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Julia Schwanholz, Lavinia Zinser, Johannes Hindemith

Measuring policy effects: online participation on the municipal level

Abstract

Do citizens' decisions, which are discussed and coordinated a priori on online participation platforms, have any policy effects? The article addresses this question in an exploratory study. Taking theoretical concepts of participation and policy effects into account, *LiquidFeedback* platforms are investigated in four municipalities in Lower Saxony (Germany). A total of 80 cases—i.e., successful citizens' initiatives that were afterwards considered by local city or district councils—are included in a content analysis. Results show that crucial policies are less often translated into binding policy decisions than other policies. Even though citizens' decisions can have binding policy effects, large-scale projects, in particular, show rather diffuse policy effects. However, diffuse policy effects are hardly transparent for citizens and could, accordingly, inhibit the willingness to participate altogether.

Keywords: Citizen participation, digitization, liquid democracy, *LiquidFeedback*, local government

Zusammenfassung

Policy-Effekte messen: Online-Partizipation auf kommunaler Ebene

Haben von Bürger*innen auf Online-Bürgerbeteiligungsplattformen getroffene Entscheidungen Auswirkungen auf politische Entscheidungen? Der vorliegende Artikel befasst sich mit dieser Frage in einer explorativen Studie. Unter Berücksichtigung theoretischer Konzepte von Partizipation und politischen Effekten werden *LiquidFeedback*-Plattformen in vier niedersächsischen Kommunen untersucht. In die Inhaltsanalyse werden 80 Fälle miteinbezogen, die auf der Beteiligungsplattform positiv abgestimmt und später von den örtlichen Stadt- oder Bezirksräten geprüft wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass es vor allem in Politikfeldern, die viel Planungszeit erfordern, seltener zu bindenden Policy-Entscheidungen kommt. Unklare politische Entscheidungen sind für die Bürger*innen jedoch schlecht nachvollziehbar. Sind sie überdies noch intransparent, wirken sie sich hemmend auf die Bereitschaft zur (weiteren) Teilnahme aus.

Schlagworte: Online-Partizipation, Bürgerbeteiligung, Kommunalpolitik, Liquid Democracy, *LiquidFeedback*

1 Introduction

Ten years ago, a *dms special issue on electronic government* discussed whether and how political processes might be organised and vitalised through citizen participation in the age of digitalisation (Winkel, 2011). This question has been taken up by scholars in the last decade. Extensive research exists today on online citizen participation (for

an early account of the literature, see Saebø, Rose & Flak, 2008; for a recently evaluated research agenda, see Johannessen & Berntzen, 2019). The relevant literature includes a large number of theoretical reflections and empirical studies on online citizen participation. One frequently asked question, according to empirical findings, concerns why user numbers are consistently low. It could be asked whether citizens have any interest in participation and governing at all. This question, however, is difficult to answer because the availability of data—due to anonymous participation—remains highly complicated, and systematic surveys on citizens' attitudes can hardly be comprehensive.

In this contribution, we will instead empirically focus on the impact on politics to answer the following research questions: How can citizens participate in governing by way of online citizen participation? How binding is their input through online tools? Does this differ across policy fields? Considering that digital transformation does not only have technological, but also political, institutional, and cultural consequences (Winkel, 2011), evaluations of online participation projects become crucial. The aim of the paper is therefore to investigate novel channels of democratic legitimation in order to monitor whether and how citizens are integrated, or not, ex-ante into regular policy-making processes and effective problem-solving through online participation. For this purpose, our evaluation will be focused on the local level because municipalities are considered to be “schools of democracy” (Kost, 2013, S. 34) with the greatest potential for direct democratic decision-making processes and political co-governance.

In an effort to answer the research questions, political decisions of four municipalities in Lower Saxony (Germany) between 2012 and 2019 will be analysed. The selection of cases is based on the reputation of these four municipalities as pioneers—the first municipalities to make use of the *LiquidFeedback* participation software. Specifically, it is assessed how often and in which policy fields online citizen participation has exerted a political impact. Consequently, the cases (political decisions) are processed through content analysis.

The contribution is structured as follows: The first section shows what we know about participation research and citizen participation (i.e., the state of research). This is followed by a section on the research context of the study to become acquainted with the software *LiquidFeedback* and learn about assumptions to be tested in the empirical part of the paper. Following this, methods and data are presented. The data evaluation and interpretation are presented in the empirical section. The article concludes by offering answers to the research questions, drawing some lessons learned, discussing limits of the study, and providing a brief outlook.

2 What we know about German participation research

Despite the recommendation of a carefully dosed, context-based application of participatory procedures (Zittel, 2012, S. 12), citizen participation has developed from an idealistic buzzword in the 1970s to an actual political trend in recent years. (For structuring and classifying the conceptual development, see Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; and for figures and facts on citizen participation in Germany, see Kersting, 2014.) Participation offers can take many forms for average citizens. In addition to traditional participation (e.g., in the form of elections and going to the ballot box), there are numerous

other participation formats. In general, it can be said that as the intensity of influence increases, the number of offers for citizens decreases. *Information* that citizens receive from the administration about political projects has the lowest degree of co-determination. In the case of *consultations*, citizens are invited to comment on a planned project. Political *co-decision* gives citizens the opportunity to set and prioritize topics. After all, *direct democracy* (e.g., referenda) shows the most far-reaching possibilities for political co-determination.

Over time, the possibilities of participation at the local level have been transferred to the federal state and EU-level; furthermore, the applicability of participation at the national level has increasingly been discussed. However, the municipal level is still of particular and suitable interest for empirical analyses since there are many comparable procedural variants for citizen participation. Furthermore, citizen participation, democratic decision-making processes at the municipal level are accompanied by an immediate or local impact (Almond & Verba, 1963; Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2006; Klages & Vetter, 2013). Accordingly, the early involvement of citizens in the process is assumed to increase input legitimacy (Easton, 1965; Kersting, 2008) or support output legitimacy, by involving citizens in finding better solutions (Cook & Morgan, 1971; Newton, 2012, p. 3). This usually happens either bottom-up, that is through procedures initiated by citizens, or top-down through procedures initiated at the political and administrative levels (Kubicek, Lipka & Knoop, 2011). Since the essential goals of participation have basically remained the same, new online participation formats were added to the existing offers. These include smooth transitions between offline and online spheres (Kersting, 2013).

The new possibilities of citizen participation provided by the internet also result in different expectations. According to Hubertus Buchstein's (1996) expectation triad, *Internet optimism* is the label for the expectation that digitalisation will improve democratic decision-making. *Internet neutralism* refers to the assumption that the effects of digitalisation will be ambivalent, resulting both in positive and negative consequences. However, the assumed risks are controllable and may be reshaped into opportunities. Finally, *Internet pessimism* relates to the expectation that digitalisation will cause negative and disadvantageous effects on democratic decision-making.

A first evaluation of these expectations is presented by Olaf Winkel (2015). Concerning *Internet neutralism*, Winkel identifies a successful shift from the offline sphere to the online sphere among the German population, enabled through the broadband network deployment and the expansion of the digital infrastructure. Accordingly, increasing segments of the population are active internet users; however, the number of *offline citizens* (people with limited or no access to the internet) remains high. This means that the digital divide still exists, and many people are excluded from access to information and thus from the possibility of citizen participation. Negative developments also include an aggressive tone and cyberbullying on the internet as well as inadequate communication between the represented and their political representatives. Finally, as Winkel states, deliberation is marginal at the local level, and civic decision-making has no binding effect (Winkel, 2015, S. 417). Whereas the negative effects of digitalisation may still be adjusted according to the *Internet neutralists'* view, the evaluation of *Internet pessimism* is darker. A culture of surveillance on the internet is assumed as well as a radical-liberal anarchy and a world of bad alternatives (Winkel, 2015, S. 423).

Ultimately, the concept of *Internet optimism* is associated with several so-called *mobilisation theses*, which predict that new tools of online participation might result in more and improved participation (Grossmann, 1995; Boulianne, 2009). Over time, the initial euphoria over online participation has long been dampened by the results of empirical studies. It turned out, for example, that “[t]he change towards a modernised, democratic public via e-participation (...) [is not] necessarily the consequence of technological developments” (Sarcinelli, 2012, S. 446). There has been further and ample evidence that the number of participants in the online sphere has remained as low as in the offline sphere or the total number today (Kersting, 2016; Escher, 2013; Marschall & Schultze, 2012). The internet has thus not automatically increased the willingness of people to participate generally, which corresponds to the idea that participatory democracy has high requirements, according to Thomas Zittel (2012) and Pippa Norris (2008, p. 238).

One basic precondition for online participation in representative democracies is reliable opportunity structures. Apart from active citizens willing to participate, these structures include participation-friendly, low-threshold, topical and project-specific offers (Sarcinelli, 2012; Schwanholz & Zinser, 2020; Sachs & Schossböck, 2019; Große, 2018; Kolley, 2017; Kröher, 2016). If such opportunity structures are available, the probability of citizen participation will be higher. However, this does not necessarily result in a higher acceptance of binding decisions and trust in representative democracy. There is little or no proof that citizen participation increases the quality of democracy, or that it might work against disenchantment with democracy (Weiß, 2013). Both theoretically and empirically, there are rather contradictory results concerning this connection (Geissel, 2008; Escher & Rosar, 2016; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Newig, Jäger & Challies, 2012), such that any final judgement must take further aspects into consideration. At the micro-level, for example, there is a positive connection between the language or language level of the participation procedures and the participation rates (Fink, Ruffing, Burst & Chinnow, 2019; Märker, 2006). On the other hand, there is a negative connection concerning the organisational culture: the more bureaucratically and hierarchically an administration is organised, the more likely administrative staff will be to reject the use of participative instruments (Chadwick, 2011). For this simple negative connection, however, Malte Steinbach (2019) points out that the institutional context of public organisations cannot be reduced to their bureaucratic organisational culture; on the contrary, municipal administrations are rather pluralist, such that it should be explained more along the lines of individual attitudes (entrepreneurial, pragmatic, skeptical) whether and how online participation is offered and implemented (Steinbach & Süß, 2018).

In addition to such theoretical, institutional and organisational analyses, the research also shows the practical relevance of dealing with online participation. More and more municipalities are offering ways to participate online (Gladitz, Schöttle, Steinbach, Wilker & Witt, 2017 for North Rhine-Westphalia; Wang, 2001, for the US), and more and more citizens are demanding ways to do so (Newton, 2012, p. 3; Bertelsmann-Stiftung, 2011). Besides input and output legitimacy, citizen feedback and input have another new function: Politics and administration can use them as deficiency indicators and early warning systems. Participation results thus become political seismographs providing orientation for implemented or new policy projects. Usually, such feedback is not representative since participation rates are often low. The final

policy decision, however, will be based on representative-democratic or bureaucratic procedures when taking the results into account in tangible policy.

This last step is often not transparent to citizens. For some time now, a growing social divide between a passive and active citizenry on the internet has been suspected in terms of participatory engagement (Norris, 2008; Merkel & Petring, 2012). However, empirical studies show that non-transparent procedures may be a central reason why active citizens become disenchanted with procedural opacity, disengaging completely from a system which fails to engage with them (Kim & Lee, 2012; Newton, 2012; Kolleck, 2017; Kröher, 2016). In this respect, a closer look at this context is useful. This study seeks to contribute to the state of the literature by empirically showing whether and how citizens can actively participate in political decisions. It will therefore be examined to what extent citizen participation (e.g., the articulation of ideas or ex-ante votes) is considered for final policy decisions.

3 Context of the study and the *LiquidFeedback* software

Two observations can be made that identify the context of the following empirical study.

- 1) In recent years, the call for direct democracy in Germany has become louder. This is due to a growing dissatisfaction with the political elite (Pickel, 2013) and is based on the citizens' desire to participate in decision-making when they are affected by political decisions. In Germany, this effort is most extensive at the local level. At the federal state level (*Bundesland*), elements of direct democracy are less prevalent, and at the national level, there is only one direct-democratic option under the Basic Law to participate in the reorganisation of the national (federal) territory.
- 2) Offers of citizen participation must be differentiated. Norbert Kersting (2013; 2016) compiled and structured a number of attributions and illustrated how diverse offers for participation are. For example, representative elements are combined with deliberative and direct democracy offers (hybrid democracy). Citizen participation can take place online and offline (blended democracy). Moreover, participation can be initiated by politics (invited spaces) or by citizens (invented spaces). Processes of online participation are thus often mixed forms of different types of participation.

In 2009, a software was published to implement a specific offer of online participation. *LiquidFeedback* was developed by the *Public Software Group e.V.* association (Interaktive Demokratie, 2021a), while the *Interaktive Demokratie* association, founded in 2010, oversaw the public relations aspect of its release (Interaktive Demokratie, 2021b). The German Pirate Party's experiences with *LiquidFeedback* had been rather sobering (see Jabbusch, 2010 & 2011, S. 162; Bullwinkel & Probst, 2014, S. 399), and *LiquidFeedback* came to the attention of an SPD-District Administrator (*Landrat*) from the District of Friesland. An alternative platform—e.g., *Adhocracy*—was also developed and is still used for purposes other than deciding on political issues.

The district council of Friesland introduced *LiquidFeedback* as a pilot project in 2012 and made it permanent one year later. All this received considerable media atten-

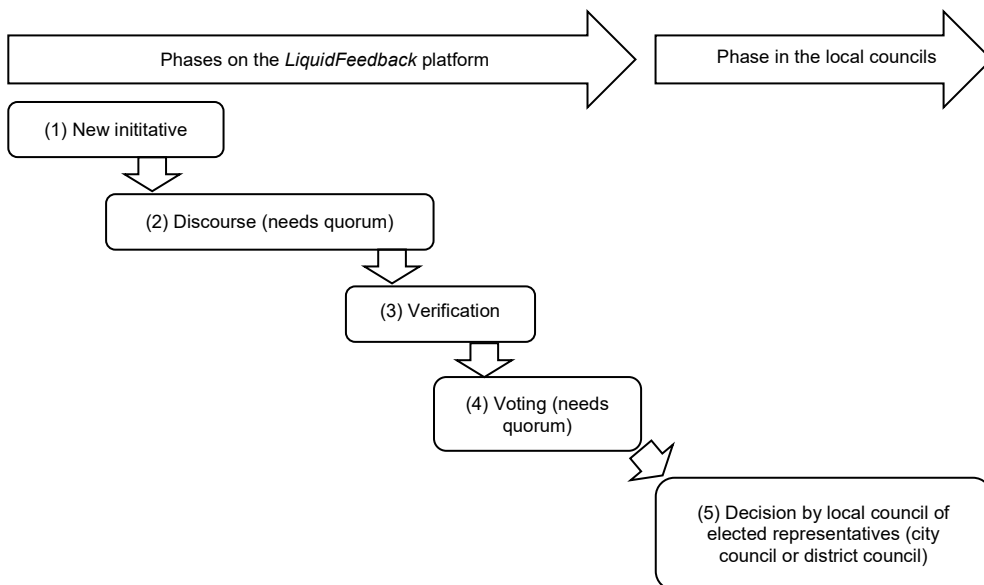
tion, since the Friesians were the national pioneers when making use of *LiquidFeedback* as a cutting-edge tool for online citizen participation (see Reinbold, 2012; Bewarnder, 2013). This venture by the Frisian District Administrator did not go unnoticed, and other municipalities, where SPD politicians had connections to Friesland, followed suit. In 2015, the District of Rotenburg (Wümme) and the City of Wunstdorf, as well as (shortly after) the City of Seelze went online with their *LiquidFeedback* platforms. In 2016, the City of Achim followed, which is the only *LiquidFeedback* platform still online today, while the other platforms have been discontinued (or, as in the case of Friesland, later re-emerging in a different form).

In the municipal area of application, the *LiquidFeedback* participation procedure, which will be dealt with in the empirical part of this article, is attributed to direct democracy. One goal of *LiquidFeedback* is to directly involve citizens in the political decisions that elected representatives make. In this way, the legitimacy of the policy output is supposed to be increased, which contrasts directly with consultative-dialogical procedures (such as deliberative polls), where the aim is not to change the attitudes of those involved or to avoid inequalities and polarisation (see Fishkin, 2012, pp. 75-84). In terms of democratic theory, the development of the *LiquidFeedback* software is based on the idea of strengthening direct democracy according to social choice theory (see Adler 2018, S. 75, 99). The software, therefore, comprises three things: (1) proxy voting, that is providing every citizen with the possibility to participate; (2) the possibility of structured feedback; and (3) a means for taking ideas into consideration for currently ongoing initiatives. The search for experts, regardless of their formal qualification (Adler, 2018, S. 74), is thus understood as a central objective of *LiquidFeedback*.

Online participation procedures, organised via *LiquidFeedback*, run in five phases (see *Figure 1*). The first four phases take place on the platform (new initiative, discourse, verification, and voting); in the fifth and final phase, the councils of elected representatives (city council or district council) decide on the results of the participatory decision (decision by city council or district council). Therefore, in the analysis, a distinction must be made between the processes happening on the *LiquidFeedback* platforms and those of the political and administrative system (*Figure 1*).

In the first phase (“new initiative”), a user can start an initiative and submit an idea or request. In order to reach the next phase, the initiative must achieve a certain quorum within a specific time period. In the second phase (“discourse”), all users can make suggestions or offer counter-initiatives. In contrast to an open discussion, this highly structured method is supposed to lead to a constructive and rational exchange of arguments. During this phase, the petitioners may revise their initiatives to correspond with the arguments of other users. After a set time, the initiative reaches the third phase (“verification”), in which users decide on the pros and cons of the initiative. After this point, no changes on the initiative can be made and no further arguments can be exchanged. When the initiative again reaches the quorum, it comes to the fourth phase (“voting”). At this stage, all users may vote for or against the initiative, or, if there is more than one initiative to consider (in case of counter-initiatives), sort them alongside their preferences (“Schulze-method”). If an initiative gets the majority of the votes and is successfully adopted within the *LiquidFeedback* platform, it is submitted to the responsible council which makes a final political decision upon the initiative (phase 5).

Figure 1: The phases of an online participation procedure via *LiquidFeedback* and beyond



Source: Own presentation based on Adler (2018).

In light of our research questions, we are particularly interested in this final phase. We will examine this phase empirically in more detail below.

4 The concept of policy effects

In order to make participation offers more than political symbolism or “window dressing” (see Neunecker, 2016, S. 267), they must actively be used by citizens and the results should be taken into account in representative-democratic decision-making processes. Online participation at the municipal level usually takes place via decision-making processes more so than deliberation processes. In this way, it is possible to empirically assess whether the requests and concerns raised by citizens are considered or not.

When citizens propose specific topics in the context of participation processes—for example, through *LiquidFeedback*—and then vote on them, no evidence is automatically collected as to whether or to what extent these proposals are subsequently taken into account by public representatives, and as to whether this results in a policy effect. It is thus necessary to analyse the fifth phase within the online participation procedure which takes place *inside* local councils of elected representatives and *outside* the *LiquidFeedback* platform. From this point on, it can be assessed which decision has been made on a certain initiative: Has it been adopted or considered or even rejected? It must, thereby, be noted that local level councils only decide on *LiquidFeedback* initiatives that have previously been successfully voted on at the respective *LiquidFeedback* platforms. Initiatives rejected by users at the *LiquidFeedback* platforms will not reach the respective local councils (or phase 5).

The concept of policy effects, in this regard, may refer to different things. It may be the effect of a policy decision during implementation (i.e., a policy impact) (see Windhoff-Héritier, 1987), or—as in the case of online citizen participation—the consideration of a citizen’s vote in the final political decision by elected representatives with the final decision right (see Neunecker, 2016, S. 253). The latter conceptual understanding is guiding the following empirical analysis.

Different types of effects can be distinguished in this regard (see Neunecker, 2016, S. 257). There is *no policy effect* if citizen input has had no impact on substantive political decisions. A *diffuse policy effect* exists if the political decision-makers consider the results of the participation as a non-binding proposal. There is a *significant policy effect* if the implementation of the participation results is linked to framework conditions, whereby the effect is comparatively greater than the diffuse policy effect. And there is a *binding policy effect* if input or citizens’ votes are implemented.

This classification was originally developed for participatory budgets (*Bürgerhaushalte*); in order to make it useful for the assessment of online participation procedures of a liquid democracy, it must be extended to municipal decision-making and, at the same time, be simplified into three types of effects (binding, diffuse, none).

In focusing on the council decisions, a simple dichotomous structuring into *rejection* (Category 1, see *Table 1*) and *acceptance* (Category 3, see *Table 1*) of an initiative by the local council is therefore necessary, but not sufficient, in light of the differentiated local political reality (Blatter, Janning & Wagemann, 2007, S. 178). The rejection of an initiative by the local council lacks a mandatory administrative action and, consequently, a political effect; the latter decision, however, indicates a mandatory action and thus a binding effect.

Council decisions and administrative statements/opinions are often more differentiated. Besides the clear decisions of adoption and rejection within the local councils, the councils of elected representatives can opt for other options and alternatives. By moving away from the mere dichotomous options of adoption or rejection of an initiative by the elected representatives, they can, with their decision, also indicate that: (a) the same or a similar initiative has already been implemented within the district; (b) there is no responsibility for a specific initiative at the local level; (c) an initiative is considered (but with an indefinite outcome); and, (d) an initiative is acknowledged by the local council (with an unspecified outcome). Depending on the specific issue or initiative, the options for decision-making in the local councils regarding an unclear decision are grouped as a category of their own—*unclear* (Category 2, see *Table 1*). This category includes the following determinations: (a) “already implemented,” (b) “no responsibility,” (c) “will be considered indistinctively,” and (d) “acknowledged.” Each of these results in a diffuse policy effect.

The *unclear* and *rejection* categories share the outcome that administrative action is not mandatory. However, the *unclear* category, in contrast to the *rejection* category, still leaves open the possibility of having an unspecified action and, therefore, a diffuse policy effect.

Finally, it may be that *no information* is available on a decision by the local council (Category 4, see *Table 1*) which means that neither a decision nor its outcome can be traced back. For this last residual category, no policy effect can therefore be determined due to a lack of information from within the council. Thus, it can be concluded that there will be a binding policy effect that entails mandatory administrative action only if the decision is adopted by the council.

Table 1: Options for decision-making in the local councils and related policy effects

Description of the decision in the local council	Policy effect
1 Rejection	none
2 It is unclear if <i>a) a proposal has already been implemented,</i> <i>b) is in one's responsibility,</i> <i>c) it is considered indistinctively</i> <i>d) a proposal has been acknowledged</i>	diffuse
3 Adoption	binding
4 No information	(undetactable)

Source: Own presentation.

Starting from the decision options by local councils and their policy effects (*Table 1*), the next step analyses the political decisions taken by German municipalities on successful citizen initiatives to determine their policy effect. It will be assessed if initiatives by citizens are politically considered in the context of making use of a new online participation procedure—here via the *LiquidFeedback* software.

5 Methods and data

In the empirical part of the paper, a case study analysis is carried out. The analysis covers four municipalities in Lower Saxony (Germany): Achim (approx. 31,000 inhabitants), Seelze (approx. 34,000 inhabitants), Wunstorf (approx. 41,000 inhabitants), and the District of Friesland (approx. 98,000 inhabitants). While these municipalities lie within the immediate vicinity of the cities of Hanover and Bremen, the district of Friesland is very rural and has no regional metropolis. The choice of local municipalities is derived from the fact that these municipalities used *LiquidFeedback* platforms as pioneers. Not taken into consideration was a fifth example, the District of Rotenburg (Wümme), where the number of initiatives was too small to be included (see Gerring, 2007, p. 37; Muno, 2009, S. 122; Lauth, Pickel & Pickel, 2009, S. 234).

At the time of the introduction of *LiquidFeedback*, the SPD was the strongest fraction in the respective city council or district council, as measured by its seats, among all the studied municipalities. All municipalities are in Lower Saxony, where *LiquidFeedback* spread from the District of Friesland via word-of-mouth recommendation among the SPD in Lower Saxony to the other municipalities. Of the original *LiquidFeedback* platforms, only the platform of the City of Achim is still online. For the analysis of Achim, all initiatives that were positively decided on by citizens and were, therefore, debated by the local councils have been included in the analysis (with a deadline of 23 April 2020). Concerning the other municipalities, decisions on initiatives made between 2012 and 2016 are considered as cases for analysis. As previously discussed, initiatives that were unsuccessful on the *LiquidFeedback* platforms were not included as cases in the analysis; no policy effect could be measured for unsuccessful initiatives since they were either rejected by citizens or failed to reach the required quorum on the platforms (hence never reaching the local councils).

In order to assess how often and in which policy fields online citizen participation could have a policy effect, the cases are analysed through content analysis. This means that all political decisions by the local committees are attributed to policy fields to subsequently qualitatively understand the political and administrative processes and to determine how often and in which cases initiatives and proposals by citizens were successful (see phase 4 in *Figure 1*).

Due to the large number of different subject areas and policy fields, the analysis includes a focus on urgent local government policies which were derived from the OB-Barometer 2019 (Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (Difu), 2019). Based on a panel survey of the mayors of all German cities (with > 50,000 inhabitants) conducted by the Institute for Urban Studies (Difu), it can be concluded that *housing* and *mobility* were the most urgent subject areas nationwide in 2019. In the empirical analysis, all decisions that can be assigned to the two priority topics are distinguished from those that form a collective group as “other policy fields.”

For the analysis, we make use of a dataset by Johannes Bauser (2020). This dataset includes all initiatives and voting results of the platforms, as well as publicly available documents from the decision-making authorities and bodies, especially from the respective council information system (*Ratsinformationssystem*)¹. The documents included the decisions by the local council (see corresponding categories in *Table 2*) and other relevant information on the debate within the council (minutes, administrative proposals).

The content analysis was conducted in several steps. Information was first collected on all initiatives on the *LiquidFeedback* platforms and their voting outcome by citizens on the platforms. Subsequently, all initiatives were sorted out and only the ones with a successful voting on the *LiquidFeedback* platforms—thereby eligible for a decision in the local councils (phase 5)—were examined further. Information on these initiatives and their consideration in the decision-making authorities and bodies was collected and then coded according to their respective decision in the local councils (see *Table 2*: Policy decision). An additional coding procedure was carried out in April 2020, as new initiatives were successfully completed on the platform of the City of Achim, which is still online. This process has resulted in a rich data set that enables the intended analysis. The data analysis was conducted through a simple frequency distribution analysis.

A total of 80 initiatives and their decisions were able to be included in the analysis. These were positively decided on by citizens across the four mentioned platforms and then decided on in the local councils (city councils or district councils). Thirty-one of these initiatives are attributed to the two policy fields of housing ($n = 9$) and mobility ($n = 22$). The other 49 initiatives are attributed to 13 policy fields, among them digital participation, administration, environment, waste management, education, budget, health, economy, culture/sports, labour/social affairs, taxes/dues, and tourism.

Initiatives in the dataset primarily deal with transport and mobility policy issues as well as housing policies. In terms of content, the policy area of mobility is about traffic safety (e.g., bike lanes and paths), noise protection, and the expansion of roads and public transport. Concerning the policy field of housing, citizens cared mostly about the general desire to create new housing or living space (or more specifically, housing for university students), questions about spatial regional planning procedures, and the rejection of certain building or construction projects. In the residual group of the “other

policy fields”, ten initiatives consider the further development of the *LiquidFeedback* platforms (such as additional comment functions, more public relations work, etc.) or administrative issues such as the extension of the opening hours of administrative offices or live-streams of district council meetings. There are a few initiatives from the environmental policy field, but these were limited to two municipalities (Achim and Friesland), such that a separate categorisation of the policy field “environment” (alongside housing and mobility) would not allow a thorough comparison across all four municipalities. The strong differentiation of the topics in combination with low numbers for each individual policy field justifies the third collective group in addition to the analysed policy fields of housing and mobility.

6 Empirical analysis of policy effects via *LiquidFeedback*

The analysis yields interesting results (see *Table 2*). Across the four municipalities, 24 initiatives out of 80 a priori successful citizen initiatives were adopted by the respective local councils, which means they show a *binding* policy effect. Fifteen initiatives were rejected by the councils and 35 were coded as unclear, which means that “no” or a “diffuse” political effect can be stated for 50 initiatives. None of these cases entail binding administrative action. In six cases, there was insufficient information for the assessment of a decision and, therefore, no policy effect can be determined. We will not consider the “no information” category in the following interpretation.

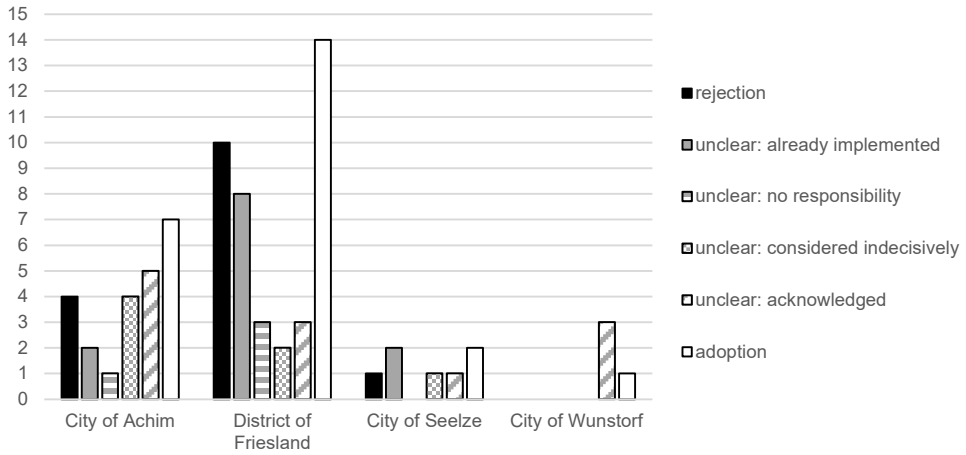
Table 2: Decisions, structured by policy fields and respective policy effect

Policy decision	Mobility	Housing	Others	Sum	Policy effect
1. Rejection	2	0	13	15	none
2a. Unclear: already implemented	3	1	8	35	diffuse
2b. Unclear: no responsibility	2	0	2		
2c. Unclear: considered indecisively	2	3	2		
2d. Unclear: acknowledged	6	1	5		
3. Adoption	6	2	16	24	binding
4. No information	1	2	3	6	(undetectable)
Sum	22	9	49	80	

Source: Own presentation.

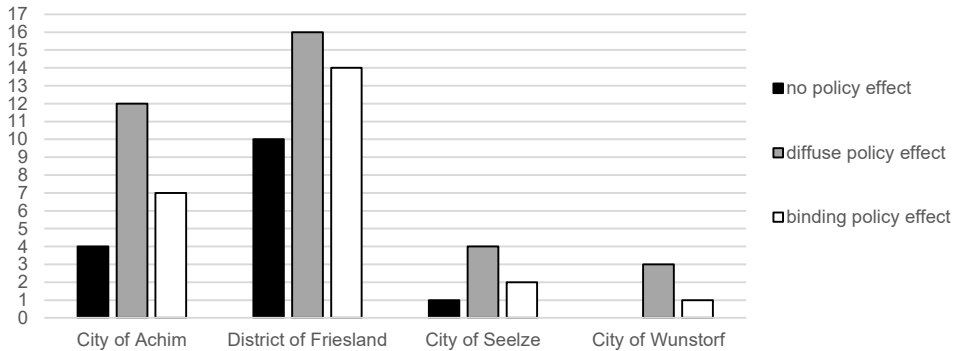
A more detailed view shows that the citizens of the district of Friesland were particularly active. Their initiatives have also been discussed and accepted with high frequency by the council (see *Figure 2*). Diffuse policy effects are the most common and predominate in all municipalities (see *Figure 3*). This means that citizens are not aware most of the time of what has happened to their successful *LiquidFeedback* decisions and no binding administrative action is indicated. Binding policy effects rank in second place, indicating that a significant number of citizen decisions have nonetheless been decided on by the councils with a binding policy effect. In comparison to Seelze, Wunstorf, and the city of Achim, the district of Friesland presents not only the most initiatives in total but also the majority with binding policy effects.

Figure 2: Council decisions on successful *LiquidFeedback* initiatives (n=74)



Source: Own presentation.

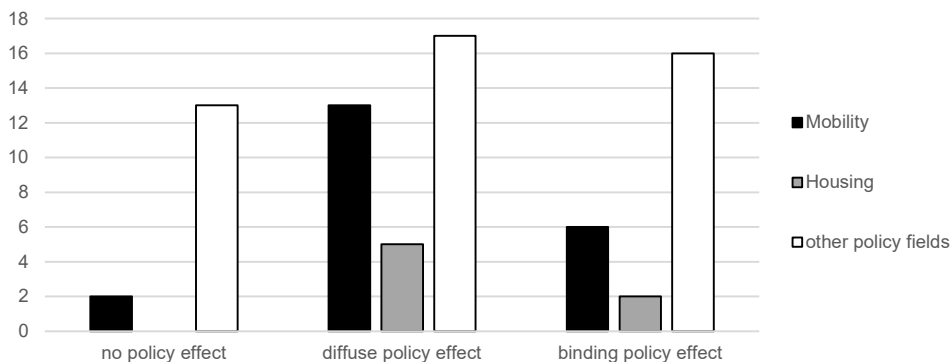
Figure 3: Resulting policy effects (n=74)



Source: Own presentation.

If the policy effects are structured according to the analysed policy fields, the diffuse policy effect once again runs predominantly through all fields (see *Figure 4*). Regarding the category “other policy fields,” the diffuse policy effects are somewhat in balance with the other policy effects, since there is almost the same number of decisions with a binding policy effect and even 13 initiatives with no policy effect. However, it is particularly evident for the mobility category that most decisions have only a diffuse policy effect and therefore cannot influence administrative action. As mentioned above, it therefore remains unclear to the citizens in these cases what happens to their successful *LiquidFeedback* decisions.

Figure 4: Policy effect, structured by policy fields (n=74)



Source: Own presentation.

7 Discussion

The results will be discussed in light of the existing knowledge of online participation procedures. Are Buchstein's (1996) expectations—as mentioned in section 2, that is, *Internet optimism*, *Internet neutralism*, and *Internet pessimism*—confirmed? It has been shown that the *Internet optimists* were right regarding the category of “other policy fields”. We identified many binding policy effects in these cases. By contrast, for urgent policies (according to the OB-Barometer 2019, these are mobility and housing), *Internet pessimists* seem to be right: Most decisions were made with a diffuse policy effect, where administrations did not have to act, and citizens' *LiquidFeedback* decisions were eventually set aside. One possible explanation for this could be that mobility planning and residential developments are large-scale construction and infrastructure projects which, due to their complexity, do not easily allow the integration of citizen input via online participation. Category labels such as “*considered indecisively*” and “*acknowledged*” suggest that the issues were at least discussed and recognized by the local councils. The policy effect, however, remains diffuse since the initiatives were neither fully implemented nor clearly rejected. In this respect, the final disposition of these cases remains opaque for citizens. Non-responsibility for issues is also considered a diffuse policy effect, although in practice, an initiative has ideally been forwarded to the responsible authority or level to take action. A clear and binding policy effect cannot, however, be derived from this decision, and transparency for citizens is not been established. Due to a lack of participation, most platforms have meanwhile been discontinued, which also supports the *Internet pessimist* thesis.

What could explain the previous observation? It is known from the literature on participation that elected political local representatives are mandate holders, who can, free of any stipulations, make their own decisions in a representative democracy based on preceding decisions from citizen participations. These officials are reluctant to allow their freedom for decision-making and action to be limited by citizen participation—be it online or offline—except in secondary issues. In this context, administra-

tions are not only the executive bodies but they are also involved in accompanying the political process and the citizens' participation procedure. Since administrative bodies are not willing to accept ad-hoc input by citizens, particularly in the case of long-term and complex planning procedures, they can even pit themselves against citizens when initiatives may have a destabilising effect. Moreover, administrations can have a steering effect by preparing administrative and decision-making proposals. The administration's ability to determine and pre-structure the entire participation process should therefore not be underestimated and needs to be examined more closely in follow-up studies.

Furthermore, it is to be expected that the competencies of active citizens will increase when it comes to participation in general and online participation in particular. This is due to the fact that more and more administrations are establishing citizen participation in order to strengthen democratic processes. That is why there are learning processes on all sides—among the citizens, politics and the bureaucracy.

8 Conclusion

In this contribution, we focused an analytical lens on the municipal level because a significant potential for direct-democratic decision-making can be identified here. We aimed at extending the empirical research by asking whether citizens can participate in governing on the local level through online participation and how binding their input through online tools can be, as well as whether this differs across policy fields.

In answering the research question, we must bear in mind that Germany is a representative democracy; nevertheless, citizens have the option to participate in governance processes through online participation. However, their decisions cannot always have binding effects. Binding effects are most applicable with less crucial decisions. On the other hand, regarding urgent policies that require long planning phases, citizen decisions will, *de facto*, have less effect on binding policy issues. These decisions usually lead to thinly diffused policy effects, which have the disadvantage that citizens can hardly understand what role their input has played.

These results are relevant in terms of citizens' participation being advantageous in the sense of output legitimacy (e.g., raising support for intended projects or rendering decision-making more rational). Only if the results are relevant for political and administrative action can output legitimacy be increased. However, if there is no such relevance, or if it is just invisible or opaque, it is likely to lead to frustration among active citizens (see Talpin, 2011; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Kim & Lee, 2012; Kolleck, 2017; Kröher, 2016).

In conclusion, politics and administration can be seen and should be further investigated as key actors of the participation processes, since these can predetermine the scope of political decision-making *ex ante* as well as *ex post*, within a representative democracy.

It seems reasonable to suspect that a correlation exists between diffuse policy effects and low citizen participation numbers due to a lack of transparency. As mentioned in the introduction, reasons for low participation numbers are difficult to investigate due to the anonymity of users (citizens). Even if there currently appear to be unresolvable factors limiting a precise identification of the reasons for this phenomenon,

the concept of transparency (or the lack thereof) could be a starting point for systematic examination in future studies. Supplementing the data with in-depth interviews of political decision-makers and administrative staff could lead to a deeper understanding of citizens' political participation, whether online or not.

Notes

- 1 Before some of the LiquidFeedback platforms went offline, screenshots were made to be analysed later.

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