

Viral engagement? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on e-participation

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic caused an increased use and a normalization of digital technologies in almost all realms of life. Therefore, it would have been expected to see substantial changes in the participation of citizens in politics using digital means, namely e-participation platforms. This article investigates the impact of the pandemic on e-participation from an interdisciplinary perspective grounded in information systems and political science. Our qualitative analysis of nine expert interviews with leading platform operators presents clear indications for a substantial increase in demand for e-participation services. However, we did not find that platform designs and business models of e-participation underwent substantial shifts that could be attributed to the dynamics of the pandemic. Platform operators saw little reason to adapt their business models to the social and political consequences of the pandemic, but proved to be well adapted by default. Thus, identified challenges remained largely unaddressed: E-participation platforms continue to struggle to include young people and marginalized groups that are traditionally underrepresented in participation processes. We did, however, find indications for some shifts among clients and participants. The interviewees report a profound shift in attitudes towards e-participation. Furthermore, due to the exposure to digital technologies during the pandemic, clients and participants seemingly increased their capacities to handle the technological tools used in e-participation formats. Especially older citizens were able to enhance their capacities to get involved. In addition, platform operators fre-

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quently stress the complementary character of digital and in-person elements for successful and inclusive participation processes.

Keywords E-participation · Digital democracy · COVID-19 · Digitalization · Platform design · Digital involvement

Virale Beteiligung? Über die Auswirkungen der COVID-19-Pandemie auf E-Partizipation

Zusammenfassung Die COVID-19-Pandemie verursachte einen erhöhten Gebrauch und eine Normalisierung digitaler Technologien in allen Lebensbereichen. Daher wären substanzielle Veränderungen im Bereich der digitalen Partizipation von Bürger*innen erwartbar gewesen – insbesondere im Hinblick auf E-Partizipations-Plattformen. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Auswirkungen der Pandemie auf E-Partizipation aus einer interdisziplinären Perspektive, die in der Wirtschaftsinformatik und der Politikwissenschaft verortet ist. Unsere qualitative Analyse von neun Expert*inneninterviews liefert klare Hinweise auf eine gestiegene Nachfrage nach E-Partizipations-Dienstleistungen. Jedoch ergaben sich keine Hinweise auf substanzielle Veränderungen von Plattformdesigns und Geschäftsmodellen, die der Pandemie zugerechnet werden könnten. Die Plattformbetreiber*innen sahen eine geringe Notwendigkeit, sich an die sozialen und politischen Auswirkungen der Pandemie anzupassen, sondern waren bereits gut darauf eingestellt. Daher wurden auch bestehende Schwächen nicht adressiert: E-Partizipations-Plattformen haben weiterhin Schwierigkeiten junge Menschen und marginalisierte Gruppen einzubinden, die traditionell in Partizipationsprozessen unterrepräsentiert sind. Wir haben jedoch Hinweise auf einige Veränderungen bei den Kund*innen und Teilnehmer*innen gefunden. So berichten die Befragten von einer tiefgreifenden Veränderung der Einstellung zur E-Partizipation. Darüber hinaus schienen die Klient*innen und Teilnehmer*innen aufgrund des Umgangs mit digitalen Technologien in der Lage, während der Pandemie ihre Fähigkeiten im Umgang mit relevanten technologischen Werkzeugen zu verbessern. Insbesondere ältere Bürger*innen konnten ihre Kapazitäten, sich digital zu beteiligen, erhöhen. Darüber hinaus betonten die Plattformbetreiber*innen häufig den komplementären Charakter von digitalen und analogen Elementen für erfolgreiche und inklusive Beteiligungsprozesse.

Schlüsselwörter E-Partizipation · Digitale Demokratie · COVID-19 · Digitalisierung · Plattformgestaltung · Digitale Teilhabe

1 Introduction

In April 2020, the United Nations (UN) released a policy brief addressing the COVID-19 pandemic entitled “Embracing digital government during the pandemic and beyond” (United Nations 2020). It envisions the COVID-19 pandemic’s global crisis as a pivotal moment for the enhancement and proliferation of digital govern-

ment practices. As social interactions were restricted by efforts to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2, a boom of digital government and e-participation seemed possible. Contact tracing, countering disinformation, artificial intelligence (AI) applications in medical services, and e-participation: The policy brief suggests the onset of a veritable boost for digitalization in various domains of government (ibid.). E-participation was portrayed as a short-term measure to help governments identify effective policy responses to the pandemic. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered rapid changes and, in many areas, significantly advanced digitalization. In particular, there has been an increase in the use of online meeting applications, whether it is for online learning due to school closures or video conferencing for work (Pratama et al. 2020). With the challenges imposed by the pandemic the role of an efficient, inclusive, and accountable government has become more critical: “During COVID-19, open data and [e-]Participation could help build public trust in government crisis response measures and support vulnerable groups in society” (United Nations 2020).

Even before the pandemic (digital) citizen participation has been advocated as facilitating engagement of citizens, building trust in governments, and ensuring their responsiveness to public sentiments and demands: “Citizen participation [...] leads to more effective solutions and public accountability” (Falanga 2020). The advent of the Internet and digital technologies has been discussed as facilitating new forms of responsive governance and citizen participation (Borucki et al. 2020; Radtke and Saßmannshausen 2020; Berg et al. 2022). E-participation is defined as a process that enhances and transforms the engagement in democratic and consultative activities within society through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Sanford and Rose 2007). Furthermore, e-participation is characterized as fostering active citizenship by leveraging cutting-edge technological advancements, thereby broadening the scope and enhancement of participatory processes to cultivate an equitable and efficient society and governance structure (Sæbø et al. 2008). Opposed to the initial euphoria surrounding e-participation as a major democratization of political involvement (Van Dijk 2012), a growing body of empirical research yielded more nuanced results (Schwanholz and Zinser 2020; August 2022). Polarization and political fragmentation have been identified as pathologies of the “digital constellation” (Berg et al. 2022). Furthermore, some authors have criticized e-participation processes for their exclusivity and ineffectiveness (Borucki et al. 2020; Rottinghaus and Escher 2020) as e-participation rarely enters “the core decision making and policy executing phases” (Van Dijk 2012, p. 59). The optimism that has been articulated at the onset of the pandemic seems to echo these (vain) hopes placed in all sorts of digital technologies, which have been pointedly labeled “exaggerations” (Scholl 2008, p. 22). Thus, the high hopes and expectations voiced at the beginning of the pandemic call for an analysis that investigates the consequences of the pandemic for e-participation. Did the pandemic really spark a ‘viral’ spread of e-participation? In our study we examine nine e-participation platforms that provide the technological architecture and procedural expertise for digital citizen participation. They occupy a crucial position in digital governance and political participation processes. We, therefore, ask: *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect e-participation platforms, their design, reach and operative practice as part of political participation processes? And moving forward, how do platform operators*

perceive relations with clients and participants of e-participation processes after the pandemic?

Macintosh et al. (2009) located e-participation research at the intersection of diverse academic fields such as democratic theory and political science as well as communication and information science. We, therefore, aim to answer these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from political science and information systems research. We do so by examining nine e-participation platforms that facilitate and host e-participation processes, often initiated by local government authorities. This approach enables us to consider both the political and normative ideals of deliberative democracy and the technological and economic realities in the field of e-participation, which became closely intertwined especially during the crises of the pandemic. It allows us to investigate the relation of platform design and the quality of e-participation judged against the normative standards derived from democratic theory.

To that end we first provide an overview of the existing literature in the field of e-participation platforms and present a theoretical foundation of digital platforms and e-participation. Central to our normative-theoretical point of departure is an understanding of digital citizen participation (Fegert 2022) and digital democracy (Berg and Hofmann 2021; Weinhardt et al. 2024) rooted in a Habermasian conception of deliberative democracy that emphasizes equal participation of all citizens (Habermas 1992) and includes the critique and nuances put forward by Nancy Fraser (1990). Employing a qualitative content analysis based on nine expert interviews with high-ranking representatives of leading e-participation platform operators we present our empirical findings. We proceed to contrast our insights with academic perspectives on the potentials of and challenges for e-participation and relate them to our normative-theoretical framework. Finally, we shift our view from past developments during the pandemic to the current situation and beyond as we offer an outlook and illustrate how further research in the field of digital democracy may complement the present work.

2 Theoretical background and existing research

2.1 Deliberation and the digital public sphere

Once viewed to possess immense participatory and emancipative potential, today, the digital sphere grapples with the issues of surveillance, the spread of hate speech, and the widespread propagation of manipulated information, all of which exert an unparalleled strain on the foundations of democratic societies. Consequently, the vision of the digital landscape as a utopian realm of equal and rational discourse is far from realized, a perception echoed by Habermas in “A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics” (2022).

According to Habermas (1990), only the modern state helped to realize the concept of the public sphere. In the 18th and the early 19th century, bourgeois public spaces, including coffee houses and later mass media, re-established the separation between private and public spheres, fostering argument-based exchanges among

citizens (Massing and Breit 2003). Deliberative democracy offers an alternative to formal decision-making in political institutions and it is argued that the public sphere can only fulfill its role when all potential stakeholders can take part in the communicative interactions that constitute democratic, deliberative will formation. It envisions a procedural understanding of democracy, in which private opinions and interests are picked up and organized by mass media to form public opinions (Habermas 2022). These public opinions serve as the basis for deliberation and decision-making in democratic institutions. The regulative ideal of the ideal speech situation is constitutive for the functioning of the process (Habermas 2022). This entails a public sphere unaffected by (power) inequalities in which all private opinions can be voiced and heard and contribute to the formation of public opinion. While its full realization is unlikely, citizens must act *as if* it was realized (Habermas 2022). Only if all actors voice their positions as if they had equal voice and regard their counterparts as equals, deliberative democracy can function (Habermas 2022). However, scholars like Nancy Fraser critique Habermas's ideal, introducing the concept of subaltern counter publics (Fraser 1990). These counter publics, opposing the bourgeois sphere, incubate critical discourses before entering the dominant public sphere when strengthened. Fraser argues that the historical realization of deliberation has excluded marginalized social groups. Habermas acknowledged this critique in 1992, defining deliberative democracy as its core—a form of “argumentative, deliberative, agreement-oriented consultation” (Habermas 1992, p. 229). Therefore, ensuring equal access to the public sphere is crucial (Schmidt 2019). While the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere is unlikely to be realized, it serves as a normative imperative to constantly improve deliberative processes and institutions as well as a framework for analyzing the digital sphere (Habermas 1990). Thus, it sets the ideal of rational deliberation among equal citizens and the equal access of all citizens to these deliberative processes as the normative frame for democratic participation processes (Habermas 1990).

Digital and conventional forms of citizen participation are often promoted with reference to Habermasian ideals (Fegert 2022; Sanford and Rose 2007). Thus, they can be read as an attempt to approach the regulative ideal of the ideal speech situation and evaluated with the normative standards of deliberative democracy in mind. Depending on the format and level of engagement (which can range from mere information/consultation to binding decision-making), differing normative principles related to deliberative democracy may be evoked. One may stress the importance of ensuring *inclusiveness* and removing barriers (e.g. inequality in resources) in a protected environment (Fegert 2022). But the *discursive quality* and the supposed rationality of decision-making of citizen councils and similar formats is of equal importance.

The new left, environmental and feminist movements in Europe, the parallel civil rights movement in the United States, as well as the democratization movement of the 1980s in Eastern Europe set the stage for the broad resonance of Habermas's writing (Lafont 2020, 2021). Furthermore, these movements all advocated for equal access to the public sphere for groups that have been historically excluded while expanding the practices of democratic participation through protests, strikes, and sit-ins (Klimke and Scharloth 2008). Finally, these diverse movements and their lasting

effects were enabled by mass media that simultaneously functioned as a corrective to state run media outlets, organized individual political action, and therefore enabled citizens to develop their political and deliberative capacities (Street 2005). In a similar vein, the internet has been perceived as potentially realizing the Habermasian ideal of deliberative democracy, supposedly ensuring full access to the public sphere and participation in democratic will formation for all citizens (Bruns and Highfield 2015; Staab and Thiel 2022).

2.2 Digital (citizen) participation

Despite the deliberative role Online Social Networks (OSN) have played in certain contexts, like the Arab Spring, they have been criticized for their rigid platform mechanisms that might hinder deliberation (Kersting 2013; Schwanholz and Zinser 2020). When discussing both a digital public sphere, as well as modern counter publics, scholars turn mostly to OSNs (Bruns and Highfield 2015; Staab and Thiel 2022; Jackson and Kreiss 2023). This could be explained by their sheer relevance—also in terms of active users. Nevertheless, a diverse set of research areas, including e-participation, seems adequate, when researching democracy in the digital sphere (Borucki et al. 2020; Weinhardt et al. 2024).

E-participation is defined as a process that enhances and transforms the engagement in democratic and consultative activities within society through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Sanford and Rose 2007). Furthermore, e-participation is characterized as fostering active citizenship by leveraging cutting-edge technological advancements, thereby broadening the scope and enhancement of participatory processes to cultivate an equitable and efficient society and governance structure (Sæbø et al. 2008). Within this scope, Habermas's theory of the public sphere provides a theoretical foundation for research in this field. Sanford and Rose (2007) highlight that while Habermas takes a critical, emancipatory stance, most e-participation research remains normative, focusing on practical implementation rather than theoretical depth (Sanford and Rose 2007, pp. 416–417). Many independent platforms and initiatives explicitly reference deliberative theories in their efforts to develop digital forms of democratic decision-making (CitizenLab and Coline Cuau 2020; Liquid Democracy 2021). Dahlberg (2007) critically examines whether online participatory spaces genuinely support deliberative democracy or reinforce existing power structures. While e-participation can enable rational-critical debate, challenges such as digital exclusion and algorithmic biases often undermine inclusivity and non-coercive communication—core principles of Habermas' deliberative theory. Thereby, calling for a shift beyond mere access toward actively mitigating power asymmetries in online discourse (Dahlberg 2007). Similarly, Susha and Grönlund (2012) argue that e-participation research remains fragmented and under-theorized, reliant on political science and media studies rather than developing its own conceptual models. They identify stakeholders, environment, and applications/tools as the core themes of e-participation studies but find that research often prioritizes technical solutions over broader democratic impacts. Furthermore, technological determinism—and the assumption that ICT inherently enhances democracy—remains a persistent bias in the field, limiting critical dis-

cussions on digital exclusion, power dynamics, and governance control (Susha and Grönlund 2012).

It has been suggested that e-participation, which has developed since the advent of the Internet, aims to improve communication and decision-making processes by serving as an intermediary between politicians, civil servants, citizens, and various other stakeholders (Sanford and Rose 2007). Typically, e-participation is regarded as a subset of e-Democracy, which itself is a research field of Digital Government. E-participation was met with high expectations: the new participatory techniques were anticipated to improve government-citizen relations, reduce costs, and lower corruption by fostering transparency, while also providing an equitable balance of power between the public and the government, allowing citizens to have a direct say in policy decisions (Kim and Lee 2019; Naranjo-Zolotov et al. 2019; Sheoran and Vij 2022). With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, these features of e-participation were evoked again. In a time of (anticipated) economic hardship and social distancing measures, participation processes were to become more efficient and transparent through the use of digital technologies (United Nations 2020). Concerning the citizens, one could expect opportunity costs of participating would drop significantly as commuting decreased due to mobile working while cultural and leisure activities were curtailed by social distancing and similar measures. Within Verba's civic voluntarism model (CVM) Verba et al. 1995; Schlozman et al. 2018 one would hypothesize that the pandemic freed up resources (i.e. time) for citizens to participate as many social activities were initially suspended (ibid.).

As early as 2008, Scholl noted in an article on e-government's (as it was then called) future that the once "electrifying" term was losing its luster. The initial allure in the late 1990s was likely driven by its promise of radical innovation, diverging significantly from traditional business and IT models. Scholl described an "e-ecitement" that led to a proliferation of e-terms and excessive expectations like its relatives "e-Business" and "e-Commerce." (Scholl 2008, p. 22). Highlighting the grand early aspirations, the observation seems appropriate when considering the onset of the 2020s, where Digital Government and e-participation seemingly fell short of these expectations. Therefore, it can be doubted that this categorization is beneficial for the research field of e-participation: Sociological research currently presents an ambiguous view on the effectiveness of e-participation platforms. Despite the general assumption that e-participation could enable involvement for everyone with internet access, research conducted by Rottinghaus and Escher (2020) indicates that the adoption of these platforms is quite restricted, primarily attracting individuals aged 30–59 who have a higher educational background and are predominantly male. Moreover, a key driver for engagement on these platforms is the users' prior political activity or their personal interest in specific issues (Send et al. 2014; Rottinghaus and Escher 2020). Rottinghaus and Escher (2020) have shown that the mobilizing effect of e-participation (as compared with in-person, offline participation) is fairly limited. E-participation faces similar challenges as conventional modes of participation which are discussed under the term of the "digital divide" (Van Dijk and Hacker 2000; Van Dijk 2006; Pantić et al. 2021). The access to e-participation processes is determined by factors such as income and level of education, which in turn are intersecting with categories such as race and gender, contributing to structural

imbalances in e-participation processes. Indeed, lack of inclusivity and usability are key challenges for e-participation (Rottinghaus and Escher 2020; Fegert et al. 2021). Research on the usability of e-participation artifacts has found that their design does not meet current standards of technological innovation and user experience (Fegert et al. 2021). Both findings indicate that thinking e-participation from the viewpoint of government digitalization not only prevents the full potential from being exploited, it also distracts attention from consistently focusing on citizens as users of those platforms.

Therefore, more recent research on e-participation in information systems tried to combine different digital involvement concepts to broaden the perspective and put the citizen as a user in the center of research (Fegert 2022). Stein et al. (Stein et al. 2023) developed a taxonomical framework for digital involvement projects that combines design knowledge from e-participation, citizen science and crowdsourcing. Another attempt to take the research field out of the primary environment of digital government, is the digital democracy approach by (Weinhardt et al. 2024). In their effort to identify research fields in information systems that help building resilient democracies, they specify participation and digital involvement projects as one of six research areas and argue that these should be worked on together with the social science researchers.

Weinhardt et al. (2024) point to Habermas's ideal of deliberative democracy, arguing that it remains unfulfilled. They highlight that OSN providers, in particular, fall short of this ideal, as Habermas himself also argued (2022). Taylor et al. (2020) argue that OSNs serve as a conducive environment for what they term "electronic populism" (ibid., p. 3). Beyond just revitalizing grassroots democracy, they propose the "establishment of public platforms [...] to rein the distribution of deliberately misleading information" (ibid, p. 5). Particularly in times when the public debate continues to be heavily strained by the proliferation of (COVID-related) disinformation, it becomes crucial to explore alternative digital deliberative spaces. Their propositions feed into a critique of digital communication platforms that by now has become a common place in the literature. In this critique, the digital sphere is characterized by immense accumulation of economic power and pathological tendencies that compromise the quality of public discourse (Staab and Thiel 2022; Kölbel et al. 2023). Discussed under labels such as filter bubbles or echo chambers, digital platforms are thought to drive an increasing polarization and fragmentation of the public sphere (Habermas 2022; Staab and Thiel 2022; Kölbel et al. 2023). This critique of the digital public sphere cautions against the enthusiastic accounts we sketched out at the beginning of our contribution. The integrity of public discourse and the effectiveness of democratic engagement rely significantly on the quality and reliability of the transparent circulation of information. E-participation could hereby play a crucial role, not only, as stated by the United Nations, as a means to organize government-citizen interaction, but moreover to create digital participatory spaces that are closer to Habermas's ideal. Exploring alternative digital deliberative spaces seems essential. This is where we would like to contribute, within this paper.

3 Methods and research design

The present work is a qualitative study of the developments among e-participation platform operators under pandemic conditions. In our interdisciplinary approach, we were interested in both the political and the economic and technological dimension of designing e-participation processes. The selection process follows Fegert's (2022) analysis of e-participation market leaders, focusing on the most established and widely utilized platforms. Of the twelve platforms presented in this market analysis, nine accepted our invitation for an in-depth interview, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their approaches, challenges, and adaptations. Thus, we conducted nine semi-structured expert interviews with representatives of leading platform operators. The interviewees were based in Argentina, Germany, Israel, Belgium, Spain and the US respectively. We selected our interview partners based upon consultation with experts, an artifact review, and an extensive internet research to identify relevant tools, platforms, and actors in the field.¹ The platform operators' services cover differing stages of the participation process, and the platforms themselves vary in their design and in their technical features. This diversity of the selected platform operators contributes positively to the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn from our research. The interviewees were high-ranking employees in their respective organizations. About half of them were (co-)founders, the rest worked as in leading positions. The interviews took place between March and May 2022 and were carried out via video calls. With this format, we faced a trade-off regarding scope and depth of our data. Subtle nuances in body language and tone might be harder to decipher than in a conventional offline setting, making it harder to uncover latent meanings and probe the interviewees responses. But video calls had the advantage that they could be carried out during the pandemic and allowed us to gather data from different geographical and political contexts, independent of otherwise necessary resources (Gray et al. 2020). The interviews were conducted in English and German language and lasted about 30 min on average. Two interviewers were present at every interview. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the help of MAXQDA (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2020). The interviews included both open-ended qualitative questions and a small set of standardized questions that were to be answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale response scheme. These standardized questions allowed for a comparison between the interviewees and functioned as a test of internal consistency (Von Soest 2023). Additionally, we complemented and contrasted our empirical findings with a discussion of existing academic literature on e-participation and first reports and studies on the impact of the pandemic. The aim here is to add context and enable a critical reading to the utterances of our interviewees.

A thematic content analysis of the expert interviews was carried out in multiple stages (Kaiser 2014). In a first reading of the interviews we utilized deductively developed categories that were linked with the questions from the interviews. During the second stage, additional themes that emerged inductively from the inter-

¹ Unfortunately, an extensive database, such as the one provided by the Innovation in Politics Institute was not yet available during this phase of our research process.

views were incorporated into the code system. The system was then restructured to accommodate the interview questions, recurring themes, and additional groups of actors. In the final phase, the updated code system was applied to all interview transcripts (Kaiser 2014; Mayring and Fenzl 2019). The coded segments were parts of sentences, sentences or short passages of several sentences in which aspects corresponding to the code system were expressed. Our final code system distinguishes (1) between three relevant groups of actors—the platform operators themselves (including changes to their business model and platform design), their clients, and the participants (including subcategories concerning composition, group dynamics, and motivation)—and (2) a number of overarching thematic categories concerning demand, the social and political environment (especially political crises and political culture), and practices and principles of e-participation. This structuring of the code system enabled us to (1) identify agents of potential changes regarding e-participation during the pandemic and (2) determine the nature of such potential changes and how they relate to the pandemic or other (potentially pre-existing) trends in the field. Overlaps in the application of actor-centric and thematic codes were to be expected and can indeed be fruitful as they may allow drawing conclusions about the relationships between thematic categories and actors. It should also be stressed that we were not merely concerned with analyzing the manifest contents of our data but also sought to trace latent aspects of meaning and consider the social and political context (Mayring and Fenzl 2019). In that light it should be noted that, as our interviewees can be characterized as rather high ranking ‘inside experts’, there might, for example, be structural incentives to attribute constraints of the development of e-participation to external factors rather than to shortcoming of their respective organizations (von Soest 2023, p. 279f.). Thus, their accounts must be contextualized and subjected to a close, critical examination. To that end we juxtaposed our empirical findings against existing academic literature on e-participation and its development during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our aim here is to understand how the utterances of our interviewees relate to challenges and potentials of e-participation that are being discussed in scholarly debates and add critical perspectives to the elaborations of our interviewees.

4 Results

In the following section, we discuss the results of our interviews with platform operators. We structured this section along the groups of relevant actors and recurring themes that have emerged from our research and are reflected in our code system. Wirtz et al. (2018) put forward a categorization of stakeholders or “demand groups” of e-participation, distinguishing between citizens, private organizations, and public organizations. The categorization put forward by us mirrors this threefold structure but it departs from the theoretical conception as it is infused with inductive insight from the interviews. In the accounts of our interviewees, citizens and the initiators or clients (mostly government institutions) emerged as the most relevant stakeholder groups. This reflects the typical intermediary position of the platforms (Rochet and Tirole 2003), providing the digital infrastructure for the interaction of

citizens and government authorities in participatory processes. Both, actor groups and the thematic categories are structured by an inside/outside divide. Our initial research interest concerned the platforms themselves, but our interviewees stressed the importance of external actors and larger social and political trends that drove changes during the pandemic. The stakeholder groups of clients and citizens are linked to broader, structural trends emerging as thematic patterns. This presentation of external factors identifiable in our material is framed by our exploration of the role of the platform operators themselves and the best practices and principles that our interviewees identify for the design of e-participation processes. In broad terms, our interviewees hold that the pandemic had an (albeit limited) influence on the progress of e-participation, with five people agreeing to varying degrees to the claim that this progress was noticeable, three answering neutrally, and one person disagreeing.

4.1 Platform operators

Our initial research interest concerned the platform operators themselves and in particular how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their mode of work, business models, and the design of their e-participation platforms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most platform operators stated that they were fairly well equipped to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. While all of the interviewees had to work from home at some point, they often pointed to existing digital infrastructure in their workplace and indicated only relatively moderate disruptions to the workflow.

More importantly, few interviewees reported any major shifts concerning their business models. On the contrary, they mostly saw an increased demand for their services as participation processes had to be moved to the digital realm due to the regulations to contain the spread of Covid-19. Thus, a majority of eight out of nine interviewees reported *no or few substantial changes* to the design of the participation platform and process due to the pandemic. Such changes would include durable modifications of the platform architecture; adding new modules, or measures that profoundly alter the structure of e-participation processes. It was, however, emphasized by more than half of the interviewees that their platforms are undergoing a continuous process of adaptation and improvement that was not directly related to the pandemic. In this light, four out of the nine interviewees described *some* changes in business model and/or platform design. *Democracia OS*, an organization from Argentina, reported on having expanded their base of clients to Colombia and the US. The two platforms *Dialogzentrale* and *CitizenLab* (now operating under the name *Go Vocal*) saw modest changes in the design of their platform and processes: *Dialogzentrale* added a Zoom-integration into their platform to accommodate demands by clients. *CitizenLab* added a tool for volunteer placement and a video workshop tool that was designed to allow for more collaborative elements during participation processes. *Decidim*, a project developed in and in cooperation with the city of Barcelona, underwent perhaps the biggest changes during the pandemic. As our interviewee described, the organization coordinates many of the participatory processes in Barcelona which include in-person events, such as neighborhood councils. Such events had to be moved to the digital space during the pandemic.

The implemented design changes expand to an integration of video-conferencing tools for online collaboration, the development of a mobile application, and efforts to develop a secure digital voting system. The interviewee also mentioned efforts to specifically include younger citizens into e-participation processes. Yet, the representative of *Decidim* was cautious to attribute these changes to the pandemic alone. As they put it, they had been considering digital solutions and enhancements of their services well before the pandemic which then, in their words, ultimately “forced” them to combine digital and offline processes which proved to be “a success” (Interview with *Decidim*). With the exception of this latter case, changes to platform design and business model were (often explicitly) not characterized as substantial by the interviewees themselves. And even in the latter case the changes to the business model and the design choices are not solely attributed to the crisis caused by the pandemic: “[...] we start to think on all that [sic] questions before the pandemic which was an advantage” (Interview with *Decidim*). This was also reflected in the fairly mixed answers to our standardized questions: Four interviewees answered that the pandemic indeed had some impact on the development of digital participation formats. Three platform representatives disagreed, two remained neutral. Questioned whether (potential) changes to their platform would be permanent, about half of the participants answered affirmatively.

Platform operators frequently stressed the importance of practical experience for the design of their platforms. About half of the interviewees claimed that responsiveness to clients’ needs and their ability to deliver customized solutions were particular strengths of their respective organization. One interviewee (*Adhocracy+*) stated that those needs just had not changed substantially over the course of the pandemic. Therefore, profound adaptations were not deemed necessary by most interviewees. Rather, the pandemic seemingly accelerated existing trends.

4.2 Clients

These last remarks lead us directly to our results concerning the group of the clients. As clients we categorized any actor that initiated participation processes and therefore requested the services of the interviewees’ organizations. This includes a diverse group of actors ranging from non-governmental organizations to local and state authorities and decision-makers. However, (local) government authorities seem to represent the bulk of the group of clients. With that definition of the category necessarily comes a certain overlap with the category of the social and political environment which we will address later on. The attitudes of clients and specifically (local) government authorities are depicted as decisive factors concerning the diffusion of e-participation practices. Especially for the German interviewees the *Kommunen* (local, municipal administrations) were addressed quite frequently. Concerning such clients, a number of sub-themes emerged from the interviews.

The first theme circled around the *attitudes of clients towards e-participation*. According to almost all interviewees, attitudes towards e-participation changed for the better over the course of the pandemic. And a majority attributed these changes (at least in part) to the pandemic. Yet, interviewees were in partial disagreement regarding the degree of that change and how much of it was caused by the pan-

demic. For platform operators their product(s) seemingly became easier to sell in most cases because clients, especially (local) governments, learned to recognize the relevance and usefulness of digital technologies for political participation processes. From the interviewees' elaborations we could reconstruct a set of mechanisms that were imagined to have caused the development toward more openness regarding e-participation. Firstly, due to lockdowns and social distancing, public administrations had no other options than to rely on digital tools in their day-to-day work which was believed to have increased their openness to these technologies and to engage in e-participation processes as well as their capacities to do so. Secondly, offline participation processes had to be substituted with e-participation because of the pandemic situation. With the deployment of e-participation platforms and tools, trust in these technologies and processes increased further and formed a virtuous circle for e-participation. Occasionally, interviewees also mentioned flagship e-participation projects that helped to set this process in motion. One interviewee pointedly characterizes this process by stating that clients had "lost [their] fear" (Interview with *CitizenLab*) of digital technologies. Another interviewee spoke of growing "acceptance" (Interview with *Adhocracy+*). This development came with growing capacities on the side of the clients as they grew used to and increasingly skillful in the application of digital technologies.

Yet, there were some relativizations of this positive overall development. Some interviewees lamented that these changes either simply did not occur in their case (Interview with *Insights*), were of no lasting effect (Interview with *Decidim*), or came too slow (Interview with *Dialogzentrale*). And, as one interviewee stated, digital tools do not automatically make for better participation processes (Interview with *Democracia OS*). Some interviewees criticized how e-participation processes were conceptualized and implemented by clients. In the Argentine context, our interviewee described how meetings held online were frequently overbooked. Another interviewee (*LiquidFeedback*) pointed to the fact that clients sometimes made the wrong choices concerning the specific formats and technological tools for their engagement processes. In addition to the concern of bad implementation one interviewee (Interview with *wer denkt was*) voiced their concern that digital modes of political participation could permanently substitute in-person participation formats. This resonates with the overarching theme of the complementary character of e-participation and offline, in-person participation which we will address later on. It should also be noted that most of these statements in the previous paragraph related to the attitudes toward digital technology. Interviewees were much more cautious to make a connection between the pandemic and overall growing relevance of political participation, pointing to a pre-existing trend towards more political participation that had not been caused by the pandemic.

To conclude this section, the pandemic appears to have caused substantial change in attitudes toward digital participation processes among clients. However, some interviewees appear cautious to extend this development to political participation in general and stress that it was building on a pre-existing trend towards more citizen (e-)participation. Furthermore, we find that, in the view of the interviewees, the success and diffusion of e-participation depended to large extent on the initiative and (positive) changes on the side of the clients.

4.3 Participants

Another central research interest concerned the reach of e-participation platforms and therefore the participants themselves. In our interviews we asked questions concerning the awareness for participation and motivation of participants, the composition of those who were participating, and the group dynamics during the processes. We were unable to identify a clear trend toward either increased or decreased social awareness for (e-)Participation during the pandemic. This is somewhat puzzling, as more people seem to have participated overall. However, as two interviewees (Interviews with *Consider.it* and *wer denkt was*) pointed out, the pandemic dominated news coverage and social debates which could explain this sentiment among our interviewees.

Interviewees frequently pointed out that they were not collecting data on demographic characteristics of their participants and were, thus, cautious about giving definitive answers to questions concerning overall numbers of participants and their composition. Additionally, it should be noted that with our research design our interviewees' perceptions can neither be proven nor quantified. Yet, overall, interviewees perceived an expanding reach of e-participation. Some perceived an increased engagement of older people (in comparison with pre-pandemic e-participation) or younger people (in comparison with offline participation). The interviewees also proposed some possible mechanisms that could explain the perceived increase in e-participation. It was stressed that during the pandemic the opportunity costs for participating were lower due to the restriction of social interactions. Online formats were also deemed more accessible for people who otherwise could not be present due to working hours, care work, or long commutes. Shifts from in-person participation to e-participation during the pandemic consequently led to higher flexibility considering the timing of the engagement processes. This led one interviewee to speak of an “explosion of participation” (Interview with *Democracia OS*) in the context of Argentina.

Similar to the developments among clients, higher exposure to digital technologies during the pandemic seemingly has increased both participants' willingness and capacity to operate digital tools and, therefore, take part in e-participation processes. All interviewees except one (Interview with *Insights*) have repeatedly described this development and therefore it should be emphasized that this finding was the most consistent throughout all interviews and categories of our analyses. Only in our interview with *Dialogzentrale* did the interviewee state that some participants still faced significant difficulties handling digital tools for video calls etc. About half of the interviewees described these increased skills explicitly regarding senior participants.

Senior citizens were apparently the only group that saw a substantial increase in their share of the total number of participants—although that claim is not quantifiable through this study. One interviewee (interview with *wer denkt was*) analyzed that their platform simply continued to reach those who had always been interested in participation. Only in one interview (*CitizenLab*) the interviewee noted an increased participation of younger people. Yet, a possibly increased engagement of older people in e-participation processes was not perceived as a dramatic shift by our

interviewees since senior citizens were known to be participating disproportionately in (offline) participation processes even before the pandemic. One interviewee stated that in some cases approximately 50% of their participants were 50 years of age or above (Interview with *LiquidFeedback*). For the specific context of Barcelona, one interviewee emphasized that e-participation hinges on interest in political engagement, rather than digital skills, suggesting older individuals exhibit greater interest. Interestingly, categories of social and political inequality other than age were virtually absent from the elaborations of the interviewees. Only, the interviewee from *Consider.it* referred to other marginalized groups and efforts to increasingly include them.

Social hierarchies appear to remain intact and unchanged on e-participation platforms. Furthermore, two interviewees (interview with *wer denkt was* and interview with *Dialogzentrale*) described that chat tools favored a rougher tone towards fellow participants. Similarly, design choices like video calls may result in crowded meetings, complex moderations, or discourage participants uncomfortable with on-camera communication. These dynamics were perceived to hinder equal participation. The interviewee from *LiquidFeedback*, furthermore, described growing sectarianism and polarization to affect debates. In the interview on *Decidim*, the interviewee mentioned tensions between established citizen associations and newcomers that arose from broader citizen engagement that was enabled by the platform. This dynamic appears to be tightly bound to the context of Barcelona and the local environment of participatory politics. Remarkably, this represented a rare occasion throughout the interviews when citizens were envisioned as acting in an organized and collective fashion rather than as individual participants.

4.4 Overarching themes

The first of the three identifiable overarching themes centers on *demand*: Demand increased for almost all interviewed platform operators which was often linked with a resulting higher number of participants. Only two interviewees (*Insights* and *Dialogzentrale*) reported an initial decrease in demand, as clients were suspending their activities or canceled planned events at the onset of the pandemic. Demand was primarily driven by the group of clients as they were the primary initiators of participation processes². As mentioned above, platform operators frequently underlined their organizations' capacity to adapt to changing demands of their clients—both ad hoc and as part of an ongoing process of improvement. Yet, they also claim that there have been only few changes to the design of their platforms. Some of them explicitly state that the preferences of their clients simply did not require substantial adaptations over the course of the pandemic. We therefore hold that changes in demand were primarily of a quantitative nature. In the interviews we included questions addressing the issues of social hierarchies among participation and also regarding the composition of participants. Yet, the interviews did not produce much

² *Decidim* represents an exception as the specific context of participation in Barcelona makes it harder to disentangle the three groups of actors: Here the city government appears not only as a client but as co-designer of the platform and participants are often organized in associations.

insight concerning these issues. We will return to these issues and their marked absence in the discussion.

The second theme consists of recurring references to broader political circumstances such as *political crises and culture*, as well as *digitalization*. These were conceived of as external factors that partially determine the success and the diffusion of e-participation but also explain its importance. For instance, the interviewees from Argentina and Israel described how practices and attitudes of political decision makers hindered the implementation of e-participation. They depicted a political establishment lacking openness to new ideas and technologies and holding specific ideas about political procedures that did not encompass e-participation. In these cases, the *political culture* served as an explanation for the absence of (lasting) positive changes concerning e-participation during the pandemic:

“So, I think that the barriers for decision making are cultural, more than pandemic related. I’m not sure the pandemic brought modesty to decision makers—at least not in Israel [...]. So, I’m sorry, maybe other platforms have a different experience, but our business is to change decisions. And it requires a certain culture of openness, of listening, of modesty and I’m not sure it changed.”
(Interview with Insights)

Especially German interviewees addressed the political context through the issue of *digitalization*. These interviewees described how a perceived lack of digital infrastructure and competencies in municipal administrations had been hindering the development of e-participation in the past: Political actors were described as lacking trust in these digital technologies due to adverse experience with phenomena like hate speech. Here, we find an overlap with the developments discussed with regard to the actor groups. Shifts in attitudes among clients and participants contribute to a broader sentiment of a change in political culture regarding e-participation. Related but distinct, the theme of *political crises* served to justify the increased deployment of e-participation processes. Reminiscent of the UN policy brief mentioned at the beginning, e-participation was depicted as a way for governments to reconnect with their constituencies. The COVID-19 pandemic was linked to other (political) crises by five of the nine interviewees. A third of all interviewees made specific reference to the climate crisis, claiming that e-participation could help finding more democratic and efficient solutions to the crisis. Similarly, two interviewees that mentioned a “global crisis of trust [in government]” (interview with *Insights*) or “increasing polarization” and “sectarianism” (interview with *LiquidFeedback*) viewed e-participation, if properly implemented, as a means to counteract these trends. In this line of argument, the lessons learned from the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic could help build what one interviewee termed “democratic resilience” (Interview with *Decidim*).

This leads us to our third theme we call *best practices and principles*. The most important and frequently recurring aspects of this theme were (1) the importance of the combination of multiple channels of communication and engagement in e-participation, and particularly (2) the complementarity of e-participation and conventional, in-person practices of citizen participation. While the broader idea of the combination of multiple channels was found in all interviews except one (inter-

view with *Insights*), the latter, more specific idea was mentioned in five out of nine interviews. Two distinct justifications for the necessity of multiple channels were given. First, the combination of various offline and multiple online channels was believed to make the participation process more accessible. Second, the combination of channels and tools would increase the effectiveness of the process. Varying affordances of online tools and offline practices could be mutually beneficial. The interviewees' examples illustrate this by pointing out the importance of physical interaction during deliberation and the practicality of information sharing or voting etc. via asynchronous digital platforms. Two interviewees expanded on this issue of complementarity by arguing that e-participation should not and could not replace offline participation processes altogether. They claim it would be both impractical and normatively undesirable to replicate offline events using digital platforms for e-participation. Moreover, one interviewee (interview with *wer denkt was*) voiced their concern that clients may be tempted to promote e-participation at the expense of offline participation because it is thought to be less complicated to organize more affordable.

5 Discussion

Rottinghaus and Escher (2020) have shown that the mobilizing effect of e-participation (as compared with in-person, offline participation) is fairly limited. Therefore, the increase in demand for e-participation which we identified should not be equated to an overall expansion of the reach of participative politics during the pandemic. Furthermore, an increase in participation in absolute numbers does not necessarily entail a more inclusive and accessible participation process. E-participation faces similar challenges as conventional modes of participation which are discussed under the term of the “digital divide” (Van Dijk and Hacker 2000; Van Dijk 2006; Pantić et al. 2021). Indeed, lack of inclusivity and usability are key challenges for e-participation (Rottinghaus and Escher 2020; Fegert et al. 2021). We argue that the changes during the pandemic were not substantial enough to help overcome these traditional shortcomings of e-participation. E-participation platforms, their business models and workflows were already fit for the external stress of the pandemic, given their affinity for digital technologies. Restrictions of social interactions changed societal attitudes towards digital technologies, while (temporarily) rendering alternative offline participation formats impossible or impractical. Consequently, interviewees almost unanimously described increased demand in their services. Thus, there was little economic incentive for a profound re-design of their platforms and challenges of inclusivity and usability remained unaddressed.

Platform operators reported substantial change mainly in external factors. The role of clients came up in all interviews even though our interview structure did not include questions specifically addressing them. Platform operators (sometimes explicitly) linked the growing demand for their services to profound shifts in the social and political environment. An accelerating digitalization, the need to strengthen government-citizen-relation in the light of continuous crises, and, consequently, changing priorities and skills inside of government authorities were all viewed as contribut-

ing to an environment deemed more favorable for e-participation because of the perceived *recognition* of the value and importance of platform operators' services. This perspective also centers the importance of both the thematic and conceptual choices of the initiators of participation processes. This resonates with efforts in the academic landscape to develop strategic frameworks for the employment of e-participation by government authorities (Wirtz et al. 2018). To put it pointedly: In the elaborations of our interviewees it was the clients and the participants who caught up with the platform operators, acknowledged the potential of their services, and learned how to use their tools. The pandemic can be viewed as having normalized digital means of participation among (local) state authorities (Pantić et al. 2021). This echoes findings that lasting positive effects of e-participation require an institutionalization of ideas and values among state actors rather than a simple adoption of new technological tools (Randma-Liiv 2023). As previous research, our results highlight the important role of clients as initiators of e-participation processes and namely of (local) government authorities.

However, attributing changes to a large extent to external factors and emphasizing responsiveness to client demands also de-emphasized the capacity and responsibility of platform operators to design inclusive participatory processes and platforms. We do not suggest that platform operators deliberately rejected responsibility for the design of inclusive participation processes—after all a majority stated to be in a continuous process of developing and updating. Yet, the relatively moderate changes that did occur during the pandemic and the emphasis that was put on external factors and actors (particularly increased technological skills among participants), beg the question whether particularly participants (read: citizens) can and should be the agents of change towards more inclusive e-participation at all. From a normative-theoretical perspective of deliberative democracy, e-participation processes organized by the operators and (local) governments as their clients should be designed in a manner that is readily accessible to *all* citizens (Fraser 1990; Habermas 1992). Citizens should not need to acquire specific (technological) skills to be able to take part in political participation processes, be they online or offline.

We included two questions targeting the composition and the social hierarchies among participants. Yet, our interviewees could not report any major changes that go beyond the age range of the participants. Furthermore, other categories of social difference, like level of education, gender, social status and financial resources, that have been identified as possible determinants of online participation in the academic literature (Van Dijk 2006; Rottinghaus and Escher 2020), were virtually absent from the interviewees' elaborations. Instead, the only trend regarding the composition of participants was the perceived growing participation of senior citizens due to increased digital skills. While in principle this development could be welcomed, it is unlikely to fix the misrepresentation of social groups that has been observed regarding digital participation. Older and middle aged citizens are more likely to participate in conventional participation formats (Einstein et al. 2019). Thus, an increased participation of older citizens would be no indicator for a wider reach of participatory practices than before the pandemic. If anything, it would be indicative of a transfer of existing imbalances from offline to e-participation formats. This adds to previous findings that the mobilizing effects of e-participation are strongest

for groups that are already disproportionately represented in participatory politics (Rottinghaus and Escher 2020).

The increased skills of participants can also be viewed as an example of the latent issue of structural inequalities that rarely came to the forefront in our interviews: Material resources are needed to access the necessary hardware to participate. Skills in handling these technologies are linked to education levels which are “highly unequal and stable across generations” (Stark 2019; Rottinghaus and Escher 2020). An explanation why an observed increase in skills in the use of digital tools did not result in a more equal access to the process was provided by an interviewee who stated that what matters are not only technological skills, but a more general “interest” in participation. This resonates with findings of a meta-analysis conducted by Naranjo Zolotov et al. (2018) who found that factors such as perceived usefulness of the participation process, social influence, and trust in government were important predictors of the intention to use which in turn is a strong predictor of the actual use of e-participation. These insights correspond with findings that more affluent parts of society who are already actively involved in politics, are most likely to be mobilized by e-participation (Rottinghaus and Escher 2020). These insights are concerning, considering that equal access to participation platforms is a cornerstone of the understanding of e-participation informed by deliberative ideas (Habermas 1992). It is equally concerning that these links were rarely made explicit by the interviewees. One could even expand on this argument further, considering Nancy Fraser’s concept of “counter publics”. Rather than simply ensuring proportional representation of diverse social groups, this would entail the active amplification of marginalized voices to counter the imbalances in the dominant public sphere.

The role of opportunity costs for individual decisions to take part in participatory processes has also been discussed in the literature and in the CVM in particular (Verba et al. 2002; Zheng and Schachter 2017). The double effect of lower opportunity costs of e-participation vis-à-vis in-person events and the social distancing measures lead one interviewee to speak of an “explosion of participation”. Yet, the same interviewee lamented the temporary nature of positive effects on e-participation. This suggests that—without changes to e-participation processes themselves—the positive effect depended to a large extent on the peculiar pandemic conditions.

What has been discussed so far supports our argument that the changes attributed to clients and participants were not sufficient to address the most salient challenges for e-participation. This would require a more profound re-organization and re-design of e-participation platforms and processes. It has been shown that platform design plays a vital role for the accessibility and usability of e-participation platforms (Fegert 2022). The fact that platform operators claimed to be in a continuous process of updating their platforms and adapting them to the individual demands of their clients should thus be welcomed. However, the pandemic does not appear to have pushed innovation in this field in any particular way. Even the one case that saw significant changes in its business model and design attributed these changes (partly) to considerations and trends that predated the pandemic. The perceived increase in skills (among clients and participants) and the rising awareness (primarily among clients) lead us to argue that the pandemic did indeed have some potential to boost e-participation. Ultimately, to a large extent, the responsibility for designing inclusive

e-participation processes lies with those who are in control of the technical design processes—the platform operators. Externalizing the potential for positive change in the field by attributing it to contextual factors (political environment) and actors (clients and participants) might hinder the fulfillment of this responsibility.

As a result, we return to the recurring theme of the combination of digital and conventional formats as a foundational principle for successful participation processes. This idea can be read as expressing the limitations of e-participation (in its current form) and counters overly enthusiastic attitudes towards e-participation that have been voiced during the pandemic and that are reminiscent of the *e-xaggeration* of the 2000s. E-participation, as it was stressed by some of the interviewees, must not be seen as superior or replacing conventional modes of political participation. Instead, in the absence of social distancing measures, e-participation and conventional modes of participation must be seen as complementary to design more immersive and accessible participation processes for all. This point is particularly important considering that clients can hold misconceptions about the affordances of e-participation platforms. The choice of e-participation as the cheaper, more convenient option without any substantial added value to the quality of the participation process should therefore constantly be questioned.

This argument is supported by empirical data from the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (OECD 2023). It shows that online deliberative meeting formats peaked in 2021 and declined dramatically during the following two years. In comparison to pre-pandemic times as well as 2020 and 2021, face-to-face and hybrid meeting formats saw a substantial increase after the pandemic. In 2022 and 2023, there were roughly twice as many face-to-face formats as hybrid formats. This adds empirical backing to our argument that without substantial changes to e-participation processes, the external influence of the pandemic was unlikely to cause a durable positive impact for e-participation. The increase of face-to-face and hybrid formats also mirrors our findings that in-person interactions remain relevant and digital and offline modes of engagement are best conceptualized as complementary. It is through this complementary approach and addressing issues of technological design that e-participation can contribute to more inclusive and democratic participation processes.

6 Conclusion

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic sparked hopes for a ‘viral’ spread of e-participation, as efforts to contain the virus profoundly altered human life. In the present article, we investigated the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for e-participation platforms. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of nine expert interviews with representatives of leading e-participation platforms. We were able to identify three relevant groups of actors: platform operators themselves, clients, and participants. Remarkably, our interviewees identified changes concerning clients and participants as well as other external factors. Regarding their own platforms, most interviewees reported relatively few profound changes to their platform. In addition, three overarching themes emerged from the interviews. We found indications that

(1) the pandemic indeed caused an increased *demand* for the services of e-participation platforms. This was linked to (2) a perceived shift in the broad political environment which was perceived to be characterized by more positive attitudes toward e-participation under pandemic conditions. (3) E-participation was rarely conceptualized in opposition to conventional modes of participation. Instead, a mix of communication channels as well as digital and in-person participation practices is perceived as complementary and mutually beneficial.

With our research design and theoretical perspective come some limitations that can be turned into pathways for future research. Representative, quantitative studies could help to gain a better understanding of the composition and structural inequalities among participants in post-pandemic conditions. Similarly, studies focusing on participants and clients would certainly yield valuable new insights on the issues at hand. Our study only offers glimpse into the field at a specific point in time. With new actors and platforms gaining relevance, increasing normalization of digital technologies and now post-pandemic conditions, the situation remains dynamic, requiring ongoing research efforts to keep track of developments in the field of e-participation. Finally, design science studies that link the analysis of e-participation processes with the design of technological artifacts can help build more inclusive e-participation processes and more accessible technological tools for the future.

Nevertheless, it could be found within our study that changes to the business model or the design of the platforms have mostly been relatively marginal as their digital business model and workflows were largely well suited to pandemic conditions and, thus, experienced little economic incentive to alter either one. However, this also implies that challenges, such as a lack of representation of marginalized groups as counter publics, in participation processes remained largely unaddressed. Interestingly, we find indications for shifts among two other relevant groups of actors: Both, participants and clients, seemingly exhibit greater openness towards e-participation and increased their capacities to handle the necessary technological tools. While there have been no substantial shifts concerning the inclusivity of e-participation, increased digital skills seemingly facilitated the participation of older citizens. However, other categories of social difference (such as gender, material resources, or ethnic and discriminatory marginalization) that structure unequal access to offline participation and e-participation were largely absent from the utterances of our interviewees. This is problematic insofar as equal access to political participation is central to our understanding of Habermasian deliberative democracy and, at the same time, remains a key challenge for e-participation. We have also shown that platform design is central for building inclusive and engaging participation processes. Therefore, the relatively limited changes to platform design are likely to fall short of addressing the traditional shortcomings of e-participation as identified in previous literature. With regard to the high hopes placed in e-participation at the onset of the pandemic we come to the rather sobering conclusion that the expansion of e-participation did not in itself fix its inherent shortcomings. Instead, it appears to have enhanced existing trends. We, therefore, argue that while the changes on behalf of clients and participants are to be welcomed, addressing social inequalities through e-participation would require more profound changes to the design of platforms and e-participation processes. Additionally, we conclude that a more in-

clusive e-participation should entail the use of multiple communication channels and a mix of technologies as well as, online, and offline participation formats, aiming to target those who remain chronically underrepresented. Therefore, we advocate for an interdisciplinary approach that combines information systems and political science research, as it provides a theoretical foundation to evaluate platform design choices and mechanisms. Pandemics end and so do the life cycles of other ‘viral’ phenomena. It will take a sustained effort to design more inclusive e-participation processes addressing its political and technological challenges.

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