The many forms of e-participation? A framework for measuring e-participation adoption by local governments in the UK and Germany

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Abstract

Electronic participation has become a priority for policy-makers across Europe. Both scholars and practitioners emphasize the potentials of digital participation for representative democracies. Despite these high expectations, empirical evidence on the diffusion of e-participation and insights on potential variations regarding the supply of e-participation across local governments are rare. This lack of knowledge about different forms of e-participation makes it difficult to evaluate whether local governments can live up to the high expectations prescribed to e-participation. To provide evidence on different forms of e-participation adoption, this study introduces a framework for assessing the supply of e-participation by local governments. The framework presents e-participation supply as an integrative challenge, requiring local governments to not only provide e-participation practices, but also to present these opportunities on websites that are transparent and easily accessible. The framework is tested by conducting a web-content analysis of 127 local governments' websites in the UK and Germany. Based on the results, a cluster analysis is applied, aiming to identify meaningful forms of e-participation adoption. Preliminary results show a high degree of variation in e-participation adoption and suggest that e-participation only diffuses across specific groups of local governments, while others remain reluctant to adopt such practices. Moreover, the analysis suggests that municipalities generally struggle to provide e-participation opportunities that empower citizens to participate in decision-making, and to provide websites that are easily accessible. The study enhances our understanding of the empirical adoption of e-participation and hints towards a gap in e-participation research, which lacks explanations for the variation of e-participation adoption across local governments.