Investment in technology is not enough to guarantee e-participation in politics

There have been a number of efforts to promote 'e-participation' in politics to give citizens a better voice in policymaking. Yet the success of these initiatives has varied substantially across the world. **Pragati Rawat** *and* **John C. Morris** *argue that investment in technology alone is not enough for citizens to embrace these new avenues for participation. Governments must also provide a supportive environment with institutional structures that can facilitate the process.*

Governments use several mechanisms for public participation in the various stages of policymaking, including voting, surveys, public meetings, open forums, citizens' juries, and opinion polls. Public participation is an extension of democratic processes and helps governments engage with citizens in an ongoing manner and in more direct ways.

The growing popularity of the internet since the 1990s has led to the extensive use of information and communication technology (ICT) in public participatory activities. E-participation is the process of engaging citizens in government decision-making through the use of this technology, such as through websites, social media, or text and instant messaging.

E-participation strengthens the collaboration between government and citizens by facilitating wider public participation, the analysis of large amounts of information collected from citizens, and two-way communication between government and citizens. However, despite increasing investment in ICT, the technology has not been fully utilised by governments to enhance e-participation.

The United Nations' e-participation index measures and ranks its member countries on the utilisation of ICT infrastructure for the purpose of communicating government information to citizens. This includes providing information on policies and budgets, consulting with citizens during the policymaking process, and empowering people to provide their own inputs into government decision-making. The survey results are intriguing as they show that e-participation differs substantially around the world, but at the same time there are countries with different levels of income, democracy, and technology infrastructure that are ranked side by side. There is limited research at a global scale to provide insights about why e-participation differs across countries in this way.

Why investment in technology is not enough

In a recently published book, *The Effects of Technology and Institutions on E-Participation*, we argue that the level of e-participation in a country is influenced by complex relationships between technology and the country's institutional structures. Investment in ICT infrastructure is not in itself sufficient for promoting e-participation. The technology has other dimensions that play important roles, including the skill levels in a country when it comes to using technology, the affordability of the technology, the usage of the technology by public and private sectors, and its adoption by individuals.

Apart from technology, governments also need to provide supporting institutional structures such as a suitable political environment, effective regulatory processes, civil rights that provide requisite information to the public in a transparent manner, opportunities and encouragement to the public to provide inputs into policymaking, and consideration of citizen inputs in decision-making. Furthermore, rather than a single dominant element, various dimensions of technology and institutions influence each other and are strengthened in each other's presence. It is this set of interactions that eventually impacts e-participation.

A better model for understanding e-participation

We propose a policy feedback and socio-technical model for e-participation (PFSTEP) and analyse this model using data covering 143 countries. Scholars have long argued about the dominance of technology versus institutions in citizen participation. Our model argues that neither technology nor institutions, but rather complex interactions and influences of multiple dimensions of both technology and institutional resources, shape and determine the level of e-participation in a country.

One of the important findings of our study is that the institutional factors of political rights and civil liberties and the political and regulatory environment in a country impact e-participation both directly and indirectly. The indirect impact is via ICT skills that act as a mediating variable. Additionally, the group of countries that have higher than average e-participation scores also have higher than average scores on all dimensions of technology and institutions.

The importance of institutions

What do these findings mean for governments looking to increase levels of e-participation? Technological resources are no doubt a 'must' for e-participation. The difference in technological resources (the 'digital divide') exacerbates the gap between countries and leads to unequal participation.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reported in 2020 that in Africa, less than one-third of the urban and only about 6 percent of the rural population had internet access. Further, European citizens spend less than one percent of their income on mobile broadband subscriptions while African citizens spend 13.5 percent of their income on mobile services. Europe also has the highest utilisation of ICT for e-participation while Africa has the least.

Although ICT is important, it is not, in itself, sufficient for e-participation. The political rights and liberties available to individuals, and the political environment in a country play an important role. Many of the countries that are high on e-participation scores, such as the Netherlands and Luxembourg, also have high tariffs on mobile devices and broadband services.

However, these countries have excelled when it comes to ICT laws and are amongst some of the top scorers in measures of the right to vote, freedom of expression, and equality. Slovakia, for instance, strengthened its ICT laws, the effectiveness of its legislature, and the independence of its judiciary, and enjoyed a large improvement in its e-participation scores between 2012 and 2016.

Our findings establish the role of institutions in a country as the factor that promotes or hinders technological resources. Despite an extremely competitive telecommunications market, India had low e-participation scores in 2012. However, the country's e-participation score rose significantly in 2016 after the launch of a set of policies to promote universal digital literacy and to support digital media for various government programmes and as a platform for sharing and commenting on policies. The United States and the United Kingdom both provide favourable environments that promote digitised business and public sectors, and both nations have maintained high scores in the UN's e-participation index.

Lessons for the future

Our study highlights that investment in technology must be supported by effective institutional resources for it to have a positive effect on e-participation. The presence of strong institutional resources, such as political rights and civil liberties, ICT laws, effective dispute settlement, an independent judiciary, and effectiveness of law-making bodies will encourage the adoption of ICT infrastructure for the purposes of e-participation.

Additionally, institutional resources also shape an individual's understanding of their role in democratic processes. Countries need to develop specific aspects of technology (those that facilitate e-participation), along with the institutional capacity to support e-participation. Our work can ultimately help draw attention to facets like ICT skills and usage in countries for promoting e-participation.

For more information, please see the authors' accompanying book, [The Effects of Technology and Institutions on E-Participation](#) (Routledge, 2022)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Sigmund on Unsplash

---