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E-participation: a quick overview of recent qualitative trends

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly takes stock of two decades of e-participation initiatives based on a limited review of the academic literature. The purpose of the paper is to complement the results of the e-government Survey 2020. As such, the emphasis is on aspects that the e-government survey (based on analysis of e-government portals and on quantitative indicators) does not capture directly. Among those are the challenges faced by e-participation initiatives and key areas of attention for governments. The paper maps the field of e-participation and related activities, as well as its relationships with other governance concepts. Areas of recent development in terms of e-participation applications are briefly reviewed. The paper selectively highlights conclusions from the literature on different participation tools, as well as a list of key problematic areas for policy makers. The paper concludes that while e-participation platforms using new technologies have spread rapidly in developed countries in the first decade of the 2000s and in developing countries during the last 10 years, it is not clear that their multiplication has translated into broader or deeper citizen participation. Beyond reasons related to technology access and digital skills, factors such as lack of understanding of citizens' motivations to participate and the reluctance of public institutions to genuinely share agenda setting and decision-making power seem to play an important role in the observed limited progress.

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Keywords: E-participation; e-government; sustainable development goals.

Sustainable Development Goals: 16, 16.6, 16.7

CONTENTS

I   Introduction

E-participation has become a common instrument used by governments across the world as part of their e-government toolbox. This paper was prepared as a background paper for the chapter on e-participation of the 2020 edition of the United Nations e-government Survey. The e-government Survey, published every two years, provides an overview of recent developments in e-government at the national level, based on data collected from national e-government portals (see Box 1). This paper aims to complement the Survey's approach by reviewing recent qualitative trends and challenges in terms of e-participation, based on a review of recent literature.

The ambition here is not to cover in detail all developments in the field of e-participation – this would require an exhaustive report[1] and would face severe constraints in terms of data availability. Rather, the paper is intended as a kind of primer on e-participation for people who would like to have some background when they read global publications on e-government such as the UN e-government survey.

As such, the emphasis is on aspects that the e-government Survey does not capture directly. The paper maps the field of e-participation and related activities, as well as its relationships with other governance concepts. Areas of recent development in terms of e-participation applications are briefly reviewed. The paper provides a quick overview of selected salient issues in e-participation for policy makers, without entering into details. In all the paper, the objective is to flag important points or reference frameworks, not to elaborate on them or to provide new theoretical or empirical evidence.

The arguments made in the paper are based on a partial review of the literature. An initial set of references was obtained by searching the Scopus database based on keywords.[2] Additional references were obtained by

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Box 1
Scope of the United Nations E-government Survey

Since 2003, the United Nations E-government Survey has tracked developments in e-government in all countries. The Survey is a well-recognized global source of data on e-government. The methodology of the Survey is based on inspection of national government portals. It therefore focuses on the provision by government of electronic services, information, and opportunities for consultation and engagement on policy-making and service delivery, at the national (whole-of-government and sectoral) level.

Due to this methodology, the e-government Survey essentially provides information on the "supply-side" of e-participation and does not measure the "demand side" for participation. It does not either focus on the "e-democracy" aspect of e-participation, i.e. initiatives that aim to involve citizens in the construction of the political discourse. Lastly, the Survey does not yet systematically cover the sub-national level, where a large portion of the innovations in terms of e-participation have come from.

The Survey. does not assess the take-up and use of e-participation participation opportunities by citizens and the quality of the resulting participation. It does not measure outcomes of e-participation – primary outcomes of interest would include the difference made in the quality of policies and decisions made, and improvements in the quality of public services. Similarly, the Survey does not measure the costs and benefits of e-participation.

Source: Author's elaboration.

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[1] For example, see a recent publication covering e-participation (among other aspects of e-democracy) at the European level, Hennen et al., 2019. The report is 350 pages long.

[2] The keywords used were based on prior reviews of the field, including: Macintosh (2004); Saebø et al. (2008); and Medaglia (2012).

scanning the bibliography of the papers thus collected. In total, about 150 articles were read by the author. Only a subset of those - those found most relevant or compelling by the author - are mentioned here.

The remainder of the paper is constructed as follows. The next section covers definitional issues and locates e-participation with respect to other governance-related concepts with which it interacts. Section 3 surveys recent qualitative trends in terms of channels, mechanisms and tools for e-participation. Section 4 presents key challenges that require the attention of governments. Section 5 concludes.

II Defining E-participation

II.1 Definition

Definitions of e-participation found in the academic and practitioner literature vary, but most of them revolve around the basic concept of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to engage citizen in decision-making and public service delivery (Macintosh, 2004; Saebø et al., 2008, Medaglia, 2012). E-participation is more rarely defined as a branch of e-government with special focus on citizen engagement for deliberation and decision orientation (Welch, 2012). The definition used by the UN is "the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery so as to make it participatory, inclusive and deliberative" (UN, 2014).

Saebø, Rose and Flak (2008) define e-participation as a social activity, mediated by ICT, involving interaction between citizens, public administration and politicians. This definition highlights the key importance of the triangle citizens – public administration – politicians as actors in e-participation initiatives, and therefore as key stakeholders to consider when looking at the success and impact of such initiatives.

In all these definitions, government has a role to play. That is to say, e-participation usually does not cover civic initiatives or political discussions that take place without the involvement of the government as initiator, moderator, or receiver. Given the increasing presence of such initiatives in recent years, the question of their articulation with formal institutional processes has been a key subject of attention (see section 3 below). This paper focuses on participatory mechanisms in which the government plays a role.

II.2 Rationales for e-participation

As a sub-field of participation, e-participation is seen as necessary both for intrinsic reasons and for instrumental reasons. Intrinsic reasons are based on the idea that participation (online or offline) is a desirable goal, which contributes to inclusive societies both directly and through increased civic engagement. Instrumental reasons focus on the role that e-participation mechanisms can play in increasing government accountability (e.g. Peixoto and Fox, 2016), making public services more responsive to citizens' needs, and improving the quality of policies and legislation. Broader goals include strengthening the legitimacy of governments and citizens' trust in public institutions. In addition, e-participation is also analysed from a technology viewpoint as a way to enhance digital governance, for example for smart cities, and move towards digital societies. Contributions to the literature on e-participation have adopted one or more of these perspectives (Sanford and Rose, 2007).

By definition, e-participation is both a subset of participation and of e-government. It is also connected to several other dimensions of governance and public administration. The following sections briefly survey such relationships. A simplified conceptual map showing some of those relationships is shown in Figure 1.

II.3   E-Participation as a subset of participation

Participation is a key dimension of governance. (see UNDESA, 2018b, chapter 1). Based on Arnstein's participation ladder (Arnstein, 1969), several degrees of participation are usually distinguished. In the participation literature, a common reference is the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) scale. The scale has five steps: information; consultation; collaboration; involvement; and empowerment (see UN DESA, 2018).

The literature on e-participation has adopted different scales to measure levels of participation. Some authors use a five-point scale that mirror the IAPP scale, adding the "e-" prefix in front of the five points of that scale (see for example, Tambouris et al., 2007). However, experts of e-participation more commonly use a three-point scale that distinguishes between provision of information (whereby the government provides information to citizens); consultation (whereby the government consults citizens on policy or on service delivery at different stages of the process, and possibly provides feedback to them); and decision-making (whereby the government involves citizens in decision-making). The UN e-government Survey has used this scale since its inception. The three steps are sometimes referred to as e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering (Macintosh, 2004).

In general, while the distinction between the first two steps (information and consultation) is conceptually straightforward, distinguishing among involvement, collaboration and empowerment is not always easy. Another distinction that is relevant for analyzing e-participation is that between decision-making and agenda-setting (Dahl, 1989). While in the former, citizens can influence the decisions that are taken in the context of a given policy or service provision initiative, the choice of what to address is made by the government. In contrast, agenda-setting means that citizens, not the government, can propose what should be acted upon. In the context of e-participation, this is a key difference between initiatives such as policy consultations, where citizens have the possibility to provide comments and inputs during the process of policy elaboration, and e-petitions, through which citizens can influence the policy agenda of formal institutions. Based on this, and even though it is not currently used by the literature on e-participation, it can be useful to adopt a four-point scale of e-participation, which distinguishes: (i) provision of information; (ii) consultation; (iii) collaboration (by which the government and non-governmental actors work together to arrive at decisions or to deliver public services); and empowerment (agenda-setting).

Box 2
Information as a basis for participation

While in common language the mere provision of information is not considered as participation, it is included in all participation scales, for good reasons. In general, it is a precondition to meaningful participation – i.e., without the provision of information by the government, there cannot be meaningful engagement. Modern transparency initiatives such as Open Government Data emphasize this relationship heavily.

Secondly, specific information (as opposed to broad-based transparency) is necessary as a basis for elaboration of public services that meet the needs of citizens. The discourse about co-creation and co-production of public services emphasizes this aspect (UN, 2014).

Thirdly, disclosure of information regarding the performance of public services and citizens' feedback thereon is also key to opening accountability channels that may lead to increased responsiveness of governments in the provision of services (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

Source: Author's elaboration.

II.4 E-participation within e-government

E-government is usually defined as "the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for the provision of public services". Most of the e-government literature thus focuses on the electronic delivery of public services. E-participation is usually considered part of e-government. This is understandable, inasmuch as e-participation refers to "those participation initiatives that are mediated through ICTs".

However, the scope of e-government has broadened beyond the delivery of public services, as reflected by a semantic shift from e-government to "digital government" and "digital governance", which emphasizes the role that ICT play in governance. A large field of literature studies "e-democracy", defined as "the use of ICT to support the democratic decision-making processes" (Macintosh, 2004).[3] That literature puts emphasis on civic participation in the construction of the political discourse, and engagement of citizens in direct partici-pation (as opposed to participation through representatives). In between the two, the sphere of policy-making is usually considered as part of e-government and is included in studies of e-democracy and e-participation.

For conceptual clarity therefore, it is convenient to distinguish a continuum that goes from construction of the political discourse and engagement of citizens in political agendas, to policy-making, to the design and delivery of public services. It is difficult to define precise boundaries between those categories. However, the associated e-participation mechanisms vary depending on where in the continuum one looks (see Figure 2). It is also clear that governments put different emphasis on the three categories depending on the political regimes and the prevailing values in public administration (Rose et al., 2015). This has consequences for the understanding of the potential and limitations of e-participation initiatives (see below section 4.11).

II.5 Link with other concepts

Other dimensions of governance are connected to e-participation and often mentioned in relation to the latter. For conceptual clarity, it is important to distinguish between those.

Inclusiveness or inclusion

In the context of e-government, inclusion can be defined as the imperative for governments to reach all citizens. From the beginning of e-government, there has been a concern that digital technologies do not reach certain segments of the population, and digital services are not equally friendly to all groups in the popula-tion. Concerns about the digital divide based on availability of IT infrastructure (for example, Internet access or mobile access) have given way to a concept of multiple divides, which incorporate both availability and access concerns as well as issues of differential digital literacy and skills (see below). This is sometimes referred to as "e-inclusion". While these concerns are important in assessing the success of e-participation initiatives, they relate to a distinct concept, and will not be the central focus of this paper.

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[3] The relationship between e-democracy and e-participation in the academic literature is not clear-cut. Some authors include e-voting in e-democracy but not in e-participation (Macintosh, 2004). Other authors take the two concepts as synonymous (Reddick and Norris, 2013). E-democracy studies tend to be based on the assumption that participatory democracy is the goal to achieve, and tend to emphasize the transformative effects of technology use and the political impacts of electronic participation. E-participation studies are often silent on the ultimate goal of e-participation and tend to focus on the socio-technical aspects of participation (e.g. design, suitability and accessibility, user friendliness, etc.) (Susha and Grönlund, 2012).

Transparency

Transparency is usually defined as the principle of enabling the public to gain information about the operations and structures, decision-making processes and outcomes and performance of the public sector (Heald, 2006). Transparency encompasses multiple channels, sub-dimensions, which include: access to information frameworks; mandatory disclosure; and proactive, voluntary disclosure, including open government data (OGD) (See UNDESA, 2019). Inasmuch as information provision is considered a part of participation, there is a natural intersection between the two concepts. In particular, OGD efforts have often been touted as (potentially) promoting e-participation – specifically, by providing citizens data with which they can engage in accountability initiatives, and by providing the public with data that can be used to create new digital services in partnership with government (co-creation), for example through hackatons or other forms of innovation competition. However, OGD initiatives have followed other goals as well, and are not considered as an intrinsic component of e-participation initiatives in this paper. Other forms of transparency such as mandated transparency and access to information have preexisted e-participation, and are not directly aimed at spurring participation, even though they might contribute to it in specific cases.
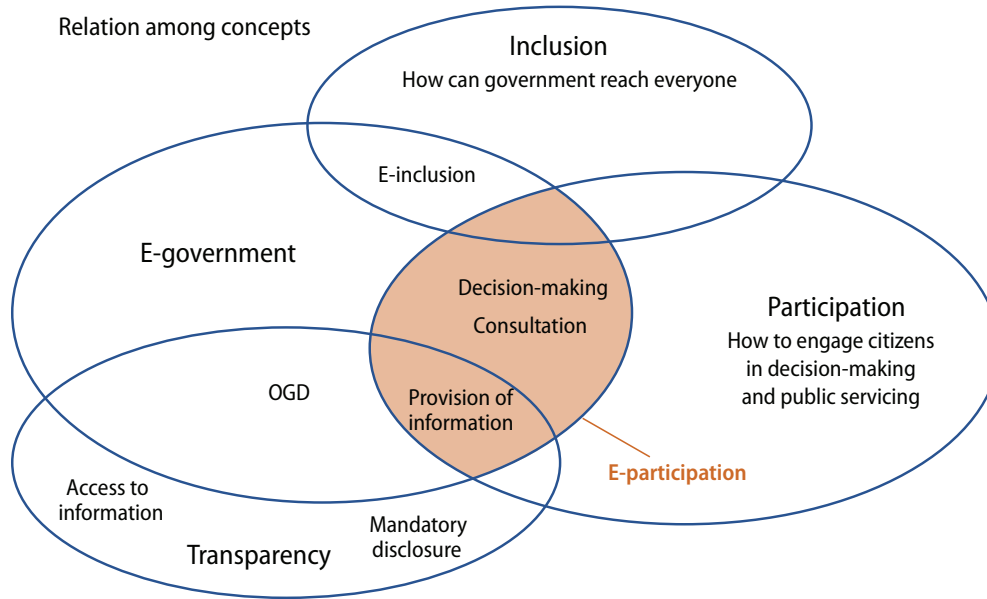
Accountability

As described in the World Public Sector report 2019, participation (in combination with transparency) is often a key component of accountability mechanisms, for examples those related to holding governments responsible for the provision of public services (UN, 2019). E-participation is no exception. There has been a rapid development of digital citizen feedback mechanisms on public services, both in developed and developing countries (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

Communication

A large part of the exchange of information that takes place between governments to citizens does not directly stem from participation goals. This encompasses, inter alia, communication about what the government does; communication about rules as they apply to public services and citizens' obligations (laws, regulations, codes, etc.); and individualized communication between the government and citizens regarding administrative transactions that concern them. As part of e-government initiatives, many governments have created features for individual accounts and digital access to all government services on a portal (see UN, 2018a). For instance, citizens can pay their tax online, see the records of their tax filings and other transactions, and ask government employees about documents or processes that concern them online through secured channels and electronic IDs. However, this personalization of online communication is merely a digitization of administrative transactions and does not imply participation.

On the other hand, many other types of communication activities are usually considered part of e-participation. For example, in the context of a parliament's activities, this includes providing information on the contact information of members of parliaments; on the calendar of parliamentary activities; on the forthcoming opportunities for public consultation and other forms of engagement (Missingham, 2011).

Figure 1
Relations among e-participation and selected governance concepts

Relation among concepts

Inclusion
How can government reach everyone

E-inclusion

E-government

Decision-making

Consultation

Participation
How to engage citizens in decision-making and public servicing

OGD

Provision of information

E-participation

Access to information

Mandatory disclosure

Transparency

Source: Author's elaboration.

Note: The figure represents e-participation as the intersection of participation and e-government. The figure refers to the three classic levels of e-participation used in the e-government Survey: provision of information, consultation, and decision-making. Transparency intersects with e-participation around the provision of information, including through open government data (OGD). Inclusion intersects with e-participation as well, especially in relation to consultation and decision-making.

Figure 2
Spectrum of e-participation according to the political dimension and level of participation and examples of associated tools

More political → Less political

	Construction of political discourse	Policy-making	Public service delivery
Less engagement			
Provision of information	Political parties' website, social media	Provision of information on laws, regulations, strategies, budgets, administrative processes, etc.	Information on public services
			Open Government Data
	Voting advice applications	Ideation forums	Customer feedback
Consultation	Parties platforms	Parliamentary inquiries	Consultations on services
	Candidates' website, social media		Participatory planning (e.g. urban)
		Consultations on draft policies (incl. feedback from govt.)	Co-production (e.g. crowdsourced disaster maps)
Collaboration	E-voting and m-voting	E-voting and m-voting (e.g. for part. budgeting, referendum)	Co-creation (e.g. innovation competitions, hackatons)
More engagement	Agenda setting (e.g. e-parties, collaborative electoral platforms)	Citizens' initiatives E-petitions	
		Participatory budgeting	
		Focus of the e-government Survey	

Source: Author's elaboration.

Note: The elements in the figure are not aligned, to reflect the fact that their position along the vertical scale (levels of engagement) can vary depending on the details of their design. The same can apply horizontally as well. For example, participatory budgeting has aspects of both decision-making and public service delivery.

II.6   "New" versus "old" participation tools

ICTs make existing participatory arrangements easier to implement and provides alternative, cheaper ways of eliciting participation. In particular, the introduction of Web 2.0 has introduced new possibilities for participation. Specifically, it has decreased the costs of providing information electronically; opened new channels for doing so; and its functionalities have allowed for interaction that does not need to be synchronous or physically limited to one place. Compared to traditional participation mechanisms, this allows governments to reach out and receive feedback from more people. For example, setting up consultations on policy drafts by making them available for comment on a public platform is in theory a low-cost activity, compared to holding in-person consultation meetings or using other systems to disseminate the draft and elicit, collect and compile comments. Hence, within the same legal and institutional context, ICTs create additional opportunities for interaction between governments and citizens. However, many e-participation mechanisms are digital versions of pre-existing mechanisms or processes. For instance, consultations and participatory budgeting existed prior to the Internet; e-voting or m-voting is either a complement to traditional ballot casting or a more convenient way to vote; etc.

On the other hand, ICTs have opened genuinely new ways of doing participation, both in terms of channels for participation and of outputs of participatory processes. This is particularly evident for products or services that rely on the aggregation of individual, voluntary inputs made by many citizens acting in a decentralised fashion. Collaborative mapping, as applied to real-time disaster and hazard maps, feedback on public services, and other applications, were made possible by the combination of geographic information systems (GIS) and mobile technologies including video, text messaging and Internet access. ICTs have also made possible the co-creation of new public services, for example through hackatons or other forms of innovation competitions sponsored by public agencies.

The boundary between "old" and "new" participation tools is not always clear-cut, however. For example, today's "citizen science" based on crowdsourcing has ancestors well back into the 19th century. In many cases, making a participation practice digital mostly allows for doing more, faster and cheaper.

II.7   Expectations about e-participation – historical perspective

E-participation emerged as a field of work and research early on at the start of the e-government transformation. By 2005 it had become a widely used term, and many e-participation initiatives were ongoing across the world (Macintosh, 2004).

The political impetus for e-participation came from different sources. In Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, e-participation was seen as a way to re-create trust in public institutions, increase their legitimacy, and re-engage citizens in democratic processes in the face of growing indifference toward formal political processes (Kalampokis et al., 2008). E-participation was thus seen as an opportunity to bridge the "democratic deficit" in Europe. The European Union actively supported e-participation projects in EU member states as well as e-participation research, including through supporting the Demo-Net practitioners network. Many innovations in e-participation came from the local level.

In the United States, by 2008 all levels of governments had widely adopted e-government (Reddick and Norris, 2013). The momentum for e-participation grew sharply following the Obama Administration's Open Government Directive of 2009, which spurred quick actions by both Federal agencies and local governments to put in place e-participation features (for instance, e-consultations, use of social media). (Mossberger et al., 2013). This added to a range of pre-existing legal requirements for participation in different policy processes, such as rulemaking, and progressive digitization of those (Epstein et al., 2014).

In other countries, the impetus to adopt e-participation has come from various motives depending on the country considered. Those have included flagship initiatives on good government and good governance, on e-government, and on open government and open data (see Picazo-Vela et al., 2012, for the case of Mexico).

In developing countries, e-participation developed later than in developed countries. This mirrored lags in diffusion of the Internet and of e-government. However, on average the time lag was small (less than a decade), and as e-government developed and with it the provision of information on the web and later the adoption of social media by governments, e-participation initiatives also became commonplace. For instance, the United Nations e-government Survey has documented the rapid adoption of e-consultations between 2012 and 2018, with many countries now having some version of this participation tool in place (UN, 2018).

High hopes were initially placed in Internet 2.0 with regard to e-participation, by governments and experts alike. The reasoning, expressed in myriad academic papers and policy documents, was that interactive functions of the web 2.0, by drastically reducing the cost of participation and expanding the realm of possibilities for interaction between governments and their citizens, would almost by itself result in broader participation and higher levels of citizen engagement. In particular, because of their interactive features, social media were often presented as a way to promote two-way communication between governments and citizens and enhance both the level and quality of participation. The new technologies would enable new relationships between citizens and their governments, thereby strengthening government legitimacy and citizens' trust in public institutions. They would support a move from "thin democracy" to "deep" democracy (Tai et al., 2019). These expectations, fueled by the positivism or "techno-optimism" which tended to accompany e-government development, have by and large have not been matched by results on the ground (see below). However, recent studies have found them well alive, including in developing countries where e-participation initiatives have multiplied over the past decade (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

III Recent qualitative trends at the global level

III.1 Rapid development of the "supply side" of e-participation

The second decade of this century has witnessed the rapid development of the "supply side" of e-participation. as illustrated by successive UN e-government Surveys. Many governments now "check all boxes", in the sense that they offer a range of opportunities for e-participation that goes beyond the provision of information. Change in this regard was particularly fast between 2012 and 2018. This is valid for most world regions, with the exception of Africa and Oceania (UN, 2018).

The focus on "advanced" e-participation tools and mechanisms is illustrated by initiatives submitted by governments for the United Nations Public Service Awards (UNPSA) in 2018 and 2019, the last two years for which data are available.[4] Out of 569 initiatives featured in the UNPSA database for 2018 and 2019, 24 initiatives were identified as being fully relevant to e-participation (Table 1). The initiatives come from all regions, with Asia, Latin America and Europe most represented. Most of them relate to "advanced" forms of e-participation, including consultations and feedback mechanisms as well as mechanisms involving direct decision-making or agenda setting such as e-petitions and participatory budgeting. Half of the initiatives emanate from the local level, and half are national in nature.

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[4]   https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database/Home/UNPSA-Initiatives-and-the-SDGs

While not representative of governments' efforts and priorities overall (for example, some countries do not submit cases for the UNPSA, and some countries submit many more cases than others), this source is interesting because it reflects the perception of governments about public administration initiatives that they consider cutting edge and worthy of being rewarded.

Recent years have seen what can best be described as a proliferation of e-consultation mechanisms of various natures and purposes, for policy making, rulemaking, citizen feedback on public services, and complaint systems.

National e-petition platforms are also on the rise, prolonging a trend that started already in the last decade. More generally, "ideation forums" - platforms where citizens can submit ideas or proposals. have also multiplied. They cover a wide spectrum in terms of institutionalization, going from relatively unstructured platforms with no pre-established links to the formal decision-making process, to more structured systems reflected in the legal framework and having a clear position in the formal institutional system, such as e-petitions. An example of the former would be the "Vosidées" platform in Luxembourg (Feilner, 2016). An example of the latter would be the recent Westminster e-petition system in the United Kingdom (Asher et al., 2019), or e-petitions in Germany (Jungherr and Jürgens, 2010). A third type of mechanisms, which has received much attention in some European countries lately, is the "citizens' initiative", by which citizens can submit proposals which (upon meeting certain conditions, e.g. in terms of support) can be voted upon by citizens directly, without passing through the executive or legislative institutions. Other recent trends include the rapid development of initiatives based on crowdsourcing, as hackatons and innovation competitions, to create new e-services.

Table 1
Initiatives related to e-participation submitted to the UN Public Service Awards in 2018 and 2019

Main area of e-participation addressed	Local	National
Information	Argentina Republic of Korea	Indonesia Spain Thailand
Citizen feedback and complaint systems	Indonesia	India Mexico Uzbekistan
Consultation	Brazil Republic of Korea	Armenia
Coproduction		Indonesia Malaysia Mauritius
E-petition	Republic of Korea	
Ideation forum	Austria	
Multi-function platform	Argentina Spain	Singapore
Participatory budgeting	Australia Colombia Republic of Korea	Portugal

Source: Author's elaboration, from UNPSA database.

III.2   Combining online and offline activities in support of e-participation

Empirical studies that have studied successful e-participation initiatives over time emphasize the importance of offline activities to support e-participation. This was already noted a decade ago (Panopoulou et al., 2010). Combining online and offline activities is a widespread practice. E-participation initiatives have adopted "packages" of offline and online activities in different fields such as e-rulemaking (Epstein et al., 2014), environmental impact assessments (Sinclair et al., 2017), participatory initiatives for climate change action (Pina et al., 2017) and participatory budgeting (Ertiö et al., 2019; Falanga, 2018). Activities that are often found in support of e-participation include: advertising the initiatives and having outreach plans (both offline and online); alternating electronic and physical meetings; providing educational material on the issues being discussed; and making linkages with other programmes or initiatives. This aspect is closely linked with the institutionalization of e-participation initiatives within organizational processes, a key factor of success (Steinbach et al., 2019).

Box 4
Activities in support of the Decide Madrid platform

Decide Madrid is a virtual participation platform, put in place by the city of Madrid in 2015. The platform has been judged to be successful; the initiative was a recipient of the United Nations Public Service Awards in 2018.

The web platform is complemented by alternative channels that enable sectors of the population affected by the digital divide or other difficulties to exercise their right to comment.

The initiative is supported by a multidisciplinary team of public employees with professionals from various fields (legal, economic, administrative, social sciences, computer science, etc.), which assumes the functions of implementation and monitoring of participatory processes, the inclusion of all social sectors and the transfer of the platform to other institutions. Other municipal entities are collaborating to the platform's development: 26 Citizen Service Offices, the telephone service, 21 Local Forums (spaces for territorial face-to-face participation). The municipal service in charge of managing the platform has an annual budget of almost € 2 million for expenses related to communication and dissemination (letters at home to inform about the voting processes, posters, informative brochures, press and social media content, positioning in social networks and search engines and monitoring), conferences, procedures related to participation and voting (dynamization by professionals, mobile information and voting points, web analytics) and evaluation of all participatory projects.

A specific department, the Department of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy, has been created in the municipal structure to ensure that all voices are heard. The department meets with social organizations and institutions that serve specific groups to detect barriers in the exercise of participation and propose solutions on accessibility, dissemination, usability and address the gender perspective.

Source: UNDESA, UNPSA database.

III.3   Innovation in e-participation largely comes from the sub-national level

Much innovation in terms of e-participation has come from the local level. There are multiple reasons for this. First, participation is easier to organize when all participants are physically located in the same place, and has been found easier to stimulate when it is related to citizens' immediate concerns, making local issues a fertile ground for participation and for genuine sharing of decision-making power (participatory budgeting) and agenda setting (e-petitions). The worldwide diffusion of participatory budgeting (offline or online) illustrates

this (see UN, 2019, chapter 3). Second, the large number of local governments and the variations in the priorities they give to engaging citizens has translated into a wide variety of experiments in terms of e-participation.

Third, it is at the local level that the application of several new technologies (for example, GIS coupled with web or mobile functions, or gamification) can most readily be used for coproduction of public services (for example, participatory maintenance of public infrastructure) and for co-creation (for instance, participatory urban planning, participatory maps of natural disasters or epidemics). Many of the innovations pioneered at the local level can also work at the national level.

Multi-function local e-participation platforms are becoming standard. Many companies as well as non-governmental organizations propose off-the-shelf products that offer a range of "standard" e-participation features such as e-voting, petition systems, consultation forums, participatory budgeting, user surveys, calls for proposals, etc.[5] Some of them are open source, such as Consul, the platform used by Decide Madrid (see Box 5). In order to help local governments that contemplate organizing public consultations select the appropriate platform for their needs, the French government provides a comparison tool of existing platforms, which uses multiple criteria.[6]

Other types of platforms are increasingly popular, for instance those set up for citizens to provide feedback on the condition of roads and public infrastructure. FixmyStreet, a free software using open source technologies, initiated in the United Kingdom and is currently used in 10 countries and several municipalities.[7]

Box 5
Multi-purpose platforms: the Decide Madrid platform

In 2015, the city of Madrid created the Decide Madrid web platform, with the objective of promoting direct citizen participation. The platform is a web-based tool that facilitates several types of participatory processes, including: (i) ideation forum: any citizen can make a proposal to improve the city. If the proposal receives a sufficient number of supports, it is put to the vote of all citizens; if approved, it becomes binding for the municipality, which commits to implementing it. (ii) consultations: the City Council, before carrying out an action, consults the citizens about its opportunity, about the criteria that must be followed or gives citizens the opportunity to choose between alternative projects. (iii) participatory budgeting: the City Council reserves an amount of money for projects proposed and voted on by citizens. In 2016 and 2017, 100 million euros have been reserved annually, the largest amount dedicated to participatory budgets in the world at that time.

The software tool developed for this project, Consul, is open source and is used by many institutions around the world (130 institutions in 33 countries), including the cities of Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Turin. The shared use of technology has allowed for the sharing of experiences and knowledge among the administrations that use the tool.

Citizen participation through the project has been high, with thousands of participants in consultations on strategic plans, new municipal regulations, participatory budgets, urban projects, and citizen proposals on sustainability or transport.

Source: Author's elaboration from UNDESA, UNPSA database and http://consulproject.org/.

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[5]   For instance, Citizen Lab, Delib, and Cap Collectif. See respectively citizenlab.co; delib.net; https://cap-collectif.com

[6]   https://consultation.etalab.gouv.fr/lesoutils.html

[7]   https://fixmystreet.org/

III.4   Increasingly blurred boundaries between public and private e-participation initiatives

Boundaries between public and private initiatives in e-participation have become blurrier over the past decade. This reflects a number of developments. First, in terms of IT solutions used, e-participation platforms increasingly rely for some of their features on components developed by the private sector. This includes social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and others, but also the Global Positioning System, GIS functionalities and underlying maps such as Google Maps or OpenStreetMap, which can be combined to other components by mobile technology.

Second, in terms of participation and citizen engagement itself, the private sector and not-for-profit organizations have built platforms for citizen action or user feedback. Some well-known platforms include I Paid A Bribe (India) to report corruption and Change.org to start a petition. More generally, the development of Web 2.0 functionalities (including social media) has led to a dramatic increase in the volume of one-to-many and many-to-many communication among citizens. In many countries, citizens-to-citizens platforms (not moderated by the Government) aim to generate ideas that citizens would like to see featured in the political agenda (Päivärinta and Saebø, 2005). Those forums generally attract more traffic than government-led participation platforms (Bohman et al., 2015), which places them in competition with official forums. An example of this is the range of e-petition (or assimilated) tools in Russia, with at least six tools with similar functions and audience (Vidiasova et al., 2016).

For at least a decade, governments have felt the importance of these citizens-to-citizens forums for "feeling the pulse" of the population - that is, monitoring trends in opinions and concerns among citizens (Omar et al., 2014). The frontier with Government-mediated forums has sometimes become porous, as government officials may participate in and monitor the content of those forums.
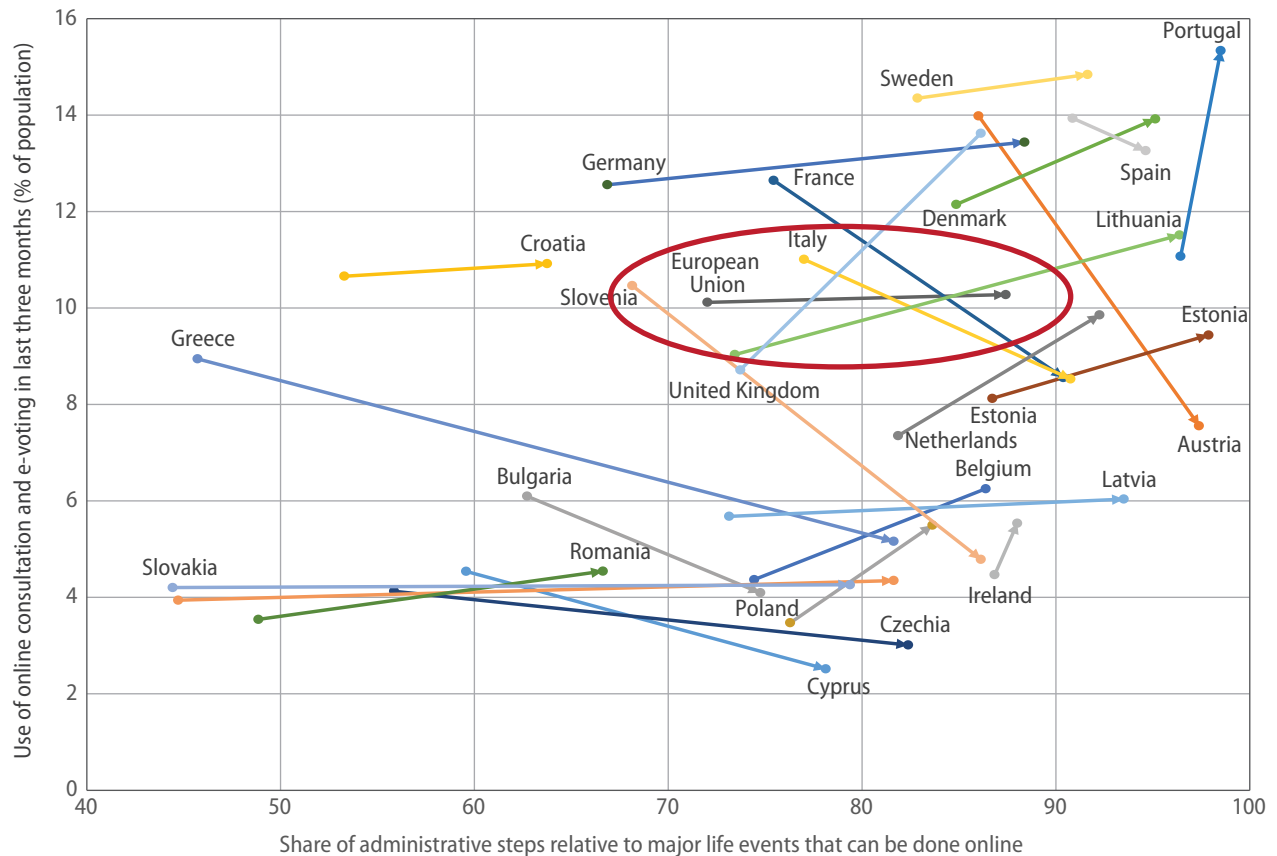
III.5   In many cases, "demand" for e-participation remains low

Demand for e-participation from citizens seems highly variable across contexts, including countries, sectors, and nature of participation. In the absence of global data on take-up and outcomes of e-participation, trends can only be surmised from anecdotal evidence. To take the example of Europe, the region with the most comprehensive data on e-participation, low take-up of e-participation initiatives was a concern for governments a decade ago. It is not clear whether the situation has changed during the past few years. For instance, in the European Union between 2014 and 2019, levels of citizens' participation in (national or local) electronic consultations and voting[8] have remained essentially the same, with ups and down in individual countries reflecting idiosyncratic circumstances (and perhaps the data uncertainty range) from one year to another. As a whole, ten percent of the population are found to have engaged in e-consultation or electronic voting over the past three months. This is in spite of a rapid increase in the availability of online services, perhaps reflecting the push for "digital by default" that underlies Europe's digital strategy (see Figure 3). Hence, increased presence of e-government has not automatically led to increased electronic participation.

At the level of individual initiatives, the literature abounds with examples of e-participation platforms with very low levels of participation, or which fail to sustain interest from citizens (for one example among many, see Saebø et al., 2011). Even countries that are very advanced in e-government and project it as a priority in international arenas such as Estonia can register failures in e-participation projects. For instance, Toots (2019) assesses the e-participation platform Osale.ee as a failure, and refers to government reports drawing similar conclusions.

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8   Specifically, indicator 3b8 from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) produced by the European Commission.

Figure 3
Availability of services online and use of e-consultation and E-voting in European countries, 2014-2019

III.6   A more cautious view of e-participation from governments?

The perspectives of government on e-participation are hard to assess objectively. There is always a gap between policy discourses, which may put citizen engagement and participation high on the political agenda, and the real appetite for increasing participation. This gap varies across countries and across time.

On the one hand, in many countries, participation is still high on the advertised agenda, and it resonates with the 2030 Agenda. Some studies point to high expectations from e-participation in some developing countries (Peixoto and Fox, 2016). On the other hand, in the European Union, which was an early champion of e-participation, a striking shift can be observed in policy and programmes documents, from optimistic expectations on reviving civic engagement and democracy through electronic means typical in documents from the early 2000s, to a more "defensive" view and approach in current ones. It has been mentioned that the current European Digital Strategy focuses on the single digital market and not much on e-democracy and e-participation (Lironi, 2018). Similarly, it has been noted that while the European Union was an early and significant funder of early e-participation initiatives (Panopoulou et al., 2010),[10] European funding

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9   The data is accessible at: https://digital-agenda-data.eu/datasets/desi/visualizations.

10   Europe funded pilot e-participation projects, a European e-participation initiative for higher education (MyUniversity), a network of practitioners (DemoNet), among many other projects.

for e-participation has been minimal in recent years. Recent calls for proposals under the Horizon 2020 programme focus on concerns such as security, the polarization of opinions, the "limits in the capacity of internet to act as a platform of rational communication between equal participants" (sic), the "capture" of e-participation technologies by populist movements, and other perceived threats to democracy. Expectations about co-creation and co-production of public services seem less affected than those related to political participation. Overall, it seems clear that optimistic expectations that were placed on e-participation two decades ago have not been fully met.

IV   Challenges to e-participation: Some areas for the attention of policy-makers

Many of the challenges and concerns that face e-participation today mirror those that were identified earlier in the context of participation in general. They include, among others: token participation; elite capture of participatory processes; lack of voice for marginalised groups; "participation fatigue" due to the proliferation of participatory processes with little meaningful impact; high but low-visibility costs of running and sustaining participation processes, matched with insufficient resources; lack of capacity in public administration to manage participatory processes. E-participation also faces challenges that are specific to the electronic variant. The rest of this section highlights some areas of concern that should attract the attention of policy-makers wanting to promote e-participation.

IV.1   Understanding the role of digital divide(s).

Digital divide has been a concern since the beginning of e-government. While, in line with the heavy technology focus of e-government at its beginning, the digital divide was initially framed in terms of access to technology (infrastructure, then Internet, then broadband), the concept has been broadened and refined to include a series of layers that combine to exclude certain groups from e-government and more generally from voice in digital governance.

Recent analyses of the digital divide distinguish at least three layers of digital literacy on top of physical access: the skills to operate computers and the Internet; the skills to look for and analyze information; and the skills to use web 2.0 functionalities to achieve one's individual goals. To these, frameworks such as the European Union's Digital Competency Framework add the ability to communicate and collaborate online, skills in problem-solving, skills in digital content creation, and skills in Internet safety (see Box 6).

In the case of e-participation (and especially advanced forms of it in the participation ladder), an additional layer consists in the skills necessary to analyse complex policy proposals and to provide inputs on those that are deemed relevant by policy-makers. These skills go well beyond the ability to use simple features of social media, such as "Like" buttons or equivalent (Epstein et al., 2014). For some types of co-creation (e.g. hackatons or other innovation competitions), participation requires very specialized skills, which can only be expected to be mastered by very small groups of individuals.

While concerns of lack of physical access to ICTs are valid for many developing countries, the experience of developed countries has shown that other barriers than access influence e-participation. But conversely, it also

Box 6
Europe's Digital Competency Framework

In the context of Europe's Digital Single Agenda and successive Digital strategies, the European Commission has defined standards of basic Internet skills. Those are used, inter alia, in education in order to define digital education curricula. The latest such framework, the European Digital Competence Framework (DigComp), distinguishes five areas in digital literacy, with 21 related competences.

1) Information and data literacy: To articulate information needs, to locate and retrieve digital data, information and content. To judge the relevance of the source and its content. To store, manage, and organise digital data, information and content.

2) Communication and collaboration: To interact, communicate and collaborate through digital technologies while being aware of cultural and generational diversity. To participate in society through public and private digital services and participatory citizenship. To manage one's digital identity and reputation.

3) Digital content creation: To create and edit digital content To improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge while understanding how copyright and licences are to be applied. To know how to give understandable instructions for a computer system.

4) Safety: To protect devices, content, personal data and privacy in digital environments. To protect physical and psychological health, and to be aware of digital technologies for social well-being and social inclusion. To be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.

5) Problem solving: To identify needs and problems, and to resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in digital environments. To use digital tools to innovate processes and products. To keep up-to-date with the digital evolution.

Source: European Commission.

shows that developing countries, where lack of ICT infrastructure and access is an issue, may face even greater difficulties than developed countries in fostering e-participation.

IV.2 Broadening the focus beyond technology to social and institutional factors

E-participation initiatives have often been conceived and implemented through a heavy focus on technology aspects, to the detriment of aspects of organizational change in public institutions and broader socio-technological considerations (see below). While the technological dimension of e-participation is clearly important, exclusive or quasi-exclusive focus on technology has been perceived as an important limitation and cause for failure of e-participation projects since the beginning of e-participation as a distinct sphere of activity (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). This is seen as part of a technology-centered approach to e-government in general. However, in comparison to other components of e-government (e.g., the digitization of public services), evaluations of e-participation initiatives have consistently pointed out that setting up platforms for e-participation is not sufficient, by itself, to stimulate participation. More broadly, technology, by itself, cannot be expected to increase civic engagement and participation (Saebø et al., 2008; Macintosh et al., 2009; Medaglia, 2012).

> ### Box 7
> ### Are social media well adapted to e-participation?
>
> Great expectations were put by governments on social media for e-participation at the beginning of the 2000s. Because of their interactive features, they were often presented as a way to promote two-way communication and enhance both the level and quality of participation. A decade later, existing analyses of social media content from e-participation platforms and channels (mostly done in developed countries) consistently showed that social media were used mostly to inform the public, much less to consult them. This was observed both for national and sub-national governments (for Norway, see Saebø, 2011; for the USA, see Reddick and Norris, 2013; for Australia, see Missingham, 2011). In other words, governments had not utilised the two-way communication features of social media as much as expected. Another key concern was that social media were not necessarily well adapted to support rational discussions that meet the criteria of deliberative democracy (Medaglia, 2012). Lastly, social media on their own do not provide a panacea for organizing meaningful consultations in complex areas such as rulemaking (Epstein et al., 2014). These problems have remained of actuality, in spite of the development of increasingly sophisticated methods for e.g. analyzing social media content.
>
> Source: Author's elaboration.

IV.3   Being clear on the goals of e-participation

It has been observed that failure of e-participation initiatives can often be traced to a lack of clear objectives for e-participation. This is not specific to e-participation initiatives; it was already observed in the 1970s, before e-government came into existence.[11]

Because e-participation is often conceived as a means to promote citizen engagement and democracy, e-participation projects often (implicitly or explicitly) have a strong component or objective of citizen education and support building. Why this is sometimes a direct goal of participation projects from the government point of view (for example, to increase awareness and acceptability of government plans in the population), objectives such as increasing civic literacy and promoting sustained citizen engagement often go beyond other objectives that are of direct relevance to the agencies that have to implement them. Yet, they imply costs and require adequate resources.

IV.4   The need to analyze varied, hard to reconcile stakeholders' expectations and incentives to participate

E-participation projects in general have many stakeholders. Central stakeholders are citizens (or citizen's groups), politicians, and public administration (Saebø, Flak and Sein, 2011). In addition, each e-participation project has its own additional stakeholders (Susha and Grönlund, 2012). The sustained success of e-participation initiatives (e.g. policy forums) closely depends on how well those initiatives align with the expectations, needs and incentives of stakeholders. Those tend to differ across stakeholder groups. Politicians may be more interested to communicate and advocate for their agendas; public administration's expectations and motivation to foster participation are shaped by institutional ethos and culture, legal requirements and other factors,

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[11]   In the context of the USA, Glass (1979) observed that the objectives of participation were generically different for the government and for citizens, and that reconciling the two was far from obvious. He also observed that because participation was seen as a commendable goal in itself (then increasingly supported by legal or regulatory requirements) in addition to being an instrument, participation promoters often did not define clear objectives of participation projects. Lack of clear goals led to lack of clear criteria for selecting participatory tools, which in turn could negatively affect the outcome of participation processes (Glass, 1979).

and framed by their perception of the value that participation mechanisms can create (Omar et al., 2014); citizens' motivation incentives to engage and level of commitment can be extremely diverse (see Box 8).

Incentives to engage also vary over time. For example, it has been observed that politicians' engagement on participatory platforms depends heavily on the electoral cycle. Yet, support from the political side has been shown to be a key factor in the success of e-participation initiatives (Saebø et al., 2011). The motivation of citizens to participate can also decrease over time when they feel that their contributions are not recognized by the government. This has been observed for e-petitions in the United Kingdom before the current system was put in place (Asher et al., 2019, see below).

Different channels for participation involve different levels of efforts for participants. By the same token, increased participation as measured by the number of people who sign e-petitions or react to communication from government on social media does not mean that engagement is sustained over time. For example, it has been mentioned that e-petitions were a form of low-effort participation, which does not lead to sustained citizen engagement (Miller, 2008). Analysis of e-petition support in Germany and in the United Kingdom has shown that many individuals sign petitions, but do not engage in the following discussion of issues in the formal process of taking the petitions forward in Parliament (Asher et al., 2019; Jungherr and Jürgens, 2010).

Box 8

Heterogeneity of stakeholders' motivations and commitment: e-petitions versus co-creation

E-petitions. Motivations for citizens to engage in e-petitions have been found to be varied. In the case of Germany, it was found that a small number of individuals participated in several petitions, while the majority of signatories were engaged only in one type of issues (Jungherr and Jürgens, 2010).

Co-creation. The motivations for citizens to engage in co-creation are not necessarily similar to those that underlie other forms of e-participation. Visibility and career advancement constitute clear motivations in some cases. A study of the motivation of participants in 11 open data hackatons organized by the Dutch agriculture department showed that citizens were predominantly motivated to engage in hackatons as part of their work. The study found that developers and problem owners were mainly motivated by fun and enjoyment. (Purwanto et al., 2019).

Source: Author's elaboration.

Many e-participation initiatives have suffered from what Saebø et al, (2011) have called "shallow stakeholder analysis".[12] Failing to properly analyze stakeholders' motivation to engage can lead to missed opportunities to tap citizens' skills for coproducing public services, co-creation and innovation, and contribution to the policy debate (Distel and Lindgren, 2019).

IV.5 Taking into account lack of trust in governments, the Internet and social media

Citizen take-up and sustained use of e-participation depends in a large part on their trust in government institutions, but also on their trust of Internet in general and of specific components of participation platforms such as social media. These types of concerns were perceptible at early stages of the development of e-participation. On the side of governments for example, concerns associated with the use of third party, private

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[12] Stakeholder analyses for e-participation projects have been carried out using the model of Mitchell et al. (1997). See for instance, Saebø et al, (2011).

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others, were voiced in a survey of managers in a State public admin-istration in Australia in 2013 (Omar et al., 2014). Privacy and security concerns were also shared by citizens, and may have become more prominent in recent times, fueled by instances of privacy breaches on private databases and social media platforms, reported instances of government surveillance of citizens through their social media accounts, and other issues.

Reflecting this, the question of identification (or conversely, of anonymity) in e-participation has been a re-curring one, in contexts as varied as e-petitions (Obersteller, 2015), e-rulemaking (Epstein et al., 2014), living labs (Thiel and Larsen-Redet, 2019), e-participation in education (Bohman et al., 2014) and citizen feedback and crowdsourcing (UNPSA, PetaBencana.id case, Indonesia). Different models have been tried in different contexts.

These concerns have largely been neglected by the academic literature on e-participation, which tends to focus on other aspects. For example, academic articles focusing on the technological infrastructure necessary for governments to follow what is happening on social media often take monitoring of social media as a given "need" of governments, necessary in order to be responsive to citizens' needs. However, the risk of shift from monitoring social media activity to outright surveillance is often overlooked in those studies, or in govern-ment communication (see e.g. Porwol et al., 2018). By contrast, reports such as the State of Internet Freedoms in Africa, published by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) each year, has highlighted surveillance and other government actions to increase government control on discussions in the cyberspace, which can negatively impact the attractiveness of e-participation for citizens.

In addition, recent times have witnessed increased awareness of the potential of social media to be used to disseminate false information, and to polarize the public debate. This has been taken very seriously by demo-cratic governments, as witnessed, for instance, by the calls for proposals under the Governance chapter of the Horizon 2020 programme (European Commission, 2019).

## IV.6 Establishing clear linkages between e-participation mechanisms and decision-making processes

Two decades of experience have shown the critical importance of linking e-participation initiatives with formal institutional processes. For instance, in a survey of European e-participation initiatives done in 2010, participants consistently voiced their fear that "the whole process might lead to nothing" and demanded a clear commitment for integrating the results of the initiative into the political process, or at least for getting feedback on the overall results of the participation exercise and indications on how these will be used in the future. The survey showed that many initiatives did not provide such feedback (Panopoulou et al., 2010).

In the field of policy-making, this means clearly defining and publicizing the process by which inputs from citizens will be taken into account in decision-making (Asher et al., 2019). In the field of service delivery, this means putting in place mechanisms through which government can act on the feedback provided by citizens and force service providers to respond to it (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

The number of steps involved in linking e-participation processes to decision-making processes should not be underestimated. This is illustrated below in a generic way for e-petitions (see Figure 4), based on the description of the current e-petition process for the UK Parliament and Government (Asher et al., 2019). The process was put in place in 2015, building on prior experiences in the UK and elsewhere. Each of the steps requires rules describing how the process can move from the current step to the next. Each step also requires resources. For example, when the new e-petition process was set up in the UK in 2015, a Petitions

Figure 4
**Linkages between e-participation processes and formal decision-making processes:
the case f e-petitions**
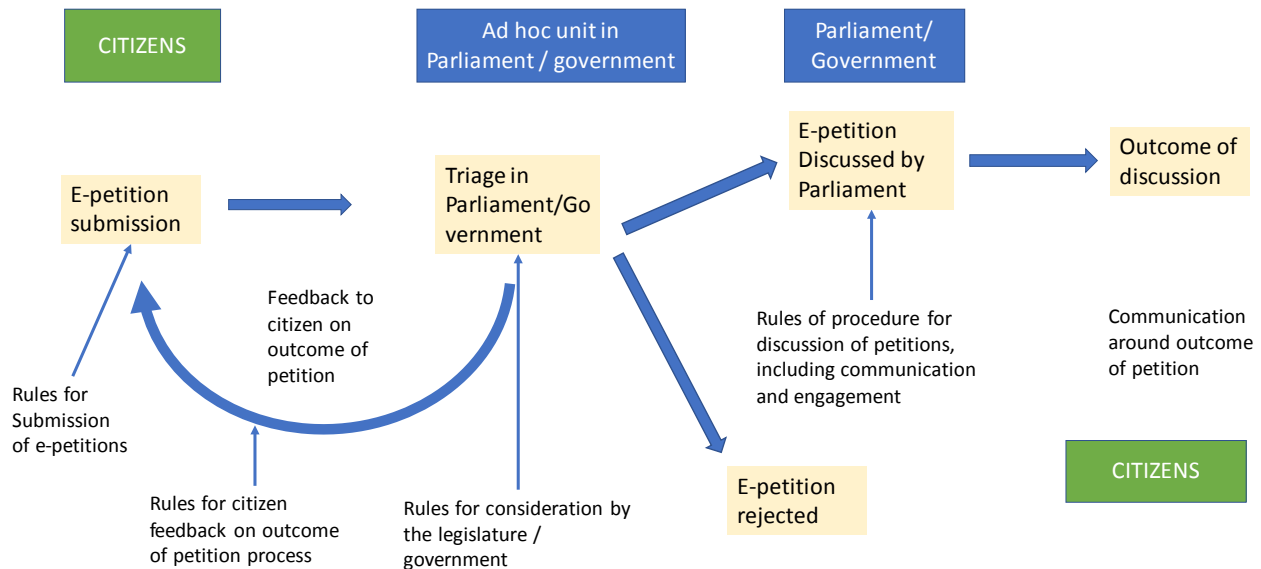
Committee was created in Parliament. The Committee is incharge of receiving the petitions and managing the process of their consideration by Parliament, including moderation and engagement with the public (Asher et al, 2019). Lack of rules at various points in the process and lack of resources to ensure that petitions are duly considered by the receiving institution can cause the process to fail, which in turn can cause citizen disenchantment with the process (Hansard society, 2012).

Box 9
The formal process for addressing e-petitions influences citizens' trust in public institutions

E-petitions (the online version of petitions, by which citizens can directly submit a policy for consideration of representative institutions) have been a popular e-participation channel in the past two decades, with many countries adopting such systems or adapting old petition systems to e-government. Petitions are considered a mechanism for participation of a high level, as they allow citizens to influence the policy agenda of formal representative institutions.

Recent studies based on modern data analysis techniques have shed light on the complex causal linkages between e-participation and trust in public institutions. A study of the Twitter conversations around e-petitions of the Parliament in the United Kingdom highlights how citizens react to the perceived fairness of the process by which petitions are addressed by Parliament. The study shows that the design of that "downstream" process can influence public's perception of Parliament possibly more than the final outcome of the petition. Issues that were found to matter included: how closely the subject of the discussion followed the original petition; how adversarial the process of discussion was; and whether the parliamentary process provided a balanced opportunity for all parties to present their views.

Source: Asher et al., 2019.

In the case of e-participation in the context of public services, the links from e-participation mechanisms (for examples, channels for citizen feedback) to increased government responsiveness involve several steps and different accountability mechanisms. As is the case for e-participation geared to enable citizen input into decision-making, the mere existence of electronic platforms is not a guarantee for increased government responsiveness and accountability on public service provision. A recent survey of ICT-enabled platforms for citizen voice in developing countries (Peixoto and Fox, 2016) distinguishes between platforms that collect individual feedback from those that aggregate inputs or feedback. Many platforms are found to do both. The study highlights the key importance of disclosing feedback provided by citizens in order for different accountability channels to operate. The study highlights that high uptake of an e-participation platform by citizens does not automatically translate into high government responsiveness: some platforms with high uptake are found to be associated with low responsiveness for governments, and vice versa.

Figure 5

From e-participation processes to accountability: the case of public service delivery

Input		Output 1		Output 2		Outcome		Impact
Platform: Channel for voice		Expression of citizen voice (uptake)		Aggregation of voice		Institutional response (e.g. breaking bottlenecks, repairs, resource allocation)		Tangible change in service delivery
Publicity		Disclosed or not?		Disclosed or not?		Disclosed or not?		Disclosed or not?

Source: Peixoto and Fox, 2016.

The introduction of engagement channels and participation processes, especially when they are advertised by the government as attempts to reduce the distance between formal institutions and citizens, often generates high, sometimes unrealistic expectations from citizens. If those can see over time that their inputs are considered, and the process through which this takes place is transparent, this can result in increased trust in public institutions. Conversely, a perception that e-participation processes are disconnected from and do not really

Box 10

Two accountability channels for service delivery

In their survey of 23 ICT-enabled platforms for citizen voice, Peixoto and Fox (2016) distinguish two accountability channels for service delivery. Upwards accountability, by which service providers (e.g. utilities) are accountable to a higher authority in government; and downwards accountability, where public disclosure of the performance of public services creates pressure for institutional responsiveness. Depending on whether a specific e-participation mechanism discloses citizen feedback (individual or aggregate), it is more likely to activate one or the other accountability channel.

The study found that the majority of platforms (18 of 23) make citizen feedback public. However, no pattern emerged with respect to a link between disclosure of feedback and institutional responsiveness.

Source: Peixoto and Fox, 2016.

impact decision-making or service delivery can result in less, not more, trust in public institutions. In that sense, e-participation (like participation in general) is a double-edged sword.

IV.7   Better measuring costs and benefits of e-participation

Like other forms of participation, e-participation entails costs and benefits. Those can be measured from the perspective of public administration (the implementer), from that of citizens (the participants), or from both. Measuring costs of e-participation is conceptually and empirically difficult; measuring benefits is even more difficult, given often unclear objectives and performance indicators of specific e-participation initiatives and the existence of broader objectives such as citizen education, increased civic engagement and trust in public institutions, which are hard to measure. To some degree, costs can be better measured as institutionalization of e-participation progresses (for example, as new positions are created within organizations to manage e-participation initiatives, with accompanying resources); this contrast with contexts of early adoption, where organizational processes have not yet adapted.

In practice, (e-) participation is often a relatively "invisible" activity in terms of planning of budgeting. Information produced by government departments on the costs of specific e-participation projects is not easily available. Case studies dating from the early times of social media adoption in developed countries indicated that uptake of social media in government was often done within existing structures and resources, causing bottlenecks and impairing the capacity of organizations to handle e-participation effectively (Omar et al., 2014). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may still happen at present (Feilner, 2016). The issue of costs of e-participation is also largely absent from the empirical academic literature (see Box 11). This lack of information is a basic impediment to better understanding the conditions under which it makes sense for government to invest more in specific types of participatory mechanisms. Because meaningful participation requires a combination of activities beyond the interface for participation itself, low participation budgets may lead to the reproduction or exacerbation of existing power differences.

Box 11
Costs and benefits of e-participation: a gap in the academic literature and government accounting

Information on benefits of e-participation is extremely hard to find. Basic questions such as who participates; whether digital channels allow to reach groups that would not have been reached by offline means, or accentuates other inequality and power structures that skew participation; what the quality of participation is; how participation affects the outputs and outcomes of the process or of the service considered, and what it brings to participants, are seldom investigated systematically by project initiators in government.

In turn, information on costs is often scarce or non-existent. A recent review study (Anggraeni, 2019) concluded that the articles that refer to benefits of e-participation are three times more frequent than those that refer to costs; that cost and benefits (or value) are very rarely addressed together; and that the literature does not elaborate from whose perspective the costs and value should be calculated and budgeted, even though the costs of participation influence participation processes and outcomes.

Source: Author's elaboration.

IV.8   The need for more systematic evaluation of e-participation initiatives

In general, knowledge of outcomes, impacts and effectiveness of e-participation initiatives is limited. Evaluations of e-participation projects by governments seem infrequent.[13] Taking the example of ideation forums, initiatives for which data on participation are available show very variable participation rates and rates of "problems solved" (see e.g. Vidiasova et al., 2016, for the case of Russia).

Participation in policymaking (for example, in consultations on draft laws or draft regulations) was another area where the Internet and Web 2.0 technology were expected to be game-changers. New technologies held the promise of transforming those processes, increasing both the quality of laws and regulation by broadening the range of participating individuals and groups, and increasing the legitimacy of policy-making processes. However, existing review studies done in developed countries and dating back almost a decade concluded that in general, electronic platforms put in place to support policy-making had largely failed to produce broader meaningful public engagement (Tomkova, 2009), Panopoulou et al., 2010). It is unclear how this may have changed during the past 10 years.

No systematic attempt to compile participation rates for similar instruments across countries seems to exist. Nor are there clear benchmarks of what constitute "good" levels of participation. To some extent, this can be linked back to the lack of clear objectives of e-participation initiatives (see above). It is clear that measuring the use of e-participation opportunities is not sufficient to assess success; yet, measures of success based on the improvement in policy and decision-making and in the improvement of the quality of public services are rare, and the available evidence regarding the impacts of e-participation on those is mixed. There is a need for more studies of outcomes of e-participation initiatives in developing countries. As already mentioned, one clear lesson that emerges from the available data is that successful e-participation projects combine offline and online activities and tools.

Box 12
Evaluating e-participation initiatives

In general, the literature emphasizes that evaluating e-participation initiatives requires to go well beyond technical or technological considerations. Several evaluation frameworks specific to e-participation have been developed. The most commonly used is the one developed by Macintosh and Whyte (2008), which was adopted (in a slightly modified way) by the European network on e-participation (DemoNet). The framework distinguishes three categories of issues: (i) project related; (ii) socio-technical; and (iii) democratic. A different framework is Smith, Macinstosh and Millard (2011), which focuses on operational outputs, outcomes, and impacts. In practice, case studies of e-participation project found in the literature rarely cover all the scope of those evaluation frameworks and focus on a few aspects. Another useful framework, developed by Toots (2018), focuses on understanding why e-participation projects fail. Toots's framework highlights the relationships between stakeholders.

Source: Author's elaboration.

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[13]   Already in 2005, the OECD noted that there was "*a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that governments in OECD countries invest in engaging citizens and civil society in decision-making and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts*" (OECD, 2005).

IV.9   Paying attention to the legal and regulatory framework

Legal and regulatory frameworks can both stimulate or constitute obstacles for e-participation. At a basic level, provisions for citizen participation spelled out in a country's constitution, organic law, or other legislation, frame the space in which e-participation can take place. Legal frameworks for access to information and transparency have been identified as critical to support participation. E-participation is also affected by laws and regulations concerning cybersecurity, cyberterrorism, telecommunications, and surveillance, which have developed rapidly in most countries (CEPISA, 2019). With regard to higher levels of participation, legal requirements for rule-making by government agencies may or may not provide incentives for agencies to proactively seek to engage stakeholders (Newhart and Brooks, 2017). At the level of government departments, existing requirements for participation may not encourage the adoption of new e-participation channels, as this might be perceived as creating risks of challenge by stakeholders or political oversight institutions.[14]

Still at the level of individual organizations, clear guidelines for public officials for communication on social media are important. Studies from the late 2000s showed that civil servants were often unsure about the tone and nature of the information they could provide on social media. Legal questions relating to, e.g., record-keeping of online engagement outside of official channels, copyright issues, and the ownership of data produced through third-party platforms used by governments were also common. Lastly, security and privacy issues were already present, and their salience has increased in recent years. Guidelines for government department staff for communicating on social media have now become commonplace in many countries. However, it has been noted that there can be a tension between communication guidelines that follow highly regulated

Box 13

Awareness raising to bridge the gaps – example of Regulation Room project in the USA

Rulemaking, the process through which United States federal government agencies develop major regulation, was an early target of e-government efforts. Because it was an established decision-making process that had substantial formal requirements of transparency, public participation and responsiveness, it seemed a perfect target for technology-supported participatory policymaking. It was believed that new technologies could transform rulemaking, increasing its democratic legitimacy and improving its policy outcomes by broadening the range of participating individuals and groups. However, a recent study (Newhart and Brooks, 2017) posits that e-rulemaking efforts have "failed to produce broader meaningful public engagement".

The paper also describes Regulation Room, a platform for participation in rulemaking run by Cornell University, which aimed to generate broader participation in rulemaking. Even though the platform succeeded in bringing in citizens who had never participated in rulemaking before, it failed to be broadly adopted by government agencies. One of the rules that had been facilitated through Regulation Room was challenged in court on the basis that the use of RegulationRoom tainted the proceeding and was grounds for invalidating the regulation.

Source: Newhart and Brooks, 2017.

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14 For instance, in the USA government agencies are legally forbidden to engage in publicity or propaganda, and efforts to communicate on social media to encourage participation in rule-making can expose agencies to judicial challenges, which in turn may carry heavy resource and public relations costs, as well as damage the relations between the agency and other parts of government. Newhart and Brooks (2017) describes how the use of social media tools into its regulatory processes by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was questioned by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and negatively assessed by the Government Accountability Office, which found that "EPA's use of Thunderclap [a participation application] constituted overt propaganda, in violation of the publicity or propaganda prohibition".

vetting processes, and the practices of social media, which call for quick exchanges and high interactivity (Mergel, 2013, Liden and Larsson, 2016). As institutionalization progresses, innovation can thus be stifled (Mergel, 2014).

IV.10 Understanding values in public administration

The success of e-government initiatives largely relies on the values that prevail in public administration. This applies at the levels of public administration as a whole, of individual public entities, and of individual staff (Steinbach et al., 2019). The ethos of government directives and directions for public administration, as well as the values that individual institutions promote, translate into ways of seeing interaction with citizens and framing a role for ICTs to mediate those relationships. Rose et al. (2015) posit the existence of four ideal types of value positions in public administration: professionalism, efficiency, service, and engagement. The four positions envision the government-citizen relationship differently, convey different priorities in terms of e-government, and have different views on the role of information technology; all of which might influence e-government development and e-participation over time.

In practice, taking into account the mix of values that prevail in public administration as a whole and in in specific departments provides a frame for assessing the likelihood of success of e-participation initiatives. For instance, studies have shown the importance of agency leadership for the adoption of e-participation (e.g., Sæbø et al., 2011). Studies also show that the prevailing norms of culture at the organization level play a role in how e-participation is implemented (Steinbach et al., 2019). The degree of openness among staff in

Table II
Four value positions for e-government

	Professionalism ideal	**Efficiency ideal**	**Service ideal**	**Engagement ideal**
Public administration tradition	Providing an independent, robust and consistent administration, governed by a rule system based on law	Providing lean and efficient administration, which minimises waste of public resources gathered from taxpayers	Maximizing the utility of government to civil society by providing services directed towards the public good	Engaging with civil society to facilitate policy development in accordance with liberal democratic principles; articulating the public good
Representative values	Durability, equity, legality and accountability	Value for money, cost reduction, productivity and performance	Public service, citizen centricity, service level and quality	Democracy, deliberation and participation
E-Government purpose	Provide a flexible and secure digital public record and support standardized administrative procedures	Streamline, rationalize and transform public administration around digital technologies	Improve the availability, accessibility and usability of government services by providing them online	Support deliberative interactions with the public and the co-production of policy
Technological frame for IT	Infrastructural: IT securely carries the bureaucratic record in accordance with the law; encourages or enforces compliance with the rules	Automation: IT increases performance and reduces costs through automation of administrative tasks	Service enabling: IT extends the range, availability and quality of services for citizens	Networking facilitation: IT underpins communicative interaction between governments and citizens

Source: Rose et al., 2015, p. 542.

the organization to the idea of public participation is a key parameter, as is the balance of views on whether e-participation should primarily be geared to improving institutional performance (for instance, making regulation or services better) or should serve broader democratic goals (e.g., educating the public and increasing civic engagement). The urge to retain control of the agenda and policy debates may always be present to some degree, and may lead to temptation to influence the discussion in open or covert ways (for instance, see Sinclair et al., 2017, for the case of e-participation in impact assessments).

These factors also have an impact on the institutionalization of e-participation, that is, the way in which new ways to engage citizens durably impact internal processes in the organization after initial adoption and implementation (Steinbach et al., 2019; Mergel, 2013). Understanding the process of institutionalization is crucial in a perspective of fostering digital transformation in public administration. However, it remains poorly understood (Steinbach et al., 2019). Existing studies of the diffusion of technology in government highlight the complementary roles played by passive observation of practices inside and outside government, peer networks, and institutional guidelines (see for instance Mergel, 2013, for the adoption of social media in the US federal government).

In the case of (e-)participation in policy-making, it has been argued that rulemaking agencies have "a disposition to risk aversion to use innovative, potentially disruptive technologies, such as systems that encourage and facilitate broader public engagement in the rulemaking process" (Newhart and Brooks, 2017).[15] Issues addressed by government agencies tend to be complex and involve conflicting stakeholder interests and trade-offs between societal values. In such contexts, increasing participation can be seen as another risk that would need mitigation, in addition to being a costly and human resource intensive process. This provides strong incentives for government agencies not to actively seek engagement beyond what they are required to do by law.

IV.11 Acknowledging the broader political context for e-participation

At a broader level, the success of e-participation and the impacts it may have on the relationship between citizens and the State depend on the prevailing values that underlie the political system in a country (Päivärinta and Saebø, 2005). While many of the aspirations for e-participation would fit well in a model of direct democracy where citizens both set the political agenda and are explicitly involved in decision-making processes, the environment for e-participation initiatives in the real world does not fit this description. Many e-participation initiatives have occurred in countries that have adopted variants of liberal democracy, where there may be little impetus and incentives for the political elite and representative institutions to relinquish power in terms of agenda setting or decision-making.

In other contexts, lack of freedom of expression and other limitations of civic space can constitute a powerful barrier to the more political forms of e-participation (see for example Wakabi and Grönlund, 2015). In such contexts, governments can be expected to put emphasis on e-participation around public service delivery, including citizen feedback mechanisms, coproduction of public services, and non-politically threatening modes of co-creation (for instance, hackatons and innovation competitions). In such cases, e-participation is more about delegating problem-solving than decision-making authority, as was noted more than a decade ago in the context of European policy networks (Smith and Dalakiouridou, 2009).

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15 The study notes that those charged with implementing the Bush Administration eRulemaking Initiative struggled against entrenched aspects of agency culture, and that the resulting Regulations.gov system digitized the existing rulemaking process rather than working significant process change.

V   Conclusion

Fifteen years after the term "Web 2.0" was coined, the record of e-participation is mixed. While Internet 2.0 has allowed for the development of genuinely new channels and tools of participation (e.g. crowdsourcing), it has generally not translated into broader or deeper citizen participation. Beyond various forms of digital divides, the reluctance of political systems to genuinely share agenda setting and decision-making power seems to explain much of the observed limited progress.

This is illustrated by the steady development of the "supply" side of e-participation, as measured by the e-government Surveys. E-participation tools have diffused quite rapidly from developed to developing regions. Most countries now have frameworks for access to information in place. Many also have in place some forms of electronic consultation with citizens. Participatory budgeting (mostly at the local level) is now well entrenched, and e-petition systems have become increasingly popular. Many countries have experimented with various forms of co-creation and coproduction of public services mediated by information technologies. E-participation is also visibly more institutionalized than a decade ago, having moved from pilot initiatives to the mainstream in many countries.

Yet, in spite of the steady development of e-participation opportunities in many countries, the results seem mixed, both in terms of immediate objectives of e-participation initiatives for the government agencies that implement them, and in terms of broader objectives of citizen engagement.

Regarding the former, the quantity and quality of participation varies extremely depending on the initiatives considered, with many factors influencing the outcomes from the macro to the meso to the micro level. Those vary widely across time and space, and understanding of their interactions is still limited. This calls for detailed analyses that go well beyond the technological or project-level aspects and encompasses social and institutional dimensions of change.

Failing to properly analyze stakeholders' motivation to engage can lead to missed opportunities to tap citizens' skills for coproducing public services, co-creation and innovation, and contribution to the policy debate. Research has emphasized the critical importance of linking e-participation to formal decision-making processes. For instance, while e-petition systems have developed over the world, their articulation with decision-making processes remains a challenge. Similarly, the impacts of participatory budgeting can vary tremendously depending on how individual initiatives are designed and how they are set into broader democratic and public administration reforms.

Regarding the latter, optimistic expectations on reviving civic engagement and political participation, which undergirded many e-participation initiatives in developed countries at the beginning of the 21st century, have by and large not been met. Participation among citizens remains low, as does trust in public institutions.

To some extent, the challenges observed in the field of e-participation can be linked to essential differences between e-participation and other fields of e-government. Participation is fundamentally more difficult to manage than standard administrative transactions, because individual feedback is expected from those who participate, as well as signals that their contribution is taken into account. Because participation is voluntary rather than mandatory as in the case of digitized public services, trust in the government and public institutions play a more important role in citizen uptake. In turn, trust in public institutions can quickly decline if citizens perceive a lack of influence of participatory mechanisms on government decision-making. This highlights the need to carefully analyse the broader political and administrative context in which e-participation takes place, as well as the needs, motivations and incentives of all stakeholders to make it meaningful.

In recent years, heightened concerns in relation to cybersecurity, privacy, and polarization of the political discourse in many countries seem to have re-focused the agenda for e-participation. Whereas it was initially promoted as a distinct component of e-government development, almost independent from "traditional" participation, e-participation seems to have been progressively recast as a component of participation, with less emphasis being put on technological aspects and more on how digital tools and channels can be mobilized to enhance citizen participation and engagement in an increasingly digital society. In this context, and given the current emphasis on digital transformation, more attention would need to be paid to the process of structural change in public administration in response to technological change.

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