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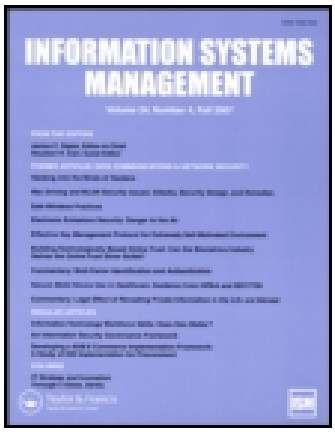

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Understanding eParticipation State of Play in Europe

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In this article, we develop a three-layered analytical framework for investigating the development of eParticipation in Europe, which incorporates the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of eParticipation, and also accounts for the action of external factors. This analytical framework was used as a basis of a questionnaire survey among eParticipation initiatives at the European, national, regional, and local levels. It has been concluded that, in most cases, eParticipation simply provided a suitable alternative channel for participatory activities and did not challenge institutionalized centers of power.

Keywords electronic participation (eParticipation); analytical framework; survey; impact assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic Participation (eParticipation) can be defined as "the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" (Macintosh, 2006, p. 364). eParticipation is becoming particularly important in all developed countries as governments struggle to fight political apathy and increase openness and transparency in their decision-making processes. This is particularly timely in Europe, due to the turbulences caused by the economic crisis, which resurfaces fundamental questions about the legitimate foundations of representative democratic systems, such as the dilemma that opposes the technical legitimacy of expert knowledge—implicit in the delegation of governance tasks to banking and financial experts—and the process legitimacy that derives uniquely from broad-based public participation (or at least consent) in governance.

eParticipation has been supported by a number of policies and strategies. For example, at the European level, the European Commission has presented a number of relevant communications, such as Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, Communicating Europe in Partnership, and Communicating Europe via the internet, Engaging the Citizens (Dalakiouridou, Smith, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2011). Member States have also presented similar plans at national, regional, and local levels. As a result, a number of eParticipation initiatives emerged all over Europe. Within a decade (1998–2008), the European Union alone has funded more than 35 eParticipation research projects, with a total budget of over 120M€ (Tambouris, Kalampokis, & Tarabanis, 2008), and the European Commission has funded at least one major study for eParticipation (European eParticipation, http://islab.uom.gr/ep/). The increasing take-up of eParticipation initiatives inevitably provoked a need for relevant analytical and assessment frameworks in order to better understand practical issues (such as what seems to works) as well as the current use and potential of eParticipation in general.

One of the first attempts to describe eParticipation was performed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2003). Ten varying case studies were examined using six characterization dimensions (stage in the policy-making cycle, government units and target groups involved, feedback received from participants, technologies used, main obstacles encountered, and key elements of success). Later, Macintosh (2004) proposed ten key dimensions for characterizing eParticipation, arguing that different political, legal, cultural, economic, or technological factors may be decisive in making an eParticipation initiative a success. The importance of the overall technical, economic, legal, organizational, political, and cultural environment was also stressed by German researchers who considered project's "fit" with external conditions and the degree to which crucial success factors may be adapted (Kubicek, 2007; Westholm, 2003).

At the same time, scholars ventured to develop evaluation frameworks to assess eParticipation initiatives; their efforts have been mostly based on former "offline participation" work by Rowe and Frewer (2000). Macintosh and Whyte (2008) proposed an evaluation framework comprised of criteria covering three different perspectives of an eParticipation initiative (the

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democratic, project, and socio-technical perspectives), as well as two additional criteria: methods available for analysis, and involved actors. This framework has been further expanded by another research team (Aichholzer & Westholm, 2009; Lippa, Aichholzer, Allhutter, Freschi, Macintosh, & Westholm, 2008). Similarly, Fagan, Newman, McCusker, and Murray (2006) proposed a multi-perspective approach to evaluation, arguing that it is useful to define a "system boundary" around the initiative and, in effect, perform twin evaluations on effectiveness goals and democratic goals. More recently, Loukis, Xenakis, and Charalabidis (2010) developed a framework for evaluating eParticipation pilots in the parliaments' legislation development processes; they classify 48 criteria under the process, system, and outcome perspectives.

Relevant work has been published by practitioners in the field; initiatives from central Europe found that eParticipation success relates to marketing, governmental responsiveness and rewards, the implication of high level politics, the adoption of a step-by-step approach, and team's multidisciplinarity (Chevallier, Warynski, & Sdoz, 2006; Lührs, Albrecht, Lübcke, & Hohberg, 2003).

In spite of all recent work towards analyzing and characterizing eParticipation, scholars are far from reaching conclusions. As demonstrated by the aforementioned short summary of different approaches towards putting eParticipation in a context, it has been difficult to encompass all different aspects and influencing factors of the field in one easy-to-work-with method. Scholars have approached the field from different perspectives and have proposed, revised, and expanded different frameworks, yet fragmentation still exists.

The main objective of this article is to progress one step further into understanding the state of play of eParticipation in Europe. For this purpose, a three-layered analytical framework to map and understand the factors shaping the development of eParticipation is described. Furthermore, the results of a European survey of eParticipation initiatives are presented, aiming (a) to operationalize the developed framework with bottom-up data, and (b) to conduct an analysis of the results to determine whether patterns or other relationships among gathered data allow for deeper understanding of the field. Our goal is to use the survey data in order to better understand current European eParticipation initiatives and also to critically discuss the usefulness of the analytical framework for this purpose. The added value of our analytical framework is that it permits us to show the conceptual links among eParticipation practice and high-level policy goals, culturally-specific understandings of eParticipation's meaning, and the chain of transformations which condition long-term impacts. Although thinking about the ultimate impacts of projects may seem impractical, we believe that the insertion of project level action in this wider framework can act as a salutary reminder of what projects can and cannot achieve.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology used in this article, including the proposed analytical framework. The results of the European survey are presented in Section 3, while Section 4 discusses the results and presents the main conclusions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach followed in our work comprised two distinct phases: development of an analytical framework and conduct of a European survey.

2.1 Phase 1. Analytical Framework

In order to map and understand the factors shaping the development of eParticipation, a three-layered framework was developed (Smith, Macintosh, & Millard, 2011; drawing inter alia on Millard, 2008). The conceptual and terminological repertoire resulting from the framework's construction was used to inform our choices about what questions to ask respondents in our survey. A brief description of the framework is presented here in order to aid the understanding of work presented in this article.

The analytical framework attempts to identify the key variables for studying eParticipation, distinguishing between factors which lie at least partly within the control of the stakeholders in an eParticipation initiative and factors which are largely external. Additionally it differentiates aspects of eParticipation which are aligned with the goal-setting strategic rationality of a governance regime from those aspects of eParticipation which are relatively insulated from these power relations. It uses an impact assessment framework distinguishing between outputs, outcomes, and impacts. The framework employs the notion of an intervention logic, which specifies the types of actions necessary to successfully initiate and manage the participation process. Its multi-layered character is intended to prompt evaluators to consider conceptual links to high-level policy goals, culturally-specific understandings of eParticipation, and the chain of transformations which condition long-term impacts.

Figure 1 outlines the model's key components, showing how outputs are transformed into outcomes, and, in turn, into impacts, via a series of intervention logics, and how these transformations are co-determined by interaction with external drivers and barriers.

External factors allow us to understand better the likely or potential impact of eParticipation processes. They can be grouped into categories such as the structure of the governance regime, political culture, legal and policy environment, technological infrastructure, socio-economic environment, and cultural environment. As a general rule, the cumulative power of external factors increases at higher levels of the model, as more political and societal external factors come into play, such that the project owner experiences diminishing control as the number of interactions between "internal" project components and other social and political processes increases. Technological factors are relevant throughout but critical at the level of outputs, while institutional factors may have a strong shaping effect on the transformations leading to outcomes and impacts.

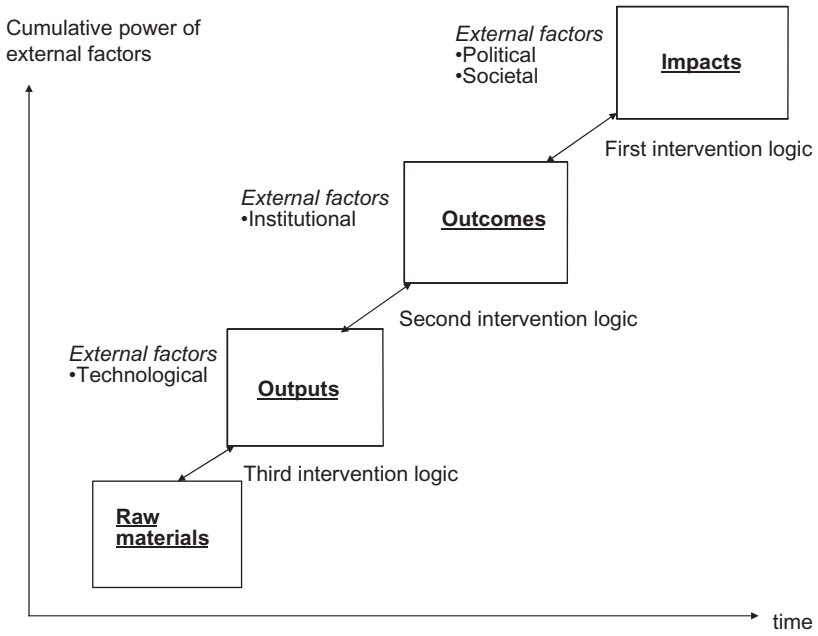

FIG. 1. eParticipation analytical framework.

The potential impacts or general objectives of eParticipation can be viewed from either a policy or a societal perspective. In many cases, the objectives are not specific to eParticipation but are articulated as "public value" impacts to which the specific objectives can contribute.

Working from the top downwards, what we call the first intervention logic, necessary to achieve wider impacts, concerns structuration effects on the one hand and strategic planning on the other. Structuration effects occur when an intervention in a particular setting changes (or stabilizes) the broader institutions in which it is embedded. Strategic planning covers actions such as foresight planning, policy and strategy development, financial allocation, leadership and commitment, legislation, and research and evaluation. All these activities shape the opportunity structure for continued eParticipation.

Outcomes or specific objectives refer to usage of the tool: how and how well it was used, levels of empowerment and forms of governance, and specific benefits for different groups of stakeholders. Many outcomes are stakeholder-dependent, and, in some cases, the achievement of a set of eParticipation objectives for one stakeholder may result in the non-achievement of a different set of eParticipation objectives for another stakeholder. For example, achieving fulfillment and transparency for participants may increase the administrative burden for the project owner.

The second intervention logic, necessary to transform outputs into outcomes, concerns the development of practices, use values, and relationships. More than the other two intervention logics, this one is dependent on the involvement of specific stakeholders, since it is their actions that turn tools into social practices and relationships.

Operational outputs are classified under three headings: (i) working and available hardware, software, and applications; (ii) organizational outputs; and (iii) eParticipation process outputs, where the latter could include awareness raising campaigns, linked offline events, or data from the eParticipation process formatted for end-users.

The third intervention logic, necessary to transform raw materials into outputs, centers on the acquisition and mobilization of materials and on process design, including decisions about what participation activities are intended. In addition to procurement and technological development, this could include the development of requisite support networks, stakeholder consultation, mobilization of political commitment, and assessing potential participants' needs.

Finally, raw materials can include information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure, human and organizational resources, materials and facilities, finance, and investments of time.

2.2 Phase 2. European Survey

To operationalize the framework, we use the feedback gathered from a survey among eParticipation practitioners comprised of four distinct steps, as follows.

2.2.1 Step 1

Firstly, 255 eParticipation initiatives from 23 European countries were identified (contact details were found for 230 of

them). Identification was performed through desktop research in relevant literature and the web, through award schemes and online databases, and through communication with experts and project owners in the field (Panopoulou., Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2009).

2.2.2 Step 2

A detailed questionnaire was prepared to capture the needed information. Questionnaire items were based on the analytical framework elements described above, inquiring on technologies, tools and channels utilized, stakeholders involved, participation area targeted, funding and costs for implementation and yearly operation, management process, benefits and beneficiaries, and societal and policy impact.

The questionnaire also included some identification questions (e.g., initiative name, scope, start and end dates, etc.).

2.2.3 Step 3

The project owners of the 230 identified initiatives were asked to complete our questionnaire. This step lasted four months, as owners needed time to seek clarifications and draft answers. Overall, 40 questionnaires were returned (i.e., 17.4% response rate): 1 from the international level, 9 from the European level, 14 from the national level, 4 from the regional level, and 12 from the local level. In terms of geographical spread, besides European and international cases, the remainder came from Denmark (1), Estonia (2), Finland (1), Germany (10), Greece (2), Italy (2), Portugal (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (1), Switzerland (2), The Netherlands (1), and the United Kingdom (6).

2.2.4 Step 4

This step involved analyzing the gathered responses and reaching conclusions regarding practitioners' input on the analytical framework. We performed two checks. First, we examined practitioners' input to each element (level and intervention logic) of the framework. Second, we examined whether any patterns and meaningful logic could be observed in the responses.

Although the 17.4% response rate may seem low, we regard it as acceptable, given that no incentives to respond were offered, no preliminary screening of the 230 cases was undertaken (e.g., officially-terminated initiatives were intentionally included, hoping that someone may still have been available to respond), and the questionnaire was only available in English, potentially discouraging respondents with poor English skills.

3. SURVEY RESULTS

This section presents the results of our work in two parts; in the first part, we attempt to operationalize the framework as a data-collection tool, and the second part presents an analysis of results and tries to determine whether patterns or other relationships among gathered data allow for deeper understanding of the field.

3.1 Operationalizing the Analytical Framework

In this section, we present the survey findings for each level and intervention logic of the framework. We commence from the external factors and the top level and then proceed downward towards the raw materials.

For the external factors, owners commented on their initiative's policy context and legal framework. They mentioned European and international legal frameworks such as Manchester eGovernment Ministerial Declaration of 2005, Commission's eGovernment Action Plan in 2006, Aalborg Charter, Plan D, Maastricht Treaty, Aarhus Convention, Interactive Policy Making initiative, EU Directive 2003/4/EC guaranteeing free access to publicly-owned environmental data and information, Lisbon's commitment to engendering IT literacy and skills throughout society, and European Commission's general regulation in favor of engaging interest groups. Different national, regional, and local laws, regulations, frameworks, policy documents, and strategy documents were also mentioned—even national constitutions. Most owners referred to encouraging the use of ICT in eGovernment and promoting participation and transparency.

Regarding impacts, owners reported on policy and societal impacts. Some initiatives did not manage to achieve policy impacts; other initiatives reported real impact in policy-making by adopting and implementing the decisions of the participation process. Some owners admit that, although citizens' contributions have been summarized and sent to relevant bodies, it is hard to discern the degree to which these were really reflected in relevant policy documents or decisions.

Societal impact seems easier to assess, as owners mentioned this much more frequently. However, some of them did point out that no hard data on impact are available or that any impact would be measurable only after a couple of years. Owners mentioned impact on policy makers, on citizens, and for society in general. Impact on policy makers includes their "education" on the feasibility and necessity of online deliberation with citizens and familiarization with new technologies. At the same time, policy makers were reported to understand the positive influence of eParticipation on the authority's profile, in strengthening awareness of their work by the public, in emerging as an innovative, transparent, and citizen-friendly administration, in reducing administrative burdens by enhancing transparency, and in avoiding costly mistakes by gauging beforehand the public's expectations. Impact on citizens includes their "education" in participation outside formal channels, becoming individually empowered and engaged directly with public affairs (with a feeling of being able to influence critical decisions about their future), and a feeling of community which is independent of physical location. For society as a whole, owners reported that eParticipation initiatives help foster a new culture of participation, strengthening participatory democracy, citizenship, and empowerment. The work and decisions of public administration are publicized, thus (in their estimation) achieving social inclusion and reducing the opportunities for corruption. At the same

time, community-building is enhanced and technology take-up is encouraged in society.

No input is available for the first intervention logic, as we felt it was too complex to include in an email survey. Nevertheless, this intervention logic is referred to in the next section by discussing the survey initiatives' participation rationale.

For outcomes, owners reported on benefits achieved. For citizens, a culture of participation is created; they become willing to participate in other political processes or existing e-Services and technology. Citizens have the opportunity to express their viewpoints and raise issues of their own with less bureaucracy and administration to negotiate. At the same time, they are able to broaden their understanding and gain public support for their standpoint. Citizens engage with government, become aware of policy issues and political developments, and obtain access to political information in a convenient way. Additionally, complex political processes (e.g., budgeting) become easier to understand, removing some participation barriers and reducing the distance between citizens, administrations, and political institutions. Process openness and visibility contribute to higher transparency and accountability, encouraging citizens, especially young people, to engage with political processes. Increased citizen satisfaction is achieved.

Reported benefits to government include increased legitimacy, transparency and accountability, an improved public image, a better informed public, increased contact with the public and better relationship building, and establishment of a new culture through increased engagement of citizens in the policy-making process. At the same time, governments receive structured input, comments, and proposals from citizens, resulting in a higher degree of consistency of policies with citizens' viewpoints and improved acceptance levels for new services and policies by the public. Governments also gain easier and faster access to information due to the digitization of documents and plans, are provided with tools to support their decision-making process, have the opportunity for more effective project operations, simpler legal procedures, faster project development, and enrich their own experience to utilize later as best practice in other technological implementations. Finally, election candidates also benefit, as voters find out more about each candidate before voting.

A careful reader may have noticed that input received for outcomes and impacts is similar. We have reported input as described by project owners, who often provided similar feedback at both levels.

For the second intervention logic, we gathered input on stakeholder types and role(s) and on the policy lifecycle stages addressed. The survey showed that citizens are usually the targeted participants, either individually or as organized citizen groups, whereas government usually takes on the leading role in initiating and facilitating the initiative and in processing and using its results.

Regarding position in the policy lifecycle, most initiatives target the analysis and formulation stages; fewer target the agenda-setting stage. No initiatives are active in the implementation and monitoring stages, while 15 initiatives are not considered relevant to the policy lifecycle, as they are mainly involved with information provision and voting.

For outputs, owners provided feedback on tools and channels utilized. Apart from common tools like web portals and FAQs, owners most commonly reported usage of discussion forums, eConsultation tools, survey tools, and virtual community tools. All other proposed tools (ePetition systems, eVoting and eReferenda, Online surgeries and chat rooms, Decision-making games, ePanels, eDeliberative polling, Suggestion tools for planning procedures, Quick polls, Webcasts, Podcasts, Wikis, Blogs, GIS and mapping tools, Search engines, Alert services, Online newsletters/listservs, Groupware tools) were also used in at least one initiative.

As expected, all initiatives utilize the conventional internet channel for use by PC. As complementary channels, most initiatives utilize offline channels such as offline events (e.g., meetings, workshops), paper documentation, paper voting, and paper petitions. Alternative e-channels, such as mobile phones, public kiosks, and digital TV, are reported only by a few owners.

For the third intervention logic, owners provided feedback on the type of participation targeted and the issues taken into consideration during design. Owners were requested to specify the participation area of their initiatives by choosing among the following: information provision, community building/collaborative environments, consultation, campaigning, electioneering, deliberation, discourse, mediation, polling, and voting. All these categories were mentioned at least once, the most frequent being information provision, followed by deliberation and consultation.

Regarding the design stage, seven owners included promotion and outreach in their process design and reported diversified approaches: developing an appropriate brand and key message, setting up a concrete communication and marketing plan, promotion through web sites (city's, owner's or affiliated bodies' web sites), through publications (own or affiliated bodies'), through online and offline events, promotion through "word of mouth" exploiting existing visitors and members, and, in one case, through the creation of a permanent marketing position. Five owners reported special design considerations to ensure inclusion of priority or "sensitive" groups; one initiative reported special provisions in the registration process in order to include citizens who live permanently abroad; another initiative included young people and immigrants in voting although they are not entitled to vote in official elections; other initiatives targeted specifically females, young people, or citizens at risk of being excluded from ICT (elderly, disabled, and ethnic minorities). One owner reported the design of a training toolkit for the moderator, and another reported hands-on training and assistance for the users prior to and during the participation period. Moderation arrangements were also reported by some owners; moderators' role could cover opening of new topics, enforcing participation rules and dealing with bad/offensive language,

enforcing rules about anonymity of contributors, producing summary reports, and forwarding results to relevant governmental bodies. Only a few initiatives reported that governmental bodies made commitments to respond to the participation process during the design phase or that a design process for this was foreseen. Four owners mentioned this factor in their design, making agreements with relevant political bodies to provide support to the initiative, such as encouraging politicians to initiate and participate in debates, undertaking editorial control of the content, and agreeing on a legally-binding dialogue. Owners reported plans for linking to public events and using phone and kiosk voting. Regarding monitoring and evaluation, some owners reported that they designed for evaluation surveys as well as analysis of web site statistical data (e.g., visits, visitors, referring sites, content overviews, traffic sources, geographical overviews, etc.).

Regarding raw materials, owners commented on technologies utilized, funding, and costs. Owners reported usage of all inquired technologies in their initiatives (Digital signature and security protocols, Mobile and wireless technologies, Geographical information systems, Ontologies, Streaming media, Argumentation Support Systems, Collaborative environments, Semantic web services, Data mining, Web 2.0 features, and Knowledge Management); digital signature and security protocols were most frequently reported and mentioned by all voting initiatives.

Funding emerged as an important raw material for any eParticipation initiative. Owners utilize one or more funding options: public sector funding (both EU and national/regional/local funding), private sector funding, and voluntary/charity contributions. There have been initiatives that are purely supported by the latter category.

Most initiatives' implementation cost and annual running costs tended to be relatively low (we should note, however, that most owners did not answer this question).

3.2 Accounting for External Factors

To facilitate further analysis of our survey results, we adapted a typology which we have previously used for exploring the relationship between eParticipation and the prevailing mode of governance in the relevant political or administrative system. This is a way of accounting for some of the political and social external factors that moderate the success of a project or program, since the mode of governance shapes the environment in which an initiative must fit or embed, creating synergies and disturbances. It is essential to properly contextualize the benefits of participation and eParticipation with reference to governance regimes which participation activities are expected to co-exist with or to co-shape. Governance regimes both offer and constrain the rationale for political or social participation, (i.e., its function and benefits for different stakeholders). Elsewhere, we have argued that the European Union itself exhibits an increasingly-networked mode of governance—although it also retains important hierarchical and market elements—and that its eParticipation offerings have, to varying degrees, made use of three distinct participation rationales, which we call problem-solving, relegitimizing, and decoupling (Smith, 2009). In terms of the analytical framework, participation rationales summarize particular directions of transformation or theories of change that an initiative wishes to enact. Given that our cases operate at different spatial scales, we can expect a greater variety of governance contexts than for our analysis of European Union eParticipation initiatives and policies (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011), but the same broad typology should be applicable, since the governance archetypes "have a general applicability that transcends any particular geographical space or temporal order" (Frances, Levačic, Mitchell, & Thompson, 1991, p. 1).

In Table 1, target public defines the type of public or public sphere we should expect to be instituted through an initiative operating according to a given governance mode, using Eriksen's (2007) typology of strong, weak/general, and segmented publics. Participants define the type of actors we should expect to be represented in the online space. Intermediation defines the way that public demands should be converted into political decisions. Symbolic representation defines the grammar of public demands or how they are represented symbolically as they are processed by the system. In Table 2, we define participation rationale with reference to the predominance of a particular form of communication (in terms of the balance between speaker and audience roles), to different "architectural" forms (how a space is organized internally and how it is integrated into the rest of the web sphere), and again to symbolic representation. The two typologies are clearly associated to a certain extent: in particular, there is a strong correspondence between hierarchical governance and the relegitimizing rationale. Market governance is associated with either a problem-solving or a relegitimizing rationale, depending on how directly market signals enact decisions, whereas network governance suggests either a problem-solving or a decoupling rationale, depending on the locus of the network in relation to centers of power. In this section, we adapt the typologies as a way of applying and testing our analytical framework on the survey data. The tables therefore also indicate the relevant layers of the analytical framework at which modes of governance are likely to act as drivers and barriers, or towards which participation rationales are attempting to enact transformations. We operationalized the governance regime according to the distribution of roles among stakeholders, the insertion of an initiative within the policymaking cycle (second intervention logic), and the owner's definition of the participation area (third intervention logic). We attempted to derive indicators of participation rationale from the observed or anticipated benefits of eParticipation for government, citizens (outcomes), and society as a whole (impacts). Although this operationalization is rather schematic, it enables us to explore some of the interactions between intervention logics, targeted outcomes, and impacts and conditioning external factors. Implicitly, it brings into play the first intervention logic, absent from our survey, but present in the notion of a participation rationale on the assumption that

TABLE 1
Modes of governance

Governance mode	Market	Hierarchy	Network
Target public	Weak	Strong + Weak	Strong + Segmented
Participants	Consumers/Voters	EU Representatives or Officials + Citizens	Experts or Delegates + Citizens
Intermediation	Aggregating opinion	Channelling demands vertically	Connecting networks horizontally
Symbolic representation	Interests	Interests + Identities	Interests + Knowledge resources
Analytical framework Components	Participation area: voting and polling	Participation area: consultation and information	Participation area: discourse and deliberation
	Policy lifecycle: often agenda-setting	Policy lifecycle: often agenda-setting, or analysis	Policy lifecycle: analysis and policy formulation
	Stakeholders roles: participants are citizens, decision-makers may be citizens, initiator is government or party	Stakeholders roles: participants are citizens and elected reps, decision-makers and initiators are government or elected reps	Stakeholders roles: participants are often citizens, other roles played by intermediates like non-governmental organizations and academia

TABLE 2
Participation rationales

Participation rationale	Problem-solving	Relegitimizing	Decoupling
Communication	Intersubjective (one-to-one) or group	Broadcast (one-to-many, many-to-one)	Interactive broadcast (anyone-to-many)
Architecture (internal)	Horizontal networking space	Vertical accountability space	Horizontal networking space
Architecture (external) -integration in the world wide web	Node	Channel	Enclave
Symbolic representation	Knowledge resources	Interests + Identities	Identities
Analytical framework Components	Citizen benefits: learning skills, access to information	Citizen benefits: transparency, redress, access to information	Citizen benefits: participation culture, learning skills, access to information
	Government benefits: effectiveness, experience	Government benefits: image, legitimacy, transparency	Government benefits: none
	Societal impact: education, empowerment, engagement, cooperation, opinion, information	Societal impact: education, empowerment, engagement, opinion, citizen-friendly	Societal impact: cooperation, information

we have captured projects' overall theory of change about how to negotiate a given social and political context as they seek to have an impact. The analytical test is essentially about assessing "fit"—how well a project fits within its environment—and "embedding force" —to what extent the intervention logics help embed a project within its environment and thus enact a participation rationale.

In relation to governance mode, 37 of the 40 cases could be classified, of which 23 fit a hierarchical mode of governance, 10 a network mode, and 4 a market mode. In relation to participation rationale, defined from respondents' answers to the open text questions about benefits and impacts, there was insufficient data to classify 13 of the initiatives. Of the remaining 27, 11 indicated a relegitimizing rationale, 8 a mixed problem-solving /relegitimizing rationale, 4 a problem-solving rationale, and 3 a decoupling rationale. This distribution suggests that the majority of initiatives deploy eParticipation within the framework of orthodox representative democracy as we encounter it at the national, regional, or local scale in Europe. Accordingly, the main perceived benefits and impacts refer to the capacity of citizen participation to restore legitimacy to the political system or to specific policies and decisions. Relatively

few of the initiatives we identified indicate that they are attempting to mobilize participation as part of a shift towards more direct or deliberative modes of governance. Similarly, it is rare to find initiatives that either decouple participation from the system of representative democracy (e.g., for experiments in localized self-governance or to manage the internal democracy of a social movement) or use it to produce knowledge for direct problem-solving (e.g., expert groups and committees with delegated powers), although the latter is relatively more common when adopted in combination with a relegitimizing rationale (e.g., participatory budgeting experiments).

When we look at the correspondences between governance modes and participation rationales, we find the expected pairings in 23 of the 26 cases which could be classified according to both typologies. For example, all the decoupling eParticipation initiatives operate within a network governance mode. Since we classified cases according to separate levels of the analytical framework, this degree of correspondence provides some confirmation that the intervention logics adopted by project owners were usually appropriate to the outcomes and impacts they sought to achieve and should help embed them in their environment. It is nonetheless worth focusing on the three anomalous cases, in which the governance regime seems "out of alignment" with the participation rationale. This could either be explained by constraint—the governance mode is constraining or thwarting an intended participation rationale—or subversion—the governance mode has been subverted by participants to induce an incongruous participation rationale. We found two different types of anomaly: two initiatives combine a hierarchical mode of governance with a problem-solving participation rationale, while a third combines a network governance mode with a relegitimizing rationale. The networking/relegitimizing combination could occur when an experiment with network governance is subverted by actors whose habitus is more comfortable with a vertical representative relationship, or it could be that participation in the network is lop-sided, allowing power-holders to derive the principal benefits. In this case—a political party eParticipation network with a high participation rate among registered party members—the former explanation seems more probable. A hierarchical/problem-solving combination may also arise from either constraint or subversion. Interestingly, both our examples concern consultation and consensus-building around planning proposals or infrastructure projects. We speculate that both constraint and subversion are implicated: a problem-solving rationale emerged partly against initial intentions (or beyond original expectations), but its effects were limited by the governance context. It is, of course, possible that the positive results reported by both initiatives may induce a relaxation in the dominant mode of governance—decentralizing power from representative bodies to citizens' forums—in the longer term and thereby changing the external environment to make it more conducive, if the wider democratic system is able to learn from the experience that decision-making effectiveness was improved by this partial subversion of the intervention logic. For this reason, we wish to stress the importance of tracking the impact of eParticipation initiatives over the longer term, so that their interactions with the governance regime in which they are embedded can be observed. Our study is not able to do this, but our framework provides a tool for identifying limit cases that may be particularly valuable for such longitudinal study.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we discuss the results and present our conclusions in two parts. In the first part, we discuss our main conclusions in terms of understanding European eParticipation initiatives. In the second part, we discuss our main conclusions from using the analytical framework which includes outlining future research work that our results suggest is still needed.

The survey results reveal that it was difficult for most owners to provide tangible, measurable benefits. In most cases, owners suggested that eParticipation provided a suitable alternative channel for participatory activities. Trying to relate this finding to the potential of eParticipation, we should note a restrictive use of eParticipation. Certainly, eParticipation can be utilized as just an alternative communication channel, but it can also be used for greater deliberation and engagement or for facilitating a shift of power and even paving the way towards direct democracy. Our survey indicates that current eParticipation initiatives are mainly exploiting eParticipation as just an alternative communication channel. In other words, we have not identified many significant initiatives that contest or challenge institutionalized centers of power. Clearly, the fact we did not find them does not necessarily mean that they do not exist, but if they exist, they do not have a very high visibility.

It should be also noted here that an analysis of owners' responses suggests that, in general, the use of eParticipation as an alternative communication channel was close to the intended use of the initiative. On the other hand, among the three "anomalous" cases presented in the previous section, there are two where usage seems to be pushing the limits of the system (to be more participative, more open) and one where, on the contrary, usage may be conforming to type (vertical, hierarchical communication) against designers' intentions for something more radical. One can claim that a similar sort of tension is indicated by the mixed problem-solving/relegitimizing rationale apparent from the benefits described by several case owners, and it may be that it indicates a need for (formal or informal) educational services to stimulate participatory literacy.

Another survey finding, which probably relates to the discussion above, is that eParticipation initiatives were mostly pilots or trials—in general, one-off initiatives. This is particularly true for national, regional, and local initiatives. This was also evident from the low response rate of initiative owners, as many initiatives were no longer operational. It is therefore evident that eParticipation seems to still be at the trial stage and not fully integrated to relevant policies. This inevitably raises questions

on sustainability. Related to this is another finding on participant numbers. It seems that in most cases participation was not high when compared to eParticipation potential (although it is inevitably difficult to estimate potential participation, even a casual comparison with usage rates of popular social networking sites indicates a far higher level than that reported by most of the initiatives here). In most cases, citizens' participation was limited to a few hundreds.

Finally, it seems that in many cases, general purpose tools (such as e-forums) are used in eParticipation initiatives. This suggests that, although dedicated eParticipation tools have been developed from research projects and by companies, they have not yet penetrated the relevant market. Having said this, the first results of a study we are currently conducting on eParticipation initiatives in European Institutions suggest a massive shift to the use of existing social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, for participation purposes.

Moving to the use of the analytical framework, we can make the following remarks. Overall, results suggest the framework can be practically used to analyze eParticipation initiatives. Nearly all the different levels, external factors, and intervention logics were efficiently used to guide the development of questionnaires and, hence, assist in better understanding of eParticipation. This is particularly true for external factors where a good level of response was forthcoming. On the contrary, there was a common misunderstanding from the respondents' part between outcomes and outputs. It may be that this distinction, although standard in commonly-used impact assessment frameworks, is not appropriate for self-administered questionnaires aimed at frontline officers or project workers. Nevertheless, we can say that the main focus in terms of outcomes claimed was on civil society and how citizens would be more aware and more engaged.

When it comes to impacts, respondents mainly focused on societal impact; little political impact was mentioned. There might be two possible explanations for this. First, to gauge political impact, longitudinal studies are required. Second, respondents were mainly government agencies, so it might be possible that the impact of civil society was self-evident to them. The expected social impact, of course, is not necessarily identical to the real impact, which once again can be more precisely monitored through longitudinal studies.

Finally, the data obtained in the third intervention logic and raw materials were quite rich and detailed. This suggests respondents found it much easier to list and describe what they did, as opposed to what they aimed for or what they finally achieved. This suggests better research is needed into the roles and impacts of different actors and user situations in eParticipation and that ongoing and longitudinal evaluation should be undertaken.

Finally, it should be noted that not all elements of the analytical framework were explicitly exploited in the questionnaire and in this article. This is left for future work using a more suitable methodological instrument, such as in-depth analysis of a single eParticipation case or comparative eParticipation cases, using the principles of qualitative case-study methodology.

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