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The success of e-participation. Learning lessons from Decide Madrid and We asked, You said, We did in Scotland

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Abstract

Electronic participation (e-participation) has grown across the world in recent decades and many governments offer a range of opportunities for e-participation. However, there is a lack of comparative analyses of successful initiatives, which can be useful in supporting subsequent adopters. This study identifies the best practices and areas for improvement of Decide Madrid and We asked, You said, We did in Scotland, whose software has been widely adopted by hundreds of institutions worldwide. Key common enablers include political leadership and senior management support, top-down approach, high levels of internal and external collaboration, embeddedness in the formal policy-making processes, and careful consideration of design features. Most of these factors are related to processes, organizational, or managerial dimensions, rather than being linked to the institutional context or information and communication technologies. Areas for improvement relate to the way the initiatives provide feedback, allow discussion and flexibility on policy options, incorporate possibilities for offline participation, and involve a wider range of stakeholders. An important contribution is the identification of factors contributing to the robustness and continuity of e-participation initiatives, combining the flexibility of collaborative network governance and the stability of public bureaucracy.

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KEYWORDS

citizen participation, e-participation, open government, robust governance, transparency

INTRODUCTION

Electronic participation (e-participation) has grown across the world and many governments at different levels offer a range of opportunities for e-participation beyond the provision of information.¹ E-participation is particularly useful where people spend more time at home, for example, teleworking, health problems, emergencies, or more recently lockdowns (Criado & Guevara-Gómez, 2021; Iordache et al., 2022). As a result, there is a growing market of e-participation platforms supplied by start-ups, multinationals, and pioneering governments, which enable citizens to propose, comment, debate, vote, decide how budgets are spent, and contribute to legislation or strategic plans (Smith & Martín, 2021). However, there is a lack of comparative analysis of successful initiatives, which can be useful in supporting subsequent adopters.

Two decades of experience have shown the critical importance of linking e-participation initiatives with formal institutional processes (i.e., the institutionalization of e-participation), for people to see that participation has an impact (Steinbach et al., 2019), although there is limited research on how to achieve this. Most previous research refers to a single e-participation initiative, usually at local level (e.g., Barros & Sampaio, 2016; Mitozo & Marques, 2019; Sæbø et al., 2011; Sjöberg et al., 2017; Toots, 2019), or has covered pilot experiences in the initial stages of implementation, making it difficult to analyze long-term impacts and sustainability (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). Some comparative e-participation studies have focused on specific features of different platforms, their rollout, or their contribution to specific policy domains (Borge et al., 2022; Hovik et al., 2022; Randma-Liiv, 2022, 2023; Smith & Martín, 2021; Tseng, 2022a, 2022b). This study contributes to this literature in three ways. First, it provides a comprehensive comparative study of two successful e-participation initiatives and their evolution over a 6-year period. Second, by applying the robust governance approach to frame the analysis. Third, it discusses why particular outcomes occurred in each particular case. The main objectives are to highlight best practices and areas for improvement to inform e-participation theory and practice.

Defining “success” in e-participation is not straightforward as there is no conceptual agreement on success criteria (Aichholzer et al., 2016), as it will depend on the specific objectives of each initiative and the expectations of the different parties involved. Two clear and straightforward criteria have been used to select our cases: their international relevance and duration. Based on these criteria, Decide Madrid (Spanish municipality) and We asked, You said, We did (Scottish Government) were selected. Decide Madrid received the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award and its software (Consul) is the most widely used to enable active citizen participation (Secinaro et al., 2022). The platform Citizen Space, on which We asked, You said, We did is based, is used by more than 180 organizations. The initiatives have also been active from a similar time (2014 in Scotland and 2015 in Madrid). As imitation is the sincerest form of institutionalization (Zampone et al., 2023), they can be considered successful cases, which justifies the comparative analysis.

These two initiatives share several similarities that make them comparable: they serve a similar population (6.5 million inhabitants in Madrid metropolitan area and 5.5 million in Scotland²), are “top-down” initiatives adopted by the executive branch of government, and are part of the Open Government Partnership (www.opengovpartnership.org). However, they also reveal some differences, such as the level of government being served and

different levels of engagement offered to participants. Although most studies on e-participation focus on local governments by arguing that municipalities are the level of government closer to citizens, information and communication technologies (ICT) have reduced the distance between governments and citizens and previous research has highlighted the need for comparative research of national and local contexts on open government (Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023). As our study mainly focuses on the organizational, managerial and platform-related aspects, these differences do not hamper comparability. Indeed, they add value to our research, providing evidence that they do not determine the success or failure of e-participation initiatives.

The guiding research questions for the study are as follows: What are the common factors that seem to be important for successful e-participation? What are the differential factors behind the outcomes of these distinct e-participation approaches? In what ways could these initiatives be further improved? What are the lessons learnt from these successful cases?

BACKGROUND

Theoretical framework

There has been scarce use of theoretical frameworks to analyze open government (Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023) and e-participation initiatives. In this study, we build on existing research, particularly the robust governance approach, to frame the analysis, discuss the findings, and help understand why particular outcomes occurred in each case.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, faced with the lack of trust in governments caused by the new public management reforms and some political crises, the new public governance approach (Osborne, 2006) proposed the involvement of citizens, civil associations, the private sector, and other stakeholders, through the creation of collaborative networks, for the development, implementation, and monitoring of public policies (Klijn, 2008). Network management, cooperation, coordination, and new modes of leadership are needed for these networks to succeed (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Klijn, 2008), as instability, high transaction costs, and/or complex accountability relationships are important drawbacks (Ansell et al., 2023). The more participants involved, the greater the complexity and efforts needed to ensure that all voices are heard. The use of ICT can help in this regard, by supporting many-to-many interaction and facilitating knowledge-sharing.

The level of commitment to e-participation from stakeholders usually depends on their role. Research has shown that most citizens do not use e-participation tools and that users reduce their participation over time (Font & Navarro, 2013; Sæbø et al., 2011) and politicians show higher levels of involvement before elections (Sæbø et al., 2011). Networked individualism (Castells, 2001; Rainie & Wellman, 2012) suggests that citizens are easily involved in e-participation initiatives, although sustaining commitment is more difficult than in offline processes (Pina et al., 2017; Yetano & Royo, 2017). Design features of the e-participation tools can also affect citizens' willingness to participate and their perceived usefulness (Mitozo & Marques, 2019; Tseng, 2022a). These features include possibilities for discussion, interaction with politicians and experts, information availability, the aim of participation, identity verification, anonymous participation, and accessibility (Christensen, 2021).

There is no shortcut from the adoption of a novel (digital) initiative to its institutionalization. In order for change to happen, powerful actors, such as politicians and public managers, need to perceive the change as being desirable and actively support it (Panopoulou et al., 2014; Toots, 2019). Previous research has highlighted that an apolitical

context explains high levels of impact of citizen participation initiatives (Hudson, 2018). By contrast, according to the (new) political governance approach (Aucoin, 2012), if the adoption of a policy (e-participation, in this case) is highly politicized, a change of government can affect its future development.

Robust governance has emerged as a relevant topic for public administration and political science research, to deal with rapid change and crisis situations, which require an effective response from governments. In essence, the robust governance approach (Ansell et al., 2023) proposes to combine elements of the new public governance (flexibility, collaboration with external actors, innovation, and transformative and integrative leadership) and those of public bureaucracy/new public management (stability, creation of structural conditions, hierarchical command structures, and formal rules). The objective is to allow for transformation and long-term continuity in the face of changing conditions or different agendas. Important aspects for e-participation platforms to be robust include open-ended goals, modularity and reconfigurability (Ansell & Gash, 2018). Multilevel collaboration with other national or international actors helps to build reputation and keep future lines of action open.

Previous research and analytical framework

E-participation research can be classified into two main themes that have focused on (1) barriers and facilitators and (2) strategies for the adoption, implementation, and/or institutionalization of e-participation (Steinbach et al., 2019). Many studies focus on providing standard criteria for describing, evaluating and comparing different dimensions of e-participation projects and/or analyzing the factors that contribute to the success or failure of e-participation projects, but take less interest in explaining why particular outcomes occurred in a particular case (Toots, 2019).

Overall, the evidence suggests that several factors such as the legal framework, funding, organizational structure and culture, commitment by politicians, administrators and staff, security and privacy issues, and transparency-related issues may contribute to the success or failure of e-participation initiatives (Aichholzer et al., 2016; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Porwol et al., 2016; Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022). Cross-organizational issues and pre-existing forms of citizen participation have not been properly addressed by previous research (Hovik et al., 2022; Randma-Liiv, 2022).

Three types of challenges have to be carefully managed: those typical to ICT projects, those emerging from the public sector context, and those related to citizen participation (Toots, 2019). It is also important to consider each factor in the different stages of development of e-participation (from adoption, to implementation and institutionalization) (Royo et al., 2020).

Some studies have analyzed citizen participation, open government policies and e-participation in Madrid (e.g., Royo et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023; Smith & Martín, 2021; Walliser, 2013), and specific aspects of the Decide Madrid platform (Tseng, 2022a, 2022b). Some comparative citizen participation analysis including Madrid have also been published recently (Hovik et al., 2022; Randma-Liiv, 2022, 2023). The adoption of the Decidim platform in Catalan municipalities, initially based on Decide Madrid, has been analyzed by Borge et al. (2022). However, none of these previous studies has focused on the identification of best practices and areas for improvement, to inform theory and practice and/or the analysis of their evolution.

After an in-depth analysis of 15 e-participation initiatives, Randma-Liiv and Lember (2022, p. 276) provide a comprehensive list of critical factors related to the management and organization of e-participation initiatives, which are classified in three dimensions:

process-related factors, organizational design, and management. We adopted this model as our analytical framework, including the institutional context due to its significance in this field.

These four dimensions relate to the robust governance approach. The institutional context dimension analyses, among other factors, relevant aspects of the politico-administrative context. The process-related dimension includes design features of the platforms, which affect citizens' willingness to participate, and issues related to the formalization of the initiative that can contribute to more robust e-participation approaches. The organizational dimension includes aspects referring to cooperation, coordination and accountability relationships. Finally, the management dimension includes an examination of leadership.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a comparative case study as a research technique and applies inductive reasoning. A case study is appropriate when examining contemporary phenomena within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2014). The main strength of case studies is their ability to deal with multiple sources of evidence (such as desk research, interviews, and observation) and combine qualitative and quantitative evidence. Case studies have the potential to gather more in-depth information about e-participation and its impacts, and have been recommended for e-participation research (Reddick & Norris, 2013). Comparative case studies are more robust than single case studies.

Desk research included the analysis and use of the e-participation platforms, statistical data on their usage and relevant reports, and legislation. An examination of the tools and documentary analysis is not sufficient to understand e-participation processes; the role of public administrators, stakeholders and citizens, who design, administer and use the tools has also to be considered (Bingham et al., 2005).

Twenty-two semistructured interviews of politicians, senior managers, and users of both platforms were conducted (January–February 2019), selecting a sample of questions from an interview template (Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022), depending on the type of interviewee. The interviewees (see Table 1) include all the actors involved in government-led e-participation projects (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min each and were recorded, transcribed, and coded by two researchers in each country, to identify the main themes for each of the individual factors under consideration (see Table 2). The combination of different data sources has allowed us to triangulate data and assess the two initiatives according to different perspectives.

The dimensions and factors (analytical framework) in Table 2 have been selected based on previous research, particularly Randma-Liiv and Lember (2022), and the robust governance approach (Ansell et al., 2023). The institutional context covers relevant aspects of the legal, politico-administrative, and socioeconomic context, including previous developments in citizen participation. The information was gathered from desk research (academic literature review, policy documents, and relevant legislation). Process-related factors refer to the main characteristics of the platforms, including the design features identified by Christensen (2021), feedback offered to participants, and formalization of the initiatives. This evidence was obtained from the websites of the e-participation initiatives and interviews of senior managers. The organizational design dimension covers aspects related to the ownership of the technological solution, intra and inter organizational collaboration, and type of accountability relationships, whereas managerial factors refer to the type of leadership and support from senior managers, promotion-related activities, monitoring and

TABLE 1 Interviewees (I).

Interviewee code	Decide Madrid
I1-2	Responsible politicians of the governmental area
I3-5	Senior manager and technical staff of the relevant department
I6-9	Users of the platform
Interviewee code	We asked, You said, We did
I10	Representative from Delib, the company that owns and provides the platform
I11-18	Senior managers working in the management of the e-participation initiative and in other areas of government (e.g., policy, law, family...)
I19-22	Users of the platform

Note: Contacting individual users was a problem due to data protection legislation, as most users do not disclose their full name. In the case of Madrid, the “selection” of individual respondents was random amongst those users who disclosed their full name, had been active in the platform in the last year, and from which we could find contact details on the Internet. In Scotland, as individual respondents often choose not to publish their responses or names, the users interviewed represented organizations that have used the platform extensively, as in previous research (Hovik et al., 2022, p. 31). These differences in methodology are inevitable in comparative cases studies but, given the objectives of this research (highlight best practices and areas for improvement in e-participation), they are not expected to have any significant impact on the findings obtained.

evaluation, resources, and long-term sustainability of the initiatives. Information about these two dimensions was obtained from the interviews of internal actors and desk research.

RESULTS

We now move on to examine the two e-participation initiatives according to the four dimensions: institutional context, process-related factors, organizational design, and management dimension. A final subsection analyses levels of participation in both platforms during the 6-year period and summarizes users’ opinions.

Institutional context

In Madrid (and Spain, in general), the Administration has traditionally collaborated with citizens when they are part of an association or a civil society cluster. Citizen participation regulations in Madrid date back to 1988. Neighborhood associations have traditionally been the actors involved in participatory processes (Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023) and individual citizen participation is more recent. Specific ICT procedures to facilitate the effective participation of citizens in local governance were established by Law 57/2003 and requirements for online public consultations by Law 39/2015. The 2008 financial crisis, austerity policies, and subsequent protests (15M movement) led to new political parties. One of them led Madrid city council between 2015 and 2019, with the commitment to “Implement tools for citizen participation through the Internet [...]” Decide Madrid was created as a result. The change of government in 2019 resulted in reduced political support for Decide Madrid. The interviewees (I1, I3, and I4) stated that opposition parties were the main critics of the platform, but when they gained power in 2019, they maintained it.

The Scottish Parliament, founded in 1998, aimed at introducing a new style of politics based on five guiding principles: power sharing, accountability, access, participation, and

TABLE 2 Comparative overview of Decide Madrid and We asked, You said, We did.

	Decide Madrid	We asked, You said, We did
Key facts		
Population served	6.5 million (Madrid metropolitan area)	5.5 million
Level of government	Local	National
Branch of government	Executive	Executive
Launch	2015	2014
International recognition	Software/platform used in many parts of the world, both governments included in the Open Government Partnership	
Institutional context		
Previous experience with direct citizen participation and e-participation	Not directly, but through neighborhood associations	Yes
Other	15 M movement	Scottish approach to policy-making
Process-related factors		
Levels of engagement offered to participants	Consultation, collaboration, and empower	Consultation
Participatory activities	Debates, proposals, processes, polls, and participatory budgeting	E-consultations
Type of interactions	Multidirectional	One-to-one
Interaction with politicians and experts	On an ad-hoc basis	No
Information availability	Plenty of information before users participate	
Identity verification	Necessary to vote	No
Anonymous participation	Yes	Yes
Accessibility	Yes	Yes
Feedback to participants	Limited, except for participatory budgets	Yes (<i>We did</i>)
Formalization	High	Very high (compulsory since 2016)
Organizational design		
Approach	Top-down	Top-down
Ownership	Madrid city council	Private company (Delib)
Collaboration	High internal and external collaboration	
Accountability relationships	Hierarchy	Horizontal
Management dimension		
Leadership and senior management support	Yes. Change agent (Major)	Scottish approach. No individual change agents

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Decide Madrid	We asked, You said, We did
Promotion	Communication staff. External promotion	Online Communication team
Monitoring and evaluation	Statistics per activity, stages of projects in participatory budgets	Number of consultations and participants, expected versus actual responses
Resources	All costs funded by the respective government	
Long-term sustainability	Continuity is guaranteed for the time being	

equal opportunities (The Scottish Office, 1998). It promised that external groups and individuals would be empowered and that ICT would be used to achieve an efficient and accessible Parliament. Scotland has been an early innovator in e-democracy. In 1999, the Scottish Parliament launched the world's first e-petition system.

The Scottish approach to policy-making (Cairney et al., 2016) encompasses a natural inclination to place significant efforts on engaging stakeholders and citizens and has been promoted by different governments. Citizen participation initiatives in Scotland have progressed through successive iterations using small projects to build familiarity and capacity among local authorities and communities (O'Hagan et al., 2020). However, some of these projects have been criticized for replicating the pitfalls of traditional forms of associative democracy, discouraging community participation for most groups (Bennett et al., 2022).

Process-related factors

The main issues analyzed in this dimension are the objectives and main characteristics of the platforms, feedback to participants, and formalization of the initiatives.

Objectives and main features of the platforms

Decide Madrid (<https://decide.madrid.es/>) was launched in September 2015, to promote high levels of citizen participation in the policy-making process. Participation can be carried out through five modules: debates (e-forums), proposals (requests made by citizens), polls (carried out when a proposal receives the support of 1% of registered residents over 16 in Madrid or when the city council wants citizens to decide on an issue), processes (tool used by the city council to seek input from citizens on a certain issue), and participatory budgeting. Decide Madrid integrates a gamified interface (e.g., thumbs up and down for proposals, a virtual assistant, visual aids, banners and competition rules, see Tseng, 2022b) and is accessible to people with disabilities (conformance to W3C and AENOR certification). Citizens, associations, nongovernmental organizations, and companies can register in the platform, create debates or proposals, and make comments in all modules. However, only registered citizens of Madrid can verify their accounts and vote on proposals. The verification processes and almost all participatory activities can also be done offline in any of the 26 citizen attention offices.

The open-source software developed for the platform, Consul, has been implemented in more than 100 organizations around the world, most of them in Europe (especially in Spain)

and Latin America (see <http://consulproject.org/en/>). The Consul code, freely available on the Internet, allows any organization to use and adapt the platform to its own needs. The improvements made by any organization or individual user can be exploited by the rest, fostering collaboration between them.

We asked, You Said, We did (https://consult.gov.scot/we_asked_you_said) promotes e-consultations (We asked), collects stakeholders and citizens opinions (You said), and keeps the public informed on the actions taken as a result (We did). It is a feature of the platform Citizen Space, designed by a private company (Delib) and used by more than 180 organizations around the world (mainly in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). The We did part was a customization driven by the Scottish Government that has become a commonly used feature for all users. The platform is generally used for consultations regarding policy implementation: the government's position is explained and people are asked for suggestions on how to implement a policy or opinions on potential impact.

The layout of the Scottish platform is easy to navigate because of its focus on one e-participation option and its more uniform and “institutional” design. Gamification elements are not provided and interactions are one-to-one (online submission of the e-consultation form), with no space for discussion or collaboration. However, whenever a consultation is open, the Government's Online Communication team publishes a news release, social media feed, or blog post to advertise it, which immediately generates a wider online debate among stakeholders. Participants are required to add an email address for their response to be registered. They can state whether they are participating as an individual or as member of an organization and decide whether to publish their responses in an anonymized form. The platform is also W3C compliant.

Feedback to participants

The monitoring of citizen participation through Decide Madrid only covers participatory budgeting. For debates and “processes” no feedback to citizens is usually provided. Although most of the legally mandated public consultations include a link to download a report with statistics about the consultation, up to mid-2020, it was rather difficult to find (at least four clicks were needed). Since mid-2020, a direct link to the report is provided and its content has improved including the targeted citizens, profile of the respondents (age, gender, and district), frequency of the words most used per open question, connections among them, and so on. However, no information about the impact on decisions made is provided. In Scotland, participants can see the results of the closed consultations in the *We did* part (responses received, a summary of what the Scottish Government decided to do, together with all the accompanying documents and/or results of the analysis undertaken).

Formalization of the initiatives

In Madrid, the guidelines and procedures supporting the working of the platform were approved by different agreements of the city council since October 2015. The platform is embedded in the formal policy-making processes, because all areas of government use it to carry out public consultations and public hearings. The Scottish Government started using Citizen Space in 2014 and from 2016 decided to make it mandatory for all government consultations.

Organizational design

This dimension analyses the following factors: approach, ownership and collaboration, and accountability relationships.

Approach, ownership, and collaboration

Decide Madrid is a top-down initiative that has been created, funded, and managed by Madrid city council. From 2015 to 2019, Decide Madrid was managed by the Department of Citizen Participation, within the Area of Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Open Government, which depended directly on the Mayor's Office. Since 2019, this department belongs to the Deputy Mayor's Government Area. Madrid incorporated external expertise for platform development, by employing some of the tech activists that created the tools used to organize the supporters of the 15 M movement (Hovik et al., 2022, p. 64; Tseng, 2022b). Collaboration with other units of the city council has been high and fluent (e.g., coordination with offline activities or promotion among groups at risk of social exclusion, among others). Some services and departments also collaborate by proposing topics for the "processes" and evaluating citizens' proposals. External collaboration has also been important, particularly with the organizations using Consul, in improving the software. Other external collaborations involve advice on technical issues, for example, from the nonprofit organization that manages Better Reykjavik) and contracts to comply with data protection legislation (e.g., encryption of votes).

We asked, You said, We did is also a top-down initiated initiative but, in this case, the software (Citizen Space) belongs to a private company. It was created by Delib in 2005 and initially cofunded by the UK Government with the aim of finding a way to consult across central government. The Scottish Government's Digital Engagement team is responsible for running the platform and technical issues. Each policy team is responsible for running each consultation by writing the questions, advertising, making the decision about complementing it with face-to-face engagement or not, collecting the responses and reporting the conclusions back to government Ministers. Each e-consultation is, therefore, different, depending upon the decisions made by each policy team, although the government is trying to standardize them to guarantee the same quality. The Digital Engagement team works in collaboration with other departments to ensure consultations are compliant with data protection. Delib liaises with government officials to provide support and training to the policy teams. Interest groups or stakeholder organizations may ask the Scottish Government to run an e-consultation about a topic of interest.

Accountability relationships

Decide Madrid is managed by a core area of government inside the city council hierarchy. The activities carried out through its five modules are clearly defined: polls and participatory budgets are based on binding opinions and votes, whereas it is up to the politicians to decide what to do with the results in the other modules. The (Deputy) Mayor's Office acts in cases of disagreement. The higher level of decentralization in We asked, You said, We did means that accountability relationships are more horizontal, involving a mix of hierarchy and network. In case of any concern or complaint, specific numbers and emails are provided in each consultation, which link directly to the policy teams.

Management dimension

This dimension deals with key managerial aspects, such as leadership and senior management support, promotion, monitoring and evaluation, resources, and long-term sustainability.

Leadership and senior management support

Decide Madrid had strong political support from the mayor, who adopted the position of a change agent. Two other important political leaders were the councilor responsible for Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Open Government, with wide experience in programming and in the management of software companies, and the executive advisor and director of Decide Madrid, one of the creators of a software that allows debates between people.

The Scottish approach to policy-making has strongly influenced the adoption and use of We asked, You said, We did, which has contributed to the way the Scottish Government works in collaboration with stakeholders and has fostered coproduction. The “Engage” and “Digital Engagement” teams jointly proposed the adoption of Citizen Space to the Scottish Government senior management team and met Delib to customize it for their needs.

Promotion

In Madrid, communication staff within the Department of Citizen Participation work in collaboration with other units for promotion purposes. A main priority was the creation of an international and active network of organizations interested in e-participation that results in continuous improvements in the Consul software.

In Scotland, the Online Communication team is involved in advertising and promoting consultations to external stakeholders and plays an active role when a consultation is about to be published. The policy teams may also ask stakeholders to use social media, select hashtags to disseminate the consultation, or use other platforms, such as www.ideas.gov.scot to obtain more responses.

Monitoring and evaluation

Decide Madrid discloses aggregated statistics for each participatory activity (number of supports and votes, percentage of participation by gender, age group, district, and via web or offline, when appropriate). For participatory budgets, the platform also provides data about which projects are technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, in processing, in execution, or ended. The Department of Citizen Participation has its own indicators, revised monthly for internal purposes. According to one of the politicians interviewed (I1), they focus on the number of users and participants, participation growth, and impact on the decisions of the city council (e.g., money spent on participatory budget projects). Disaggregated data about the participatory activities can be downloaded from the open-data platform. Some examples of successful participatory activities, according to the manager interviewed (I3), are the participatory budgets, the proposals of “Madrid 100% sustainable” and “Single ticket for public transport”, which obtained enough support to go to the voting phase and won, and some processes and debates that caused a remarkable number of reactions, for example, those related to the municipal regulations of motor traffic for the lease of transport vehicles

with a driver (e.g., “Uber” and “Cabify”). According to the civil servants interviewed (I4-5), there have been more than 1000 actions decided by citizens at the time of our data collection.

In Scotland, apart from the raw number of participants in each consultation, the Digital Engagement team has no other performance indicators and is unable to provide trend data. One successful example is the e-consultation about the content and timing of the Scottish independence referendum, which took place in 2014, and received 26,000 responses. A comprehensive report was produced, which identified some key findings about how the referendum should be run that shaped the Scottish Government's proposal for the referendum. Interviewees highlighted, however, that the number of consultations and responses received cannot be considered as a proxy for success as some consultations aim to reach “a niche audience of 150 people and if you got 150 responses that would be an overwhelming success. Similarly, you could run a consultation that involved the whole Scottish public, 150 responses would not be a success” (I15). The policy teams predict how many responses they expect given the effort made to involve stakeholders/citizens and they compare this expectation with the number of respondents and conclude whether the consultation is deemed to be successful or not. However, there is a lack of a proper system to evaluate the impact of We asked, You said, We did on policy-making.

Resources

In Madrid, the set-up and operational costs have been funded by the city council's budget and its financial sustainability is guaranteed. The Department of Citizen Participation had around 40 civil servants and three senior managers/advisors at the time the interviews were carried out “not only dedicated to the day-to-day operations [...] many people work in connections with other countries or in more innovative or transversal projects. Such large teams are not needed [for running the platform]” (I1). Around 100 civil servants from other areas of government participated occasionally in the analysis and evaluation of proposals (I1 and I3-5).

In Scotland, Delib charges an annual fee for technical support and account management, which is met by the Scottish Government. Each consultation is run by internal policy teams and the Digital Engagement team consists of two members that oversee all the consultations from a technical point of view.

Long-term sustainability

Decide Madrid is still being used after the change of government of 2019, although with less intensity. We asked, You said, We did has become mandatory since 2016 for all Scottish Government's consultations and its profile has increased.

Levels of participation and users' opinions

In Decide Madrid, there was a growing trend in terms of users in the first years (see Table 3) and the platform reached a larger proportion of the population in comparison with other platforms at local level, such as Oslo and Melbourne (Hovik et al., 2022). After 2019, there has been fewer “processes” initiated per year, polls are no longer carried out, and participatory budgets were abandoned and then re-started in September 2021 (with half of the budget). The use of proposals and debates, generally started by citizens, has also

TABLE 3 Evolution of activities in Decide Madrid (2015–2020).

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Processes						
Processes started	6	7	36	27	14	16
Comments per open question (mean)	38	124	37	46	30	611
Proposals						
Registered	6984	8074	5500	4860	1850	750
Reach enough support	0	2	0	0	0	0
Debates						
Debates started per day	38	1.5	1.1	0.7	0.2	0.3
Comments per day	152	22	7.2	6.5	0.5	0.5
Polls						
Number of polls	0	0	19	15	1	0
Participatory budgets						
Number of participants		45,515	67,135	91,036	75,611	–
Budget (millions €)		60	100	100	100	0

Note: Source: Open-data platform of the city council of Madrid (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2021) and Decide Madrid website.

decreased. Since the change of government up to the end of 2020, 17 out of the 22 processes carried out (77%) are legally required public consultations before the approval or modification of legislation. The rest of the processes started referred to less important decisions, such as films to be projected in civic centers or selection of the name for a forest, or looked for proposals/initiatives to give visibility to activities carried out during the COVID crisis. Although the citizens interviewed indicated that Decide Madrid increased citizen participation, both online and offline, some of them suggested that they can put less pressure on the municipal government online than offline. All the citizens interviewed agreed that they did not have enough information about the impact of their engagement: “There should be a section with the actions carried out based on citizen participation [...]; there is a lack of feedback” (I7).

The number of consultations in We asked, You said, We did varies from year to year, with stakeholder participation on the rise and much higher than in Decide Madrid “processes” (see Table 4), except for the year 2020 (COVID lockdown). Users’ feedback on the platform is generally positive. However, for some consultations there seems to be a

TABLE 4 Numbers of consultations and responses in We asked, You said, We did (2015–2020).

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Consultations closed	54	87	103	110	95	67
Received responses (mean)	79	113	255	301	457	459
Received responses (min)	2	2	1	0	2	1
Received responses (max)	1269	1032	7665	15,767	16,583	16,835

Note: Source: We asked, You said, We did and FOI request to the Scottish Government.

discrepancy between the You said and the We did parts. This occurs when the platform is used for consultations on policies that have already been developed, despite what stakeholders, organizations, and citizens contribute. This mismatch of expectations represents a familiar story of consultations, whether they are facilitated by electronic means or not. For example, the consultation on gun control produced a small number of respondents, but a large majority of these suggested that guns should not be controlled. Interviewees from the Scottish Government believed that the answer would have been reversed if an opinion poll was conducted. This meant that the platform is not able to properly capture the general opinion of the population and cannot act as a referendum. A government official explained that “[...] the questions we asked were not the ones that we were able to be flexible on” (I12).

DISCUSSION

What are the common factors that seem to be important for successful e-participation?

The two e-participation platforms share characteristics that seem to be important for their success. Both platforms include most of the design features (process-related factors) defined by Christensen (2021): information availability, aim of participation, identity verification (required to vote in Madrid), anonymous participation, and accessibility. The only exceptions are the lack of discussion possibilities (Scottish platform) and interaction with politicians and experts (both platforms). Other best practices, common in both initiatives, include a high level of formalization, as the platforms are embedded in the formal policy-making processes (process-related factors), top-down approach, high levels of internal and external collaboration for platform development and operation, clearly defined accountability relationships (organizational design, based on network governance approaches in both cases and key aspects of public bureaucracy, particularly in Madrid), leadership and senior management/political support, resources, and promotion (management dimension). Because of the institutionalization and legal requirements for e-consultations in both countries, the continuity in the use of the platforms seems to be guaranteed.

What are the differential factors behind the outcomes of these distinct e-participation approaches?

In Madrid there is a long tradition of participation through associations, although individual citizen participation was not actively promoted until 2015. In Scotland, direct citizen participation has been a core principle since the creation of the Scottish Parliament and a shared ideal across different political parties. Thus, the creation of the platform was an apolitical issue. In spite of some areas from improvement, as shown below, citizen participation is on the rise.

The robust governance (Ansell et al., 2023) and the (new) political governance (Aucoin, 2012) approaches are particularly useful to explain developments in Decide Madrid. The enthusiastic promotion of e-participation and the appointment of some activists of the 15 M movement into senior positions in the responsible department (Hovik et al., 2022; Smith & Martín, 2021) is an example of politicization that led to a reduced use of the platform with the arrival of the next government. However, the institutionalization and robustness of Decide Madrid has been key to ensure its continuity. In fact, the lack of transparency has

been partially solved by the incoming government, which is an indicator of the intention to keep the platform in operation and solve some of the initial problems detected. Robust governance choices regarding process-related factors (open-ended goals, modularity of the platform, and innovation) and organizational design, combining network governance (through high internal and external collaboration) and hierarchy (through a top-down approach, core central department, and formulation of written rules), have allowed Decide Madrid to survive the change in political leadership.

In what ways could these initiatives be further improved?

The results show three areas for improvement in each initiative. First, in Decide Madrid, no feedback about what happens with citizen input in the “processes” module is provided. The lack of feedback makes it difficult to legitimate e-participation and could also negatively influence citizens’ future participation levels (Font & Navarro, 2013; Sjoberg et al., 2017). Second, the minimum number of people needed to support proposals to pass to the voting stage could be revised, as only two proposals have reached this threshold in 6 years. Third, the city council could consider revising the role of associations (traditional participation stakeholders in Madrid) and try to involve them to a greater extent (e.g., in the moderation of debates, which is absent). The lesser role attributed to associations may be one of the reasons behind declining participation, as online individual participants are less committed than offline participants, according to networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Regarding We asked, You said, We did, the platform does not allow discussion among participants, which is important to increase the quality of citizen participation (Christensen, 2021) and a criticism of other participatory initiatives in Scotland (Bennett et al., 2022). Second, the design of the consultations needs some attention so questions are posed where there is some flexibility on policy choices and ‘best practice’ should be shared to avoid inconsistencies across policy teams. Third, possibilities for offline participation should be offered, as previous experiences show that successful e-participation projects combine offline and online activities (Panopoulou et al., 2010; Yetano & Royo, 2017).

What are the lessons learnt from these successful cases?

Our results show that some factors that have been highlighted in previous literature as influencing the success of e-participation initiatives, such as the level of government, the ownership of the platform, the level of participation pursued, and the previous background in e-participation (Aichholzer et al., 2016; Randma-Liiv & Lember, 2022; Smith & Martín, 2021), are not crucial.

As regards the different stages of development of e-participation—adoption, implementation and institutionalization (Steinbach et al., 2019)—both initiatives had a smooth adoption. In Madrid, this was mainly due to the strong political support from the mayor and environmental pressure for transformation. In Scotland, the adoption was mainly due to the strong tradition of citizen participation (Scottish approach to policy-making) and significant previous experience in e-participation.

The implementation stage has been critical in both initiatives. In Decide Madrid there was some initial resistance from the other areas of government, as “they did not anticipate that citizen participation would imply additional work” (I3), and citizens’ complaints about the lack of transparency of the platform. In We asked, You said, We did, there have been criticisms about the choice of the topics (some of them with a predefined government option, which is almost impossible to change) and lack of alignment between the You said and We did parts.

The institutionalization of the two initiatives has been favored by their integration in formal policy-making processes and cross-boundary collaboration, particularly in Madrid with the creation of an international network of users around the open-source software developed. These results confirm the need to integrate citizen engagement with organizational structures and processes (Nalbandian et al., 2013) and feedback (Font & Navarro, 2013) for the success of e-participation initiatives. Our results also show that support from politicians and senior managers is not only essential in the initial stages of e-participation (Sæbø et al., 2011), but also to provide resources and adjustments in the administrative structures to ensure the long-term continuity of these initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that best practices common in successful e-participation initiatives are related to leadership and senior management/political support, top-down approach, high levels of internal and external collaboration with clear accountability relationships, embeddedness in the formal policy-making processes and careful consideration of design features. Most of these factors are related to processes, organizational or managerial dimensions, rather than being linked to the institutional context. For the ICT component, only accessibility seems to be a must. More advanced features, such as the use of multifunction platforms, gamification elements, or in-house development of the technological solution, are not required.

Areas for improvement also exist even in these successful e-participation initiatives, such as improving feedback, allowing discussion and flexibility on policy options, incorporating possibilities for offline participation, and greater involvement of a wider range of stakeholders. These should be carefully considered to increase the performance and sustainability of e-participation initiatives worldwide.

Efforts to build robust e-participation initiatives are particularly helpful, as the two cases demonstrate. Their continuity, top-down approach, formal regulations, high levels of institutionalization and increased collaboration with different actors, evidence that they have successfully combined elements of network governance and public bureaucracy.

A comparative approach is more robust than single case studies, but there are still limitations. For example, it is possible that the opinion of politicians and senior managers in the interviews might focus more on the positive outcomes than any difficulties experienced with the platforms. We tried to mitigate this by interviewing technicians and other stakeholders and using other data sources to triangulate the data. Furthermore, the views of users are critical to understand how the platform was used, but access to citizens was difficult to achieve.

Further research could try to shed some light on the importance and significance of the different success factors, by sampling a much larger number of respondents and applying relevant statistical techniques (e.g., structural equation models). Another interesting research avenue could be the identification of discourses for e-participation among the different stakeholders involved (politicians, technicians, representatives of relevant organizations and individual citizens, both users and nonusers) by exploring the use of Q-methodology.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Citizen participation initiatives can involve different levels of engagement, which can be summarized as information, consultation, active participation, and delegation of power (Smith et al., 2011).
- ² Source: www.citipopulation.de. Population figures refer to January 1, 2020, for Madrid and June 30, 2019, for Scotland. Many developments in Decide Madrid affect the inhabitants of the metropolitan area because of the high number of commuters. Being a resident in Madrid municipality is only required to vote on proposals.

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