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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Digital invited spaces and local democracy: Constitutive ambivalence and paradoxical dynamics

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Abstract

Background

This paper[1] analyzes the role of local participatory digital platforms as "invited digital spaces"—that is, participatory mechanisms that are open to citizens' participation yet institutionally regulated. These tools, widely used in Europe and France, are presented as democratic innovations that promote inclusion, transparency, and civic engagement.

Methods

The study is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of digital participation mechanisms implemented by municipalities in France and Bulgaria. The French cases include Bordeaux, Bordeaux Metropole, Grenoble-Alpes Metropole, Lyon, and Rennes Metropole. The Bulgarian analysis focuses on Sofia's participatory budgeting platform, municipal reporting tools such as Dobrich's digital signal platform, and broader patterns of online consultation across Bulgarian municipalities.

Results

The findings show that local digital participatory mechanisms are hybrid governance arrangements rather than purely democratic innovations. Four paradoxical dynamics structure their operation: openness versus institutional control, individual expression versus collective deliberation, visibility versus actual influence, and stated inclusion versus persistent inequalities.

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Conclusion

Digital invited spaces should be understood through their constitutive ambivalence. They can democratize access to local participation while simultaneously reinforcing institutional control over participation. Their democratic value therefore depends less on the technology itself than on institutional design, feedback mechanisms, hybrid participation formats, and the real capacity granted to citizens to influence public decisions.

Keywords
Invited Digital Spaces – Local Democracy – Citizen Participation – Civic Tech – Institutional Framework – Constitutive Ambivalence – Participatory Platforms

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1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years or so, European and French local governments have widely integrated digital technologies into their citizen participation policies (McNulty, 2013). Participatory platforms, online consultations, digital participatory budgeting, and civic tech initiatives have become key tools in local public policy. These mechanisms are often presented as democratic innovations capable of broadening access to participation and renewing the relationship between citizens and institutions (Rouet, Côme, 2023).

Nevertheless, digital technologies do not automatically produce more democracy. Rather, they alter its forms, its actors, and the conditions of participation. It is therefore worthwhile to analyze participatory institutional mechanisms as socially and politically constructed spaces. This is the aim of this paper, which draws on the concept of "invited spaces" to analyze local digital participatory mechanisms and examine the extent to which the digital participatory spaces established by local governments are effectively transforming local democracy.

Digital invited spaces open up new possibilities for expression and participation while establishing specific forms of institutional and technical framing of participation (Friess et al., 2021). Participatory platforms can thus become instruments of local governance as much as instruments of democratization. These mechanisms are thus based on constitutive ambivalence. While they effectively expand the possibilities for expression, traceability, and public disclosure of public action, they simultaneously perpetuate asymmetries of power, authority, and visibility that limit their deliberative scope and their capacity for democratization. In other words, they open up access while strictly framing the acceptable forms of participation. This approach is consistent with the literature on invited spaces, which emphasizes both their potential for openness and their function as institutional channels for citizen voices (Cornwall, 2004b; Cornwall, Coelho, 2007). There are different definitions of e-Government (E-democracy) and e-Governance. According to Baxter, E-governance is related to formal two-way exchanges between governed and government (Baxter, 2017: 8). Accordingly, E-participation is connected with E-governance, but also with E-government, because "citizens certainly have a stake in E-government (one-way) strategies and, as such, there is clearly a place for their participatory, or at least regulatory, voice to be heard within them" (ibidem). Following other definitions, E-government encompasses administrative services, while E-participation refers to the ability of citizens to interact online with administration and politicians regarding decision-making processes and to participate in formulating policy (Vellani, 2024: 9). E-participation is operationalized as a platform for online citizen participation, online assemblies, and similar projects (Vellani, 2024: 10).

1.1 Research objective and comparative design

The objective of this comparative study is to analyze the digital tools implemented by local authorities with the aim of engaging and involving citizens in democratic and decision-making processes. The study compares two national cases: France and Bulgaria. This choice is motivated in particular by their similarities and differences. France is a long-standing democracy, whereas Bulgaria, a former Soviet bloc country, is now an electoral democracy (V-Dem Institute, 2026) that has not yet been fully consolidated, as the rule of law, democratic norms, and procedures are not yet fully developed and entrenched. France and Bulgaria take a cautious approach to the implementation and application of various tools of direct democracy and citizen participation in decision-making (Smith, 2021; Magni-Breton and Morel, 2022), giving priority to representative democracy. In France, citizen mobilizations and protests against authorities and unpopular political decisions deemed unjust are common (and numerous). Since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, Bulgarian civil society has also demonstrated its capacity to respond through several cycles of civic mobilization in public spaces to demand more democracy and to protest against corruption, the power of oligarchs, and the misappropriation of state resources.

An important distinction: while both countries, France and Bulgaria, are characterized by strong traditions of local democracy and a political and administrative history of centralized states, since the 1980s, France has implemented decentralization (Sauviat, 2017), whereas Bulgaria remains one of the most centralized countries in the EU.

The paper is based on a qualitative study of websites of big and medium size municipalities in France and in Bulgaria and of platforms provided by municipalities for E-participation. Specific cases of E-participation in both countries are selected and analyzed, representing different types of interactions between authorities and citizens (G2C), between citizens and authorities (C2G), or between citizens themselves (C2C) and different goals, functions, and different levels of citizens' empowerment.

The study is structured as follows: in the first place, the article introduces some of the key concepts and theoretical approaches related to invited spaces, citizen participation and e-participation. The second part of the study focuses on French municipalities and paradigmatic cases. Then, in third place, the study analyzes Bulgarian municipalities and

existing digital invited spaces. In conclusion, on the basis of French and Bulgarian cases explored, the article seeks to highlight certain ambivalence and paradoxical dynamics that structure the functioning of invited spaces at the local level.

2. Participatory digital spaces as invited digital spaces

The analysis of participatory digital spaces draws on several theoretical traditions stemming from political science, the sociology of public action, and studies about deliberative democracy. Early contemporary analyses of citizen participation are rooted in the work on deliberative democracy. Habermas proposes a normative conception of the public sphere based on rational discussion among free and equal citizens. From this perspective, democratic legitimacy rests on the quality of public deliberation processes rather than solely on the aggregation of individual preferences (1992).

This approach has largely inspired contemporary analyses of participatory democracy and participatory institutional mechanisms. However, several authors have highlighted the empirical limitations of this normative conception. Actual participation in institutional mechanisms is often shaped by social, political, and cognitive asymmetries. An institutional approach to participation based on the analysis of concrete participatory mechanisms shows that participation depends heavily on the institutional architecture of these mechanisms: the terms of access, the types of actors involved, and the forms of power granted to participants (Fung, 2006). The concept of "empowered participation," derived from research on participatory democracy, is particularly useful for describing participatory mechanisms in which citizens have a real capacity to influence public decisions (Fung, Wright, 2003). Other studies on the digital transformation of participation analyze digital democracy as a space for reshaping the relationships between citizens, media, and political institutions (Coleman, Blumler, 2009; Postigo, 2011).

Studies on civic tech and digital participation have also highlighted the ambivalence of these mechanisms. Thus, digital technologies can facilitate collective intelligence and improve institutions' ability to harness citizens' knowledge (Noveck, 2015). However, digital participatory mechanisms often result in socially selective and highly structured participation. The democratic quality of participatory mechanisms, therefore, depends on several institutional criteria: inclusivity, deliberation, transparency, and real influence on public decision-making (Smith, 2009).

2.1 Invited, claimed and created spaces

The analysis of digital spaces fits well within a broad field of research on democratic innovations and contemporary transformations of participation. The concept of "invited spaces" thus refers to open arenas of participation organized and framed by public institutions. These spaces are never politically neutral. They can become venues for cooperation, compromise, or even dissent, but they are also often designed to gather "voices" likely to reinforce the legitimacy of public policies (Cornwall, 2004b). Participation can only be understood by situating the spaces where it takes place: "invited," "conquered/claimed," or "created" by citizens.

The boundary between invited spaces and more autonomous spaces, "popular spaces," is not fixed, for an institutional space can become a site of protest, while a space born of mobilizations can be gradually institutionalized. It is precisely this plasticity that makes these mechanisms analytically fruitful.

Participation can be considered in terms of power relations, the configuration of spaces, and concrete possibilities for influence, without reducing participation to the formal opening of a channel for expression. Indeed, what matters is the participants' actual ability to influence decisions (Gaventa, 2006). However, these "invited" spaces coexist with spaces "invented" by the actors themselves, in which social groups define their own causes, their own timelines, and their own repertoires of action (Miraftab, 2004). To analyze digital local democracy, we must therefore consider these two dimensions together: the institutional offer of participation and the appropriations, workarounds, or resistance that respond to it.

2.2 Controlled openness and local digital governmentality

From the earliest studies on local digital technology, these technologies have been described as ambivalent: they can support democratic practices, but they can also reinforce the dominance of the institutional center within the local political communication system (Wojcik et al. 2023). In many cases, digital platforms are less oriented toward deliberation than toward a contributory approach to gathering opinions. They therefore offer little genuine interaction between citizens or between citizens and sponsors, so that the promised interactivity often amounts to a staged performance. These platforms thus appear to be designed primarily to mobilize new audiences—a goal that remains very difficult to achieve due to the persistent weight of social inequalities.

Thus, these digital spaces can be viewed as mechanisms for controlled openness that expand access opportunities, but within formats, schedules, and structures defined by the institution. They involve asymmetrical publicization, for while

everyone can in theory express themselves, inequalities limit the realization of this objective, as not everyone possesses the same technical, cognitive, and social resources, which explains certain instances of self-censorship. Nevertheless, these spaces are indeed part of a local digital governmentality, as they enable the community to collect data, identify target audiences, prioritize contributions, and streamline public action. They do not, however, replace other forms of participation; rather, they overlap with them and reshape hybrid participatory ecosystems, where meetings, workshops, collective mobilizations, and, of course, platforms coexist and may interact.

3. Digital participation initiatives in france

Statistics provided by INSEE show that while digital participation is growing in society, digital capabilities remain very unevenly distributed. Thus, in 2023, 15.7% of people aged 15 and older are digitally excluded, and 30.3% have low digital skills. The age effect is significant, as digital exclusion affects 23.4% of those aged 60–74 and 62.2% of those aged 75 or older. Furthermore, 34.3% of people aged 15 or older lack basic digital skills in software use, and 33.3% lack basic skills regarding online privacy protection. But the explanation based on skills is not entirely satisfactory; one must also take into account usage patterns, habits, and attitudes (Rouet, 2022), without falling into generational stereotypes: more than 21% of 15- to 29-year-olds have low digital skills, compared to 26% of those aged 75 and older (Rouet, 2019). However, digital openness does not therefore guarantee universal social accessibility.

In 2019, the National Commission on Informatics and Liberty (CNIL) noted, based on a Médiamétrie survey, that 51% of internet users surveyed in France reported having already participated in a consultation via an online participation platform. However, 21% of respondents are wary of these platforms for reasons related to the use of their personal data. The neutrality of civic technologies is obviously an illusion. Furthermore, the organizations that develop *civic tech* sell both participatory expertise and digital tools to local governments, with leading players generating revenue that can exceed one million euros. Digital local democracy is therefore also a market, dominated by private service providers offering platform models, with data collection at stake.

3.1 Scale and institutionalization of participatory platforms

Compiling data from multiple levels of quantification allows us to estimate the number of digital participatory systems in France that could constitute "invited digital spaces." First, several studies on *civic tech* and local participation indicate that France has nearly a thousand participatory platforms deployed by local governments and public institutions (Chaput, 2022), including municipal participation platforms, digital participatory budgets, public consultation platforms, and national or regional consultation mechanisms. In the vast majority of cases, these platforms are deployed using solutions provided by civic tech companies (Cap Collectif, Decidim, Fluicity, Civocracy, Purpoz, etc.).

For participatory budgeting mechanisms, estimates are more precise, likely because they directly involve the use of public funds, even though this represents a small portion of public authorities' investments: 0.3%, or less than 200 million euros. A study conducted with the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and the Banque des Territoires indicates that approximately 465 French local authorities will organize a participatory budget in 2024: municipalities, metropolitan areas, inter-municipal bodies, departments, or regions (Bézard, 2024). More than 6 million French people live in a municipality with a participatory budget, or about one in ten French people (Broussolle, 2019). Participatory budgeting is certainly the most institutionalized form of local citizen participation, but not necessarily the most relevant from the perspective of the issue addressed in this paper, as it is very often a mechanism that is not, or only minimally, integrated into an overall strategy for participatory democracy (Magne et al., 2023).

The ecosystem of digital tools used by local authorities also enables the organization of public consultations, calls for ideas, and citizen votes (Institut de la Concertation et de la Participation citoyenne, 2022; ONG Francophonie, n.d.). Overall, we can therefore conclude that approximately 1,000 participatory platforms are active in France, slightly less than half of which operate a participatory budget, and which involve more than 6 million residents. Their reach is thus significant but socially and geographically uneven, with a strong concentration in major cities and regions with the most developed participatory frameworks.

3.2 Selected french cases

The presentation and analysis of five participatory democracy mechanisms in cities or metropolitan areas allow us to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and concrete implementations, thereby highlighting the ambiguous nature of implementation and the paradoxical dynamics at play. The selected cases are summarized in Table 1.

3.3 Bordeaux: Permanent democracy and follow-up

The two institutional levels—the City of Bordeaux and Bordeaux Métropole—each have their own participatory framework, their own platforms, and their own tools.

Table 1. Cases presented and analyzed.

City metropolitan	Area population	Year the program was launched	Software or tool	Types of participation offered
Bordeaux	265 328 (2022)	2019	Cap Collectif	Public consultations, calls for ideas, urban planning consultations
Bordeaux Métropole	854 334 (2023)	2020	Cap Collectif	Metropolitan planning consultations, urban projects, citizen input
Grenoble-Alpes Métropole	450 608 (2023)	2018	Cap Collectif	Consultations, citizen proposals, public policy consultations
Lyon	520 774 (2022)	2019	Cap Collectif	Regulatory consultations, public hearings, citizen input
Rennes Métropole	473 973 (2022)	2015	Proprietary software & collaborative tools	Participatory budgeting, consultations, citizen projects

Sources: Authors, based on institutional websites.

In Bordeaux, participatory democracy is organized around the concept of "permanent democracy"; citizen participation is not presented as a series of isolated tools, but is integrated into a coherent public policy. The "democratic contract," adopted in 2022, "establishes the framework, ambitions, and values of Bordeaux's permanent democracy," implemented along three pillars: "strengthening citizen dialogue, encouraging citizen proposals, and providing tools for everyone." The City's official website brings together the main initiatives: neighborhood councils, urban planning projects, the Grand Dialogue Citoyen, participatory budgeting, the Permanent Democracy Tour, the citizen inquiry mechanism, the Initiatives Workshop, the Permanent Democracy Observatory, and advisory councils.

This framework is based on the dedicated platform, participation.bordeaux.fr, developed with Decidim, organized into three sections: participate, act, and raise concerns. The platform is designed as a central infrastructure for participation, not merely as a one-off technical tool. Among the initiatives, the "Grand Dialogue Citoyen" is presented as a participatory and collaborative process spanning several months, aimed at exploring an issue critical to the city's future and generating solutions, directions, and strategies. Its first edition, from 2023 to 2024, focused on the climate emergency. A panel of 100 Bordeaux residents selected by lottery was formed as part of a citizens' convention. The city thus goes beyond open consultation and combines open participation, public events, and a panel of randomly selected citizens.

The citizen initiative aims to ensure transparency in the handling of requests, guarantee equitable treatment among initiative proposers, and enable citizens to place their proposals and concerns on the municipal political agenda. The "permanent democracy" unit supports initiative proposers and organizes mediation sessions. We are thus dealing here with a tool that does not merely collect opinions but explicitly aims to place issues on the municipal agenda.

Through the "Initiatives Workshop," the municipality seeks to support and facilitate citizen-led actions of general interest via a network of 18 institutions, community centers, and neighborhood town halls. Thus, Bordeaux does not rely exclusively on the digital platform but integrates digital tools with a network of local support.

The Observatory of Permanent Democracy, described as an "independent citizen body," is tasked with providing critical feedback on the implementation and objectives of the democratic contract, with a mandate to monitor and track the commitments made by the city. This element is rare in France; the municipality is institutionalizing not only participation but also a right to follow up on that participation.

For Bordeaux Métropole, participation is more focused on consultation and development projects, with its own platform, participation.bordeaux-metropole.fr, also developed with Decidim, which publicly displays activity indicators, providing a sense of the scale of online activity (for example, over 5,300 comments at the time of the consultation). The metropolitan approach is more clearly focused on consultation regarding development, mobility, urban planning, and environmental projects—that is, more "traditional" areas involving planning, infrastructure, and urban operations.

Bordeaux is a particularly interesting case of a "guest space": residents are invited to participate, but within a framework organized by the City or the Metropolitan Area, through prestructured procedures, themes, and mechanisms. The strength of the Bordeaux case lies in the density and coherence of its structure; it is not merely a consultation platform, but a combination of multiple components: information, consultation, guided deliberation, citizen proposals, support for initiatives, a randomly selected panel, public questioning, critical oversight by an independent body, neighborhood councils, and advisory bodies. In this sense, the city has built a participatory ecosystem that is both digital and in-person.

This institutional diversity also constitutes its main limitation. These mechanisms open the door to participation, but do so within a strict framework. The participatory budget remains constrained by municipal eligibility criteria. Citizen interpellation is supported and mediated by the Permanent Democracy Unit. Neighborhood councils operate with an agenda partly defined by the city. The "Great Citizen Dialogue" is initiated by the municipality on a theme chosen by it. Even the observatory, though independent in its production of opinions, works on a referral entrusted by the mayor. Bordeaux thus offers a good example of genuine openness to participation, yet one that is institutionally governed.

Participation is thus both extensive and guided: extensive because the city is expanding the entry points, themes, target audiences, and formats; guided because this plurality of mechanisms is integrated into an explicit municipal doctrine, that of "permanent democracy," itself linked to a "democratic contract." Participation is therefore not a form of civic self-organization, but is conceived, administered, monitored, and evaluated as a public policy. The Bordeaux case thus demonstrates how a local government can seek to institutionalize participation in a sustainable manner, making it visible, traceable, and more inclusive, while maintaining the central role of the institution in defining legitimate issues, admissible procedures, and the follow-up given to citizen contributions.

3.4 Grenoble: Structured participation and institutional framing

In Grenoble, participatory democracy mechanisms form a relatively structured system, both at the city level and at the Grenoble-Alpes Métropole level. This is not merely a collection of tools, but a participatory framework that combines participatory budgeting, a digital platform, public consultations, workshops, citizen petitions, advisory bodies, and co-production mechanisms.

This case, like the previous one, illustrates how local governments seek to embed participation sustainably within their governance models, while retaining control over its formats, themes, and the follow-up given to contributions.

In the case of the city of Grenoble, the municipal website highlights a variety of mechanisms, notably thematic project workshops presented as spaces where recommendations for elected officials are discussed and developed. The website states that, as of 2024, the citizen participation mechanism established in 2021 has already enabled more than 10,000 residents to have their voices heard. Participation is not presented as a one-off event, but as an ongoing public policy, combining digital participation, citizen workshops, and support for local engagement.

Grenoble-Alpes Métropole also reports having established a participatory platform to allow citizens to share their opinions on ongoing projects. This platform provides access to information on participatory bodies, ongoing consultations, metropolitan projects, and the Governance and Citizenship Pact. The Metropolis sets forth five commitments for a participatory region: embedding citizen dialogue within a deliberative framework, involving all segments of the public, providing reasoned feedback on the contributions of participation, ensuring the complementarity of approaches, and fostering cooperation between the Metropolis and municipalities. The citizen petition is a means of drawing residents' attention to an issue, giving visibility to proposals, and supporting a project. The petition itself is governed by rules of admissibility and processing, which reflect Grenoble's participatory approach; this additional channel for expression operates under procedural conditions defined by the institution.

A sociological survey was conducted among residents of Grenoble-Alpes Métropole (Cambone, 2023), showing that the platform is primarily used as a space for expression and consultation rather than as a venue for sustained discussion among citizens. Furthermore, usage remains socially situated, as participation is not distributed uniformly across the population and the platforms do not automatically erase inequalities in engagement.

Analysis of these mechanisms, however, highlights their nature as an "invited space," as residents can propose, contribute, sign, vote, or debate, but always within formats designed by the city or the metropolitan area, as illustrated by the operation of the participatory municipal budget: participation is open, visible, and valued, but it proceeds through a precise sequence of institutional steps, from the call for ideas to the feasibility assessment, and then to the final vote.

The first paradox in Grenoble thus stems from the combination of genuine openness and strong institutional framing. Openness is genuine because citizens have a variety of entry points into local public action. The framework is strict because the institution defines the scope of legitimate action—project ideas, opinions on a consultation, signing a petition, participating in a workshop, or filing a complaint with an authority. The local government does not merely welcome participation; it shapes it and dictates its terms. This is why Grenoble is not simply an example of an expanded local democracy; it is also a case of participatory governance.

The second paradox concerns the nature of participation. Grenoble's mechanisms increase opportunities for people to speak out, but they do not necessarily lead to robust collective deliberation. The participatory budget primarily serves to generate ideas, sort them, and then put them to a vote. The metropolitan platform allows people to contribute to consultations or support petitions, but observed usage remains primarily that of a space for expression rather than an intensive debate among participants. Thus, the space is participatory, but it is not automatically deliberative. It fosters the expression and articulation of preferences more than it facilitates a sustained exchange of arguments among citizens.

The third paradox concerns visibility. Grenoble makes participation highly visible, which has a strong political impact by demonstrating the local government's democratic openness and the existence of active citizen participation. However, this publicity does not automatically equate to a shift in the center of decision-making. Both the city and the metropolitan area remain the actors that organize procedures, validate admissibility, review proposals, and decide on next steps. The more visible participation is, the more it can also become an instrument for legitimizing local public action.

The fourth paradox concerns inclusivity. At the metropolitan level, Grenoble demonstrates a commitment to involving everyone in participatory processes. This objective is politically significant because it acknowledges that participation is not a given and must be cultivated. However, the use of an institutional platform remains tied to specific engagement profiles, rather than to a spontaneously balanced representation of the entire population. Institutional voluntarism in favor of inclusion does not, on its own, eliminate social and political inequalities in participation.

Ultimately, the case of Grenoble can be analyzed as an advanced example of the institutionalization of local participatory democracy. The richness of its mechanisms is real, as is their long-term commitment. Nevertheless, Grenoble precisely illustrates the paradoxical dynamics of digital spaces: the more participation is organized, equipped, and made visible, the more open it can be, but also the more likely it is to be framed, administered, and reintegrated into institutional centrality.

3.5 Lyon: Digital participation and neighborhood democracy

Third French example: citizen participation in Lyon is based on a relatively structured set of institutional mechanisms that combine digital participation, grassroots democracy, and public consultation. This participatory framework is part of a municipal strategy aimed at involving residents in local public policy, while maintaining a strong institutional structure for these processes. Lyon is thus an interesting case for analyzing how local governments seek to institutionalize citizen participation in their modes of governance.

The city has developed a digital platform dedicated to citizen participation that centralizes all participatory initiatives and allows residents to propose ideas, participate in public consultations, vote in the participatory budget process, and track the progress of municipal projects. The municipality presents this tool as a space enabling residents to participate and make decisions together on projects concerning the city.

However, citizen participation in Lyon does not rely solely on digital tools. It also draws on a network of local democratic bodies that structure the dialogue between residents and municipal institutions. Thus, in addition to the participatory budget, the city has a network of neighborhood councils that serve as forums for dialogue between residents, associations, and local elected officials (36 neighborhood councils spread across the various districts). These bodies allow residents to discuss urban projects, make proposals, and engage directly with elected municipal officials through regular meetings and thematic working groups.

Citizen participation in Lyon also relies on a series of public consultations organized around specific urban projects or public policies. These participatory initiatives particularly concern urban development projects, transformations of public spaces, and environmental policies. Residents can participate in these consultations by submitting contributions to the participatory platform or by attending public meetings.

Lyon has thus established an institutionalized participatory framework, featuring a relatively comprehensive structure that combines a digital platform, participatory budgeting, neighborhood councils, and public consultations. This framework expands opportunities for citizen expression and fosters resident involvement in local public policies.

However, these mechanisms remain heavily regulated by public institutions. The rules for participation, the topics of consultations, and the decision-making procedures are defined by municipal authorities.

An analysis of the Lyon case highlights several paradoxical dynamic characteristics of contemporary participatory mechanisms. On the one hand, participatory platforms and consultation mechanisms broaden access to citizen participation and make residents' contributions more visible; on the other hand, these mechanisms remain embedded within an institutional framework that limits the scope of participation in public decision-making. Citizen participation thus helps enrich local public policies without challenging the central role of institutions in the production of political decisions. These dynamics show that local participatory democracy rests on a balance between participatory openness and the institutional framing of participation.

Overall, citizen participation remains strongly structured by public institutions. Lyon's participatory mechanisms thus illustrate the ambivalence characteristic of contemporary participatory democracy policies, which combine democratic openness with the maintenance of institutional control over decision-making processes.

3.6 Rennes: The "Fabrique citoyenne" as participatory infrastructure

The final example analyzed: Rennes and Rennes Métropole launched a dedicated platform in 2015, the "Fabrique citoyenne," as a stable entry point for participatory initiatives. This case illustrates a process of gradually normalizing the use of digital technology. Indeed, the platform is not a one-off experiment but is established as a standard infrastructure for engaging with residents. The Rennes experience is not limited to a simple digital platform; it is part of a set of institutional, organizational, and technical tools that shape citizen engagement.

The "Fabrique citoyenne" is a participatory ecosystem that combines a digital platform, public consultations, and various participatory tools. The stated goal is to enable residents to stay informed, propose projects, or participate in the development of certain local public decisions. Participation in Rennes also relies on neighborhood councils, randomly selected citizen bodies, citizen initiative mechanisms, and participatory conventions designed to produce opinions on certain public policies. Digital technology thus serves as an entry point and a tool for linking different forms of participation.

An analysis of Rennes' system highlights a fundamental ambivalence characteristic of digital spaces for participation. These systems explicitly aim to broaden access to public debate and renew forms of citizen participation. The digital platform theoretically allows any resident to submit a proposal, comment on a project, or participate in a public consultation. Participation is no longer limited to traditional public meetings, which are often restrictive in terms of time and physical attendance. This openness is reinforced by the diversity of tools employed. Random selection mechanisms, for example, seek to bring citizens into participatory processes who are not necessarily involved in community or political life. Similarly, participatory budgeting gives residents the opportunity to directly influence the allocation of a portion of local public resources.

However, this openness coexists with a significant institutional framework. The topics of consultations, the rules for participation, and the procedures for selecting projects are defined by the local government. Municipal departments play a central role in the technical validation of proposals, their reformulation, and their implementation. Participation is thus embedded within a highly structured administrative and political framework. This situation creates a fundamental ambivalence. Digital participatory mechanisms expand opportunities for citizen expression while simultaneously strengthening the institution's capacity to organize and regulate this participation. Digital technology acts simultaneously as a vehicle for democratic openness and as an instrument for governing participation.

Thus, the Rennes experience illustrates a broader transformation of modes of urban governance. Participatory digital spaces do not replace traditional forms of political decision-making, but are integrated into them. They contribute to reconfiguring the relationships between citizens, the administration, and elected officials by simultaneously generating opportunities for expression, framing mechanisms, and new forms of participation management.

An analysis of the digital participatory mechanisms in the French cities under consideration shows that they are predominantly at the consultation level on Arnstein's scale (1969). While they allow citizens to express opinions or make proposals, decision-making power remains primarily in the hands of institutions.

4. Digital participation mechanisms in bulgaria

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index of the European Commission, in 2022 Bulgaria ranked 26th of 27 EU member states (European Commission, 2023). Only 34% of internet users in the country interact with the

government online. Bulgaria ranks below the EU average in digital public services for citizens and in digital skills. At the same time, 77% of Bulgarian citizens believe that digital technologies will be important for engaging in democratic life, including voting, virtual citizens' assemblies, town hall meetings, finding reliable information, etc. (European Commission, 2025).

An examination of digital participation mechanisms for citizens in deliberation, discussion, and decision-making processes at the municipal level in Bulgaria reveals a rather limited landscape, with such tools being implemented sporadically and infrequently; moreover, their potential to engage and include citizens has not yet been harnessed by local authorities. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, little was done by local authorities to offer digital tools for public consultation and citizen participation (Bozhinova, Gueorguieva, 2023).

However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and European programs, the majority of Bulgaria's 265 municipalities have created links on their websites, allowing citizens to contact local authorities directly to obtain information or submit reports regarding irregularities or complaints. Residents of most municipalities in large and medium-sized cities can directly follow city council meetings online.

4.1 Sofia decides: Participatory budgeting as digital innovation

Only the municipality of Sofia, the country's capital, has established a digital platform dedicated to citizen participation, featuring a limited version of participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is, in fact, a late arrival in Bulgaria, lagging behind other former communist countries that have already introduced this type of innovation at the local level. The municipality of Sofia introduced this mechanism for direct citizen participation at the end of 2024, under the leadership of Vassil Terziev (an elected official from the liberal anti-corruption coalition "We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria").

The digital platform is called "Sofia Decides" Reshava Sofia[2]. The mechanism is presented by the municipality as an innovative tool aimed at empowering citizens in the decision-making process. The platform offers two main activities: Civic deliberations and Civic budget. Citizens' budgeting is aimed at fostering citizens' active participation in decision-making processes and the implementation of projects aimed to ameliorate the city's environment and the quality of living of capital city inhabitants[3]. There are two separate levels of funding provided: 1. the city-wide level and 2. District levels. Selected city-wide civic budget projects are awarded grant amounts from 100,000–250,000 EUR. District budget proposals that have a local impact are awarded grants from 5, 000 to 100, 000 EUR.

Eligible for proposing projects are all citizens over 16 years old, with a current address in Sofia, as well as civic organizations, CSOs or informal groups of citizens. Citizens can submit projects in ten limited thematic areas: City's environment; Solidarity; Environmental issues; Culture and Heritage; Sports; Education and Youth Activities; Mobility; Security; Housing Policies; Shared Economy.

4.2 The online budget process

The process of the Civic budget is unfolded entirely online and is divided in four different stages:

1. Project submission: collecting ideas and proposals of citizens.

2. Approval of proposals: projects submitted are evaluated and approved by committees appointed by the mayors. A special committee for the city-wide citizens budget is appointed by the mayor of Capital city municipality and is composed by five to seven experts from different administrative units. For districts a special committee for the district citizens' budget is appointed by the district mayor and composed by three to five experts. To be published on the digital platform Reshava sofia, all citizens' submitted proposals have to be validated by these committees' applying criteria based on technical and budget requirements).

3. Voting. All proposals validated are published on the digital platform for voting. Every citizen (current address registration in Sofia) is entitled to pass in review and to vote (only once) to support no more than one project at city level and for several projects at district level. The vote is definitive and cannot be modified.

[2]Cf. https://reshava.sofia.bg/ accessed on September 28, 2025, as well as the following citations
[3]Cf. https://reshava.sofia.bg/processes/grazhdanski-budget2024?locale=bg

4. Implementation. After the completion of voting, Sofia Municipality and at district level administrations have to implement the projects selected within fifteen months.

For the first edition of Citizens' Budget, the funding provided was 2, 708 504 EUR. Sofia Municipality reports that for the first edition of Civic budget over 370 citizens projects were submitted, and 77 projects were selected for implementation, including four playgrounds; an open stage for talented children; new street lighting on a street between two schools; as well as the construction of a new public parking lot and the renovation of a second one. The digital platform Reshava Sofia – Civic Budget has been implemented for the second time in 2025 and a new third edition is announced for the end of 2026.

Sofia municipality has successfully implemented this digital innovation to increase civic participation and to include citizens. However, in the entire process, there is not a stage of citizen deliberation at the horizontal level. The procedure remains vertical, top-down, fully controlled by the municipal: administration. The selection is made only by appointed administrators and without disclosure of how these appointed committees of evaluators take decisions. What is more, the authorship of citizens' projects is not disclosed on the platform and remains anonymous for citizens.

4.3 Municipal reporting platforms and public consultations

Under the E-government, the vast majority of municipalities publish on their website's draft documents or draft decisions for public consultations. Citizens, CSOs, and different stakeholders can submit written opinions, proposals and objections. For instance, on the municipality website of Kyustendil, citizens can get informed and take part at consultations related to different local initiatives: "Scheme for providing financial assistance through the Municipal Program for Local Initiatives 'Culture' 2026", with a priority area: "Active Communities: Building Capacity for Change in the Municipality of Kyustendil"; "Scheme for providing financial assistance through the Municipal Fund in Support of Local Initiatives – 2026", with priority area: "Environmental protection, public works and repairs in the municipality of Kyustendil".[4]

Another digital tool implemented by some municipalities is the collection on behalf of citizens of signals, proposals, complaints. The website of the municipality of Dobrich offers not only a developed digital space for citizens, but also a special section allowing citizens to send signals about irregularities, but also an interactive digital map of signals and places with problems.[5] The platform invites citizens to make a proposal of a project, an idea or a plan to include it in the municipal agenda.[6] According to the platform, as of April 2026, 1943 signals send by citizens have been closed by the municipality, and 1513 signals are in the process of assessment. The website lists all signals, proposals and demands. Table 2 presents some examples of cases in the process, as of April 2026.

This case of a digital invited space shows from one hand the willingness and openness on behalf of municipalities to interact and include citizens. Even though the platforms proposed are interactive and sophisticated, the logic of interactions remains top-down. Table 3 presents the main digital channels of invited spaces set up on the websites of Bulgarian municipalities.

4.4 Citizen uptake and barriers to participation

On the side of citizens, the low levels of participation and usage of digital invited spaces provided on a municipal scale are an issue which merits attention. One could suggest that non-participation could be explained by several factors. The first one is related to structural low levels of public opinion in democratic institutions, politicians, and authorities in the country. The second is the digital divide, especially in poor regions and localities, and attitudes of suspicion regarding how digitally provided information will be treated, how citizens' personal data will be used, what the consequences would be for them.

On the government side, digital open spaces for genuine civic deliberation, consultation, agenda setting and decision-making are rare and in their infancy in Bulgaria. Here, various reasons may explain why citizens are not invited to participate. One reason may be the reluctance of political actors who prefer to maintain control and are not inclined to expand the arena to citizens. Another reason lies in the lack of resources or staff, or sufficiently trained personnel to manage and operate digitally invited spaces.

[4]Cf. https://kyustendil.bg/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=3706:2026&lang=bg
[5]Cf. https://signals.dobrich.bg/
[6]Cf. https://signals.dobrich.bg/bg/signals/add/19

Table 2. Municipality of dobrich: Citizens' signals, proposals, questions in process.

Signals	Number	Issue
	76	Dangerous building
	283	Non-working lighting/traffic light
	89	Garbage/dump
	29	Dangerous playground
	168	Pothole
	12	Damaged/missing sign
	79	Improper parking
	23	Dangerous hanging cables
	107	Water leak
	531	Other
Proposals	54	n.d.
Questions	62	n.d.

Source: Authors' compilation of data from the website of Municipality of Dobrich, https://www.dobrich.bg/en, April 3, 2026.

Moreover, during the last two decades, Bulgarian citizens have proved to mobilize and react through digital platforms for mass street protest cycles against parties and authorities. However, this protest mobilization is usually stronger in big cities than in medium and small municipalities.

4.5 Comparative levels of E-Participation

In both France and Bulgaria, we have seen the introduction in recent years of digital tools designed to involve citizens in decision-making processes; however, their use remains limited to a few municipalities and certain stages of the public decision-making process. Table 4 summarizes this situation based on the classification of levels of e-participation proposed by van Dijk (2012).

5. Ambivalence and paradoxical dynamics

An analysis of local digital participatory platforms reveals a series of paradoxical dynamics that shape their functioning and their democratic effects. These paradoxes stem from the fact that participatory platforms are neither mere technical tools for citizen participation nor mere mechanisms of institutional control. Rather, they constitute hybrid mechanisms in which participatory openness is combined with the institutional framing of participation.

Thus, these digital spaces are neither a mere technical supplement to local democracy nor a substitute for traditional forms of participation. They constitute governance mechanisms that nevertheless open up new possibilities for citizens while reorganizing hierarchies of visibility, formats of speech, and channels of legitimation.

5.1 Openness and institutional control

The first paradoxical dynamic concerns the relationship between the openness of participation and the maintenance of institutional control. Participatory platforms are often presented as mechanisms for broadening access to citizen participation. They do indeed allow residents to propose ideas, participate in public consultations, or vote on local

Table 3. Mapping digital invited spaces on municipal websites in bulgaria.

Citizens contacting officials	Platform for Citizens' complaints/ signals for irregularities	Livestreaming meetings of municipal councils	Citizens sending proposals to municipality	Public consultations on draft acts and decisions	Online consultations	Digital participatory budgeting
Implemented by a vast majority of municipalities	Implemented by some municipalities	Most municipalities	Some municipalities	All municipalities	Rare	Rare: Sofia municipality

Sources: Authors, based on institutional websites.

Table 4. Classification of levels of E-Participation.

Political Process – Phases	Forms of e-Participation	Digital tool on municipalities' websites in Bulgaria	Digital tool on municipalities' websites in France
Agenda setting	Open online consultations (governments and public administration)	Rare cases	Rare cases
	ePetitions and eActivism (citizens);	Yes	Yes
Policy Preparation	Online plan consultations (governments)	Rare cases	Rare cases
	Online forums for policy making (citizens)	Rare cases	Rare cases
	Online knowledge communities	No	Rare cases
	Social Media serving Policy Making (Citizens)	No	Rare cases
Right to submit a petition	Submission of a petition Gathering of support Review and response	Non	Rare cases
Decision-making	eVoting (governments, election committees)	No	Rare cases
	eCampaigning (citizens and politicians)	Yes	Rare cases
Policy execution	eMaintenance of the law (citizens invited by government)	No	Rare cases
	eGovernment services (for the needs of citizens and including participation (government initiatives)	No	Rare cases
	eGovernment services with participatory user-design (government initiative)	Rare cases	Rare cases
	e-Complaints and e-surveillance (by citizens)	Yes	Yes
Policy evaluation	Quality panels and individual evaluations of online public services (government initiative)	No	Rare cases
	Citizen control sites and information services for public and government policy (citizen initiative)	No	Rare cases

Sources: Authors, based on Van Dijk (2012) and institutional websites except Right to submit a petition.

projects. By reducing certain logistical constraints associated with traditional participatory mechanisms, they can genuinely facilitate access to participation and enable the involvement of broader audiences.

However, this openness is generally accompanied by a particularly significant institutional framework. Local governments define the rules of participation, often the topics of consultations, the criteria for the admissibility of proposals, and decision-making procedures. Citizen contributions are thus integrated into participatory processes over which public institutions retain control.

This paradox lies at the heart of the analysis of participatory spaces; the opening of a participatory space does not necessarily imply a redistribution of political power. It can also function as a mechanism for channeling and structuring citizen expressions (Cornwall, 2004a).

In the case of local digital participatory platforms, this dynamic is particularly visible in participatory budgeting schemes. Residents can propose projects and participate in voting, but proposals are generally subject to an administrative review phase designed to verify their legal, technical, and budgetary feasibility. This process constitutes a key stage of institutional filtering of citizen contributions, and this filtering can ultimately lead to the scheme being called into question and abandoned by the local government. The example of Tinqueux, a town of 11,000 inhabitants in the Marne department, is significant in this regard. A participatory budgeting scheme, with a fairly limited budget, was implemented in a two-stage process. After collecting project proposals from citizens, the municipal administration verified their "legality" and their technical and financial feasibility, and proposed modifications to the projects without consulting their

initiators. Next, a committee appointed by the municipal council ranked the projects, and finally, the council voted to approve them. By the end of this process, the selected project(s) could turn out to be quite different from those originally proposed. As a result, after three years, residents stopped submitting projects, and the program was discontinued. Another interesting example related to this municipality involves a platform that allows residents to report issues, particularly regarding road infrastructure (sidewalks, water leaks, etc.), traffic signs, congestion (long-term parked cars), or traffic management (roundabouts, traffic flow, etc.).

The initiative is interesting but suffers from a lack of responsiveness. This platform serves as an alternative channel for reporting issues, but not at all within timeframes acceptable to citizens. In this example as well—which is indicative of situations in many French cities—citizen participation wanes until it disappears, and the image of local governments deteriorates.

5.2 Individual expression and collective deliberation

A second paradoxical dynamic concerns the relationship between citizen expression and collective deliberation. Participatory platforms *a priori* allow for the generation of a large number of citizen contributions, provided the system is legitimate. Residents can submit proposals, comment on other participants' ideas, or express their preferences through voting mechanisms. However, these contributions often take the form of individual expressions rather than in-depth collective debates. Interactions among participants generally remain limited, and digital participatory systems often favor the aggregation of opinions rather than collective deliberation.

This observation reflects broader analytical insights regarding social media. Indeed, the technical architecture of participatory platforms can shape patterns of use. Contributions are generally structured as proposals, comments, or votes, which encourages individual expression rather than collective deliberation. Participatory platforms thus function more as opinion-aggregation tools than as arenas for public debate. The deliberative quality of participatory mechanisms depends heavily on their institutional design and the mechanisms put in place to foster collective discussion (Smith, 2009).

5.3 Visibility and actual influence

A third paradoxical dynamic stems in part from this functioning and is rooted in the relationship between the visibility of participation and the actual influence of citizen contributions on public decisions—whether perceived or real. Residents' contributions can be published, commented on, and tracked online. Public institutions can also communicate about the number of participants or the projects carried out within the framework of participatory mechanisms, put verbatim quotes into context, and weave participation into a narrative—all of which makes citizens' "voices" more visible, if not, ultimately, their actual participation. This "enhanced" visibility helps reinforce the legitimacy of participatory policies and demonstrates that public institutions take citizen input into account. However, it is very difficult to assess the actual influence of citizen contributions on public decisions … in the vast majority of initiatives, this aspect is not evaluated.

This is not a political strategy, as in many participatory mechanisms, citizen contributions are integrated into complex, hierarchical decision-making processes that also involve technical, legal, and budgetary considerations. Furthermore, public institutions generally retain full authority to arbitrate between different proposals and define the direction of public policy—an essential element of representative democracy. The paradox thus lies squarely within the issue of the relationship between participation and power. Access to a participatory space does not necessarily mean that participants have real power over public decisions (Gaventa, 2006); to resolve this paradox, appropriate, visible, and credible mechanisms would need to be put in place.

5.4 Inclusion and persistent inequalities

A fourth paradoxical dynamic relates to the social effects of digital participation. Participatory platforms are often presented as mechanisms capable of democratizing access to citizen participation, and this generally aligns with the political intentions and strategies of their promoters. By allowing citizens to participate remotely and at different times, they can reduce certain constraints associated with traditional participatory mechanisms.

However, as noted above, online participatory mechanisms can also reproduce certain social inequalities in participation. Digital skills, educational level, interest in politics, and attitudes toward digital technology are key factors driving differences in participation (Rouet, 2022; 2025). It is essential to take local sociocultural situations into account and adapt mechanisms to specific contexts in order to avoid, as much as possible, drifting toward socially selective participation in digital participatory mechanisms, with certain social groups being overrepresented.

5.5 Digital platforms as governed participation

Highlighting these paradoxical dynamics shows that digital participatory platforms should be analyzed as hybrid mechanisms, at the intersection of citizen participation and the governance of that participation. These digital spaces cannot be understood solely as instruments of democratization, because if poorly designed and/or misused, they can also lead to reduced participation. It is also essential to constantly bear in mind that these are institutional mechanisms and instruments of public action that help transform the modalities of citizen participation without necessarily altering the fundamental structures of political power. This ambivalence is certainly a central characteristic of digital participation in contemporary local democracy.

6. Conclusion. design implications for hybrid participation

Digital platforms can broaden citizen access, improve the traceability of projects and expenditures, and diversify modes of engagement, but these mechanisms can also reduce participation to individualized expression, reinforce institutional centrality, favor already-engaged audiences, and ultimately transform participatory democracy into a procedure for collecting opinions rather than a space for genuine deliberation. They may therefore function primarily as mechanisms for aggregating preferences rather than as genuine spaces for collective deliberation. Even when these spaces increase the visibility of citizen proposals, the ability of the collected contributions to effectively influence public decisions remains uncertain and depends largely on the institutional framework of the mechanisms. Under these conditions, participatory platforms contribute to the legitimization of public policies by demonstrating an openness to participation, while leaving the central role of institutions in decision-making processes largely intact.

It is therefore essential to take context into account when establishing these platforms, to integrate them into a multi-channel approach to citizen expression—without abandoning "physical" meetings and while supporting the emergence of interest groups—and to provide feedback to citizens on how individual and collective opinions are actually taken into account in the decisions made. It is necessary to seek to harness the dynamics generated by the creation of these spaces in order to manage their ambivalence within a system of representative democracy. The political project, clearly, must always take precedence over the technological project.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

Underlying data

The empirical material consists of publicly available information from municipal websites and participatory platforms. The repository could be found at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20795493. (Rouet, G 2026).

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

Extended data

No extended data are associated with this article.

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Ville de Paris: **Budget participatif 2024 et 2025.** 2025.
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?

John Gastil
Penn State University, University Park, PA, USA

This study has promise, but depending on the editorial standards and scholarly aspirations of this journal, it may not be ready for indexing. The strengths of the paper are straightforward. There have been too few articles looking closely at the use of digital platforms for governance/participation, and this article looks at contrasting cases in two countries. The other main strength is that there is some useful conceptual work and theoretical claims. The idea of "invited digital spaces" could be useful if developed further in contrast to alternative framings of these technologies.

The main claim regarding "constitutive ambivalence" also seems plausible. Through this framing, the authors suggest that invited spaces need to be conceptualized as involving tensions between "openness versus institutional control, individual expression versus collective deliberation, visibility versus actual influence, and stated inclusion versus persistent inequalities." But are these original contrasts? What's fruitful about this ambivalence framing versus past theoretical accounts? Specifically, theorists who elevated the concepts of openness, deliberation, and inclusion did so explicitly in contrast to their opposites. "Visibility" vs "influence" is more distinct but comes close to theories stressing real policy impact/influence versus inauthentic processes that deliver no public influence.

The deeper issue concerns the ability of this report to connect effectively with scholarly literature and methods. The theoretical grounding of this piece is thin and would need to be developed considerably for this paper to find its place in literatures on the different facets of democratic theory and innovation. More importantly, the paper does not provide clarity on its methods. The heart of the paper consists of detailed case study accounts, but it's unclear where all these insights and information come from. Case study research, like qualitative research more generally, has its own requirements for validity and reliability, and these aren't addressed explicitly. (See, for instance, the SAGE publication, Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research by Kirk and Miller.) In the end, I'm left with the impression that this is a thoughtful paper by authors who have some insight into the cases described, but I don't know how warranted those insights are in relation to the actual cases.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
No

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
No

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: social scientific methods / democratic theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 26 September 2026

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?

David Špaček
Masaryk University, Lipová, Czech Republic

The topic is relevant and the paper is written nicely. I am very happy that I was intiveted to review the paper since I have done some research in e-participation too.

Although I am rather positive about the paper, I would still encourage the authors to do some minor revisions and add some more information in order to improve the paper. I would suggest especially the following:

1) I think that the analytical framework that was used for comparisons needs to be specified more

and interlinked more in literature. A comparative research on e-participation is available and I would expect that the authors argue more what they used and what they did not use (and why) in their research. For instance, I would also like to encourage authors to work also with Randma-Liiv et al. (2022; https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767211106919), because they include the aspect of institutionalization of e-participation which has been perceived as rather important for actual e-participation practices.

2) I think that the case selection criteria need to be presented in more detail. I am not sure if we can speak about "country" case studies. I think that it is more appropriate to speak about case studies from two countries, because authors do not have a representative sample, neither they are dealing with e-participation on the national level.

3) Some language correction would be beneficial (Bulgaria, not bulgaria in the title of the section 4 etc.).

4) The section dedicated to the discussion should be included, as it is a standard part of academic papers in which authors discuss their findings with regards to results and theories available in literature.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My areas of research have included digitalization, digital gransformation (e-gov), including e-participation and comparative research.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 26 Sep 2026

Gilles ROUET

Dear David Many thanks for your relevant comments We will wait for another report before change our text. Best Gilles

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.