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**Evaluating e-democracy**

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## Dimensions and approaches for the evaluation of e-democracy

### Introduction

The evaluation of eParticipation is related to defining and assessing the quality of democracy and democratic governance.

Evaluation of e-participation intends to provide evidence of whether e-participation *extends* (from a quantitative point of view) and *enriches* (from a qualitative point of view) participation, or not.

As there are various approaches to deepening the quality of democracy, evaluation is charged with measuring interrelationships and the impact of e-participation on policy-making: Lessons learnt from previous evaluations show that neither the use of qualitative nor quantitative approaches / indicators alone is sufficient to meet these challenges.

Consequently, a flexible combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches is needed. As political culture and participative behaviour differ from case to case, combinations must be modified for each participation process.

In addition, evaluation of any kind of political participation, whether online or offline, necessitates comparative analyses alongside a well-defined timescale.

Starting points for evaluation exercises:

- As values define the perspective of measurement, clear pre-defined evaluation criteria including values/norms/expectations are recommended.
- As each case is individual, political culture and participative behaviour may differ from case to case.
- The evaluation of a participative process includes an *ex ante*- and an *ex post* diagnosis: an assessment of traditional ways of negotiation, participation and decision-making.
- Comparative analyses can be recommended, *i.e.* mixed and various approaches to measure the quality of democracy, including finding intended and unintended effects.

Key questions for an evaluation include:

- Does eParticipation improve democracy and democratic governance and, if so, how?
- To what extent does it strengthen democracy? What are the intended/unintended effects?

- What is the impact on policy making and policies themselves?

## **Evaluation dimensions**

### **1. Quality of Democracy**

The following principles or criteria could be used as a measurement framework:

- The institutional order of a social system is based on ideas of freedom and equality (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, human rights).
- Referring to the heterogeneity of a society, inclusive citizenship is the leading idea (equal rights to vote, voting systems including minorities).
- Contestation and alternation within an - at least - two party system is selfevident.
- Popular control of policy making is based on the transparency of the decision making processes or “enlightened understanding”.
- The existence of a well established and active public sphere.

**Methods** include, *e.g.*, analyses of party systems and voting procedures (voter turnout and other contestation indicators); media analyses (variety, content, sources), analyses of organisation of interests, the variety of sources of information, decision making (e.g. polling expert opinion), etc.

### **2. Quality of Governance**

There are two different notions of quality: one understood in terms of “democraticness” and the other understood in terms of “effective governance”. Criteria-based methods, as described above, are useful in accessing the democratic "hardware" of formal entities, such as the functioning of governmental and institutional orders, but they do not enable data to be gathered on the democratic "software" - the informal day-to-day practices of actors within hierarchies, in network-structures, partnerships and other hybrids.

Interpretative approaches try to capture the different notions of quality by moving beyond the analysis of institutional nodes in order to understand the democratic performance of a wider government “multi-dimensional” network.

**Methods** include, *e.g.*, Narrative analysis, network analyses or participating observation and qualitative case studies provide routes into the so called democratic software, etc.

### 3. Quality of public participation

Participation represents and comprises the specific expressions of democratic practice. Its scope may range from very wide definitions including any form of public input to more narrow ones involving a claim for direct democracy and empowerment of the public. As a participative procedure does not only stand for itself, the linkage to government practice and institutional decision making procedures, the effects on political decision making and on policies and their implementation, are additional aspects of comprehensive evaluation of the quality dimension of public participation.

**Methods** include on the one hand, measuring *process* criteria, for example inclusiveness, transparency, interaction, continuity and fairness, by discourse and content analysis, monitoring, participating observation, etc; on the other, measuring *outcome* criteria, such as the incorporation of public views into decision making, resolution of conflicts among competing interests, the increase/decrease of trust in public agencies, representativeness of public opinion by comparative approaches as policy based document analysis, ex post interviews with various stakeholders, media resonance, etc.

### 4. Quality of e-democracy

The interactive features of digital ICT open up unprecedented opportunities for more inclusive public engagement in the design of policy issues and for the general quality of participation in democratic decision-making. Therefore, our main question is perhaps:

To what extent do digital technologies contribute to the realisation of democratic objectives that both governments and citizens are trying to achieve?

For a start, differentiating between levels of participation is advisable. Three levels of participation focus concretely on the role of ICT's in digital democracy initiatives: e-enabling, e-engaging and e-empowering. As a further example, based on these criteria, a framework for the comprehensive evaluation of e-democracy initiatives could be:

Key dimensions of **e-democracy initiatives**:

1. Type of engagement (information-consultation-active participation)
2. Stage in decision-making
3. Actors involved
4. Technologies used
5. Rules of engagement
6. Duration and sustainability
7. Accessibility
8. Resources and Promotion
9. Evaluation and Outcomes
10. Critical success factors (to be agreed on before starting the initiative)

Additionally, the following criteria can be recommended:

11. Gender aspects
12. Understanding of democratic principles, actors' images of democracy

Generally speaking, **tool quality criteria** can be distinguished by:

*Social acceptability*

1. Trust and security
2. Relevance and legitimacy

*Usefulness*

1. Accessibility
2. Appeal
3. Content clarity
4. Responsiveness

*Usability*

1. Navigation and organisation
2. Efficiency and flexibility
3. Error recovery

**Methods** of evaluating the quality of e-democracy include:

*Qualitative Methods*

1. Semi-structured interviews
2. Field tests of e-democracy tools (incl. usability tests)
3. Online questionnaire
4. discourse analysis
5. analysis of talk policies
6. Internal (government agency) documentation
7. Measuring interactivity
8. analysing log files

*Quantitative measuring of online engagement*

The e-democracy tools themselves provide evidence of the breadth and depth of their use, measurable in terms of numbers of:

1. Registered users – usage statistics
2. Responses to questionnaires
3. Messages posted to discussion fora
4. Petitions raised
5. Names added to petitions

A further example of evaluating e-democracy is benchmarking:

Benchmarking approaches focus on a supply side measurement of e-participation offerings. Two examples which include a measurement of e-participation in one way or another are:

- The *eParticipation Index* (United Nations Global E-Government Readiness Report 2005) assesses the quality and usefulness of information and services provided by a country for the purpose of engaging its citizens in public policy making through the use of e-government programs. As a qualitative assessment of selected government websites based on the relevancy of participatory and democratic services, it should be used with caution. Measurement is based on questions grouped under three categories of e-information; e-consultation; and e-decision-making. Each country is assessed on a scale of 0-4.
- The *Citizen Participation Measure* (Rutgers-SKKU Report Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide 2005) has been developed as part of an instrument for evaluating city and municipal websites consisting of five components altogether (the others focus on Security and Privacy; Usability; Content; and, Services). In this case, indicators for citizen participation comprise six questions surveying the presence and functions of municipal forums, online decision-making (e-petitions, e-referenda), and online surveys and polls.