

Advancing citizen engagement via digital tools: A comparative study of the Baltic States

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Abstract

Focus of the paper. The aim of this paper is to explore and comparatively analyze how recent e-participation initiatives have been implemented in the three Baltic states. With the advent and evolution of digitalization, researchers have become more interested in the potential of digitalization and the benefits that digital technologies are expected to produce for open government (Norris, 2010b, Bannister and Connolly, 2012) rather than studying empirical cases and actual implementation of e-participation initiatives. Moreover, drawbacks in implementing e-participation are sometimes argued to relate to societal, administrative, and organizational factors rather than technical aspects (Chadwick, 2011; Zheng et al., 2014). For example, previous research has shown that the societal characteristics such as the number of internet users (e.g. Ström et al., 2012), digital divide (e.g. Min, 2010; Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015), trust in e-participation (e.g. Scherer and Wimmer, 2014), the socio-economic background of the population (e.g. Medaglia, 2007; Williams et al., 2013) as well as management and organization of citizen participation (Randma-Liiv and Lember, 2022) are related to the adoption and institutionalization of e-participation.

Research question. The study at hand addresses the following research questions: Which societal and administrative characteristics influence the adoption and institutionalization of e-participation initiatives in the Baltic states? What are the similarities and differences across the Baltic states?

Empirical study. The paper draws on three recent e-participation cases from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The focus is on national-level e-participation platforms which have been set up to foster long-term collaboration between citizens, civil society organizations and the government. The following cases have been chosen for the comparison: The Estonian Citizens' Initiative Portal, the Latvian e-participation platform MyVoice and the E-Citizen platform in Lithuania. The Baltic states are characterized by similar historical-cultural, political and economic contexts which allows to apply a most similar case design. Case studies are conducted in each country following a common case study protocol in order to empirically uncover drivers and barriers to digital participation. Thorough desk research as well as interviews with the stakeholders involved in each e-participation project will be conducted in all cases.

Expected results. The study shows that the impact of technology on the public sector is strongly mediated by the institutional context that frames the ways public sector interacts with citizens and other governmental and non-governmental units contributing to participatory democracy. Citizen involvement is embedded in existing institutional arrangements and constrained by societal, political, administrative, and organizational factors. Despite the positive connotation of the word "digital democracy" and the high expectations policy-makers have with regard to the potential of digital democracy tools, in reality, it takes a lot of systematic effort, time, and adaptability of the governance systems to incorporate digital democracy processes into the existing institutional routines. Yet another concern in the Baltic states is related to civil society with its low capacity to substantially influence the processes of policy-making.