relatively isolated disciplinary approaches, with little cross-fertilization between them. eParticipation is studied from the perspective either of social sciences, including sociology, political science, policy analysis, etc., or of information systems – besides the more technical approaches. The different disciplines seem not to interfere with each other, and approaches that combine two or more disciplinary perspectives are still rare. Such a gap is even more challenging when considering the inherent degree of transdisciplinarity that characterizes eParticipation

as such: a field that embraces a wide array of key processes related to technical infrastructures, with so many social, political and cultural implications.

4 Conclusion

This paper provides the main results of an extensive analysis of the current state of eParticipation research in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden). The main research questions addressed in the literature of each country are included, and the shared characteristics and differences between them regarding the main research questions, the units of analysis, the research subjects, the methods used, the results and the future directions are discussed. As a result of this analysis of the national scenarios, a common set of research findings and future directions of research are identified. The main research findings emerging are the following:

- eParticipation must be analyzed in the context of other forms of participation;
- New media supplement traditional forms of participation;
- New media often reinforce existing off-line patterns of participation, rather than changing them;
- Information dissemination and gathering, rather than deliberation and debate, dominate digital platforms initiated by parties and institutions;
- Politicians are generally reluctant to embrace new possibilities enabled by eParticipation.

A comprehensive analysis of the six national cases has also identified the following gaps in eParticipation research:

- Conceptual development;
- Wider cross-national empirical research;
- Focus on the emerging institutional levels (European, national, regional) other than the local one.

At a more scholarly level, a challenge to be faced in the near future of eParticipation research concerns breaking the boundaries between disciplines in approaching the analysis of eParticipation processes. Given that eParticipation as such is a complex social, technical, political and also economic and management process, the research community will have to move away from a relatively persistent division between different disciplinary approaches to the mushrooming number of eParticipation processes in Europe. This also brings us to a further need identified in the analysis: the development of more solid conceptual frames. The refinement of new tools of analysis, and of new research methods to be used for investigating eParticipation needs in fact to stem directly from the interaction between disciplines, including sociology, political sciences, law, information systems, psychology and other social sciences. Moreover, the need for transdisciplinary research underlines the practical necessity of further networking between researchers at the European level.

Building a relevant body of knowledge around eParticipation, although still somehow fragmented and with room for improvement regarding shared concepts and research tools, has been basically accomplished so far. The next challenge to be faced in

the near future is to provide durable integration among different research communities in order to make this body of knowledge further flourish and cross-fertilize.

While the top-down and public institutions focus in eParticipation is still important, because it expresses the commitment of institutional decision-makers, citizen-initiated processes are becoming increasingly relevant in understanding what is going on in the “real world” of ICT-enabled new forms of democratic participation. At the level of promising research themes in the forthcoming eParticipation agenda, we have to highlight the fundamental importance of bottom-up, citizen-initiated eParticipation processes. The emergence of the Web 2.0 philosophy, the diffusion of social networking services and of entirely new platforms based on user-created content cannot be overlooked anymore as far as eParticipation research is concerned. Web 2.0 environments, such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, citizen blogging, etc., constitute now the new frontier of citizen interaction in the online world. We need to shift our focus from the top-down, institution-initiated eParticipation platforms, to the bottom-up, citizen-initiated ones, which are playing an increasingly relevant role in shaping the way citizens interact with decision-makers and the institutions. The new agenda of eParticipation research will have to include this focus shift in the immediate future.

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