# Chapter 2
# Closing the Evaluation Gap in e-Participation Research and Practice

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**Abstract** This chapter points out the upswing of citizen participation, the emergence of a broad range of participation forms, and the high expectations of the potentials of e-participation. Against this background, a twofold evaluation gap is identified: a lack of acknowledged success criteria and indicators and a lack of empirical studies analyzing, differentiating, and comparing ecologies of e-participation instead of undertaking isolated case studies. The second part reviews major types of evaluation criteria and different conceptual frameworks for evaluating e-participation processes. It concludes with a twofold "relativity theory" of evaluation and proposes an adapted Input–Activities–Output–Outcome–Impact model for the comparative evaluation of e-participation through a quasi-experimental field study design.

## 2.1 Expected Benefits of Citizen Participation

Since the 1970s, there has been a tendency to complement political decision-making and administrative decision processes in the framework of the structures of representative democracy by procedures of citizen participation. This can be seen by statutory hearing procedures for land use planning and urban development, legal provisions for petitions and referenda as well as a broad variety of informal participation procedures on different themes, especially at the local administrative level, such as urban development, citizen budgets, overall visions for urban development, and environmental protection.

International organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe, strongly encourage national

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and local governments to increase the degree of citizen participation (OECD 2001a, b, 2003; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities 2000, 2008a, b; Council of Europe 2001, 2009)[1]. In particular, in the context of environmental policy there was the Aarhus Convention, launched by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE 1998), starting local agenda processes in many countries, followed since 2003 by directives by the European Union (EU) demanding citizen participation in environmental planning processes which have been transferred to national law.[2] Since 2004, more than 700 cities and towns have signed the Aalborg Commitments, obliging themselves to initiate local climate protection programs with citizen participation and regular assessment.[3]

In a critical appraisal, Innes and Booher (2004) summarize five reasons or objectives for the participation of citizens, in particular, in urban planning processes, which also apply to participation in environmental and climate protection policies:

1. Through participation, decision-makers can find out what the public's preferences are and consider them in their decisions.
2. Decisions can be improved by incorporating citizens' local knowledge.
3. Public participation can advance fairness and justice.
4. Public participation helps getting legitimacy for public decisions.
5. Participation is offered by planners and public officials because the law requires it (p. 422).

Moreover, some expect that participation will help to overcome the widely stated disengagement with politics and the loss of trust in political institutions (a.o. Pratchett et al. 2005). Others emphasize the building of democratic competence or social capital on the side of the participating citizens by their participatory experience (Irvin and Stansbury 2004), which could be called social learning as well. In political science, public participation is regarded not only as a means to specific political goals, but as a goal and a value in itself or, by integrating some elements of direct democracy, as a complement to the dominating forms of representative democracy.[4]

In most cases, the legal requirements for citizen participation demand the active involvement of public interest organizations by sending documents for consultation, while with regard to individual citizens, governments comply by allowing planning documents to be viewed in government offices or by general invitation to public hearings. In recent years, formal channels for petitions and procedures to start referenda have been established in a few EU member states as well (Riehm et al. 2013).

The actual acceptance by citizens of such participation offers often falls short of expectations because participation requires time and other resources. Especially in connection with urban development and land use planning, the participation

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[1] In 2009, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the recommendations of the Ad hoc Committee on e-democracy (CAHDE), including guidelines and principles as well as an accompanying document on practical tools, to which two of the editors of this book made their contributions. http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/democracy/activities/ggis/cahde/default_EN.asp. Accessed 27 July 2015

[2] See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/legislation.htm. Accessed 27 July 2015

[3] See http://www.sustainablecities.eu/aalborg-process/. Accessed 27 July 2015

[4] Proponents of direct democracy most often refer to the theory of deliberative discourse and the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas (1996; summary by Chambers 2003).

obligations regulated by law or politics are not always fully supported by administrators and planners. Trained planners perceive it as a disregard of their professionalism and qualifications if the plans they laboriously produced can be rejected by citizens who have no special qualifications. And they argue that, in many participation procedures, it is not always the interests of the most concerned that become accepted but often the interests of the best organized. Also, sometimes the politicians in charge do not back the participation offers of their administrations because they fear for their acknowledged legitimacy (cf. Pratchett et al. 2005; Creasy et al. 2007).

On the other hand, citizens tend to refrain from engaging in statutory formal participation procedures mainly because it is not clear what will happen with their contributions and because trust in political bodies is lacking. According to so-called ladders of participation (Arnstein 1971; Wiedemann and Femers 1993), many procedures offered do not qualify for true participation but are restricted to the lower levels of the ladder, that is, informing citizens. Moreover, Innes and Booher (2004) emphasize that the communication situations, for example, in a public hearing, are such that qualitative improvements are rarely brought forward and that often reduced arguments are aggressively stated. Finally, the participating citizens quarrel, and administrators and politicians cannot reconcile the different arguments.

These experiences with formal participation requirements lead to experiments with more open, informal, and long-term participation procedures, such as focus groups, panels, planning cells, round tables, etc., where planners and the persons concerned work on problem analyses and solutions for longer periods of time. This so-called deliberative participation, according to Coleman and Goetze (2001), is a method of encouraging citizens to discuss and weigh up competing options, aiming towards preference formation instead of preference assertion. The OECD calls this kind of participation "cooperative participation" or partnership (OECD 2001a). In such settings, it has been observed that the prejudices of planners and citizens can be revised and that a constructive attitude develops. This positive learning success was especially strong in processes where the participating persons knew that they did not only have to deal with criticism of the administration's plans, but that the citizens also had to contribute, as is the case with measures against climate change (Creasy et al. 2007).

## 2.2 A Broad Range of Forms of Participation

Meanwhile, there is a broad spectrum of different forms of citizen participation, and there are different approaches to classifying this broad range of methods and devices. The OECD (OECD 2001a, pp. 15–16) uses a classification with three main forms of citizen participation:

- Information
- Consultation/communication
- Active participation/cooperation

For each of the main categories, a variety of methods and instruments is available (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1** Devices for citizen participation (Kubicek 2010, p. 175)

| Information | Consultation | Cooperation |
|---|---|---|
| Written official plans with maps | Surveys and polls | Neighborhood planning office |
| Leaflets | Complaint forms | Development trusts (i.e., by independent organizations) |
| Booklets | Appeal services | Round tables |
| Visualization | Citizens' expertise | Focus groups |
| Games | Ideas competition | Workshops |
| Newsletters | Award schemes | Neighborhood committees |
| Oral lectures/presentations | Simulation | Consensus conferences |
| Road shows | Face-to-face/door-to-door | Advocacy planning |
| Hotline | Community planning forums | Mediation procedures |
| Site visits | Citizens' request sessions | |
| Street stalls | Invitation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to council meetings | |
| | Complaint hotlines | |
| | Action planning events | |
| | Experimentation | |

Cooperation can take place in different ways and with different degrees of engagement. The International Association for Public Participation distinguishes five kinds of participation, with an increasing level of public impact, including three different forms of cooperation (IAP2 2007). The distinction between involvement and collaboration points to different degrees of engagement in terms of the time spent and the length of the process (see Table 2.2).

These different forms of participation are offered by governmental agencies or political bodies, and citizens may accept these invitations and participate in order to articulate their needs, provide their knowledge, and exercise some influence on plans or decisions, mostly within a predefined set of subjects and channels of communication. But there are other forms of participation where citizens or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) try to initiate such processes by themselves and put the subjects of their concern on the political agenda. Complementary to the provision of public information by government agencies is the provision of information by NGOs, including the independent monitoring of government activities. Citizens may articulate and communicate their concerns and appeals, for example, by sending letters, collecting signatures, organizing, or taking part in demonstrations, etc. On a larger scale, this may take the form of campaigns, and in a more formalized and more influential way, there is the possibility of petitions and referenda.

In Fig. 2.1, bottom–up and top–down initiated forms of citizen participation are arranged according to the direction of initiation and the degree of commitment.

In the following parts, our discussion on evaluating e-participation will concentrate exclusively on top–down initiated forms, or e-participation understood as "taking part in public affairs in a particular phase of the institutional policy process" (van Dijk 2012, p. 12).

**Table 2.2** Different forms of citizen participation (IAP2 2007)

Increasing level of public impact →

|  | Inform | Consult | Involve | Collaborate | Empower |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public partici-pation goal | To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportuni-ties, and/or solutions | To obtain public feedback on analysis, alter-natives, and/or decisions | To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently under-stood and considered | To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the iden-tification of the preferred solution | To place final decision-making in the hands of the public |
| Promise to the public | We will keep you informed | We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision | We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alter-natives developed and provide feed-back on how public input influenced the decision | We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recom-mendations into the decisions to the maxi-mum extent possible | We will implement what you decide |
| Example techniques | Fact sheets Web sites Open houses | Public comment Focus groups Surveys Public meetings | Workshops Deliberative polling | Citizen advisory committees Consensus-building Participatory decision-making | Citizen juries Ballots Delegated decision |

## 2.3  High Hopes for e-Participation

The participation landscape has become especially variegated over the more recent past as an impressive list of information and communications technology (ICT)-supported forms of engagement in policy-making has evolved. Some of them transform previous models from the real world into the digital world, while others provide more or less new forms of political engagement (Oser et al. 2012). This diversification also applies to the subset of institutional participation on which this book focuses. There are several distinct approaches to structuring and classifying
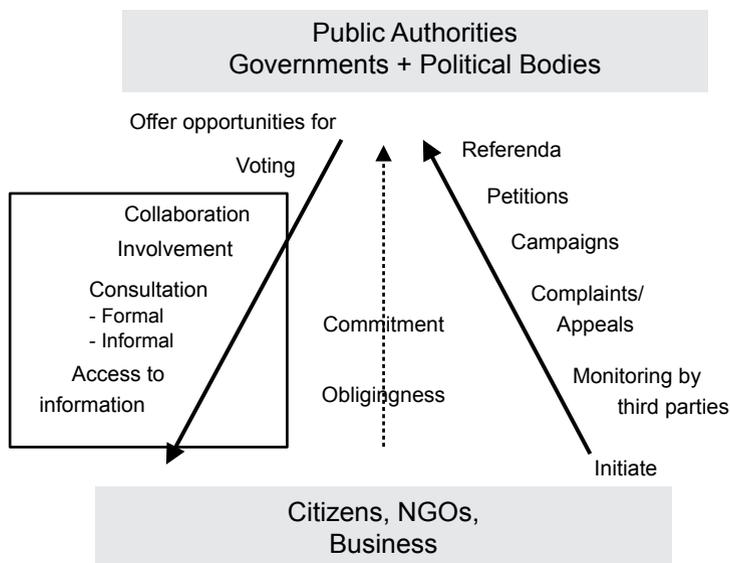
**Fig. 2.1** Two directions of participation (illustration by H. Kubicek)

this landscape. On the lines of the OECD classification, Macintosh (2004) has suggested distinguishing between the different roles of ICTs: *"e-enabling"* denotes the function of ICTs to provide access to relevant and useful information, *"e-engaging"* evokes the idea that a wider audience can be consulted and involved in deliberative processes via networked technologies, and *"e-empowering"* is understood to support the active participation of citizens in policy-making and influencing the political agenda. In contrast to mere information and consultation type activities, the latter type of e-participation covers both formal and informal collaborative processes of civic engagement. Porwol et al. (2013) have compared 12 different models of e-participation, underlining the variety of perspectives.

Table 2.3 provides an overview of the methods and tools of the three main categories of e-participation and the corresponding stages of the policy-making process. The dynamics of technological innovation, experimentation and communication culture, as exemplified by the upswing of social media, make it necessary to continuously amend this participation matrix and existing toolboxes with new forms (see e.g., Macintosh et al. 2005; IAP2, 2006).

Along with the diffusion of the Internet as an information and communication medium in everyday life, hopes were raised that the new media might help to overcome the barriers to citizen participation experienced so far, because electronic communication—compared to citizen meetings or access to records in administrative agencies—is much easier and more flexible as regards place and time; on the side of the administration, it is also much easier to carry out surveys online instead of sending paper questionnaires by postal services.

Typical of these expectations is the following list in a publication of the OECD (Macintosh 2003, p. 33):

**Table 2.3**  E-engagement matrix (Macintosh 2003, p. 98)

| Stage in policy-making cycle | Information | Consultation | Participation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agenda setting | Search engines, e-mail alerts for new policy issues, translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon | Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring e-mails, bulletin boards, and FAQs | E-petitions, e-referenda, e-communities |
| Analysis | Translation support for ethnic languages, style checkers to remove jargon | Evidence-managed facilities, expert profiling to assist government to know who the experts are | Electronic citizen juries, e-communities |
| Formulation | Advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal terms | Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools | E-petitions and e-referenda to amend policy |
| Implementation | Natural language style checkers, e-mail newsletters | Discussion forums, online citizen juries, e-community tools | E-mail distribution lists for target groups. |
| Monitoring | Online feedback | Online surveys and opinion polls, discussion forums, monitoring emails, bulletin boards, and FAQs | E-petitions, e-referenda |

*FAQs* frequently asked questions

> (…) the objective of technology-enabled information dissemination, consultation and participation is to improve the policy-making process through a range of devices designed to enable:
>
> - Reaching and engaging with a wider audience through a range of consultation and participation technologies adapted to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens thereby enabling broader participation.
> - Providing relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable to the target audience to enable more informed participation.
> - Enabling more in-depth consultation and supporting deliberative debate online.
> - Facilitating the analysis of contributions to support policy-makers and to improve policy.
> - Providing relevant and appropriate feedback to citizens to ensure openness and transparency in the policy-making process.
> - Monitoring and evaluating the process to ensure continuous improvement.

In economic terms, e-participation, that is, participation based on information technology and in particular the Internet, is supposed to overcome the dilemma of legitimacy versus effectiveness (Dahl 1994) by reducing the marginal cost of additional participants (Andersen et al. 2007).

Moreover, recognizing decreasing voter turnout and increasing mistrust in political parties and bodies, politicians hope that they can regain trust and engagement by offering online dialogue and online participation. In particular, there is widespread hope that the interest of young people in politics can be raised if online communication channels are offered.

Similarly, the Internet allows for more effective and cheaper methods of citizen-initiated participation such as monitoring political bodies, publishing documents,

organizing online campaigns and online petitions. However, sometimes this potential is seriously overestimated; at least there is often no corresponding empirical evidence.

In political science research, there is rivalry between a "mobilizing" and a "reinforcement" hypothesis with regard to the number and the sociodemographic characteristics of online activists (Oser et al. 2012): Do the new online facilities draw previously less active citizens into the political process (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013) or do the main social factors of political engagement prevail in the digital world as well, and are online tools "weapons of the strong" (Schlozman et al. 2010)? On an international level, the debate about the Arab Spring is a good example of technology being overestimated. In 2011, the mass media attributed the success of the civil uprisings, that is, the largely peaceful revolution in Egypt, Tunisia, and with violence in Libya, to the Internet and text messages and videos via mobile phones. But Morozov in his book *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*' criticized this attribution to technology (Morozov 2011). We would also argue that only the publication of amateur videos by the big TV-channels has created worldwide attention and pressure and, therefore, the retreat of the ruling leaders. In other words, the Internet is not the final decisive factor for the success of a movement, but rather success depends on several situational factors and the interplay of different communication channels (mix of media). And there is another lesson to be learned from these cases: By now everybody can see that the desired impacts have not been achieved. Therefore, one should take a longer perspective beyond the immediate short-term changes before making judgements about the success or failure of political movements.

It is interesting to note that all these expectations on the contribution of technology to the advance of democracy have been raised for decades. Very similar effects were listed almost 20 years ago with regard to "teledemocracy," defined as electronic dialog via two-way cable-television or computer networks (called mailboxes at that time).

Before the rise of the Internet, Scott London (1995, pp. 2–3) put together the following list of principal arguments in favor of electronically mediated political talk:

- Interactive telecommunications can foster increased civic participation in the democratic process.
- Telecommunications can link citizens together across the boundaries of time and space. It can also involve citizens who may ordinarily have no opportunity to participate.
- A direct link between citizens and government ensures the accountability of representatives.
- Electronic media can function as a mass feedback system, providing legislators with instant public opinion on issues.
- Many new electronic media provide unmediated communication allowing citizens to be in touch with each other and their leaders without such traditional gatekeepers as newspaper editors, mail carriers, and television moderators.
- The new media can facilitate direct public participation in governance through plebiscitary mechanisms or direct communication between citizens and policymakers.
- New technologies can process vast amounts of information almost instantaneously.
- Electronic communication can guarantee equal access to information to large numbers of citizens.
- Electronic networks are excellent vehicles for political agenda setting and planning.

- Teledemocracy enhances political competence by involving large numbers of people more directly in the process of public discussion.
- New technologies provide innovative ways of informing and educating the electorate on key public issues.
- Telecommunications can strengthen ties of communication among and between individuals and groups.
- New technologies provide improved access to government information and services.

Following US President Barack Obama, new initiatives have been started under the headline of Open Government in many European countries and the EU (Office of the President 2009; Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment 2009; European Commission 2010). The vision is that Open Government can be achieved by political leadership through building on the three pillars of transparency, participation and cooperation, based on Open Government data, generated for and from integrated network-based public services (see Fig. 2.2).

In line with this broader understanding of (e-)participation, Millard et al., in their review of the state of the art of e-participation in Europe, highlight the following opportunities in the application of ICT to participation (2009, p. 7):

In the context of decision-making initiated by government "ICT can exploit the vast reserves of data the public sector has available" … and could include "involving constituents through political representatives or directly through processes of information, consultation, active participation and elections".

Regarding empowerment from the bottom "ICT can help to leverage the voices and expertise of huge numbers of individuals and groups, setting their own agendas and developing their own policies in new forms of 'crowdsourcing', mass collaboration and mass creativity. This can also result in short-term single issue politics, and sometimes in instant street politics and forms of mob-rule, but can potentially also build to more permanent countervailing power bases possibly at odds with governments".

"Transparency and openness can be supported by ICT through freedom of information and consultation, to reveal the purposes, processes and outcomes of government, also through real-time tracking and tracing. This will help place responsibility, reduce corruption and make decisions more responsive, although legitimate privacy and the space for risk taking should be safeguarded".
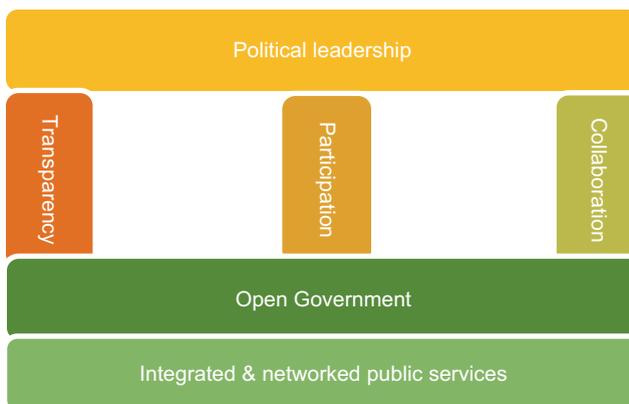


**Fig. 2.2** Participation as part of Open Government (internal document of the European Commission; authors' translation from German)

But these are opportunities that are not always realized. For example, in Germany, governments and in particular national ministries and the chancellery have been heavily criticized by big magazines for spending money on expensive online consultation platforms, with either low participation rates or questionable results:

- "Online Konsultationen sind kein demokratischer Selbstläufer" (Online consultations are no democratic self-seller). Spiegel Online, 26 Nov. 2010. http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/oeffentlicher-web-dialog-online-konsultationen-sind-kein-demokratischer-selbstlaeufer-a-731118.html. Accessed 27 July 2015.
- S. Becker: "Teure Websites—Regierung scheitert am Bürgerdialog" (Expensive websites—Government fails on citizens dialog). Spiegel Online, 2 Sept. 2011. http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/teure-websites-regierung-scheitert-am-buergerdialog-a-783532.html. Accessed 27 July 2015.
- F. Beck and L. Novy: "Bürgerbeteiligung ist mehr als eine Webseite" (Citizen participation is more than a website). Zeit Online, 29 Feb. 2012. http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2012-02/partizipation-demokratie. Accessed 27 July 2015.
- "Experten sehen Chancen der Online-Demokratie nüchtern" (Experts assess the chances for online democracy with reservation). Heise Online, 20 March 2012. http://www.heise.de/newsticker/meldung/Experten-sehen-Chancen-der-Online-Demokratie-nuechtern-1475287.html. Accessed 27 July 2015.
- P. Beuth: "Bürgerbeteiligung im Netz mit fragwürdigen Ergebnissen" (Citizen participation on the net with questionable results). Zeit online, 13 April 2012. http://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2012-04/dialog-fuer-deutschland-ergebnis-manipulation. Accessed 27 July 2015.

So, what are the relevant criteria for evaluating participation offers? The number of participants, the number of new ideas, new insights for whom, or is the impact of the process more important than the output? And what is the specific contribution of e-participation tools?

Between 1998 and 2008, the European Commission funded more than 35 e-participation research projects with a total budget of over 120 million € (Tambouris et al. 2008). As a supporting action, the MOMENTUM project has been set up in order to evaluate these (research) projects (Bicking et al. 2011). The most tangible results assessed were the websites, in most cases created as pilot projects in several member states. In quantitative terms, figures have been collected about the size of the target groups, the number of people reached, the number of visits to the websites, and the number of active participations, for example, posts or votes. According to the authors, the most striking results of this analysis are the great differences between these levels of engagement for most of the projects. For example, one project contacted about 1000 people, only 260 registered, 110 visited the website, but there were only 25 posts. In other projects, there was a better relation between the people addressed and the visits, but in all cases, the relation between the visits and the posts was even worse, for example, 232 out of 35,600, 2371 out of 21,909, or 273 out of 74,681 (Bicking et al. 2011, p. 4). With the data collected on the four benchmark areas, it was not possible to explain these gaps between passive and