

Digitalization and Electronic Media Opportunities in Increasing Public Participation in Legislative Process

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Abstract. The development of information technology and electronic media lead to the changing concept of public participation and citizen involvement in decision-making process. It is especially relevant when it comes to one of the most important processes of the state governance – legislation or law-making, where citizens and other stakeholders are given the opportunity to make the impact and shape the political agenda. Even though e-participation platforms are being developed in more countries, according to United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, public-participation and involvement rate in Lithuania remains insufficient. Therefore, it is important to determine how to exploit electronic media and process digitalization solutions for greater e-participation and involvement of citizens in the law-making process. Although the number of scientific researches on e-participation is growing, there is still a lack of literature examining digitalization solutions and the use of electronic media, specifically in the legislative process. After the analysis of e-participation models, the article provides suggestions and insights about a new theoretical e-participation platforms evaluation model, revealing most important factors for achieving greater citizen e-participation and involvement in the legislative process. The proposed model includes two important dimensions of e-participation: the efficiency of the service and public value.

Keywords: electronic media, e-participation, e-information, e-consultation, e-empowerment, legislative process, law-making, citizen engagement, public participation, e-participation platform, digitalization.

1. Introduction

The progress of information technology has led to an increasing influence of information and communication technologies on public engagement and participation in decision-making processes, making it increasingly important to seek new forms of citizen engagement and participation. According to a study on e-governance development by the United Nations in 2020, e-participation platforms are being developed in more and more countries, and multifunctional forms of participation, such as idea forums, public consultations, and e-petition platforms are emerging. However, it is not clear whether such fragmentation of e-participation platforms leads to broader and deeper public engagement in decision-making processes - in many cases, e-participation is still inadequate (United Nations, 2020). Lithuania has a relatively high potential for increasing e-participation and digitizing public engagement in decision-making processes at the state level through the use of electronic media. The development of GovTech (Government Technology), defined as an innovation ecosystem where small and medium-sized enterprises create innovative technology-based solutions to address challenges in the public sector, is constantly growing. According to the GovTech Maturity Index compiled by the World Bank in 2021, which comprehensively evaluates 48 key indicators in four areas - core e-governance systems, provision of public services, citizen engagement, and GovTech enabling environment - Lithuania is classified as a GovTech leader with a score of 0.78, along with top-ranking countries such as South Korea, Estonia, France, and Denmark (Dener et al., 2021). According to the United Nations' Electronic Government Development Index (EGDI), which comprehensively assesses the development of countries in three areas (accessibility of e-services, e-communication infrastructure, and human capital), Lithuania ranked 20th out of 193 countries in the world with a score of 0.8665 in 2020, a rise of 20 positions from the previous assessment conducted in 2018 (United Nations, 2020). Although Lithuania is classified in the group of "very high EGDI" countries, it still faces challenges in terms of citizen and stakeholder engagement in one of the most important decision-making processes of the state - legislation. Including citizens and other stakeholders in the legislative process and consultation helps to identify their opinions on emerging problems and their solutions and provides an opportunity for the public to influence the content of a draft law. Therefore the possibilities of using electronic media and digitalization of processes to increase e-participation are relevant. As noted in the United Nations study on e-government development, although many countries are increasingly using various technological solutions and electronic media to find ways to improve electronic citizen engagement, research on their impact and effectiveness is lacking (United Nations, 2020).

The research question: despite the increasing use of various technological solutions and electronic media to improve citizen engagement, the indicator of e-participation in Lithuania remains insufficient; therefore, it is important to analyse how to leverage electronic media and digitalization solutions to increase citizen e-participation and engagement in the legislative process?

The object of the research: electronic media and digitalization in the legislative (law-making) process. The aim of the research: analyse scientific literature and key theoretical aspects related to citizen digital engagement in the legislative process and e-participation, and to develop a model for studying e-participation platforms and the possibilities of using electronic media and digitized processes to increase e-participation in the legislative process. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are set in this article: 1. Conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of scientific literature on e-participation and citizen engagement in the legislative process and reveal the evolution of concepts related to e-participation. 2. Analyse the theoretical and practical models for evaluating citizen e-participation platforms and digital engagement presented in the scientific literature and provide suggestions and insights for a new theoretical model for evaluating e-participation platforms, which highlights the key factors for increasing citizen e-participation and engagement in the legislative process. 3. Propose guidelines for further research - application of the evaluation model in practice.

2. Digitalization and Electronic Media in Citizens' E-Participation

Using the "Web of Science" database and the main keywords "digital", "public", "participation", 1927 scientific publications were found. The majority of them are research articles (1464), while other types of publications include conference proceedings (380), electronic publications (63), reviews of other scientific research (61), book chapters (66), etc. The terms e-governance and e-democracy are not new, as they have been mentioned in scientific literature since 1992. Upon reviewing the statistics of scientific publications found in the "Web of Science" database, it was observed that the number of publications on the topic of citizen engagement and participation in governance through digital tools and electronic media has been steadily increasing over the past two decades, with a more pronounced increase since 2015 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of scientific publications in the "Web of Science" database by year

Year	Number of publications	Percent (out of 1927)
2022	206	10.690
2021	314	16.295
2020	284	14.738
2019	248	12.870
2018	213	11.053
2017	161	8.355
2016	109	5.656
2015	76	3.944
2014	64	3.321
2013	53	2.750
2012	51	2.647
2011	44	2.283
2010	34	1.764
2009	20	1.038

In order to identify the most frequently researched topics based on selected keywords "digital", "public", "participation", a keyword co-occurrence network map was created using the bibliometric visualization tool "VOSviewer". Circles represent the frequency of occurrence of different keywords and are divided into seven groups (clusters), with the second group (marked in green on the map) containing 94 related elements or keywords, the third group (marked in blue on the map) containing 84 related keywords, and the fourth group (marked in yellow on the map) containing 78 keywords directly related to the theme of digital citizenship and stakeholder engagement in governance (see Figure 1).

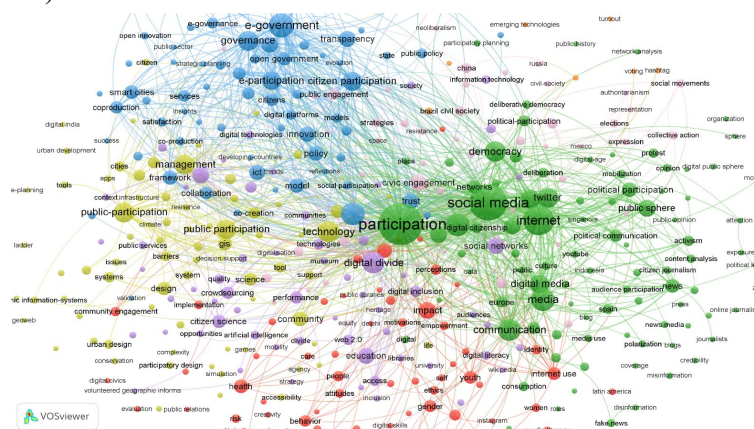


Fig. 1: Visualization map of keyword co-occurrence, 2022 (created by the author), source: VOSviewer

The most frequently recurring keywords in the second group are "participation", "social media", and "internet". In the third and fourth groups, recurring keywords include "citizen participation" (a synonym for "public participation"), "e-participation" (also known as "electronic participation" or "digital participation"), which refers to the use of information technology (IT) to enhance citizen and stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, and "e-government" or "electronic government", which is a broader concept encompassing the use of IT in the provision of all public services, including citizen and stakeholder involvement in the legislative process.

Based on bibliometric statistics, it can be concluded that the relevance of topics related to civic engagement, participation in decision-making, and the role of social media in these processes, as well as the development of e-government, is increasing.

Although the number of scientific publications indicates that these topics are being studied quite extensively (as evidenced by the density of keywords in the network map, see Figure 2), most of the research has been conducted in the areas of e-democracy as a means to strengthen civil society, challenges of civic engagement in the information age, and the influence of the internet and social media on these processes. Considering the rapid development of information technology and GovTech, and the constantly evolving forms of active e-participation and public consultation, there is ample room for further research in this field.

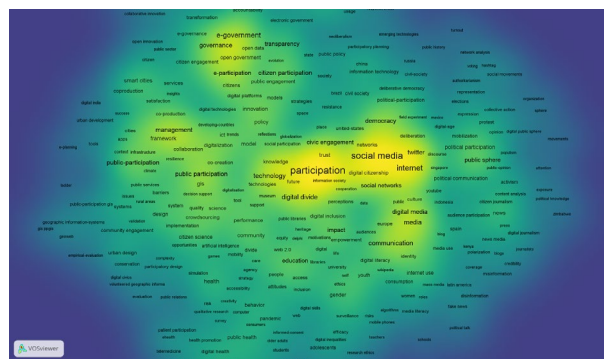


Fig. 2: Keyword intensity network map, 2022 (created by the author), source: VOSviewer

3. The Importance of Digitalization and Electronic Media for Citizen E-Participation

As mentioned earlier, although the terms of e-participation and the application of information technology to increase public engagement and participation in decision-making issues are not entirely new in the scientific literature and have been studied for several decades, it is observed that the growth of publications in this area was not as significant until 2005. This is related to the innovation of information technologies, access to the internet, the development of social networks as sources of political information and public opinion expression, which promotes more active citizen participation (Shah et al., 2005).

As early as 2004, Ann Macintosh emphasized the need to consider the application of innovative information technologies for public participation, which would allow a broader audience to contribute to democratic discussions and increase citizens' input into decision-making (Macintosh, 2004). However, Øystein Sæbø, Leif Skiftenes Flak, Maung K. Sein note that despite the possibilities opened up by information technologies for increasing citizen engagement, e-participation initiatives and platforms are not always successful (Sæbø et al., 2011), which opens up opportunities for further research seeking to identify key factors that determine the success of e-participation platforms.

E-governance and e-participation initiatives are constantly changing the public sector, which adapts to the evolving needs of the information society (Tambouris et al., 2015). Authors Panigrani and Vakeel

note that when citizens actively participate in e-governance processes as co-creators, it also contributes to the development of e-governance itself. In their study, the authors apply a customer-oriented perspective to explore whether the use of social media influences the reduction of the distance between society and government, increasing citizen engagement, improving their dialogue with government institutions, and the development of e-governance itself (Panigrahi & Vakeel, 2018). Furthermore, IT-based innovations in the public sector can change governance systems and how governments around the world can leverage digital technologies to address systemic problems such as inefficiency, accessibility, and trust in government services (Misuraca et al., 2020).

4. The development of concepts of e-participation

Certain trends can be observed in the field of scientific research on public engagement and e-participation when explaining e-participation and public engagement in decision-making processes in terms of socioeconomic and political factors, transitioning to research on the influence of social networks, internet platforms, and digitized processes on engagement, according to authors María Rosalía Vicente and Amparo Novo (Vicente & Novo, 2014). Other researchers also discuss the increasing influence of the internet and social networks on public engagement in decision-making processes (Jugert et al., 2013, Purdy, 2017). However, e-participation is still an eclectic field of research that brings together multiple disciplines and topics. This is characteristic of relatively new and rapidly growing research fields and often means that the field lacks well-developed theories and methods of its own, but instead applies them from other disciplines, i.e., there is no general consensus on suitable theories and methods (Sæbø et al., 2008).

When analyzing the field of e-participation research, it is important to emphasize that the concept of e-participation has evolved over time along with the increasing digitization and development of electronic media, so it is important to identify the main models of e-participation recognized in the scientific literature by different researchers and organizations. Back in 2001, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined e-participation as a three-level model (Coleman & Götze, 2001):

1. Information (e-information) as the one-way provision of information from government institutions to citizens. This includes both providing information upon citizens' request and proactively disseminating information by government institutions. The more intensive it is, the more transparent the country's political system becomes and the greater the engagement of citizens. The more informed the citizens and stakeholders are, the less apathetic and indifferent they become to the processes taking place in the country.

2. Consultation (e-consultation) as a two-way communication between government institutions that provide primary information and set questions and issues for consultations, and citizens who respond to the invitation to share their opinions and provide feedback. For example, public consultations are initiated to ascertain the opinion of citizens on relevant issues by representatives of government institutions. However, this dialogue between government and citizens takes place in a "top-down" manner, as it is initiated by government institutions. In addition, citizens need to be sufficiently empowered to participate meaningfully in the consultation process and provide input.

3. Active participation as a higher level of engagement, where citizens actively participate in decision-making processes and collaborate with government institutions in the development of policies, strategies, and solutions. This level of engagement allows citizens to have a greater impact on decision-making processes and be more actively involved in shaping public policies. The United Nations defines this level as "empowerment" - citizens are empowered to propose policy alternatives and engage in political dialogue, with the main goal being that they feel they are influencing important processes taking place in the country. The OECD emphasizes that information technology and electronic media can help involve citizens in:

- initiating decisions and shaping the political agenda;
 - analyzing problems (e.g., through open discussions among politicians, citizens, business representatives, non-governmental organizations, and other societal groups);
 - formulating political decisions, including drafting legislative proposals;
- implementing legislation;
- overseeing and evaluating existing legislation (ex-post evaluation), for example, by suggesting amendments and providing feedback on the functioning of legislation (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).

Based on the three levels of e-participation identified by the OECD, in 2004 Ann Macintosh proposed a slightly adjusted model of e-participation: enabling citizens through information (e-enabling), involvement through e-consultation (e-engaging) and empowering citizens through their active involvement in decision-making (e-empowerment) (Macintosh, 2004). Basically, the levels proposed by a thor corresponded to the OECD model:

- E-enabling: defined as the provision of information, such as publishing legislation on e-participation platforms and enabling citizens and other stakeholders to access the information provided;
- E-engaging: describing public consultations and debates with interested stakeholders and citizens;
- E-empowerment or active participation: defining true empowerment of citizens and stakeholders, giving them the ability to shape the political agenda, initiate the drafting and amendment of legislation, and directly influence decision-making by the government (Fedotova et al., 2012).

Ann Macintosh also emphasized that e-participation should be understood more as involvement in the dialogue between the government and society in decision-making and deliberation processes, for example, during public consultations, when the aim is to find out the public's opinion on certain legal acts being drafted or to involve interested stakeholders in the early stage of the legislative process – such as consideration of legislative draft initiatives (Macintosh, 2004).

A little later, in 2007, the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) detailed the concepts of OECD and Ann Macintosh, dividing the level of active participation into three parts: inclusion (involvement), collaboration and empowerment.

The involvement level describes the process of working directly with the public to ensure that citizens' expectations and preferences are clearly understood and constantly considered. The level of cooperation represents the partnership of state authorities with citizens in various aspects of decision-making, i.e. developing alternative solutions and identifying the preferred solution. The level of empowerment refers to the highest level of engagement when the making of certain final decisions is transferred to the discretion of citizens (Fedotova et al., 2012).

This classification of citizen participation proposed by IAPP was modified by the author Eftimios Tambouris and transferred to the electronic dimension, distinguishing e-informing, e-consulting, e-involving, e-collaborating and e-empowerment levels (Tambouris et al., 2015).

Information about all e-participation concepts analyzed in this chapter, their classification and change are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Classification of e-participation

EBPO	Macintosh	International Association for Public Participation, IAPP	Tambouris
Active participation	E-empowerment	Empowerment	E-empowerment
		Collaboration	E-collaborating
		Involvement	E-involving
E-consultation	E-engaging	Consultation	E-consulting
E-information	E-enabling	Information	E-informing

Note: the table was compiled by the author based on the analyzed literature on e-participation.

In conclusion, the analysis of these e-participation concepts is important for further analysis of

citizens' involvement in the legislative process with the help of electronic media and digitized solutions - through e-participation platforms.

5. Models for Evaluating Citizen E-Participation Platforms

One of the areas of e-participation in which information technology and electronic media are widely used is the law-making process. In interactive electronic platforms, interested stakeholders and citizens can find the necessary information related to the legislative process and the legal acts being prepared, submit their proposals and thus influence policy-making. Such platforms are often distinguished by the fact that their design and structure reflect the formal legislative process, their founders are the highest government institutions, so they often include both the government institution - to - government institution and the public stakeholders (citizens) - to - government institution dimensions at the same time. According to Tomkova, e-participation in law-making process is unique, and formal legislative e-participation platforms differ from informal electronic spaces, which are often managed by active civil society representatives or lobbyists, but do not directly influence formal policy-making (Tomkova, 2009). Thus, as e-participation initiatives related to the legislative process are constantly evolving and state governments are constantly adopting the latest information technologies for the development of e-participation platforms, the field of research in this area has also developed, focusing mainly on the implementation of technologies that facilitate e-participation. It is true that for a long time in the scientific literature the most emphasized aspect of e-participation efficiency is associated with the provision of high-quality public services and the improvement of administrative processes in state management institutions (Peristeras et al., 2009), in other words, the efficiency of e-participation platforms as public services provided by public authorities principle. Much less attention has been paid in the scientific literature to the aspect of created value for citizens, which is associated with the values of liberal democracy, i.e., accessibility of e-participation platforms for all groups of citizens and different interested parties, their inclusiveness, openness and transparency of state institutions, trust in government.

E-participation platforms, as one of the instruments of dialogue between citizens and the government, have higher expectations than just e-government service portals, to ensure the proper functioning of the information system. They include ensuring an effective dialogue and discussion space between authorities and interested parties, greater opportunities for citizen involvement in political decision-making, increasing citizens' trust in state institutions and their own accountability, increasing the legitimacy of the democratic process, and improving the quality of policies implemented by the government. It is clear that these goals are fundamentally different from the goals related to the proper provision of service that are set for typical e-government systems and portals. For example, since the legitimacy of the democratic process is directly related to the widest possible participation of citizens, it is expected that e-sharing platforms will be able to mobilize large or at least representative groups of citizens to ensure one of the aforementioned goals - increasing legitimacy and transparency. Moreover, the expectations of different interested parties may differ, authors studying e-participation emphasize that the diversity of interested parties is one of the important characteristics when talking about both e-government systems and e-participation platforms. It becomes a challenge for the latter, because they have to respond to the interests of citizens, interest groups, civil servants, and policy makers at the same time. As it was mentioned earlier, the success and failure criteria of e-participation platforms must be based on the quality factor of citizen involvement. However, it is important to remember that the satisfaction of interested parties and the adaptability of systems to each interested party are also very important factors in the development of e-participation platforms (Toots, 2019).

In their research, the authors Matuš Sloboda, Katarina Staronova and Alexandra Polakova Suchalova emphasized the value created for citizens and the concept of democratic values in the development of e-participation, examining the case of the Slovakian e-participation platform Slov-

lex. The study reveals that in order to properly assess the success of citizen e-participation platforms for involvement in the legislative process, it is necessary to analyze two dimensions, the effectiveness of the e-participation platform as a service and the value created for citizens. The created evaluation model distinguishes the main criteria of e-platforms, which are important in evaluating the involvement of citizens in the legislative process (Sloboda et al., 2022).

The effectiveness dimension includes the two previously discussed levels of e-participation: e-information and e-consultation. The evaluation criteria covering these levels and the e-platform effectiveness dimension are indicated in Tables 3 and 4, respectively, and are mainly related to the technical and visual features of the e-participation platform, the opportunities provided by electronic media and digitized processes that define a good user experience.

Table 3: The efficiency dimension of the e-platform in assessing the level of e-information

Dimensions	Levels	Criteria/features	Definitions	
Efficiency (of service)	e-Engaging functionality (enables communication)	The information is reliable, presented centrally and in a structured way	The e-platform reflects all stages of the legislative process	
		Easy search for information	Existing search engine	Convenient for the user (citizen)
			Consolidated versions of the legislation are provided	The legislation is presented in such a way that the consolidated version and amendments can be seen in one place
		Alerting about new information (filtering possibilities)	Notifications about published legislative acts and/or preliminary notification about forthcoming legislative acts (filtering possibilities)	
		All information is accurate, up to date	Perceived accuracy/reliability of information by users and real-time updates	
		Clear steps in the legislative process and information on deadlines	The platform clearly sets out the deadlines for participation in the legislative process, for example, by when can the user submit comments on draft legislation	
		User-friendly interface	Modern and attractive platform design, the ability to connect using mobile devices	

Note: compiled by the author based on a study of the Slovak e-participation platform by Matuš Sloboda, Katarina Staronova and Alexandra Polakova Suchalova

Table 4: The efficiency dimension of the e-platform in assessing the level of e-consulting

Dimensions	Levels	Criteria/features	Definitions	
Efficiency (of service)	e-Engaging functionality (enables communication)	Inputs	Insertion of comments	The platform gives users the opportunity to comment on draft legislation
			Collection of ideas and suggestions	The platform acts as an area for citizens' ideas and proposals for policymakers
		Document management system functionalities		On the platform, the user can easily work with existing documents
		Opportunities for communication and interaction with policymakers	Discussion forum	Quantity of comments and participants
			Moderator to enhance deliberation	Perceived usefulness of interactions
		Technical support		Availability of guide book or any other form of frequently asked questions for (new) users
		Responsive helpdesk		
		Tool for reporting bugs in the system		

Note: compiled by the author based on a study of the Slovak e-participation platform by Matuš Sloboda, Katarina Staronova and Alexandra Polakova Suchalova

Another important dimension of evaluating an e-participation platform is the creation of value for citizens, which includes the level of e-empowerment of citizens (Sloboda et al., 2022). The criteria that describe how the e-platform enables citizens to actually get involved in the legislative process, to influence the content of legal acts and the decisions made at any stage of the legislative process and thus create value for the citizens themselves and the state, are indicated in Table 5.

It is also important to note that when it comes to the criteria for e-empowerment of citizens, it is worth emphasizing the principles of open government. Only with the existence of open, transparent, accountable state institutions can we talk about real empowerment of citizens, ensuring effective dialogue and cooperation between the public and the government, so certain criteria of the Open Government Implementation Model (OGIM) are applied in the proposed model. The model consists of four stages of implementation: increasing data transparency, improving open participation, strengthening open collaboration, and implementing full engagement. In the study by authors Gwanhoo Lee and Young Hoon Kwak, the emphasis is on the last stage, i.e., An e-participation platform for citizens and interested parties must be accessible "from anywhere and anytime" (e.g., via mobile devices), based on mutual integration of systems and data (Lee & Kwak, 2012).

Table 5: The dimension of the e-platform as a tool that creates value for citizens in terms of the level of e-empowerment

Dimensions	Levels	Criteria/features	Definitions	
Public value	e-Empowerment (enables participation)	Influence on decision-making	Comments integrated into final proposal	
			Perceived ability to influence final outcome	
		Early-stage involvement (initiating legislative process)	Involvement (generating ideas) before legislation draft is submitted	
	Open government	Access to law-making process for all stakeholders	Registered users (unique) for categories (businesses, civil society, individual citizens); Diversity of stakeholders providing comments	
			Transparent and holistic overview of comments from all stakeholders	Perceived transparency of the process
			Transparent and holistic overview of all stakeholders involved in generating comments	Clear awareness of the transparency of stakeholders involved in the legislative process
	Accountability and trust	Responsiveness	Platform responsiveness	Providing feedback on the comments submitted and reporting on further actions
				Providing feedback on the submitted proposals for improving the platform and reporting on further actions
			Ownership	The e-platform clearly and visibly presents who the owner and provider of the platform is and provides contacts or a contact form
			Government responsiveness to legal substance (comments)	Dispute procedure with stakeholders who submitted a comment

Despite the increasing number of e-participation platforms and technological progress in their development, e-participation platforms often remain more informative in nature, limited to the first level of e-informing (Fedotova et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the factors of media use and digitization that contribute to improving active citizen e-participation (e-consultation and e-empowerment levels) and engagement in the legislative process through e-participation platforms. The model presented in this section is suitable for further research precisely for the reasons mentioned above:

- It encompasses two important dimensions of e-participation: the technological dimension related to evaluating the effectiveness of the e-participation platform as a service and creating value for citizens.
- It includes all levels of e-participation: e-informing, e-consultation, and e-empowerment.

6. Conclusions

After conducting a thorough analysis of the topic of e-participation and citizen engagement in the legislative process based on the scientific literature, it became clear that e-participation is not an entirely new area of research, but comprehensive studies on citizen engagement in the legislative process through e-participation platforms are still lacking. Although the concept of e-participation has evolved over time, the fundamental classification has remained consistent, only supplemented with the advancement of technology: e-informing, e-consulting, and e-empowering. The latter two levels are particularly relevant when discussing active citizen engagement in the legislative process and the key factors that determine the success of such e-participation platforms.

The article presents an evaluation model for e-participation platforms, which reveals two essential dimensions of e-participation through three levels of citizen engagement: the core technological and efficiency principles of e-participation platforms as public services provided by governmental institutions; the value created for citizens, associated with active citizen inclusion and their ability to influence the legislative process, the content of legislation, and the formation of political agendas.

The proposed model is applicable to future research on e-participation platforms in other countries and at the international level, as well as for the case of Lithuania, where the indicator of e-participation and engagement in the legislative process remains insufficient. In further research on the Lithuanian case, the criteria established in the model can be modified by applying expert evaluations of stakeholders participating in the legislative process and structured surveys of citizens. In other words, further analysis would focus on determining the most important factors that would increase citizen engagement in the legislative process and active public participation through electronic media and innovative digital solutions.

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