

E-participation: Democracy's false friend?

An investigation of the UN e-participation index and its role in
quantifying progress in e-government

By

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Declaration I, the undersigned Calum Cameron hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

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Abstract

With the emergence of e-government has come a belief that internet technologies will lead to democratic renewal, creating new ways for citizens to participate in government. Hence, there has been some surprise that the UN e-participation index (EPI), the biggest global survey of e-government, has awarded authoritarian regimes with high e-participation scores. Scholars who have previously examined the index have claimed that its lack of correlation with democracy is a failure of measurement. This criticism assumes the EPI is a measure of e-democracy and should therefore reflect real democracy. This thesis evaluates the index, clarifying its proper function and reappraising its effectiveness. Quantitative data analysis is used to retest the index's relationship with democracy, serving as a basis on which to tackle the theoretical assumptions that it should correspond to democracy. Ultimately a case is made that focusing on democracy relies on faulty assumptions and that the index should be judged solely on its accuracy at measuring e-participation. Recommendations are given to improve its quality based on a substantive definition of e-participation.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review	4
E-government as public administration	4
E-government as political process	6
Conceptualising e-democracy	7
E-participation, a close cousin or a false friend?.....	8
ICTs as democratic salvation?.....	10
A lack of democratic theory	12
Chapter 2: Measuring e-participation	14
The UN E-Participation Survey	14
Methodology	16
Variables Tested	18
Data	18
Independent Variable: Level of democracy.....	19
Dependent variable 1: e-participation index score	19
Dependent variable 2: e-decision-making score	20
Dependent variable 3: internet freedom.....	20
Chapter 3: Findings	21
E-participation and democracy	21
E-decision-making and democracy	23
Freedom on the net and democracy	25
Chapter 4: Discussion of findings	27
The implications of no relationship	27
A weak proxy for e-democracy	27
A problem with theory?.....	28
The purpose of the e-participation index	34
The value of e-participation	34
Measuring e-participation	35
Chapter 5: Recommendations	39
Improving the e-participation index	39
Framework for an e-participation feedback loop	39
Factoring in the political environment	40
Measure bottom up initiatives	41
Marketing the index	41
Limitations	42
Conclusion	44
References	46

Introduction

With the proliferation of the internet has come the belief that information communication technologies (ICTs) will enhance government, improving both the provision of services and the connections between citizens and the state. These efforts have been labelled 'e-government', a concept representing an objective of practitioners, as well as a multidisciplinary academic field. From this, a subfield of 'e-democracy' has emerged, examining how new technologies connect citizens and governments directly in ways which can improve political processes.

There have been a number of efforts to quantify the development of e-government. The most sustained and comprehensive of these is the biannual E-Government Survey from the UN division for Public Administration Country Studies (UNPACS 2014). Surveying 193 Member States since 2001, this global study is taken seriously by academics and practitioners and has influence on both the study and practice of e-government. The survey provides two primary indicators: the e-government development index (EGDI) relating to capacity to provide online services, and the e-participation index (EPI) measuring the opportunities for citizens to take part in political processes through ICTs.

While the UN does not claim that the EPI is a measure of e-democracy, it is widely interpreted and used as such a measure. This interpretation has led to criticism of the index as it has awarded non-democratic countries with high scores in recent years. This criticism claims that as a measure of e-democracy, the EPI should broadly reflect the level of democracy in the countries evaluated, and so awarding non-democracies with high scores is a methodological failure (Grönlund 2011). This position is contingent on assumptions that the EPI is a measure of e-democracy, and

that e-democracy is predictive of “real-world” democracy. This thesis challenges these theoretical assumptions in order to establish the validity of such a critique and evaluate the index on a sounder conceptual basis. The field suffers from a lack of clarity around key concepts such as ‘e-democracy’ and ‘e-participation’, both of which need to be critically addressed to properly assess the EPI.

This thesis evaluates the UN e-participation index, clarifying its proper function and reappraising its effectiveness. Central to this evaluation is testing whether the EPI is an effective measure of e-democracy, and questioning whether using the index as a measure of e-democracy is appropriate. If not, the fundamental purpose of the index must be considered in order to establish its success as an indicator. It is valuable to thoroughly understand and evaluate the survey, to ensure that its results accurately portray e-government, and that it is being interpreted correctly. A proper understanding allows for a fair critique and delivers an opportunity for improvement. A more accurate survey will improve how e-government development is understood in academic study, and in the wider sphere via the many news reports that refer to the country rankings, and the governments that use the index as a marker of legitimacy. Since the presence of a country ranking survey is an incentive for governments to improve their position, a robust survey encourages pursuit of initiatives that genuinely reflect improvement in e-participation.

This evaluation of the EPI is conducted through empirical and theoretical methods. Quantitative data analysis using regression and descriptive statistics is used to test the relationships between a number of indicators relating to democracy and EPI. These results are used as the basis for the theoretical discussion about the index’s suitability as an e-democracy indicator and what its normative role should be.

Previous studies have tested the relationship between the index and democracy with Grönlund (2011) finding no relationship and Lidén (2015) finding a statistically significant correlation at a low level of magnitude. This thesis expands on these studies in a number of ways, providing an updated analysis of the most recent data, increasing the granularity of data analysis, controlling for external factors, and most importantly dropping the normative assumption that the EPI should serve as an indicator for e-democracy. This greatly affects the interpretation of results, allowing that a weak correlation may not be a fault of the index, but instead can shed light on the theoretical understandings of the central concepts of e-government.

Based on findings that suggest that there is little relationship between EPI and level of democracy, the theoretical discussion outlines the legitimate reasons why this is the case, explaining the apparent contradiction between e-participation performance and level of democracy. A case is made for evaluating the index based on how it measures a substantive interpretation of e-participation. With this standard for evaluation, the index is found to have fundamental shortcomings, and recommendations are made to improve it.

There are five chapters, with chapter one reviewing defining works of the e-government field, giving specific attention to the subfields of e-democracy and e-participation. Chapter 2 discusses the UN survey, outlining its methodology in addition to how it is used in the field, and details the thesis methodology. Chapter 3 delivers a presentation of the findings. Chapter 4 discusses these, outlining the implications for the interpretation and usefulness of the EPI. Finally, chapter 5 offers recommendations for improvements to the index.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Following the increased drive to integrate ICTs in the public sector, e-government has developed into an academic field with a diverse range of contributions from a number of disciplines, principally political science, public administration and information systems (Misuraca 2009). In broad terms e-government is described as “the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners, and employees” (Silcock 2001). While in its youth the field was criticised for being theoretically weak, overly optimistic and technologically deterministic (Heeks and Bailur 2007), it has recently matured, generating more theory and coherent sub-fields. However, some of these subfields lack conceptual clarity, which ultimately has an impact on theory building and empirical study, as the analysis of the EPI will show. This chapter introduces key debates within e-government, focussing specifically on e-participation and e-democracy.

E-government as public administration

There is a sharp divide in the literature separating the use of ICTs to provide public services, and those that improve communication between citizens and government, often referred to as ‘e-democracy’ (Fisher 2012). Of the two elements, service provision has been pursued more enthusiastically by governments (Freeman and Quirke 2013), and is traced back to a 1993 report from the Clinton Administration (Lee, Chang, and Berry 2011) where e-government was hailed as a tool to provide more efficient, effective public services. In the UK Tony Blair positioned e-governance tools as crucial to the Labour Party’s ‘citizen-centric’ vision of government (UK Cabinet Office 1999), claiming they would improve services,

increase efficiency, and deliver cost savings. There was no reference to improved democratic processes. Today the emphasis remains on service provision with the current European eGovernment Action Plan for member states focusing on modernising public administration and achieving a digital internal market (European Commission 2016). Much of the academic literature is aligned with this approach, describing e-government in New Public Management (NPM) terms (i.e. Fountain 2001; Chadwick and May 2003; Heeks 2002; Silcock 2001). The characteristics of e-government tools are supportive of NPM strategies, and emerged as NPM became the dominant public administration paradigm, providing a means to operationalise NPM's philosophical goals. Tolbert and Mossberger calls this frame 'the entrepreneurial approach', with the public sector borrowing private e-commerce strategies in an effort to become 'customer driven', and 'service oriented' (2006). This extends existing scholarship which for decades has sought to import private sector values to public administration (i.e. Ostrom and Ostrom 1971). Bekkers and Homberg describe the transformation rhetoric of e-government as based on myths. This is not to say necessarily false, but illustrative of a general technocentric belief that ICTs by themselves can realise NPM aspirations (2007). The authors conclude that these myths are partly responsible for the 'chasm' between grand aspirations and disappointing results. Others agree that there is a tendency to over emphasize technology without sufficiently accounting for regulatory and institutional frameworks (Misuraca 2009). Just as this has caused disappointment in the impact of e-government in service provision (i.e. Hall 2015), the same is true of its effect on democratic governance.

E-government as political process

The literature on the impact of ICTs in the political process is often termed ‘e-democracy’ and explores the view that ICTs can foster participation, enhancing access to government in order to make policymaking more transparent and governments more accountable and responsive to citizens (Fisher 2012). Some scholars challenge the separation of e-government into subfields of services and e-democracy, and call for convergence on the basis that they are fundamentally integrated. Chadwick argues that online service provision exposes governments to the kinds of demands that private firms face, and so makes the public sector more accountable and responsive to citizens, leading to more democratic forms of governance (Chadwick 2003). This ‘evolutionary model’ views the proliferation of ICTs in public sector services as enhancing democratic processes. Fisher counters this with a ‘contradictory model’, arguing that e-government weakens democracy, because while democracy demands active citizenship, e-government promotes passive consumerism, and the demands of these roles are in conflict (Fisher 2012). As this thesis is specifically interested in the measurement of e-participation tools, it views the separation as useful as it simplifies complex phenomena, though this is not an endorsement of either model.

While some disagreements in the literature are ideological, based on normative views of citizenship and the role of government, some are the result of conceptual muddiness, with concepts like ‘e-government’, ‘e-democracy’ and ‘e-participation’ vaguely defined. While these broad terms are perhaps unavoidable, they describe a range of tools within a range of institutional arrangements, some of which will likely support the ‘evolutionary’ view, and others the ‘contradictory’ view. Conceptual clarity is necessary, particularly when evaluating attempts to measure these concepts.

Conceptualising e-democracy

'E-democracy' is conceptually challenging, hung as it is on 'democracy' that is itself complex and contested. The literature tends to have a technological, not political theory focus, defining e-democracy as a set of technologies enhancing existing democratic processes, rather than a novel vision of governance. Spirakis et. al. describe e-democracy as "technological innovations that allow improvement and empowerment of democratic institutions", and that it allows "increasing citizens' participation in public dialogue and decision-making, promoting the development of active citizens" (2010). Although multiple authors warn against this technocentrism, noting that ICTs are tools that can be used to suppress citizens as well as empower them (Mindus 2014; Freeman and Quirke 2013; A. Macintosh and Whyte 2008), this definition is typical, viewing e-democracy as empowerment through technology, isolated from other institutional constraints.

The wide acceptance of the internet as democratic by nature is evident in the very term 'e-democracy' and an absence of an equivalent study of 'e-authoritarianism'. The democratising power of ICTs is based on the premise that they increase access to information and give citizens new mechanisms to engage in politics, making policymaking more transparent and governments more accountable (Gunter 2006). Moreover, the internet's decentralised, non-hierarchical architecture is seen as highly compatible with democratic ideals, offering low transaction costs, and facilitating peer-to-peer communication and information sharing. Noveck goes as far as arguing that democratic norms can be coded directly into software (Fisher 2012). The belief that the internet promotes democracy, combined with a tendency to analyse ICTs in terms of technical capacity rather than political context, creates ambitious expectations about the internet's democratising potential. Some authors are more

cautious, broadly agreeing that internet technologies are naturally democratic, but warning this may be affected by the behaviour of governments (Freeman and Quirke 2013). If the concept of 'e-democracy' is meant simply to describe the effect of ICTs on political processes, a neutral term like 'e-politics' would be useful, allowing for investigation of phenomena without the normative expectation that technology necessarily supports democracy. E-democracy as it stands is an ideologically loaded concept.

While there have been a number of typologies developed to analyse e-democracy, the most frequently cited are linear multistage models of increasing technological sophistication. These stages are typically defined as information, discussion and decision-making (Vedel 2006). The first stage, information, is about ensuring that citizens can access basic information, data, news and opinions and corresponds to democratic ideals of transparency and accountability. The second stage is discussion, providing people with a forum for public deliberation and a mechanism for governments to consult citizens. Finally, decision-making tools allow citizens to participate directly in politics (Vedel 2006). Participatory budgeting is an example of such decision-making tools (Moss and Coleman 2014), demanding more technological sophistication than earlier stages. The stages model of e-democracy focuses on technology, making assumptions about how these tools interact with political institutions. This limits the scope of the e-democracy discourse, which is evident in the literature.

E-participation, a close cousin or a false friend?

A concept related to e-democracy is 'e-participation', describing citizens' participation in the political process using online tools. While described as a separate subfield

field of e-government research (Medaglia 2012), it is frequently used synonymously with e-democracy, and the distinctions are often blurred. In his meta-study of the research area, Medaglia describes e-participation as “the use of ICTs to support democratic decision-making” (2012). This definition views e-participation as the practical implementation of advanced e-democracy. The view that e-participation is a constituent part of e-democracy dominates the field. In one of the most widely cited works, e-participation is described as one of two components of e-democracy (the other being e-voting) (A. Macintosh and Whyte 2008). Similarly Lee et. al. describe e-participation as a mechanism of e-democracy to ‘broadly engage citizens through ICT use in the political process’ (2011). While there is a significant literature questioning the ability of e-participation to enhance democracy, this caution is often grounded in ideas of the digital divide, a lack of digital skills, privacy concerns, and various organisational challenges to implementation (Norris 2001; Davies 2015; Mindus 2014). Sussha challenges the view that e-participation is simply a sub-component of an e-democracy concept, arguing both that it describes interactions with public services beyond political processes and is therefore wider than e-democracy, and that there is no reason to assume that participation is democratic (2012). In general, the e-participation discourse inherits the tendency of e-democracy to focus on the technical characteristics and under-examine the political environment in which they exist. This thesis takes Sussha’s position that e-participation tools should not be assumed to be democratic, and views the conflation of the concept with e-democracy as erroneous.

Much of the e-participation literature is on the practical implementation of technologies, describing a range of online tools facilitating political participation, including web streaming, social media, blogs, discussion forums, consultation tools

like surveys, and e-voting (Davies 2015). While some are sophisticated, even basic government websites are considered as facilitating e-participation, giving citizens access to information and data to equip them to take part in the political process. A number of frameworks are offered to evaluate such e-participation initiatives (see Tambouris, Kalampokis, and Tarabanis 2008), but the most widely adopted follows Vedel's model of e-democracy with evolving stages of 'information', 'consultation', and 'participation' (Freeman and Quirke 2013; Macintosh and Coleman 2003). While most e-participation studies look at tools provided by governments, Coleman and Blumler helpfully differentiate between e-participation 'from above', and 'from below' (although they too use the terms e-participation and e-democracy interchangeably). State-led programs are considered top down e-participation, whereas initiatives created by civil society and private individuals are categorised as e-participation from below (Coleman and Blumler 2009). Bottom up e-participation is a wide category potentially describing an array of activities from online political protest and hacktivism, to websites like theyworkforyou.com (mySociety 2016b), which provides access to UK parliamentary data. Bottom up activity tends to be discussed in political communication and social movement literature, rather than the e-government literature that focuses on top-down tools. This is arguably a shortcoming of the field, making it more difficult to conceptualise the total effect of ICTs on the political process.

ICTs as democratic salvation?

E-democracy and e-participation must be understood in the political context in which they emerged. In the past two decades or so, Western democracy has been seen as in decline as globalization, neoliberalism, and other structural forces have shaken existing political systems and raised questions about democratic legitimacy (Fisher

2012). Claims of a growing democratic deficit, accompanies rising public distrust in representative democratic institutions, and a decline in voter turnout and other political engagement (Tambouris, Kalampokis, and Tarabanis 2008). Just as e-government has been seen as a way to respond to changing demands in public administration, e-democracy was seen as a remedy to political structures under pressure. A dominant optimistic perspective positions online tools as a way to 'fix' democratic mechanisms, giving people new tools to engage in politics and increase their satisfaction with the performance of democratic systems (Coleman and Blumler 2009). According to this view, by removing barriers to communication ICTs will lead a renewal of democratic citizenship with participation at its core. Rather than a passive electoral citizenship, people would have a more interactive relationship with government and continually have their voices heard (Moss and Coleman 2014). Such a system could improve deliberation among citizens, and between citizens and government, improving decision-making, increasing government legitimacy and trust in the political process (Freeman and Quirke 2013). There is pushback against this view from scholars like Matthew Hindman who argues that despite creating some striking new forms of political participation, the internet has not led to increased levels of political participation overall, instead providing new avenues for those already engaged (2009). The claim that ICTs will improve democracy via participation assumes that these technologies will be used. Either this implies that current weak participation is due to transaction costs, which e-democracy can reduce, or that citizens do not value current mechanisms. While plausible, the literature is overly focused on supply and more work is needed on the demand side to better understand the usage of tools and the effects on the political system. The technocratic optimism of much of the e-government literature has tended to equate

descriptive concepts like 'participation' with ideological concepts like 'democracy', arguably creating unrealistic expectations for such tools.

A lack of democratic theory

I have argued there is a deterministic narrative in much of the literature drawing the concepts of e-government, democracy and participation together, on the basis that tools invite participation, which empowers citizens and makes governments accountable, thereby improving political systems (i.e. Tambouris, et. al. 2008; Spirakis, et. al. 2010). This is partly explained by a conspicuous lack of grounding in democratic theory. Within discussions of technology and democracy, there is relatively little definition of what democracy means, with many studies not referring to a model of democracy. Democracy is often taken as a concrete political reality rather than the abstract theory with competing definitions and attributes that it is (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013). Some writings refer vaguely to the type of democracy that the ICT tools may promote, such as a Habermasian public sphere (Fisher 2012) or Athenian direct democracy (Coleman and Blumler 2009). Alternatively, writers make reference to principles that are assumed as central to democratic systems, such as participation and deliberation (Chadwick 2009). However, few take a systematic approach, plotting how technologies enhance the processes within a specific model of democracy. 'E-democracy' tends to rest on the use of 'democracy' as a byword for good governance, relying on the near universal acceptance of 'democracy' as desirable.

This lack of conceptual definition is part of the reason 'e-participation' has become conflated with 'e-democracy'. By facilitating online participation, ICT tool are labelled as e-democratic because they support one necessary component of democratic

systems. However, few definitions of democracy would regard participation alone as sufficient. Even Dahl's minimalist interpretation requires the element of political competition to qualify as democracy (Dahl 1971). If e-democracy is meant to explain the enhancement of democracy through ICTs, it must be more ambitious, recognising the effects across various institutions that support a democratic system. Even outlining the basic scope of a democratic model would help the analysis of e-democracy. For instance, clarity on whether we mean a substantive definition of democracy where we are concerned about outcomes, or a minimalist definition focused on the existence of institutions (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013), would improve research.

While there have been substantial efforts towards model building within the e-democracy field, there has not been wide adoption by researchers. Päivärinta and Sæbø synthesise a body of literature outlining a range of democratic frameworks for e-democracy, grounded in political theory. But as they concede, the majority of e-democracy studies fail to adopt such models (Päivärinta and Sæbø 2006). It is perhaps telling that the framework most cited in e-democracy (and e-participation) literature is the technology-based stages model of information, consultation, and decision making, rather than frameworks based in democratic theory. Without using such models of democracy, the concept 'e-democracy' becomes somewhat of a 'glittering generality', emotionally appealing, but lacking a tangible basis for a deeper analysis of the efficacy of e-government tools for achieving specific objectives.

Chapter 2: Measuring e-participation

There have been a number of efforts to quantify e-government development including reports from The Economist (Economist Intelligence Unit 2009), Brown University (West 2006) and the European Commission (Tinholt 2012). The most frequently published, global, and widely cited is the bi-annual e-Government Survey published by the UN (UNPACS 2016). A rudimentary news search returns 119 English language articles citing the index during 2014 (ie Ghazal 2014; Business Day 2014; Wanjiku 2014). It is also frequently quoted by Governments seeking to promote their e-government development (ie Government of Spain 2014; Bahrain Government 2014; Qatar Government 2012), and is regularly used in academic studies. Its large audience and consequent influence makes it worth examining.

The UN E-Participation Survey

Covering 193 countries, the UN positions the survey as a tool to promote the development of e-government in all member states. The survey adopts the dominant view that e-government has separate economic and political logics. This is reflected in the structure of the survey which is separated into two parts: the e-government development index (EGDI), and the e-participation index (EPI). The EGDI is a composite index designed to capture the state of e-government development of online services. This thesis examines the EPI, which measures the provision of ICTs that promote participation in public decision-making.

The e-participation index ranks all member states by their provision of online tools that facilitate participation. The methodological framework for the EPI maps to the e-democracy literature, ranking countries based on three-stage model of information, consultation and decision-making. The precise definitions of these have changed

during the survey's lifetime. In the 2014 report, 'e-information' is defined as "providing citizens with public information and access to information without or upon demand", 'e-consultation' as "engaging citizens in contributions to and deliberation on public policies and services" and 'e-decision-making' as "empowering citizens through co-design of policy options and co-production of service components and delivery modalities" (UNPACS 2014). The index is based on a qualitative evaluation of participatory tools on government websites, with each country receiving an overall score between 0-1, derived from scores of the three subcomponents. Since the sophistication and ambition of e-participation tools increase over time, the scores do not measure an absolute level of e-participation but show the performance of states relative to each other. As a measure of e-participation, the methodology is open to challenge, with questions around the scope of what is measured, and the thoroughness with which the tools are evaluated. This is discussed in depth in chapter four.

While the EPI borrows its evaluation framework from e-democracy studies, the UN reports do not use the term 'democracy', instead using language like 'citizen empowerment', 'civic participation', and 'inclusive political processes'. While characteristic of democratic behaviour, they do not equal democracy. Hence, the report avoids ideologically loading the concept of 'e-participation' and opening up the evaluation process to the conceptual confusion evident in the literature. However, the absence of explicit reference to 'democracy' does not prevent interpretation of the index as a measure of e-democracy. A number of studies use EPI as a proxy for e-democracy, usually as the dependent variable in their models. For instance, Lee et. al. uses the index as an e-democracy indicator, citing a lack of an alternative e-democracy survey (2011). They justify this by citing a Coleman and Norris definition

(2005) of e-democracy as “anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation using digital or electronic means”. This exemplifies the under-theorisation of key concepts allowing scholars to use indicators in unsuitable ways. In his study of the 2010 UN e-participation rankings Grönlund criticises the index for having a weak relationship with measures of democracy (Grönlund 2011). Explicit in his critique is the assumption that EPI is a measure of e-democracy and so its rankings should reflect democratic reality. On this basis, he regards the index a failure, without sufficiently engaging with what it should measure, or its correct interpretation. Lidén shares the position that the EPI should be an e-democracy indicator and therefore correspond with wider democracy indicators (2015). Neither writer makes persuasive case about why an indicator that claims to measure e-participation should meet the democratic demands implied by e-democracy.

Methodology

This in order to evaluate the index, it's normative function needs to be clarified, which in turn requires engaging with this conflation of e-democracy and e-participation and the expectations it establishes. To set the grounding for this theoretical discussion, three hypotheses are tested empirically:

- There is a strong relationship between level of democracy and the EPI
- There is a strong relationship between level of democracy and e-decision-making scores
- There is a strong relationship between democracy and internet freedom

Previous studies of the EPI and democracy by Grönlund and Lidén (2011; 2015) make the normative assumption that there should be a strong relationship between sophistication of e-participation and level of democracy, following the reasoning

evident in the mainstream literature that e-participation is essential to e-democracy and e-democracy promotes, and is promoted by, real democracy. This thesis does not adopt this position and is open to the outcome that there is a weak relationship between EPI and democracy and yet EPI could still be considered an accurate and useful indicator. Instead, the following empirical analysis serves as a platform for a discussion of what the EPI is measuring and how it could be improved. This less ideological position allows a more nuanced investigation of the index than has previously taken place.

As well as taking a different normative perspective, the data analysis expands previous efforts in a number of ways. While the EPI as a whole is measured as a dependent variable, I also break it down into its constituent parts and measure 'e-decision-making' on the basis that it better meets the requirements of most definitions of democracy than do 'e-information' or 'e-consultation' which measure initiatives that could comfortably exist within non-democracies. Furthermore, I control for country capacity. It is reasonable to assume that e-government development is in large part driven by the capacity of governments to build such tools. Neither Grönlund nor Lidén control for this, meaning their results may be clouded by the correlation between capacity and level of democracy. Finally, I use data from the most recent 2014 survey. In his study, Grönlund uses data from the 2010 survey, and Lidén uses data from 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008, and 2010 studies. I have not conducted a longitudinal analysis as the UN reports emphasise that since the methodology is continuously adapted, the EPI is not suitable for cross-report comparison. Since there has been no such evaluation of the data since the 2010 report, an updated analysis provides a valuable contribution.

Variables Tested

OLS bivariate regressions and descriptive statistics are used to test the relationships between indicators. Firstly, the EPI is measured as the dependent variable against democracy as the predictor variable. This provides a fresh measure of the correlation between the indicators. This is followed by testing with a control variable of country capacity to provide ICTs, as measured by internet penetration rate (ITU 2014), showing how important a factor democracy is after accounting for capacity. These tests re-evaluate how e-participation relates level of democracy, and provides a basis for discussing whether e-participation can be used as an indicator of e-democracy. Secondly, the EPI is disaggregated with 'e-decision-making' scores as the dependent variable to show whether this most advanced stage of e-participation, which better matches the normative expectations of e-democracy, has a greater correlation with democracy than the EPI as a whole. Finally, I will swap the EPI for a dependent variable that measures the level of internet freedom. While the goal is to interrogate to use of e-participation as a proxy for e-democracy, the ability to use the internet in an unrestricted way facilitates participation and allows for a more open discourse, which is necessary to most conceptions of democracy. Looking at the conditions under which people can freely participate online gives a useful alternative perspective, establishing whether there is a relationship between democracy and what is arguably a key component of e-democracy.

Data

The analysis uses secondary data from a number of sources. All data are from 2014 reports, collected in 2013, and so from a consistent period. The full dataset consists of the 193 UN member states. Sample sizes are reduced when using variables that do not have data for all countries such as the Freedom on the Net index covering 65

countries and Polity IV covering 165. Of the 193, 88 states qualify as democracies, 77 as mixed regimes, and 29 as dictatorships, according to the Freedom House framework, detailed below. As a near-complete set of the world's states, the data is a representative sample across geography, development, regime type, and other attributes.

Independent Variable: Level of democracy

The primary democracy indicator is taken from the Freedom in the World report (Freedom House 2014a). This report gives each country a freedom rating, derived from the mean of their political rights (PR) and civil liberties (CL) scores. PR and CL scores range from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), based on a number of questions about electoral process, the functioning of government, rule of law and individual rights (Freedom House 2016a). While not technically a measure of democracy, it is widely regarded as a valid indicator for democracy (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013). Other measures such as democracy-dictatorship (DD), and Polity IV adopt procedural conceptualisations of democracy, whereas Freedom House takes a substantive definition which fits the perspective of this study, interested in how measurements of e-government concepts relate to democratic outcomes, not just institutions. Polity IV is used as a secondary measure to ensure any findings are not limited to a specific democracy index. Polity IV ranks countries between -10 (autocratic) and 10 (democratic) based on a minimalist framework looking at political process and competition (Clark, Golder, and Golder 2013).

Dependent variable 1: e-participation index score

The EPI measures the presence of online tools promoting interaction between government and citizens, and among citizens. Each country is given a rating in three

areas of 'e-information', 'e-consultation', and 'e-decision-making' which aggregated to create an overall rating which is normalized to give a final EPI score on a 0 (worst) - 1 (best) scale, relative to other countries (UNPACS 2014).

Dependent variable 2: e-decision-making score

A subcomponent of the EPI, the e-decision-making score is designed to measure online tools that empower citizens to get involved with the design and production of government policies. Countries are given a percentage score with 100 representing a top score.

Dependent variable 3: internet freedom

While 'internet freedom' is a contestable concept, for the purposes of this study Freedom House's Freedom on the Net score is used. Based on a global survey of 65 countries, representative in geographical diversity and economic development, this is a measure of internet openness. The factors analysed are grouped as obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights (Freedom House 2014b).

Countries are given a score of 0 (best) to 100 (worst).

Chapter 3: Findings

E-participation and democracy

The primary question in this section is whether level of a democracy has an impact on countries' EPI scores. Figure 1 suggests that while more democratic countries on average have slightly higher EPI scores, the differences are not huge, and the pattern is not one of consistently lower average EPI scores for less democratic

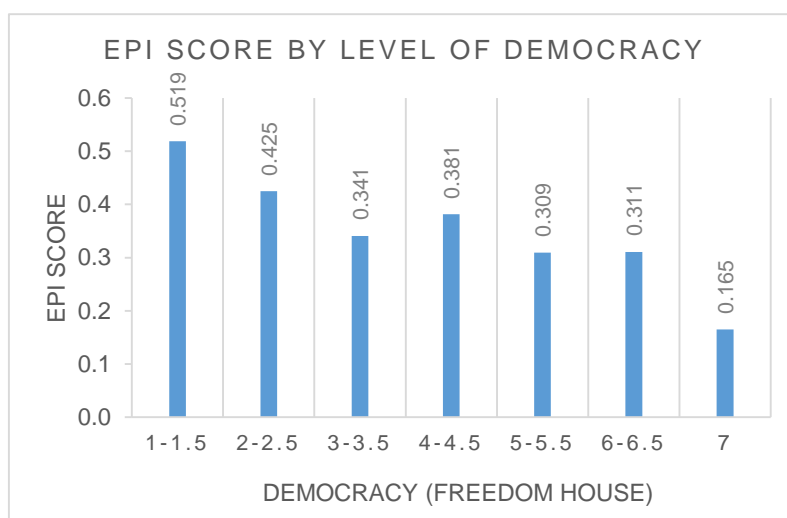


Figure 1: Mean EPI score grouped by level of democracy

countries. For instance, the average EPI score for countries with democracy scores of 4-4.5 is higher than that of their more democratic peers with scores of 3-3.5. Though there is a notable drop in the average EPI scores among the least democratic countries, the overall trend does not allow for the conclusion that there is a strong relationship without a more thorough analysis.

A regression testing the strength of the relationship, with EPI as the dependent and Freedom House democracy as the predictor variable, illustrates more doubt about the association. Table 1 below shows the expected negative relationship is present, with the coefficient indicating that each step on the democracy scale towards dictatorship decreases the EPI by 0.047, or 4.7%. While statistically significant, this is a very weak effect given that democracy is measured on a 7-point scale. In addition, an R^2 of 0.127 shows that democracy only explains 12.7% of the variation.

Variable	EPI
Democracy (Freedom House)	-0.047***
β	-0.356***
R ²	0.127
N	193
Democracy (Polity VI)	0.012***
β	0.281***
R ²	0.079
N	164

*p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 1: Effect of democracy on EPI score

To ensure this result was not specific to the Freedom House democracy indicator, the same regression was run using the Polity IV measure of democracy (Center for Systemic Peace 2014), which shows a weaker relationship with a smaller standardized coefficient and an R² of just 0.079. The residuals in the tests are consistent with the regression assumptions of linearity, normality and non-homoscedasticity.

The relationship becomes weaker still when we control for the capacity of each country, as measured by their population's access to the internet. As there is a correlation between level of democracy and internet penetration, with democratic countries having more capacity, the apparent (albeit small) effect of democracy on EPI score found above may be inflated. A stepwise regression model is used to find out if democracy has predictive value after internet penetration has been factored in.

Variable	EPI
Internet Penetration	0.006***
β	0.671***
R ²	0.450
Democracy (Freedom House)	-0.006
β	-0.044
R ²	0.452
R ² change	0.001
N	193

*p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 2: Effect of democracy on EPI after controlling for capacity

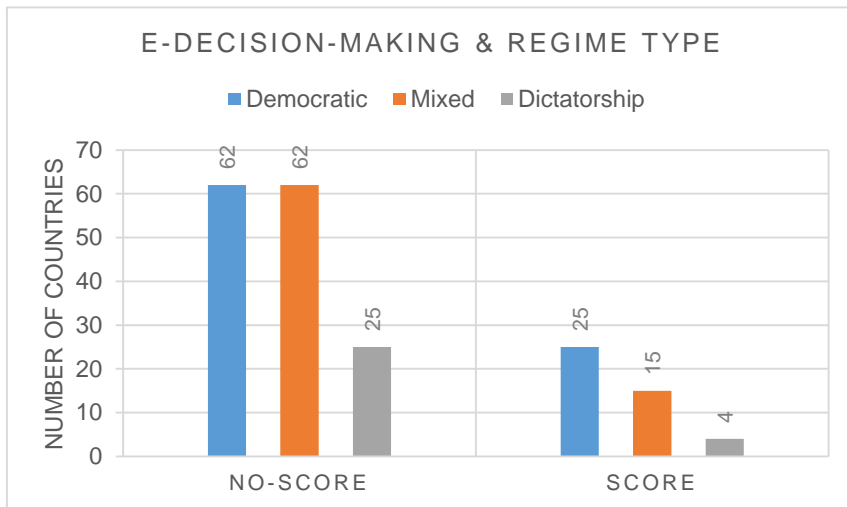
The results show in table 2 show that internet penetration accounts for 45% of the variation of EPI, with a highly significant coefficient of 0.006. This means each percentage increase in penetration rate increases the EPI by 0.6%. Adding the democracy measure to the model increases the R^2 by only 0.1%. The size of the democracy coefficient also decreases and ceases to be statistically significant. From this, we can conclude that not only is the relationship between EPI and democracy weak, when controlled for capacity it disappears entirely.

Due to the strong role of capacity, a check is required to ensure it is not only undeveloped democracies causing the weak correlation in the regression analysis. Of non-democracies, 36 out of 106 countries have an EPI score above 0.395, the average of all countries. Furthermore, 29 non-democracies (27%) have an EPI score above 0.487, the average for democratic countries. Hence the weak correlation is not solely caused by low-capacity democracies, or a couple of non-democratic outliers. Instead, a substantial number of non-democracies received relatively high EPI scores. With this robustness check and the above regression results, we can discount the first hypothesis and conclude there is not a strong relationship between EPI and democracy.

E-decision-making and democracy

Regression analysis is not appropriate to analyse the relationship of e-decision-making score to democracy because the assumptions of linear regression are not met. This is largely because the majority of countries have a zero score for this measure of e-participation, heavily skewing the distribution. However, plotting the data can help illuminate the relationship between the two variables. Figure 2 shows

that the majority of countries do not have e-decision-making scores, meaning they



are stuck at the first two stages of e-participation as measured by the UN survey; e-information and e-consultation. Of the 44 countries that do, only 25 are

Figure 2: No. of countries with/without e-decision-making scores by regime type

democracies, with 15 mixed regimes and 4 dictatorships also achieving this third stage of e-participation. Moreover, 62 of 87 countries ranked as democratic have no e-decision-making score. Figure 3 plots the countries that did receive an e-decision-making score. While

there is a negative relationship between democracy and e-decision-making score, the slope and distribution is not such that we can affirm the hypothesis that there

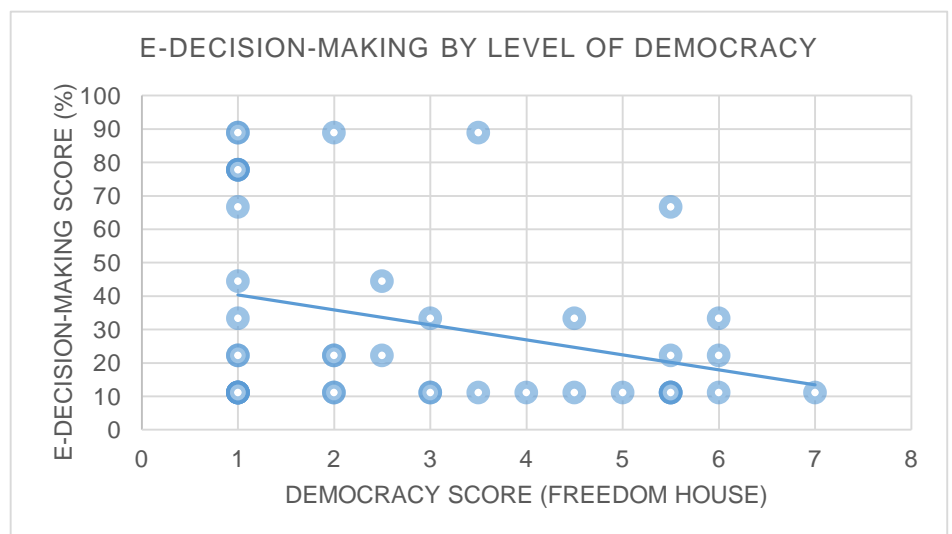


Figure 3: Countries with e-decision-making scores by level of democracy

is a strong relationship between e-decision-making and level of democracy. As a robustness check, a regression was run against these 44 countries, with e-decision-marking scores as the dependent variable predicted by the Freedom House

Variable	E-decision-making score
Democracy (Freedom House)	-4.48*
R ²	0.09
N	44

*p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 3: Effect of democracy on e-decision-making scores (where available)

who received an e-decision-making score. As with EPI scores, any association is likely driven by other factors such as the development and capacity of countries.

Freedom on the net and democracy

While EPI is understood as a measure of online tools governments provide to enhance political participation, Freedom on the Net is a measure of how much governments restrict users online, which effects the conditions under which they can

Variable	Freedom on Net
Democracy Score (Freedom House)	9.563***
β	0.868***
R ²	0.753
N	65
Democracy Score (Polity IV)	-2.847***
β	-0.839***
R ²	0.703
N	64

*p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4: Effect of democracy on freedom on the net score

strength of the relationship, the test was repeated using Polity IV as the independent

democracy score. With an R² of 0.09, and a small coefficient of -4.48 at a low significance, there is no clear relationship between e-decision-making score and democracy among countries

participate. As table 4 shows, this relationship is far stronger than that of democracy and EPI. Each change in level of democracy yields a 9.5% shift in freedom of the net score, with a high R² at 0.75. To avoid the possibility that using two Freedom House measures inflates the

variable. The size of the R^2 and standardized coefficient are similar. Unlike testing the effect of democracy on EPI score, when controlling for country capacity democracy still has a strong impact on freedom on the net score, with a further 57% of the variation explained by the independent variable, and the coefficient unaffected. Hence we can confirm that while level of democracy does not affect countries' provision of e-participation tools as measured by the EPI, democratic countries are more likely to have more open internet environments, which is likely to have an impact on e-participation, particularly bottom-up e-participation not part of the state e-government infrastructure.

Chapter 4: Discussion of findings

“Virtual politics will mirror the traditional political system...if correct, the diffusion and functions of digital politics within each country should be able to be predicted by overall levels of democratisation” (Norris 2001)

Contrary to Norris’ hypothesis, a country’s level of democracy does not predict its provision of e-participation, as measured by EPI. While dictatorships like China and Bahrain score highly, Czech Republic and Switzerland have low scores. The regression results confirm that no relationship exists on the aggregate. This chapter discusses the results, exploring why e-participation rankings are not consistent with the expectations suggested by much of the earlier literature. This is followed by a normative discussion about the role the index should play, and how the index is currently falling short. The final chapter then make specific recommendations.

The implications of no relationship

A weak proxy for e-democracy

The results suggest that the EPI is not a valid indicator of e-democracy. If e-democracy is dependent on ‘real’ democracy, then the e-participation index cannot serve as a proxy for e-democracy, as it’s correlation to democracy is minimal.

However, the assumption that e-democracy is conditional on ‘real’ democracy depends on the definition of e-democracy, which is contested. If defined as an ICT-driven democratic system of governance, then e-democracy can logically only exist within a democratic regime. However, with the common formulation of e-democracy as a set of tools that promote democratic behaviours, it is plausible to argue that e-democracy can exist within undemocratic regimes, and that the tools are not, or have not yet been, sufficient to bring systematic change. If accepted, it is empirically conceivable that the e-participation index may be a valid measure of e-democracy,

because e-democracy need not have a strict correlation to real democracy. However, this thesis rejects this notion because for ICT tools to be considered 'democratic', the mechanics of the hardware and software need to be considered within the environment in which they are used. The concept of 'democracy' has certain normative values that need to be met, and within a substantive conception of democracy, these need to have output validity. Therefore, if the outputs of ICT tools are suppressed or are ineffective within a given system, then the tools cannot be said to be 'e-democratic'. Therefore, 'e-democracy' is understood as referring to ICTs that enhance democratic behaviours within a system in which they are effective. This implies that e-democracy is at least partially nested in democracy, regardless of the definition. Hence, this conclusion, combined with the finding that EPI has no connection to real democracy, means that EPI is not a valid indicator of e-democracy, and should not be treated as such. This discussion emphasises that interpretations of empirical findings are highly dependent on key concepts and therefore e-government studies would benefit tremendously from clearer definitions of these.

A problem with theory?

This finding that there is no empirical connection between the two concepts can be explained either by a measurement failure of the index, or a theoretical failure on the part of those who demand such a relationship. Lidén sensibly argues that e-democracy is a subordinate concept to democracy, meaning that absence of democracy means absence of e-democracy (2015). However, he concludes from this that because the EPI is insufficiently tethered to level of democracy, it must be 'corrected' to better reflect democratic outcomes, and suggests fusing the EPI score with an index of democracy. This has problems on two counts. Firstly, it assumes

that e-participation should be a measure of e-democracy, which is disputed shortly. Secondly, even if taken as a measure as e-democracy, he advocates inflating countries' scores on the basis that they are democratic, regardless of the democratic quality of their ICTs. This means a democratic state with weak provision of e-democratic tools could receive a higher e-democracy score than a partially democratic country with very good ICTs. While the political environment in which tools exist is important, simply rearranging e-democracy scores based on a democracy rank does not provide a good measure of how ICTs contribute to democratic processes. If we applied the same logic to measuring different countries' electoral processes, it would be deemed wrong to weigh scores according to overall levels of democracy. Instead, we would evaluate how well electoral processes perform within the overall democratic system. Similarly, any measure of e-democracy should judge the extent to which tools affect democratic processes within the system, rather than how democratic the whole system is. Such specificity and conceptual clarity is required to measure components of e-government in an accurate, coherent way.

As the remainder of this thesis will argue, the effectiveness of EPI should not be judged on its ability to predict democracy, via e-democracy. Dropping the assumption that e-participation should be a measure of e-democracy, we can better deconstruct the apparent paradox that EPI has no correlation to democracy. The presumed direction of the relationship between e-participation and democracy is two-way; democratic countries are more likely to adopt participation tools, and countries that adopt tools facilitating participation are likely to become more democratic. If this were the case we would expect the gap in EPI scores between democratic and non-

democratic countries to grow over time, though the opposite is true (Åström et al. 2012). The logic of each direction is considered separately.

That democratic countries are more likely to embrace e-participation tools makes intuitive sense given how strong the value of participation is to democracy. It stands to reason that democracies will adopt ICTs to boost their systematic processes, and non-democracies would avoid them lest they create a challenge to their governing legitimacy. However, neither may hold. Firstly, democratic countries may not develop such tools for reasons of capacity or priority. The results showed that capacity was the overwhelming driver of countries' implementation of e-participation tools. Hence, democratic countries without the additional resources to pay for such tools will be slower in adoption. The democratic countries that do not register e-decision-making scores have an average GDP per capita of almost half that of democratic countries with e-decision-making scores, emphasising the importance of wealth and capacity in e-government development. There is particularly little incentive for such investment if countries' systems of governance are working satisfactorily or if e-democracy tools are unlikely to add much value, such as in smaller democracies like Monaco and the Pacific Island States with their extremely low populations, reflected in their low EPI scores.

More crucial is the presence of non-democracies scoring highly on the EPI. On closer examination of the tools being measured, this may not be particularly strange. While surveys like the UN index treat 'e-participation' as a single phenomenon in a bid to quantify it in a coherent way, in reality it is a broad concept representing many tools and processes. These processes facilitate different kinds of participation in different ways, some of which challenge the legitimacy of government and some that

do not. A single e-participation tool can be used in varying ways. For example, the publishing of government information online would fall under the first 'e-information' component of EPI. A government could make all budgets, associated metrics and policy evaluation documents available online in a user-friendly format, giving citizens access to information to assess the quality of the administration. This transparency and accountability would improve the outcome level of democracy in many countries, and be perceived as a challenge to power for authoritarian states. However, the same government could instead cherry-pick the most attractive information to publish, omitting information that would challenge its position or make it look ineffective. Both would be registered in the EPI index, and yet the second would have little democratic impact. Non-democratic governments can benefit by adopting such tools, without exposing themselves to political competition. Because e-participation tools are driven in a top down way by governments, they are able to shape them to suit their own ends and fortify their power. This conservative as opposed to revolutionary view of technology is referred to as 'reinforcement politics' (Åström et al. 2012). Pro-active authoritarian governments can implement e-participation for a number of reasons such as controlling information flows, monitoring citizens, or increasing external legitimacy. China provides such an example where its relatively sophisticated e-participation environment allows a subtle form of social control by shaping the agenda, and managing public dissent, and yet e-participation initiatives are presented as pro-democratic (Jiang and Xu 2009). This is consistent with the perspective of the 'Irvine School' that views most ICTs as reinforcing existing power structures of public administration, implemented as they are by those in power (Snellen, Thaens, and Donk 2012). Clearly not all e-participation tools are equal, and governments have control over those they pursue.

This gap between the popular vision of e-participation tools, and how they are actually implemented, and ultimately quantified in the EPI, helps to explain the confusion at the high scores of undemocratic countries. The role of ICTs needs to be viewed within a political context, with the understanding that governments can subvert the participatory function that would normatively be associated with democracy.

Reversing the direction of causation, it is not only states subverting e-participation tools, but an inflated faith in participation as a democratic value that explains the cognitive disconnect between e-participation and lack of democracy. Certainly, participation is a necessary ingredient to any democratic system. However, that does not mean that participation is sufficient for democracy, or that participation per se is inherently democratic. Linde and Karlsson point out that participation means different things within different political contexts, and that while non-democratic regimes have tended to limit participation, there are examples where it is an integral part of the system, such as the mass mobilization in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (2013). This emphasises the need to look closely at how e-participation tools are being used, rather than assume that they create democratic pressures. Are tools being used to empower citizens as the UN claims is the goal of e-participation? Or do they serve the interests of those in power? If the latter then they are unlikely to lead to democratic reform. Participation is just one among many institutions necessary for a robust democracy. Dahl lists elected officials, free and fair elections, free expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship in his discussion of political institutions required in democratic countries (2005). While participation is clearly a factor in some of these, such as electoral participation, other institutions listed and the sub-institutions they imply, go

beyond participation. The expectation that participation, unaccompanied by broader institution building, can lead authoritarian states towards democracy is unduly optimistic.

Both the insufficiency of e-participation to tilt regimes towards democracy, and the consequent willingness of authoritarian states to adopt them, explains why the level of democracy had little effect on states' adoption of e-decision-making tools, the most advanced phase of e-participation. It was theorised that this stage of e-participation, focused on bringing citizens into the decision-making process, would have a stronger link to democracy, as this is an antithetical concept to authoritarian regimes. Data shows this is not the case. If such tools are not perceived by governments to challenge their legitimacy because they remain within their control, then their implementation will depend instead on other factors such as capacity.

While this conclusion may seem disheartening for those who see the internet as a democratic force, there is of course a strong case to be made that online tools can shift power dynamics, spark engagement in citizens and lead to meaningful political action, ultimately cultivating democracy. The claims here are limited to the relationship between the EPI and democracy. This section began by asking whether the lack of correlation was due to the way the EPI is measured, or whether it is wrong to presume a correlation. The answer is both. While it has been shown why it is wrong to confuse 'participation' and 'democracy', it is also important to be clear on what the EPI should measure and whether it does so well. The UN makes choices about what the EPI measures, which naturally has an effect on country rankings. While the index should not be put in a democratic straightjacket, its results should be held to a normative standard of what it claims to measure: 'e-participation'.

The purpose of the e-participation index

If the EPI does not measure e-democracy, what then is its purpose? Does it provide a genuinely useful benchmarking tool or just an opportunity for authoritarian leaders to project political legitimacy derived from participatory window dressing? As an index designed to promote the development of e-participation, the answer depends on two primary factors. Whether we view e-participation as a desirable set of initiatives that should be progressed, and whether the EPI measures e-participation well.

The value of e-participation

The existence of a ranking system in which some countries come top and others come bottom is a clear statement that the UN views e-participation as a worthy pursuit. When the report talks about ‘top performers’, this is not just a description of where countries are in relations to each other, but a statement that e-participation technologies that “empower people” are inherently valuable (UNPACS 2014). While this thesis has argued that there are good reasons why e-participation should be conceptually detached from democracy, this does not undermine e-participation’s value. First, of all e-participation can be a useful mechanism within regimes other than democracies. For instance, ‘e-consultation’ mechanisms can allow authoritarian countries to better understand the preferences of their citizens, and therefore deliver public services in a way that fulfils citizens’ needs, keeping them satisfied and therefore increasing government legitimacy. Access to information can be beneficial to citizens outside of democratic contexts, helping them understand and navigate the world around them. Although democracy advocates might take issue with this position, by improving governance within a given system, e-participation tools can benefit citizens. Second, while participation alone is not sufficient for democracy, it is

a necessary pre-requisite. Therefore, if democracy is seen as normatively desirable, then the presence of e-participation mechanisms in non-democratic states are generally to be welcomed. Even if engineered by governments in a way they perceive not to be a challenging, there may be unintended consequences such as increasing ideas of citizenship and teaching political engagement that opens up political competition over time. There is reason to agree with the UN that e-participation, even when shed of its e-democratic overtones, is valuable in itself, and so it makes sense to quantify and celebrate its progress. The question then is whether the EPI does this effectively.

Measuring e-participation

While the EPI should not be expected to deliver an index that shadows democracy rankings, it should be held accountable for what it claims to measure: e-participation. It is important that the EPI measures e-participation accurately so that users of the index get a true sense of how countries are performing, and to encourage countries to adopt tools that really enhance participation, rather than pursue those that improve their performance on global indicators. Just as a substantive definition of democracy was adopted, the EPI should be judged against a substantive definition of e-participation. We are interested in the performance of institutions, not just their presence, and so the existence of surveys, online contact forms, and portals to information is not enough. Unless these are actually used, considered, and have some kind of effect on the policy process, it does not make sense to say they constitute participation any more than to claim that a ballot in which there is control of media, suppression of voters, and jailing of opposition candidates constitutes a free and fair election. Hence, e-participation should not simply be considered as a set of tools, but a process in which people use these tools to engage in a way that

affects the political process. Viewed in this way, the UN EPI has a number of shortfalls.

A key deficit is the scope of what the EPI measures, only factoring government websites and tools. There has been expansion of scope over time with previous reports only considering websites at the central government level, whereas the 2014 report included those operating at a regional and local level (UNPACS 2014). This is important, as distributed delivery is largely an organisational choice, rather than a qualitative difference in sophistication or functionality. However, focusing only on mechanisms provided by the state can miss some hugely important tools provided by other actors such as non-profits and civil society organisations. The UN e-government survey is designed to measure how governments are developing e-government ICTs and consequently takes a top down approach. However, this results in an incomplete picture of true opportunities to participate. The UK website theyworkforyou.com, gives information about how every MP votes, explains debates going through parliament, and covers the activities of public committees, yet it would not be counted by the EPI, even though the charity running the site receives grants from the UK Government (mySociety 2016a). Similarly, change.org is the world's biggest petition website, with its UK petitions regularly receiving responses from MPs (Change.org 2015). However, because it is not a government website, it is not counted by the EPI, even though it provides an arguably better mechanism for participation than the UK Government petitions website that is counted. Including bottom up as well as top down e-participation tools is a challenging task, requiring a system for identifying such initiatives and determining whether they should be counted. However, not doing so presents a limited picture of e-participation, and an unrealistic view of citizens' opportunity for online participation.

Bottom up initiatives are in large part a function of the online political environment, over which governments have considerable influence, but which is not counted in the EPI. By looking at e-participation from a technological basis, ignoring the social, political factors in a country, the EPI does not sufficiently account for how meaningful these tools are. For instance, the 2014 UN report has a call-out section congratulating Bahrain for its commitment to open government data. However, there is no mention that the country regularly blocks access, filters and removes content, and arrests internet users who are critical of government (Freedom House 2016b). These put Bahrain's commitment to openness and transparency into serious doubt. The EPI's failure to take account of this is concerning given how much the reports emphasise citizen empowerment through online tools, and how damaging internet controls can be to autonomy on the web. As is clear in the findings, there is strong correlation between authoritarianism and restrictions of the web, with governments attempting to curb challenges to authority that the internet might pose. Any tools that governments provide must therefore be viewed in their political context to account for how citizens are able to freely participate.

The EPI takes a quantitative approach, measuring the presence of tools, but not how frequently they are used, by whom, and how. That means, for example, performance metrics on the home page of one government portal accessed by thousands of people could be given the same score as equivalent figures buried in a labyrinth of hyperlinks in another. It is not just the theoretical ability to use tools that is important, but their accessibility, ease of use, and ultimately how they enhance participation. Furthermore, the measure counts the presence of tools of various levels of sophistication ('e-information', 'e-consultation', and 'e-decision-making') but does not differentiate between the quality of such tools, or their ability to fulfil the normative

goals of each of these participatory steps. Without measuring the quality of such tools, it is not possible to evaluate them in the context of deeper political processes. I.e. are the tools used, do they effectively allow people to contribute, and do governments ultimately take account of citizens' input? Past governance studies have shown that citizens feel hugely disillusioned if their contribution is ineffective, something Pateman calls 'pseudo participation' (Coleman and Blumler 2009). Therefore, any evaluation should consider the citizen-input/policy-output dynamic to measure e-participation in a substantive way.

While the UN has come under unfair criticism for failing to provide an effective measure of e-democracy, the EPI can rightly be challenged as being a weak measure of e-participation. To measure a 'thick' definition of e-participation, which I have argued is necessary to understand the potential of ICTs to improve governance, democratic or otherwise, the e-participation index needs to extend its scope and ambition. It should expand to better measure the quality, not just quantity, of government tools. It should understand these tools within a wider political context, and it should expand its focus to include bottom up e-participation activities.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The previous section highlights some of the index's shortcomings. While measuring in a more nuanced way can be challenging, the EPI is an evolving index that can and should be improved over time. The below recommendations suggest ways that it can be optimised to provide a fuller picture of e-participation.

Improving the e-participation index

Framework for an e-participation feedback loop

The EPI should not stop at measuring the existence of tools. Instead, it should adopt a framework that accounts for the full process of meaningful e-participation. This includes evaluating the quality of e-participation tools, measuring their use by citizens, establishing whether their outputs are being considered - and if appropriate acted upon - by governments, and finally how the government provides feedback to citizens to complete the loop.

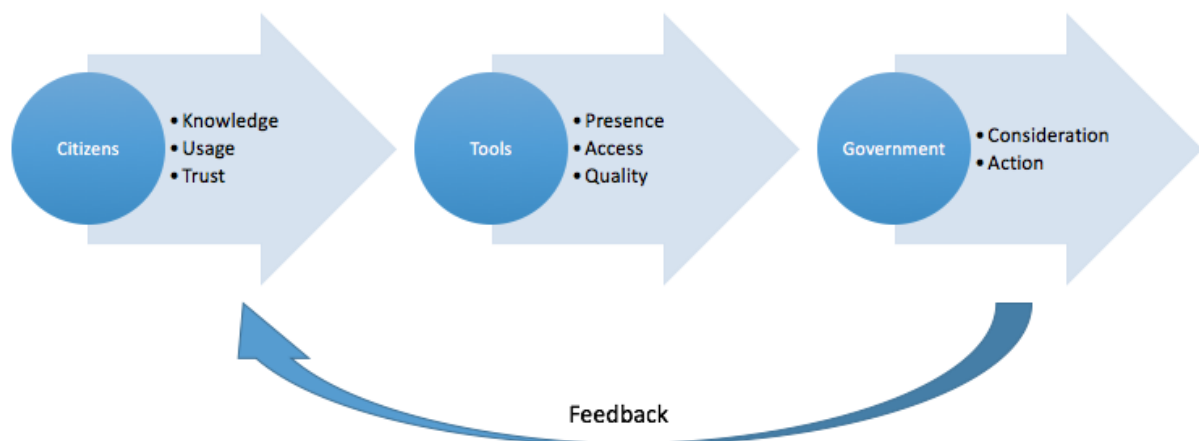


Figure 4: framework for evaluating e-participation tools

Currently the EPI measures only the first bullet on the middle arrow in figure 4, and so adopting a framework like this would be a significant expansion of the current

process. It would seek to understand whether citizens know about tools, if they trust and understand them, and ultimately how widely used they are. It would not only register the existence of tools, but also evaluate the ease and equality of access, as well as the quality and comprehensiveness of the tools. It would establish how the output of such tools is factored into policymaking by governments, before finally measuring how this action is fed back to ensure that citizens are aware of the consequence of their participation. This would require new methods such as surveys of citizens and government officials which would be difficult to attain in some cases. Given the frequency and global scale of the survey, moving to such a framework would be resource intensive. Hence, this high bar for measuring e-participation serves as an ideal model that can be used to guide the process of optimizing the survey, moving it beyond the current scope of simple website review.

Factoring in the political environment

In order to move towards a model focused on outcomes of e-participation, the political environment must be accounted for. I rejected Lidén's suggestion to weight the measure with a general democracy index, because this is too far removed from the objectives of e-participation tools. However, to effectively enable citizens to participate freely through ICTs, the online environment needs to be relatively open so that people have access to information, and do not fear repercussions to participation. Therefore, it is appropriate to weight the results using a measure of internet freedom, such as the Freedom on the Net report. While my findings suggest this would lead to better scores for democratic countries, this is not designed to favour democracy per se but to reflect the conditions that are necessary for genuine e-participation, which are indeed more present in democratic states. So while rejecting the position that the EPI should reflect democratic outcomes, the

suggestions to make it a better measure of e-participation would likely tilt it towards democracy.

Measure bottom up initiatives

E-participating initiatives originating from other actors than the state can have a major impact on citizens' opportunities for participation and so should be factored into the EPI. These should be measured separately from government initiatives and be represented by an additional component of a composite index. Understanding the differences in both quality and quantity of initiatives between government and civil society is valuable information that could indicate the government's level of commitment to involving citizens in governance. An obvious difficulty is establishing what should be counted. Bottom up e-participation could be interpreted in an unmanageably wide way. For example, every discussion on Twitter about politics could be argued to be deliberation between citizens and therefore represent participation in the political process. The danger is that the measure becomes both meaningless and impossible to quantify. Therefore, more work is required to create a framework for measuring bottom up e-participation activity in a way that is measureable, meaningful and rewards those countries with substantial bottom up tools with higher EPI scores.

Marketing the index

Finally, the issue of how the EPI is marketed and interpreted should be considered. As has been shown, while it is often interpreted as being an indicator for e-democracy, there is little theoretical or empirical relationship between e-participation and democracy. The fact that the reports do not use the term 'democracy', does not exempt the UN of all responsibility over how they are interpreted. As the EPI survey

is based on an e-democracy framework of information, consultation and participation, the misinterpretation is somewhat predictable. While I have argued that it is perfectly legitimate for the UN to measure e-participation unencumbered by democratic baggage, it has a role in ensuring that consumers of its research thoroughly understand what the indicators represent so that they used in an appropriate way. Three straightforward changes could help. First, the e-participation section of the report can explicitly say that the EPI should not be interpreted as necessarily having democratic outcomes. Secondly, it should explain some of the reasons why e-participation does not necessarily represent democratic behaviours, some of which are detailed in this thesis. Finally, the report should provide researchers with a detailed account of the EPI methodology explaining the specifics of what it measures, with a criterion for evaluation. The brevity of the current EPI methodology leaves many unanswered questions and presents opportunity for misinterpreting the results.

Limitations

The above recommendations call for significant changes to the way EPI is measured. Achieving these changes would be demanding. For instance, relying on the self-reporting of governments detailing how they integrate citizens' input into policymaking will unlikely reflect reality, particularly for countries seeking to use EPI to enhance their external legitimacy. Therefore, these recommendations should be seen as a call to expand the ambition of the EPI, finding innovative methods to measure e-participation in a more substantial way, rather than a blueprint for reform.

One of the main challenges in formulating these recommendations is the lack of detail in the EPI methodology, leaving readers to make educated guesses as to how

UN researchers conduct the survey. Specific details would aid interpretation of the results. This is important given that the methodology changes in every report and would help researchers interpret changes to scores and rankings between reports.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to evaluate the UN e-participation index, clarifying its proper function, reappraising its effectiveness, and in the process provide more clarity to the concepts 'e-participation' and 'e-democracy'. Regression analysis and descriptive statistics found there is no empirical relationship between democracy and e-participation as measured by the EPI. A case was made that past criticisms of the index on this basis are the result of a flawed interpretation of e-participation as a measure of e-democracy. Instead, the EPI should be evaluated squarely on its ability to measure e-participation.

The index was criticised as measuring a e-participation at a superficial level. This has the danger of awarding high EPI scores to countries with e-participation tools that provide little genuine opportunity for citizens to participate in the policy process, giving them a veneer of e-participation. In order to create a more robust measure, a substantial definition of e-participation should be adopted. This calls for a deeper analysis of the concept of e-participation, recognising that not all tools are equal and can aid, or undermine, participation in different ways. Furthermore, not only the tools, but also the political environments in which they operate affect outcomes.

Recommendations were given to expand the scope of the EPI to include measures of bottom-up participation, to factor in the online political environment, and to better consider the qualitative outputs as well of existence of tools. These recommendations sit within a framework that evaluates e-participation in terms of outcomes for citizens, rather than purely by technology. These enhancements can make the index a more accurate measure of e-participation. Not only would this improve the research of scholars who employ the index, it would give practitioners a

clearer idea of where their efforts rank, and perhaps most importantly, encourage governments to make the substantive changes required to score highly on a reformed EPI, giving citizens more opportunities to participate in government.

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