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# What Do Participants Take Away from Local eParticipation?

Analyzing the Success of Local eParticipation Initiatives from a Democratic Citizens' Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper asks how the intensity of individual local eParticipation affects users' perception of democratically valuable effects. Drawing on participatory and deliberative theory literature we extract four participatory effects—internal political efficacy, common good orientation, tolerance, and legitimacy. Furthermore, the paper examines which cognitive factors may moderate the relationship between intensity of participation and perception of participatory effects. Drawing on online survey data from 670 citizens engaged in public budgeting online consultations on the local level, the conducted path analysis shows that intensity of participation seems to foster the perception of common good orientation and tolerance. The other perceptions of participatory effects were not influenced by participation intensity. Findings on moderating factors indicate that the beneficial effects of online participation were not distributed unequally among participants. In conclusion, the research presents evidence for an optimistic view on local eParticipation that is able to promote democratically valuable user experiences.

**Keywords:** eParticipation, participatory theory, deliberative theory, evaluation research

## 1 Introduction

During the last 20 years, governments across the world have spent enormous efforts to push forward eGovernment services. Some of these services include opportunities for citizens' participation in various stages of democratic decision making processes which we refer to as *eParticipation* (Susha/Grönlund 2014). While citizens demand new opportunities for participation, politicians and administra-

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tors expect that public participation could increase legitimacy and quality of the final policies compared to strictly representative modes of policy making (Newton 2012). Further, participation is expected to foster citizens' democratic skills. Against this background, it has been argued that eParticipation is on top of the political agenda because it is seen as a cure to the perceived crisis of democracy (Coleman 2005; Geissel/Newton 2012). Accordingly, eParticipation could also be understood as a democratic innovation which is defined as new institutions intending to change government processes in order to *improve* democratic governance (Newton 2012, 5).

The prevailing majority of eParticipation initiatives emerge at the local community level (Aström/Grönlund 2012; Freschi/Medaglia/Nørbjerg 2009). From a historical perspective, institutions designed for public participation have traditionally been associated with local arenas of decision-making (see Dahl 1994; Fung 2003; 2004). From ancient Greece democracy until the 18th century, democracy was mainly viewed as a local concept embedded in small city-states (Dahl 1994). After the emergence of nation states and representative democracy, nowadays trends toward decentralization, the growing importance of cities and regions in the global economy and citizens' participatory demands have led to a reinvention of local governments (Melo/Baiocchi 2006, 588).

Ever since, the local level has been presented as the cradle of democracy within democratic theory. Theorists such as Tocqueville (2000[1835]), Mill (2010 [1861]; 1965) and Dahl (1967; 1992) have argued that political participation in the local community provides the ground for democratic socialization and the development of democratic skills. Reflecting on how to institutionalize 'Strong Democracy', Barber (1984, 267) emphasizes the "commitment to pervasive local participation" and stresses the fundamental need of local forums for democratic talk. Similar, communitarian theories of democracy stress the particular relevance of the local community (Bellah et al. 1985; Etzioni 1993). Beside theoretical consideration, authors such as Almond and Verba (1963) and Geissel (2009) have outlined the importance of citizens' civic attitudes and skills for thriving local democracy based on empirical research. Therefore, theoretical and empirical literature suggests what Kotler (1969) has phrased "the local foundations of political life". However, since extensive evidence suggests that local democracies are subject to several issues such as low voter turnouts, declining interest and trust in politics, weakness of the representative bodies and the dominance of bureaucracy (Schaap/Daemen 2012; Dalton 2004), unsurprisingly, the local community level has become a particularly dynamic field for participatory experiments (Geissel 2009).

Against this background, there are high expectations associated with the introduction of local eParticipation initiatives, which lead to the more general ques-

tion previously addressed by Rowe and Frewer (2004, 513): “How can we be sure that public participation results in any improvement over previous ways of doing things, or indeed, of any effective or useful consequences at all?” Addressing this question brings us to the issue of the *evaluation* of eParticipation processes. While evaluations of eParticipation can focus on various dimensions of the participation process, this paper proposes a democratic perspective from the citizens’ point of view, which is rooted in participatory and deliberative theory. We argue that this ‘democratic citizens’ perspective’ is especially valuable when it comes to determining whether eParticipation is ‘the right pill’ for curing the democratic malaise, as claimed by several authors (Coleman 2005; Newton 2012). This would only hold true, if citizens experiencing democratically beneficial values when participating online. The criteria for evaluating eParticipation from a democratic citizens’ perspective are drawn from the literature on deliberative and participatory theory, claiming that participation has democratically valuable effects on participants (Fishkin 2009; Warren 1992; Pateman 1970). We thus investigate the straightforward assumption that participation promotes democratic value experiences, while taking into consideration cognitive variables that may intervene this effect. By investigating such factors, we aim to contribute to the ongoing debate whether or not eParticipation reinforces the existing inequalities in political participation (Norris 2001; Wright 2012). In order to test our hypotheses, we study survey data from individuals who took part in local eParticipation initiatives on public budgeting in two major German cities.

Following this introduction, the next section will sketch out some considerations of the evaluation of eParticipation in order to clarify the paper’s focus, thereafter presenting the research question. The theory section reviews the literature on participatory and deliberative theory in order to extract four participatory effects. We continue by introducing the research model and our hypotheses. Section four describes the data and methodology, while the empirical findings are presented in the fifth section. Finally, we critically discuss our findings.

## 2 Evaluation of eParticipation

### 2.1 Considerations Regarding the Evaluation of eParticipation

Since eParticipation has been on the political agenda for more than two decades, the evaluation of eParticipation projects has become a popular research topic (Chadwick 2011; Lippa et al. 2008; Macintosh/Whyte 2008). However, while there is a growing body of literature, the evaluation of public eParticipation processes

still remains in its infancy. This is mainly due to the rapid development of online participation practices and its complexity from an evaluative perspective. The evaluators of such processes need to clarify at least three main questions: First, what exactly constitutes success for an eParticipation process? Second, which factors shape this success? And third, how do we reliably measure this success? The first question requires a solid definition of success; thus, we have to consider the perspective from which success is defined. Initiators may have other things in mind than citizens or economic stakeholders when defining the success of eParticipation. The second question requires careful consideration and testing of the various factors that might influence whether a process actually achieves the standards that define success. The third question requires criteria for evaluating the success of the participatory processes in a certain dimension, which is difficult not at least due to the lack of consensus in the literature (Macintosh/Coleman 2006).

In order to evaluate online participation processes systematically, Lippa and colleagues (2008) suggested a distinction between three different evaluation perspectives. In the *project perspective*, evaluators focus on the specific aims and objectives of a given project, as set by the project organizers or the management team. The *socio-technical perspective* is framed by user perspectives and it focuses on design usability, user-perceived usefulness, and acceptance. The most important perspective for our research is what Lippa and colleagues call the *democratic perspective*, which focuses on the democratic effects of eParticipation. We have already argued that the main reason for the introduction of eParticipation initiatives is the expectation that it can have a positive influence on democracy at large. However, in order to investigate whether eParticipation actually improves democracy, empirical research has to extend beyond the pragmatic project and socio-technical perspectives, which makes researching in this area a demanding task (Lippa et al. 2008, 29).

Even though there are some studies which addressed the impact of offline participation on the quality of democracy (Diamond/Morlino 2005; Coppedge/Reinicke 1990), there is limited research on concrete effects of political participation online. Early research in the field of eDemocracy has mainly focused on technique deterministic ideas of how the internet will support or harm liberal democracies (e.g. Sunstein 2001; Negroponte 1995). Soon after, empirical research has analyzed the distribution of internet usage for political purposes and how general internet usage is related to variables such as political engagement, -participation, -efficacy or -knowledge (Jung/Kim/Zúñiga 2011; Kensky/Stroud 2006; Norris 2001; Boulianne 2009). However, most of these studies operationalize using ‘the’ internet (sometimes even internet access) as independent variable, assuming to affect several dependent variables (e.g. knowledge, -efficacy, -participation, engagement) and do not distinguish different internet usage behaviors (Kensky/Stroud

2006, 177). Only few studies have shed light on the questions what participants concretely take away from political participation online (but see Knobloch/Gastil 2014; Min 2007). Therefore, little is known about the potential democratic effects accruing from online participation.

This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating eParticipation from a *democratic citizens' perspective*, meaning that success is located in a democratic dimension and judged from a citizens' perspective. By taking the citizens' perspective, we respond to the suggestions of eParticipation scholars to focus on the actual addressees of online participation services (Gauld/Goldfinch/Horsburgh 2010; Verdegem/Verleye 2009). Against this background, Chadwick (2011) highlighted that only a handful of studies have adopted a thinking-inside-the-box focus on the individual beliefs of affected stakeholders in order to comprehensively understand eParticipation and its potential impact. Therefore, the aim of this paper is *not* to present a comprehensive framework to evaluate eParticipation from several perspectives, but rather to deepen the democratic perspective and to suggest a theory-rooted approach. Accordingly, other proposed dimensions of success, such as economic efficiency, technical usability, and specific project-related goals are neglected for the purpose of this contribution.

## 2.2 Research Question

In this study, we focus on government-driven local eParticipation activities related to *public budgeting consultation*. The aim of this paper is to analyze and to evaluate eParticipation from a democratic perspective and from a citizens' point of view. Therefore, we address the following research question: *How does the intensity of individual eParticipation affect the perception of participatory effects, and which factors shape this perception?*

The answer to this question is relevant in many ways. First, it is related to the more general question of whether eParticipation is a solution for counteracting a democratic malaise, which is a common narrative in current (e)Participation research (Newton 2012; Wright 2012; Coleman 2005). This would only be possible if those who engage in such processes attach democratically relevant meanings to their participation, which we define as *perceived participatory effects*. Thus, if people subjectively believe that political participation supports some democratically relevant ends, the argument is valid and supports the promotion of participation projects by governments.

Second, the question empirically challenges the general assumption of theorists of participatory and deliberative theory that political participation has democracy-strengthening effects on the participants. Pateman (1970, 25) made

the claim that “the human results that accrue through the participatory process provide an important justification for a participatory system”. Therefore, the empirical investigation of whether participants experience democratic value in their participation, touches on a basic assumption of participatory and deliberative theory.

Third, while investigating factors that may affect the individual perception of participatory effects, we shed light on the question of whether users assess their participation activities differently and whether the subjective perception of beneficial effects of eParticipation is distributed unequally among users. Several authors have made the claim that political engagement and participation online could widen the distance between socioeconomically privileged and socioeconomically underprivileged milieus and therefore could reinforce the existing inequalities in political participation behavior (Oser/Hooghe/Marien 2013; Wright 2012; Norris 2001). This may lead to tendencies that citizens who are already politically engaged will benefit more from the additional opportunities offered by the internet. While scholars of participatory theory claim that participation itself will have an effect on the participants’ democratic experiences, we challenge this assumption by testing some variables that may influence the relation between the intensity of participation and the individual perception of participatory effects emphasized in the literature.

## 3 Theoretical Background

### 3.1 Participation within Democratic Theory

Since this study aims to analyze eParticipation from a democratic perspective, the starting point for theoretical considerations are different theories of democracy. Because we are interested in *participation*, we should concentrate on literature which prominently focused on citizens’ involvement in the democratic process. Therefore, realist or elitist theories of democracy, as presented by Schumpeter (1942) and Downs (1957), seem less useful for the purpose of this analysis, since they do not place a strong emphasis on citizen participation in their theoretical considerations. In contrast, theories of participatory or deliberative democracy put a much stronger focus on citizen participation. While most participatory and deliberative democrats agree that some representative institutions must exist, because the size and scope of the polity makes a purely participatory system of governance impossible to implement effectively, they also argue that citizens need more opportunities for participation in policies that affect their lives. Thus, local

forums for political participation play a fundamental role in these theoretical traditions (see Barber 1984; Dahl 1994; Fung 2004).

Within the broader debate about eDemocracy, Chadwick (2009) points out that the push for internet-enabled democracy, which emerged in the 1990s, was largely inspired by the participatory *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly, authors such as Carole Pateman, Benjamin Barber, and Jürgen Habermas provided the theoretical background for intellectual reflections on how the internet may foster democracy. Both, the strong focus on (local) citizens' participation as well as the strong impact on eDemocracy research provide the justification to choose deliberative and participatory theories for the evaluation of local eParticipation initiatives. Even though these theories differ significantly in their details (for this see Hilmer 2010; Mutz 2006), both theories acknowledge that citizen participation should have a central role in the policy-making process. However, the most important theoretical feature is that advocates of deliberative democracy (Fishkin 2009; Habermas 1996) and participatory democracy (Gould 1988; Barber 1984; Pateman 1970) alike assume that political participation is going to have an effect on the participants, which is valuable for democracy. Again, while there are important differences between these authors, they share the idea that the human self is constituted through social experiences. Therefore, the experience of political participation is assumed to be able to develop capacities and values which are fundamental for democracy (Warren 1993, 210). In the light of this, participatory and deliberative theories have been chosen to serve as the study's theoretical background. From an analytical point of view, these *participatory effects*, which (theoretically) accrue through the process of participation, have observable dimensions (Mutz 2008): they emerge as empirically accessible individual perceptions.

### 3.2 Effects of Political Participation on the Individual Level

Both participatory and deliberative theorists assume that increased citizen participation will produce myriad benefits which are unrealizable by the conventional liberal modes of democratic participation (Warren 1993). But what are the beneficial effects that are supposed to emerge from political participation? The exact benefits are a matter of dispute and they are not always easy to extract from the literature. This is well illustrated by Kaufman (1969), who coined the term 'participative politics'. He argued that the benefit of participatory politics is "the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling, and action" (Kaufman 1969, 84). In the same vein, Pateman (1970) highlights the *educative function* of participation. According to her, participation serves an educa-

tive function “in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspects and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures” (Pateman 1970, 42). In addition, she asserts that participation will have an *integrative function* and will benefit the *acceptance of decisions*. Against this background, she underlines the self-sustaining dimension of participatory systems, which will develop and foster its required qualities through the process of participation (Pateman, 1970, 25). This hints at a general belief in participatory theories rooted in Rousseau’s (1953) theoretical considerations that there is a continuing interrelationship between the working of participatory institutions and the psychological qualities and attitudes of individuals interacting within this system.

Warren (1992) puts it more precisely than Kaufman and Pateman, naming the concrete effects that accrue through the process of participation. According to him, individual’s participatory empowerment in everyday institutions, such as the workplace, school, or local government, will make citizens “more *public-spirited*, more *tolerant*, more *knowledgeable*, more *attentive to the interests of others*, and more *probing of their own interests*” (Warren 1992, 8, author’s emphasis). With regard to the outcomes of deliberation Mutz (2008, 523–524) summarizes a variety of outcomes proposed by theorists and empiricists:

“These include, but are not limited to public-spirited attitudes; more informed citizens; greater understanding of the sources of, or rationales behind, public disagreements; a stronger sense of political efficacy; willingness to compromise; greater interest in political participation; and, for some theorists, a binding consensus decision. The perceived legitimacy of the decision outcome is also argued to be enhanced through deliberation, although some theorists suggest that regardless of how it is perceived, the process is inherently legitimizing.”

This short account of outcomes or participatory effects illustrates the main argument put forward by theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy: political participation leads to more democratic citizens. However, Mutz’s summary also reveals the amount of different outcomes (for more see also Friess/Eilders 2015; Delli Carpini et al. 2004; Mendelberg 2002). For the purpose of this study, we limited our analysis on a few participatory effects. Based on the theoretical and empirical literature we extracted four participatory effects for the later analysis. We briefly discuss them in the following paragraphs.

### 3.2.1 Political Efficacy

‘Political efficacy’ is a well-investigated construct within political participation research (Morrell 2003; Nabatchi 2007). It can be defined as the subjective “feel-



ing that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, that is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties" (Campbell/Gurin/Miller 1954, 187) or simply as the "citizens' perceptions of powerfulness (or powerlessness) in the political realm" (Morrell 2003, 589).<sup>1</sup> Pateman (1970) defined efficacy as a certain psychological quality that is both, required for and developed through participation. According to her, self-governing necessarily requires that the individual citizen believes that he or she is competent and able to self-govern and therefore, is able to participate effectively in a certain context. At the same time, she argued that political efficacy is fostered by the participatory process. From an empirical perspective, thus, internal efficacy has to be conceptualized as a variable that predicts political participation and can be promoted by participation.

While Pateman's study remains vague on the empirical level, other studies have found that participation significantly increases political efficacy. Min (2007) found that both online and face-to-face deliberation increase political efficacy and the willingness to participate in politics. In the same vein, Knobloch and Gastil (2014) examined the subjective experience of cognitive and behavioral change following from face-to-face and online deliberation. They found that participants in both settings increase participants' internal efficacy.

### 3.2.2 Common Good Orientation

Another effect of participation that has been stressed by theorists of deliberative and participatory democracy is 'common good orientation'. This participatory effect rests on the assumption of the mutability of interests which bears the potential for the discovery or construction of common goals among participants (Mansbridge 1990). The argument for the common good orientation through participation was probably first made by Rousseau (1953), who argued that public participation serves the function of discovering the general will (*volonté générale*). Mansbridge (1995, 299) pointed out that "only when citizens genuinely want what is in the common good rather in their own particular interest can the degradation attached to civil life be combated and its moral promise fulfilled". Further,

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<sup>1</sup> Internal political efficacy, which refers to a citizen's feeling of individual competence with regard to understanding and effectively participating in politics, can be distinguished from the concept of external efficacy, which refers to citizens' perceptions of the responsiveness of political institutions and actors to public demands (Morrell 2003, 590). While external efficacy is an important concept in the context of political participation (see Balch 1974), we limit our analysis to internal political efficacy, which has been shown to be affected by political participation.

she argued that by focusing on what is good for all, citizens can develop a collective identity and therefore, experience laws not as a diktat but rather as a product emerging from their common identity. In the same vein, Habermas (1996) has pointed out that *careful deliberation* will contribute to decisions that reflect the common good rather than private interests. Similar, Barber (1984) argues that strong democratic talk has the potential to transform individual interests into common interests, which also leads to community building.

In summary, participatory and deliberative theorists assume that participation in public issues helps people to clarify and redefine their own positions and viewpoints in light of the common good. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on this seems rare. However, experimental research on small group deliberation suggests that deliberation can help participants to see connections between their individual and the group's interest (Dawes et al. 1990; Orbell et al. 1988).

### 3.2.3 Tolerance

By thinking beyond self-interest, participants develop greater concern for others' arguments and viewpoints, which enhances mutual understanding, respect, and empathy (Nabatchi 2007, 86). This contributes to increased tolerance of other positions and viewpoints. Similarly, Barber (1984, 119) argued that strong participatory democracy will "create a public language". Within the process of political talk and listening, citizens will empathize with other positions and try to understand different attitudes, which will make them more tolerant (Barber 1984, 173ff.). Reviewing the literature on participatory theory, Warren (1992) emphasizes that even if participants fail to discover common interests, they still can learn tolerance. Critically discussing Habermas' discursive model of democracy, Warren (1993) further elaborates why deliberation is able to transform participants' views and attitudes—including tolerance.

Less surprisingly, the participatory effect of tolerance has also been investigated empirically. Against the background of small group deliberation research, Mendelberg (2002) points out that minority opinion can lead majorities to consider new alternatives and perspectives and therefore empathize with the minority's viewpoint. In an experimental research on online deliberation, Cappella, Price, and Nir (2002) found that participation in online discussion is likely to produce greater awareness of the reasons behind opposing views, which can be seen as a step toward tolerance. Similar findings were presented by Luskin, Fishkin and Iyengar (2006) drawing on evidence from an online deliberative poll on U.S. presidential primaries. Against this background, we investigate how the participants' perception of tolerance is affected by the intensity of online participation.

### 3.2.4 Legitimacy

Legitimacy is likely the most important but probably the least empirically researched effect of political participation. Suchman (1995, 574) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs, and definitions”. The importance of legitimacy is rooted in the axiomatic starting point of deliberative and participatory theories, which needs to be viewed critically regarding the basic tone adopted toward liberal and elitist models of democracy. Authors such as Habermas (1996), Barber (1984), and Pateman (1970) have amply discussed why liberal democracy fails to provide sufficient legitimacy. In order to overcome this legitimation crisis, they suggest the need for citizens to have more opportunities to participate in politics. Against this background, Chambers (2003, 308) emphasized that the only “legitimated order is one that could be justified to all those living under its laws”. Accordingly, any act of power has to be publicly articulated, explained, and justified within the normative framework of the “forceless force of the better argument” (Habermas 1975, 108). Similarly, Manin (1987) argued that since political decisions are generally imposed on all members of a certain community, the right of all community members to participate in decision making is an essential condition for legitimacy. While differing in detail, authors share the basic idea that deliberation leads to more and better informed decisions, and that these decisions come to be accepted as legitimate and justified by participants (Melo/Baiocchi 2006, 590).

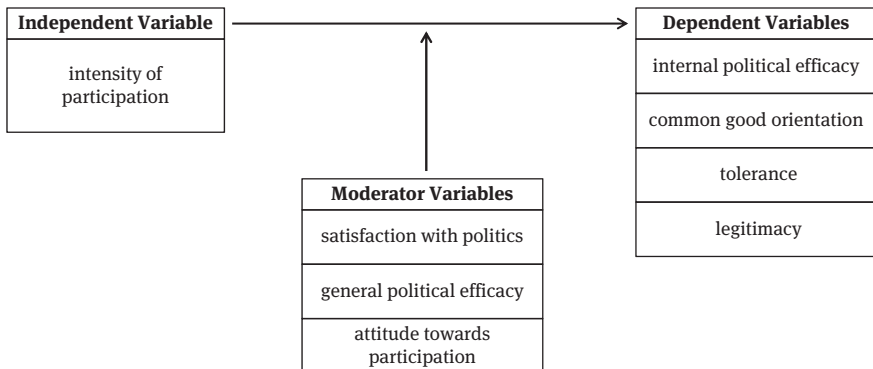
While legitimacy is a major concept within the theoretical literature, it has been only rarely investigated empirically. This may be due to its complexity, which makes it difficult to find proper operationalizations for the concept. Nevertheless, Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009) presented evidence that individual satisfaction with deliberation is associated with an increased perceived legitimacy regarding the deliberators’ policy choices. However, previous experimental research by Gangl (2003) and Morrell (1999) could not identify a positive effect of participatory settings on the individuals’ perception of legitimacy.

## 4 Model and Hypotheses

The participatory effects outlined above serve as the theoretical anchors for the empirical analysis to follow. More precisely, they serve as the indicators for evaluating eParticipation processes from a democratic citizens’ perspective. Accordingly, they serve as *dependent variable*, which is assumed to be affected by the

intensity of online participation (*independent variable*). However, we also assume that the intensity of participation is not the only factor that affects the perception of participatory effects. Drawing on previous findings from empirical participation research (Balch 1974; Campbell/Gurin/Miller 1954; Verba/Nie/Kim 1978), we presume that *satisfaction with politics*, *general political efficacy*, and *attitudes toward participation* moderate the relationship between eParticipation and the perception of participatory effects.

All these variables refer to political cognitions. When subjects have to assess (political) objects, e.g. political eParticipation platforms, their reasoning process relies on considerations that may help to form their assessments. Political cognitions may serve as accessible and applicable considerations which are activated when involved in political participation (Lee/McLeod/Shah 2008). Accordingly, three political cognitions were integrated as moderator variables in our model (*figure 1*). By investigating these moderating variables, we investigate whether the benefits of eParticipation are distributed unequally among participants.



**Fig. 1:** Model

Based on this model, we suggest the following four hypotheses: The first hypothesis tests the general claim made by deliberative and participatory theorists that participation is going to have valuable effects on participants. Therefore, we hypothesize that the more citizens are involved in local eParticipation, the stronger they experience participatory effects (*Hypothesis 1*).

Second, we presume that *general political efficacy* has a moderating effect on the relationship between eParticipation and *internal political efficacy*. Thus, the

second hypothesis contends that citizens who are intensively involved in local eParticipation projects, and have a high sense of general political efficacy, are more likely to perceive the participatory effect of internal political efficacy (*Hypothesis 2*).

Third, we assume that *satisfaction with politics* has a moderating effect on the participatory effects of perceived *legitimacy*. Therefore, we hypothesize that individuals who are involved in local eParticipation projects, and who are satisfied with politics overall, are more likely to assign a legitimizing effect to eParticipation (*Hypothesis 3*).

Our final hypothesis contends that *attitude towards participation* influences an individual's perception of *all four participatory effects*. Accordingly, we hypothesize that citizens who participate more intensively in a local eParticipation process, and hold positive attitudes toward participation, are more likely to perceive all participatory effects (*Hypothesis 4*).

## 5 Method

### 5.1 Data and Sample

The hypotheses were tested using online survey data from online public budgeting consultations on a local level. In both cases, the local authorities set up eParticipation platforms and invited citizens to discuss how to invest a certain amount of the municipal budget. Participants had the opportunity to contribute their own proposals, vote for existing proposals or discuss them with other participants. After three weeks of consultation, the municipal administration compiled a list of the best rated proposals which was passed to the city council for deliberation and decision (for a more detailed description also see Friess et al. 2013). Since the management of local resources is a crucial locus that not only impacts on quality of life and economic outputs, but serves as an important site for the development of democratic citizenship and practices, both processes were considered to be a suitable case to investigate the perception of participatory effects.

Survey data was gathered from individuals who participated in an online consultation in the two major German cities Cologne and Bonn between 2009 and 2012. Based on this population, we sampled those who were registered and received a regular e-mail newsletter from the local government, which informed them about the ongoing budgeting consultations (N = 6,149). We received a total of 886 completed surveys. After excluding those who received an e-mail newsletter but never participated in the online public budgeting consul-

tation (216 individuals), the final sample consisted of 670 subjects.<sup>2</sup> This corresponds to a response rate of 11%, which is lower than usual for online surveys (Kaplowitz/Hadlock/Levine 2004). As such, the sample has a self-selection bias, and it is possible that it were mainly the most active individuals who took part in the study. If this is true, the evidence presented would be of limited generalizability. The sample's limitation has to be taken into consideration when interpreting the data.

Participants filled out an online questionnaire which mainly asked for their participation in and assessment of the online public budgeting consultations. The questionnaire was pretested and designed to allow completion in an appropriate amount of time (approx. 10 min). There were hardly any dropouts during data collection, which indicates that the questionnaire was of a reasonable length. The applied questionnaire measures are described below.

Data for three demographical control variables were collected in order to test the suggested hypotheses under externally valid conditions. These participant characteristics also provide insights into the composition of the sample. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 83, and the mean age was particularly high ( $M = 51.76$ ;  $SD = 12.43$ ). Most of the subjects were between 46 and 60 years old (39%), while the other age groups were evenly represented, with an almost normal distribution. Furthermore, looking at the participants' sex, the data show that almost two out of three participants were male (65%). The overrepresentation of men in our sample is not surprising, as most participation studies point to the fact that men are politically more active than women. Finally, the level of education had the following distribution: Only a few participants had no educational degree (1%) or a basic secondary school degree (4%). More had an intermediate secondary school degree (11%). However, most of the participants had either some higher education (23%) or a university degree (61%). The above-average participation of highly educated subjects is a typical outcome in self-selected surveys. The sample's characteristics could not be compared with demographic data of the sample population, as the latter was not available. However, (online) participation research shows that those who participate in politics tend to be older, well-educated, and male (Oser/Hooghe/Marien 2013). Therefore, the sample could claim (or be blamed) to include the 'usual suspects' of online participation.

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<sup>2</sup> This study was led by the idea that coming in contact with online participation provokes what we understand as perceptions of participative effects. Thus, although it is for many reasons important to include those that detach from (online) participation we suggest to limit the scope of perceptions of participative effects to those experiencing previous engagement with politics online. In doing so, we focus on a central claim made by deliberative and participatory theorists which argue that *participation* is going to have an effect on participants.

## 5.2 Measures

### 5.2.1 Dependent Variables

Based on the participatory and deliberative theory framework, this study aims to find out how participation in local eParticipation projects affects the perception of participatory effects. Therefore, four outcome variables were taken into consideration. Subjects were asked how strongly they agree with several items and were provided answers ranging from 1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”. As the first dependent variable, *internal political efficacy* was measured with two items. The first item reads “The public budgeting consultations allow me to be actively involved in the political decisions of my town” ( $M = 3.08$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ). The second item reads “It does not make any difference what I suggest at the public budgeting consultation. My proposals won’t be realized by politics anyway” ( $M = 2.82$ ;  $SD = 1.08$ ). The second item was reverse coded before data analysis. Both items showed a modest consistency ( $r = .43$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ). Thus, the two items were matched to form the internal political efficacy measure because both nevertheless point to a joint theoretical concept ( $M = 2.94$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ). The second dependent variable was *common good orientation* measured with the following item: “When I considered or assessed proposals, I particularly thought about what would be best for the majority of the citizens” ( $M = 4.11$ ;  $SD = 0.92$ ). *Legitimacy*, another dependent variable, was operationalized with this item: “With the outcomes of the public budgeting consultation, the politicians can now take decisions that reflect the will of the community” ( $M = 3.28$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ). Finally, *tolerance*, the last dependent variable, was operationalized with this item: “During my participation in the public budgeting consultation, I was confronted with many different perspectives, even though they did not correspond to my own views” ( $M = 3.79$ ;  $SD = 0.86$ ).

From a *descriptive perspective*, three observations become evident. Those who were active in eParticipation promoted the belief that they could affect the political process (rather low internal political efficacy) less strongly. In contrast, becoming involved in eParticipation fostered the belief that the participant was actually doing something beneficial for the whole community (rather high common good orientation). In addition, the high level of tolerance points to the fact that when people became involved in eParticipation, they became aware of the opinions and perspectives of others and could thus contribute with thoroughly informed proposals.

### 5.2.2 Independent Variable

The degree of individual involvement in local eParticipation, referred to as the *intensity of participation*, served as the independent variable. The intensity of participation was measured by asking the following question: “Remember the last public budgeting consultation in which you took part. Which modes of participation were you involved in?” The following five modes of participation were provided as answers (percent of subjects who engaged in a particular activity in parentheses): “I submitted proposals to voting” (27%), “I directed questions to the city of [one of two anonymized cities]” (9%), “I commented on proposals” (45%), “I assessed proposals on the consultation platforms” (75%), and “I followed the process of budgeting consultation but did not actively engage” (12%). While the first item required the most time and effort, the consecutive items, in descending order, were considered to require less effort. As such, the item values were weighted after data collection (e.g., value 5 for the activity “I submitted proposals to voting” and value 1 for the activity “I followed the process of budgeting consultation but did not actively engage”). As multiple participation choices were possible, the recoded items of intensity for participation were combined to form a new weighted variable of intensity of participation, ranging from 1 “no participation” to 15 “highest intensity of participation” ( $M = 4.70$ ;  $SD = 3.41$ ). The descriptive data show a generally low intensity of participation; however, there was a considerable degree of variance, which allows us to explain differences within the various participatory perceptions.

### 5.2.3 Moderator Variables

Hypotheses 2 to 4 suggest that cognitive variables may moderate the effect of the intensity of participation on the several assessments of participation. The moderator variable, *general political efficacy*, was measured with the following question: “In the following, we show you some statements addressed by some people. Thinking of the politics in your city, how much would you agree with the following statements?” The answers were on a scale ranging from 1 “totally disagree” to 4 “totally agree”. Two items referred to general political efficacy: “Either way, people like me do not have any influence on the city politics” and “There is no way to influence the city politics beyond voting”. The two items correlated moderately ( $r = .56$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ), pointing to a shared dimension, and thus were matched ( $M = 2.59$ ;  $SD = 0.77$ ). *Attitude towards participation* was operationalized with the following five items: “In our country, too few rather than too many people are politically active”; “We should be more politically active in order to control the



actions of those governing”; “We have to be more politically active in order to influence political decisions”; “Whether we have a good government or not depends on our interest in politics”; and “We should take the opportunity to be politically active.” All items showed a strong consistency ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and were consequently matched ( $M = 3.37$ ;  $SD = 0.51$ ). The last moderator variable, *satisfaction with politics*, addresses positive cognitions on the general political process. The subjects were therefore asked: “In general, how satisfied are you with the city policy in [name of the city]?” Subjects could grade their answers along a scale from 1 “not at all satisfied” to 5 “very satisfied” ( $M = 2.35$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ).

### 5.3 Analytical Approach

The hypotheses that were to be tested suggested either a) the direct effect of the intensity of participation on different assessments of participation or b) that these effects were moderated by cognitive considerations that could be accessible and applicable when assessing participation. The hypotheses were tested in a path model that controlled for demographic variables and which was interested in the effect of the intensity of participation and its interaction with one of the aforementioned moderators. The interaction factors were calculated as multiplications between the independent variable and each moderator variable.

Path analysis is appropriate to test the underlying hypotheses because it can include different dependent variables at the same time. Meanwhile, path analysis requires complete data without missing values. In order to decide if missing data in the given sample could be imputed, a missing completely at random (MCAR) test was run to check if missing data was randomly or non-randomly distributed. The test showed that missing data was non-randomly distributed ( $\chi^2 = 196.911$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ,  $df = 151$ ) and could thus not be imputed without risking subsequent biases in the analysis. As a consequence, the data set was screened for that variable with most missing values, in our case the age variable. Cases with missing values in the age variable ( $n = 61$ ) were excluded. A subsequent MCAR test indicated that the remaining missing values were randomly distributed ( $\chi^2 = 147.460$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $df = 124$ ) and thus, could be imputed. Expectation maximization was chosen as imputation technique, which means that missing values were refilled based on regression analyses using complete values as predictors of the missing values (Graham 2009). In total, 609 cases were included in the path analysis.

We applied path analysis to test our hypotheses because of its advantage when it comes to test several relationships between independent and dependent variables at the same time. This overcomes the limitations of traditional linear regression models. Applying path analysis, however, comes with the disadvantage

in having also to rely on empirical suggestions in how to best adapt the theoretical model to the data (i.e., the model fit). The downside, however, does not mean that theoretical assumptions were discarded. Instead, it means that theoretically meaningful relationships were tested but as they do not appear to be significant, they were discarded in the empirical model only to provide more validity to the other more substantial relationships.

Starting with all variables presented in the methods section, a full model path analysis applying the maximum-likelihood method was run to explain the four participative effects. Considering the fact that almost all variables showed no normal distribution, the estimates were calculated based on a bootstrap of 2,000 simulated samples out of the underlying sample (Kline 2005). This method appears to be appropriate to test models with intervening variables (Hayes 2009), also because it is less susceptible to biases due to variations from single samples. Non-significant relationships between independent and dependent variables were iteratively excluded from the model in order to increase model fit. Following the suggestions of the modification indices analysis, correlations between independent variables and control variables (e.g. age, intensity of participation) as well as regressive relationships between dependent variables (e.g. tolerance on common good orientation) were included to further increase model fit. As post-hoc improvements of the model limits the generalizability of the data (Weston/Gore 2006), we only added relationships that were theoretically feasible and improved the model fit substantially ( $\chi^2$ -decrease greater than 5).

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Hypothesis Testing

The path model showed the following parameters of fit:  $\chi^2$  (df = 13, n = 609) = 22.11,  $p > .05$ , standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = .03, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03, Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.91, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .98. The model fit measures, with exception of TLI (recommended cutoff value  $> 0.95$ ), were all within the recommended margins for a good model fit (Hu/Bentler 1999, 27). Thus, the model was accepted.

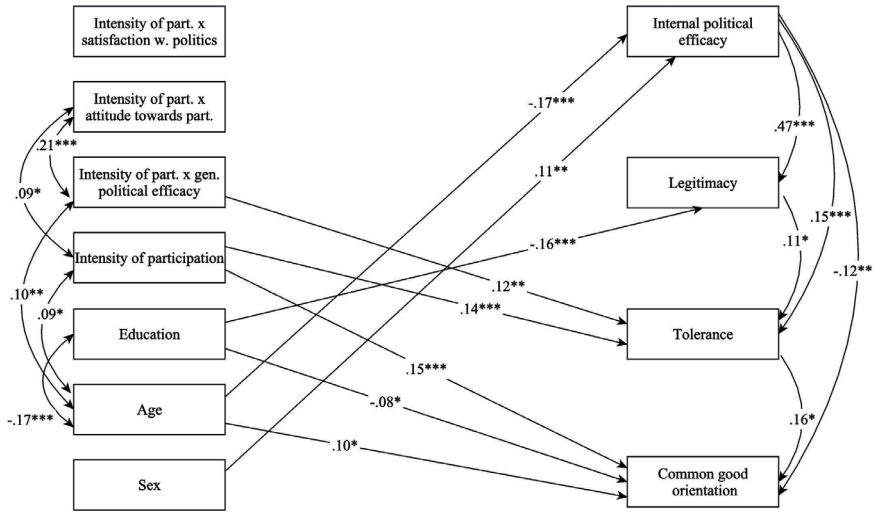


Fig. 2: Path Model; Note: Only significant effects; sex (male 1 / female 2).

The path analysis presented in *figure 2* shows the tests for direct and moderated effects controlling for age, sex, and level of education.<sup>3</sup> Hypothesis 1 postulated that intensity of local eParticipation would positively affect the perception of participative effects. Intensity of participation in fact promoted the perception of participative effects on two dimensions, tolerance and common good orientation: The more active the subjects were in local eParticipation, the more they perceived that what they were doing took into consideration the other citizens in the sense of a common good orientation ( $\beta = .15; p \leq .001$ ). Tolerance (i.e. accepting diverse and often opposing perspectives) was as well fostered by the intensity of participation ( $\beta = .14; p \leq .001$ ). However, internal political efficacy and legitimacy, the other two perceptions of participative effects, were not affected by the intensity of participation. The data therefore *partly support H1*.

The findings show that socio-demographic factors both promoted as well as hindered the perception of participative effects. High educated participants perceived less legitimacy ( $\beta = -.16; p \leq .001$ ) and common good orientation ( $\beta = -.08; p \leq .05$ ) than less educated participants. Further, internal political efficacy was

<sup>3</sup> For the stake of the analysis, the education variable was included as metrical variable given the quasi-hierarchical order of the different educational degrees measured.

rather perceived by female than by male participants ( $\beta = .11$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ). The age variable presented mixed effects: On the one hand, internal political efficacy was lower among older participants (or higher among younger ones) while on the other hand, elder participants experienced more common good orientation as participative effect than younger ones. These findings partly contrast previous studies that mainly point to the reverse view: elderly, highly educated men were the most likely to participate in politics. Altogether, when only the significant effect sizes were compared, taking part at eParticipation activities accounts for a similar influence on perceiving participative effects as socio-demographic factors.

We suggested that some factors, drawn from previous participation studies, would moderate the effects of participation activity on perceived participatory effects. We assume that when reasoning about the democratic value of one's own participation on online platforms, easy-accessible general political cognitions would be activated for such assessments. Thus, we first suggested that the intensity of participation stronger promotes perceived internal political efficacy the higher the previous level of general political efficacy is (H2). The data do not indicate such an effect and thus do *not support H2*. Nonetheless, the interaction between general political efficacy and eParticipation increased the participative perception effect of tolerance ( $\beta = .12$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ). Further, according to H3, subjects should perceive a more legitimate political process when their participatory activities were accompanied by high satisfaction with politics in general. However, the findings do *not support H3*. Finally, H4 stated that a favorable attitude toward participation together with extensive participation in the online budget consultation platforms would promote the perception of all participatory effects. The related findings show that when high degrees of eParticipation were matched with a positive attitude toward participation in general, the subjects did not perceive more or less participatory effects. Thus, our data do *not support H4*.

The path analysis accounted for low to considerable proportions of explained variances: for internal political efficacy:  $R^2 = .04$ , for legitimacy:  $R^2 = .27$ , for tolerance:  $R^2 = .09$ , and for common good orientation:  $R^2 = .09$ . Taken together, our findings support the presumption that the intensity of participation directly promotes the perception of participatory effects. This direct effect becomes clear when tolerance and common good orientation were considered as democratic value experiences but not or less clear for the other two dimensions, legitimacy and internal political efficacy. Cognitive factors that may play a role when assessing the democratic effects of eParticipation did *not*, in contrast to the assumptions posited, intervene in the relationship between eParticipation and the experience of democratic effects.

From a more explorative perspective however, the data point to some relations that may need theoretical underpinning. Although the perceived participa-

tive effects were theoretically independent concepts, some findings point to striking causal relationships between them: Internal political efficacy perception affected all other three perceptions and foremost the legitimacy perception ( $\beta = .47$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ). In contrast, internal political efficacy hindered to perceive a common good orientation ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ). Legitimacy promoted tolerance ( $\beta = .11$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ) and tolerance itself catalyzed the perception of common good orientation ( $\beta = .16$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ).

## 7 Discussion

Against the background of increasing eParticipation opportunities at the local level, this paper addressed the question of how the intensity of individual local eParticipation affects the users' perception of participatory effects drawn from normative theories of democracy. Furthermore, we asked which cognitive factors moderate the relationship between intense eParticipation and the perception of participatory effects. Therefore, four participatory effects—internal political efficacy, common good orientation, tolerance, and legitimacy—were drawn from theoretical literature in order to evaluate eParticipation from a democratic citizens' perspective. We argued that this democratic perspective from a citizens' point of view is especially relevant when it comes to the question of whether eParticipation is the right pill to cure the democratic malaise, which is a frequent narrative in the literature (Coleman 2005; Wright 2012).

We found that the intensity of eParticipation directly influences the users' perceptions regarding *common good orientation* and *tolerance*, while the perceptions of *legitimacy* and *political efficacy* did not seem to be directly influenced by the intensity of participation. While eParticipation solely affected tolerance, only socio-demographic factors accounted for effects on internal political efficacy and legitimacy. For eParticipation, these findings could indicate that it has a unique potential to induce desirable effects which benefit some democratic value experiences. However, other aspects of democratic value experiences may be immune to newer modes of participation but may rather depend on invariant personal characteristics or previous involvement in traditional modes of participation. The evidence for catalytic eParticipation effects on democratic value experiences is in line with deliberative and participatory theories that participation itself will have a positive effect on different democratic qualities of those participating. Given the beneficial effects of involving in online political action on common good orientation and tolerance, local eParticipation is perhaps an option for governments

to foster community integration in a time of a growing fear of public polarization regarding controversial issues (Prior 2013).

In addition, we found hardly any evidence that cognitive factors promoted the eParticipation effect on democratic value experiences, which somehow contradicts findings of the previous digital divide research (Norris 2001; Wright 2012). Only general political efficacy together with an intense eParticipation promoted tolerance perceptions. This finding is in line with other studies in the field of political participation, which found that efficacy is an important predictor for political participation (Balch 1974). However, in light of our data, cognitive predispositions make little difference in terms of whether people feel politically empowered due to eParticipation. As in the same time eParticipation did fuel democratic value experiences, this is good news. eParticipation may to a certain extent act as curative and thus could be an answer to the perceived crisis of democracy—and more crucial—for all individuals involved in online political activity similarly. Nevertheless, the finding that the participative perception of legitimacy was not affected by getting involved in eParticipation activities contradicts the argument raised by several scholars that participation in politics is the right pill to cure the *legitimacy* crisis (Barber 1984; Coleman 2005). However, all these findings have to be interpreted with great caution due to the sample issue of this study.

Thinking of theoretical implications of our study, the role of internal political efficacy might need reconsideration as it affected all other perceptions of participative effects. Internal political efficacy is probably more accessible than the other perceptions of participative effects and therefore may affect the other perceptions of participative effects beforehand. If this was true, the status of internal political efficacy as dimension of participative effects would have to be reassessed and the variable would have to be displaced in a more specific explanatory model where internal political efficacy would possibly function as moderator between eParticipation and perceived participative effects.

In summary, we conclude deliberately vague that the intensity of eParticipation has a partial but considerable and sometimes even unique effect on the perception of participative effects tolerance and common good orientation, and is therefore likely to foster democratic value experiences. However, legitimacy and political efficacy were not directly affected by the intensity of online participation. The examined moderating factors hardly influence whether participants perceive democratic effects through local eParticipation. However, aside from these findings, which should not be over-interpreted for several reasons addressed later, we want to highlight the theoretical approach presented in this paper. By using normative theory assumptions in relation to desirable outcomes of political participation, we attempted to improve the evaluation of democratic innovations, such as eParticipation, from a democratic perspective. Therefore, we focused on the ad-

dressees, the citizens, and investigated their democratic value experience. Since a frequently discussed aim of eParticipation services implemented by local governments is to improve democracy in general, and democratic decision making in particular, we argued that research on democratic outcomes on the individual level is a worthwhile task in the future. However, we acknowledge that the four indicators drawn from the theoretical literature are replaceable and that there may be other indicators that may appear more appropriate (Lippa et al. 2008; Macintosh/Whyte 2008).

Our research is subject to several limitations. We will address six of them and point towards further research opportunities. The first major limitation concerns the quality of the survey sample and therefore the generalizability of the findings. Due to the self-selected character of our sample and the overrepresentation of male and highly educated individuals, we have to be very careful in interpreting the findings. Since we know from previous research that male and highly educated individuals are more likely to participate online, our sample seems biased when it comes to gender distribution and education. We are aware of this sample limitation, and therefore do not overestimate the results as apt to be transferable without restrictions. Further research may overcome this major issue by different sampling methods and possibilities.

The next limitation concerns the theoretical approach used in this research. From a theoretical perspective, it must be mentioned that most participatory and deliberative theories suppose a *powerful* conception of citizen participation, which means that participation is meant to influence the final decision in a meaningful way. Since we analyzed the case of two online public budgeting consultations, which transparently indicated that citizen arguments and ideas would be *consultative* in nature and the final decision was reserved for the city council, we could face the problem of theoretical incoherency. Bearing this limitation in mind, further research may investigate differences in the perception of participatory effects by focusing on different types and levels of participation (Finkel 1987). Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' or the differentiation between strong and weak publics (Fung 2003) may provide fruitful grounds for such research.

There is also a limitation concerning the theoretically postulated *effects* of participation and the research design we chose. It could be argued that studies investigating effects that accrue from a specific action (e.g. media use or the use of eParticipation services) must use a panel or experimental design in which measurement takes place at two distinct points of time: before and after the treatment. This is true, and we therefore emphasize that we did not aim to measure effects in this sense but rather aimed to investigate whether individuals experienced participatory effects based on their participation from a subjective perspective on the *perceptual* level. However, future research could overcome this limitation by us-

ing experimental or panel designs in order to clearly investigate whether people benefit from eParticipation in relation to democratic effects.

A further limitation arises from not considering the particular design and contexts of the two consultation platforms. Since research on online participation and online deliberation suggests that design is able to shape the users' commenting behavior (Esau/Frieß/Eilders 2017; Jansen/Kies 2005) it is also likely to assume that users' democratic experience is influenced by certain design features. However, since both platforms were setup by the same service contractor and hence contained similar applications, design effects are not likely to accrue. Nevertheless, further research should focus in more detail on the effect of design and the context of different eParticipation projects.

When looking on the effect of the intensity of participation on the perceptions of participatory effects, our study included several intervening factors known in the literature. However, even though political interest is known for being positively associated with political engagement (e.g. (Sotirovic/McLeod 2001; Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995; Neuman 1986) we opted not to include interest in politics as potential moderator for two reasons. We wanted to avoid multicollinearity between the independent variables, most likely between satisfaction with politics, attitudes towards participation, general political efficacy and interest in politics. We instead decided to include education as a key factor because it provides the ground for interest in politics but at the same time, it is detached from it. That said, our argumentation does not suggest to exclude interest in politics as intervening factor in similar inquiries, but only in such where close-related and more specific variables are available as well.

Finally, our research design did not consider the process of communication that took place on the eParticipation platforms and therefore treated participation as a blackbox rather than a communication event. Deliberative theories argue that communication must meet certain criteria to unfold its productive power and therefore foster beneficial outcomes (Habermas 1996). Accordingly, the quality of the discourse is of major relevance and thus needs to be conceptualized as independent variable that influences the outcomes. Future research should follow the examples that focused on the relationship between processes of communication and their effect on deliberation outcomes in order to assess the effects of participation more comprehensively (Stromer-Galley/Muhlberger 2009).



## 8 Conclusion

The potential of local eParticipation has been the subject of intensive empirical inquiry in recent years. We contribute to this strand of research by investigating whether the intensity of eParticipation affects a user's assessment of certain democratic effects described in the literature on participatory and deliberative theory. Findings show that participants perceive at least the democratic values of tolerance and common good orientation. This is good news for democratic governments which are increasingly confronted with tendencies of social polarization. Although the empirical findings are limited due to the above-mentioned reasons, the theoretical conception of perceived participatory effects from a democratic perspective as proposed in this paper may serve to stimulate and guide further research, which should shed light on how different forms of eParticipation can improve democracy in particular at the local level.

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