

# What explains the degree of e-participation? A comparison of the adoption of digital participation platforms in Oslo, Melbourne and Madrid

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**Abstract:** E-participation research has mainly been concerned with the spread of e-participation technologies, but less of why some government organization choose to use digital tools to consult citizens (e-consultation) whereas others go to the step of including them in the decision-making processes (e-decision making). This article conducts an in-depth, comparative case-study of the adoption of e-participation platforms in Oslo, Melbourne and Madrid, and developing an alternative explanatory framework using theories of institutional entrepreneurship and change. It shows that conventional adoption theory – focusing on resource slack, socio-economic development, competition and top-down mandates – is not able to account for the differences between these cases, and argues that the degree of e-participation should be understood as an outcome of the type and agenda of change agents, the level of institutional discretion, the strength of institutional defenders, and the resources of the change agents.

**Keywords:** e-participation, innovation, institutional change, urban governance, digitization

## Key points for practitioners:

- Practitioners can learn from different pathways chosen by cities to adopt econsultation and e-decision making schemes.
- Implementing e-decision making requires high levels of popular mobilization and political support.
- Digital participation beyond mere window dressing is possible, even in large, contemporary metropolises.

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## **Introduction**

‘E-participation’ denotes the many ways that governments utilize information and communication technologies (ICTs) to engage citizens in policy-making and public service delivery (Macintosh, 2004; Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008). Even though the spread of e-participation technologies is modest compared to the optimistic predictions that many had in early stages of the internet, there is nevertheless plenty of experimentation and innovation going on — especially at the local level (Le Blanc, 2020, pp. 12-13). A recent UN survey of one hundred major cities around the world, showed that two thirds had adopted digital tools that allowed residents to share their opinions with the government. Nearly half had web portals with deliberation features, around one third conducted land-use planning and participation budgeting online, and 17 per cent opened for electronic voting on policy issues (United Nations, 2020, pp. 98-102).

The same survey distinguishes between degrees of e-participation. On the one hand ‘e-consultation,’ which means that citizens are engaged in contributions to and deliberation on public policies and services without voting or otherwise deciding on these issues, and ‘e-decision making,’ on the other hand, which refers to the involvement of citizens in actual policymaking processes (ibid, p. 250). The e-participation literature has so far mainly been concerned with factors that determine the spread of e-participation technologies, but less with the degree of e-participation that has been adopted. The aim of this article is to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by answering the question of what drives some governments to adopt electronic consultation tools, whereas others choose to include citizens in online decision-making processes? Through comparing Oslo, Melbourne and Madrid, this article proposes new explanations for such adoption processes.

There are few important differences between this study and the conventional approach in e-participation studies. One concerns methodology. We think that it is very difficult to discover whether a government involves its citizens in decision-making processes or merely consults them, by looking at their website or sending a survey to its top tier officers. This method is used by many e-participation studies, but we conduct an in in-depth, comparative case-study of the adoption of e-participation platforms in three different cities. This allows us to both assess how these e-participation arrangements are tied to decision-making processes, as well as the processes that led up to their establishment. The platforms we compare in this article are *Si din mening* ('Have your say') in Oslo, *Participate Melbourne* in the City of Melbourne, and *Decide Madrid* in Spain. The reason for selecting these cases is that they fulfill the criteria for where e-participation schemes are likely to be found, but vary on the degree of e-participation – from e-consultation (Oslo and Melbourne) to e-decision making (Madrid).

Another characteristic of e-participation research is that largely rests on an innovation model that sees its adoption as the outcome of either learning, competition, citizen or top tier pressures (Lee, Chang, & Berry, 2011; Ma, 2014). Although generating useful knowledge about the diffusion process, it nevertheless tend to overlook internal drivers, as well as such drivers interplay with external factors, that lead to the adoption of e-participation technologies (Steinbach, Sieweke, & Süß, 2019). This is even truer for the degree of e-participation. To generate new explanations that account for the differences in such degrees, we develop an alternative explanatory framework that uses elements from theories of institutional entrepreneurship and change. There are of course also limitations to our study, the most notable being that the limited number of cases restricts how far one can generalize from our findings. Yet, the strength of the inductive approach that we apply in this study is that it can

generate new hypotheses that can be tested in future studies that involve a larger set of cases, and that it can point at new answers to questions that largely has remained unanswered.

### **Existing adoption theory**

The research field of e-participation studies, which this paper addresses, contains four main, and often interrelated, explanations of what propel governments to adopt e-participation technologies. The first is size. Large, wealthy cities are more prone to adopt e-participation technologies than smaller ones (Colombo, 2010; Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Llorca, Fernández-Durán, & De Souza Rech, 2009; McNutt et al., 2016; Sobaci & Eryigit, 2015; Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle, 2020). One reason is that rich municipalities have the necessary resource slack to do so (Ma, 2013, p. 294; 2014, p. 280; Medaglia, 2007, p. 273). Another reason is that big cities have large populations, which motivates them to invest in ICTs to communicate more efficiently with residents (Höchtel, Parycek, & Sachs, 2011, p. 41; Medaglia, 2007, p. 272). A second explanation is that a certain degree of socio-economic development — meaning a relatively high level of education, wealth and Internet access among residents — leads to pressure on governments to adopt e-participation technologies. The idea here is that citizens in economically developed areas tend to be more politically engaged and demand more from their governments (Ma, 2013, p. 294; Medaglia, 2007, p. 273). A third is that inter-governmental competition spurs a dynamic whereby municipalities in this case emulate and copy each other, through which ‘best practices’ in digital engagement spread (Ganapati & Reddick, 2014; Mergel, 2013; Wilson, 2020; Yun & Opheim, 2010). The competition is motivated by a fear of tax revenue consequences of falling behind their peers (Lee et al., 2011, p. 446), or that the city projects an unmodern appearance (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2017, p. 327). The fourth explanation is that regulations and political signals from

higher-tier authorities contribute to the spread of e-participation practices, either because local governments want to show their superiors that they are best in class (Ma, 2013, p. 296) or because they have to follow national or state (provincial) government mandates (Mergel, 2014; Panagiotopoulos, Moody, & Elliman, 2012).

These theories successfully separate adopters from non-adopters – or early movers from late-comers – in the field of e-government. This is a highly valuable endeavour, but leaves a research gap when it comes to determining between cities that involve residents in e-decision making as opposed to those that merely practice e-consultation. In terms of size, for example, there is no reason to assume that cities would open up for e-consultations and especially e-decision making simply because they have the resources to do so. Even though citizens in bigger cities more likely will demand opportunities to engage politically through digital platforms than in small towns (Bonsón et al., 2017, p. 327), this hardly explains why city governments would share decision-making powers with their residents. A more likely theory is that of socio-economic development, yet empirical data show that cities scoring highly on such indices vary greatly on digital citizen engagement (United Nations, 2020), which means that the explanation lies elsewhere. Nor does inter-city competition explain why e-participation constitutes substantive competitive advantage. If the opportunity for e-decision-making inspired migration, it would be likely only for a very small population. It is difficult to believe that any city would go to the length of changing its political system in favor of e-decision making for such tenuous symbolic or revenue reasons. A more plausible, albeit less exciting theory, could be that higher-tier governments demand municipalities adopt significant degrees of e-participation. If it were true, OECD-countries which are most actively experimentating with e-participation would have provisions for not only citizen consultations, but also for co-decision making in their legislation, but this is not the case except for

provisions on binding referenda (Vetter, Klimovský, Denters, & Kersting, 2016). As pointed out by Åström, Hinsberg, Jonsson, and Karlsson (2013) the adoption literature's focus on the above mentioned *systemic* factors, largely leaves out *contextual* factors such as policy problems or the political climate, which are crucial when cities decide on whether to adopt e-decision making or e-consultation schemes.

### **Agency, institutional rules, and contextual factors**

There are a few studies recognizing the importance of such contextual factors. Colombo (2010), Medaglia (2007) and Panagiotopoulos et al. (2012), for example, find that left-leaning municipalities adopt e-participation technologies more frequently than those led by governments of other colors. van der Graft and Svensson (2006) proposes that declining levels of trust and voter turnout impel governments to seek legitimacy through e-participation practices. Recent publications, such as those by Silva, Tavares, Silva, and Lameiras (2019) and Faber, Budding, and Gradus (2020) find that political competition is a significant determinant of governments' use of social media, indicating that weak incumbents adopt them to overcome the opposition. The only study, however, that distinguishes between degrees of citizen involvement is a comparison of local governments in Estonia, Iceland and Sweden conducted by Åström et al. (2013). They argue that the lower the trust in the public institutions, and the deeper the policy problems, the higher the chances are for the adoption of an elite-challenging type of e-participation. To better understand how systemic and contextual factors are interrelated, we lend central concepts from theories of institutional change to be explain the outcomes of the adoption processes we study.

#### *Change agents and their agendas*

An account of institutional change have to begin with the agents that carry them out and their ideas – also called ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). What distinguishes entrepreneurs from one another is the type of ideas about change they bring to the table (Schmidt, 2008, p. 316). With Zimmerman (2016), we differentiate between three levels of ideas — policies, programs and public philosophies. *Policies* are suggestions for a single intervention, often directed to solve a concrete problem. *Programs* are based on a policy paradigm or a series of coherent and related policies. Public *philosophies* are worldviews that offer broadly based analysis of political problems, and alternative values, attitudes and identities. As Zimmerman writes there is an important difference between ideas and how easy they are to implement: “While the lowest level of ideas (policies) is easier to influence, it is at the paradigmatic level where the most fundamental and enduring change occurs” (ibid, p. 26). In the context of this study, we expect that e-decision making schemes to be motivated by alternative public philosophies since it entails a break with the established practices of representative political institutions. E-consultations, on the other hand, are probably initiated by single policy proposals — either as part of or separate from programs.

#### *Institutional discretion and strength of institutional defenders*

The degree of institutional change is normally connected to the level of discretion in existing political institutions and the strength of the their defenders (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Discretion describes the extent to which its rules are open to interpretation or variations in enforcement. In this study it means that if existing rules do not permit delegation of political decisions to citizens, then the adoption of e-decision-making is only possible through either outright confrontation and replacement of existing rules (displacement). Another possibility is

the introduction of e-consultation schemes as an addition to established rules of conduct and engagement (layering). If, on the other hand, rules are ambiguous and contrasting interpretations are possible — where there are tensions and conflicts involved in their exercise — conversion is more likely. So far, e-participation research has mainly been concerned with how institutional signals or formal rules instruct local governments to adopt e-participation technologies (Ma, 2013; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2012), but less on whether such signals or rules permit the adoption of e-consultation or e-decision making schemes.

Every institutional arrangement has defenders that protect it against attacks and ensures that practices function according to its rules. Previous e-participation studies have pointed out that institutions existing institutions are defended by politicians, parties or bureaucracies (Aikins & Krane, 2010; Carrizales, 2008; Chadwick, 2011), but we may also add laws and courts, media organizations, interest groups etc. Their ability to defend the institutions depends on their veto capabilities (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) — the institutional and extra-institutional means they have to block change — which can be rooted in the political context. If the defenders enjoy a high degree of public confidence due to economic and political stability, they tend to win elections and can ward off attempts to introduce competing institutional schemes such as proposals based on e-decision making. If they, on the other hand, face deep and perhaps unresolvable policy problems, enjoy little confidence, and are weakened in elections, their veto capabilities against the introduction of e-participation schemes will be fractured. In contexts where defenders have strong veto power, e-consultation is more likely to occur than e-decision making schemes, but if the defenders are weak challengers have more opportunities to displace existing institutions or convert their interpretation and enforcement through e-participation.

## *Entrepreneurial resources*

Changing institutions requires more than alternative ideas, and the right set of institutional and contextual circumstances. It demands hard work to bring about collective action and mobilize support for new rules and practices (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 210). In many cases — especially those that involve the type of radical change that are associated with e-decision making — it involves outright struggles where challengers have to prevail over institutional defenders (Colomy, 1998, p. 278). To achieve this, institutional entrepreneurs depend on certain resources for success. One can be a beneficial position in the field which provide them with the means to force their opponents to surrender (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 9), or a certain space for adopting piecemeal changes without altering its grander structure (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012). Another is the ability to mobilize support, both within and outside institutions through collaborations, coalitions, and alliances (Mayka, 2019). In this analysis, we expect that the resources of the change agents have to be much more substantial when it comes to adopting e-decision making than e-consultation schemes, whereas e-consultations can be introduced by relatively weak agents who still have the necessary skills and positions to play the rules of the existing political and administrative system.

## **Research methodology**

According to Steinbach et al. (2019, p. 63), e-participation adoption encompasses “the process in which organizations become aware of and learn about ICTs; gather information to evaluate the potential benefits [...]; and make the decision whether to acquire ICTs.” In line with their recommendation of focusing on processes and strategies we have traced the process that led to the establishment of the e-participation platforms listed in table 1. We take advantage of what

George and Bennett (2005, p. 19) call the case study's 'high conceptual validity' to distinguish between degrees of e-participation, going in depth to assess how the platforms are connected to the political system in each case. Comparison allows us to investigate the interplay of conditions and processes – or the 'complex causal configurations' (Ragin, 2014, pp. 51-53) – leading to the adoption of e-consultation and e-decision making respectively.

Within each case we follow a multimethod research approach (Hunter & Brewer, 2015), combining semi-structured interviews with document analysis and secondary sources. The documents encompass municipal strategies, party programs, participation frameworks, internal reports, website descriptions etc. We interviewed 35 individuals for this project,<sup>1</sup> coding the interviews using a qualitative data software (Nvivo). An overview of the interviewees is found in the appendix. An asterix (\*) indicates those who directly provided information about the adoption processes. These can be considered experts because they have what is often referred to as 'exclusive knowledge' of the adoption process (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). The other interviews are important sources to understand the cases as a whole. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the difficulty of reaching key leaders in the Melbourne city council who had left the organisation, this case is undersampled in comparison to the others. Yet, we consider that the combination of sources from this small selection provides useful insights. Another benefit of the multimethod research is that it other data sources can be used to balance out the inherent bias of the experts. As Yin (1999, p. 1217) points out, the more sources that are used in the same study "the stronger the case study evidence will be."

## **About the cases**

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kirstin Reichborn-Kjennerud, Inger Marie Bertelsen, Sissel Hovik, Bhavna Middha and Cristina Paupini for their contributions to the data collection.

<Insert table 1 about here>

Let us return to our cases. Of the three platforms, Oslo's *Si din mening* and *Participate Melbourne* clearly fall under the label of e-consultation, whereas *Decide Madrid* can be classified as e-decision making. Feedback gathered from users of Oslo's platform is either sent to proponents of zoning or building plans (either private entrepreneurs or public entities) or to the municipality's Agency for Planning and Building Services (from here on called 'the Agency') which has the authority to approve or disapprove plans before they are sent to city council politicians. It is up to the proposer or the Agency, to "decide whether or not they will take the opinions into account " or "if the inputs are so important that plans have to be modified" (Plan- og bygningsetaten, 2020). All feedback gathered through the consultations is entered into the public record, and summarized in documents informing the city council's decision making. In the end, however, it is up to the city council to take this feedback into account or not when they decide upon a plan.

Like 'Si din mening', *Participate Melbourne* is also a venue for e-consultation, although the council's rhetoric focuses more on how citizens' input can actually affect policy making. Slogans encourage users to "join the conversation to *influence* the plans" for their neighborhoods; and states that residents' opinions and ideas "help *shape* Council's decisions" (City of Melbourne, 2020, our emphasizes). Nonetheless, council community engagement affirm that is up to the project teams within the administration themselves to judge whether and how to use the input from online engagement.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately it is the city council that makes

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with WP1MEBP6, Acting Manager, Placemaking and Engagement, City of Melbourne

decisions regarding most projects put up for consultation, and as such, “if you are looking at a [citizen participation] spectrum it sort of [fits] very well into the consult area.”<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the other two, Madrid’s platform lets citizens directly decide on certain policy issues. This is conveyed through slogans on the website such as “In Madrid, you decide”. Officials underline that the votes on the platform are binding: “This means that what the citizenry decides, becomes a reality.”<sup>4</sup> This was to a certain extent true during the period from 2015-2019. In this period, over 346 million euros worth of investment was reserved by the city council for allocation by citizens through the platform. Two citizen initiatives gathered enough support through the platform to initiate a binding referendum, and the city government itself initiated binding votes on other issues, including refurbishments of parks and squares and traffic ordinances. The council did not have specific legal authority to hold binding votes or referendums, but voluntarily committed itself to implement the results of the processes.

### **Distinct adoption processes**

The adoption process are notably distinct – especially between those of Oslo and Melbourne on one hand, and Madrid on the other. Oslo’s *Si din mening*-platform had its background in the municipality’s efforts to digitize services and communication channels, which coincided with an ambition to improve citizen participation in the city’s highly market-driven planning process. The individuals who developed the platform had a fairly autonomous role, yet low-ranking role, within the Agency, but the development of the website was continuously ratified by the Agency’s senior management. The adoption of the platform needed no approval from

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with WP1MEBI3, Consultant and former community engagement manager, City of Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with WP1MABP3, General Director of Citizen Participation, Madrid

the city's politicians. *Participate Melbourne* also came about as result of an internal process, spurred on by the arrival of two outsiders in the municipality's administration. One was a CEO with a background in organizations working with community participation in health. The other was a community engagement officer who had recently been the Australasian president of the *International Association for Public Participation* (IAP2) — a global organization that promotes citizen participation in government. The idea to establish the platform came from within the team that the community engagement manager established. It had, however, to be approved by the city council. There was some resistance — especially from the IT Department, but also from some top managers – to its adoption. After considerable “convincing”<sup>5</sup>, the councillors approved and decided to fund it. The process went out to tender, and the municipality ended up procuring a ready-made platform for community participation.

The adoption of *Decide Madrid*, on the other hand, began in the Spanish *Indignados* movement that arose in May 2011 as a reaction to the economic crisis following the global financial crisis. The movement criticized the representative political system for being corrupt and unresponsive to population needs (Romanos & Sádaba, 2016), and some of its segments coalesced in new electoral alliances. One in Madrid, simply named *Ahora Madrid* (‘Now, Madrid!’), won the 2015 local elections on a program to transform the city's political system into a direct and participatory democracy. The *Indignados* movement was recognized as an innovator in using social media and self-developed ICTs to organize its activities. Tech-activists from these movements became central in the *Ahora Madrid* alliance (Nez & Ganuza, 2020; Romanos & Sádaba, 2016), and helped develop the *Decide Madrid* platform.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with WP1MEBI3

## Different change agents, different agendas

Following the description above, one central finding is that the the first and most obvious of the differences between the processes that ended in e-consultation and e-decision making here, are the change agents and their agendas. In Oslo the agents' aim was not to disrupt conventional politics, but rather to strengthen the already established institution of citizen consultation in planning processes by making it more accessible to the public. As explained by the Agency's director, the purpose was to "make it easier for people to not have to remember the case number and addresses and things like that" and enable citizens to "discover what [planning processes] was going on relatively early." The desired effect was to give "people the feeling that they have the opportunity to be part of [planning] in a slightly different way than before."<sup>6</sup> Another dimension was to also to improve the opportunities of citizens to shape plans proposed by private developers. A key platform developer called it an example of democracy building: "Some say that they just send plans to consultation because they have to, but we honestly want to listen to what people have to say to a certain extent."<sup>7</sup>

Although the change agents saw *Si din mening* as a way to strengthen participation opportunities, they were keen not to compromise the Agency's bureaucratic neutrality or the principle of representative democracy. There were, for example, internal discussions on whether or not to include survey questions on the website, but this was dropped because it resembled a referendum. As a middle manager commented: "I [am] one of those who think that we should not have concrete questions because that makes it seem more like a vote."<sup>8</sup> Since the aims of creating the platform essentially were symbiotic, it constituted what

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with WP1OS01, Former Executive Director of Agency for Planning and Building Services, Oslo

<sup>7</sup> Interview with WP1OSBP13, ICT advisor, Agency for Planning and Building Services, Oslo

<sup>8</sup> Interview with WP1OSBP2, Head of Unit, Agency for Planning and Building Services, Oslo

Zimmerman would call a *policy* that easily could be implemented within the existing institutional framework. Thus, it did not need to be referred to the political arena for approval.

In Melbourne, the initiative to adopt the platform also came from within, but unlike Oslo, the change agents promoting Melbourne's initiative saw a window to expand community engagement practices. The manager who led the process had an ambitious goal for the council to be recognized as a leader in the field of citizen participation. To achieve this, she deployed a program that involved the centralization of all participation processes in a community engagement team, capacity building across the organization, a community engagement framework, an evaluation toolkit, guarantees that private contractors would also follow these principles, and the convening of mini-publics inspired by theories of deliberative democracy, one of which was a — partly digital — participatory budgeting exercise where a randomly selected panel of 43 citizens made recommendations on spending around 4 billion Australian dollars over a ten year period (Clear Horizon, 2015).

*Participate Melbourne* was devised to assemble all of these participation processes, and enhance their public visibility and transparency. When the community engagement team was established, the municipality was already undertaking several digital surveys, scattered across different departments and units. The community engagement team considered these were of doubtful quality, and did not think that the IT Department was equipped to resolve their problems. Therefore, the team went to tender to get “something that was much more transparent, something that required people to learn more, be more informed about an issue, a topic, a problem, before they provided us with some feedback.”<sup>9</sup> The website itself was not regarded “as the panacea of community engagement, but it was a complementary platform,

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with WP1MEBI3

opportunity for people. It was seen as a wonderful way to share information, to build up standing, to seek really elementary feedback.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is important to see it as not a single policy but part of a broader *program* – following Zimmerman’s typology – to make citizen participation a practice that permeated the whole organization using a combination of both analogue and digital practices. Thus, as we shall later see, it was also met with skepticism and resistance.

The *Decide Madrid* case, however, distinguishes itself from the other two. The change agents entered the government with a comprehensive political ideology — or, according to Zimmerman, a *public philosophy* — with an alternative vision for the city that included calls for a new economic model. Participatory and direct democracy was the centerpiece of this philosophy, since an “active and responsible citizen participation in decision-making” was necessary to realize this vision. The aim of the alliance was to create a democratic city in which “all citizens can intervene in the definition, administration and development of fundamental policies” — not merely by voting in elections. The relationship between citizens and politicians should be turned upside down. Elected officials “should serve the citizens” and bureaucrats should learn to “work together with the people” instead of from within their offices (Ahora Madrid, 2015, p. 7).

*Ahora Madrid*’s electoral program specified many of the instruments that later were adopted by the government, such as participatory budgeting, digital democracy, and citizen initiatives (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2016, p. 64). The tech activists from the *Indignados* movement, who were seminal in the construction of the platform, saw digital technologies as indispensable for achieving the goals listed above. As the manager of the platform told us:

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with WP1MEB13

“[If] you don’t have a digital platform, the possibility of having an inclusive participatory process is basically zero. Without digital platforms it’s basically impossible for you to reach the population.”<sup>11</sup> There were also significant impulses from what one central collaborator called technopolitics; the idea that a sufficient amount of interconnected people can emerge and challenge established powers structures (ParticipaLab, 2019, p. 37).

### **Relatively high institutional discretion**

The agendas of these diverse change agents met an institutional framework that was fairly similar across the three cases. National and state legislation establishes and defends democracy as the main rule of decision-making, but also opens the way for local governments to implement a variety of tools for citizen participation – mostly of their own choosing.

Norwegian legislation requires municipalities to enable participation by affected interests in planning processes. Citizens have the right to petition the local council, the municipality can hold advisory referenda, and the council can even delegate certain decisions to committees that do not contain elected politicians (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2020a, 2020b). In Victoria, local governments are obliged to regularly consult with communities in relation to service provision, their annual budgets, and the adoption of major strategies (Victoria State Parliament, 2020). Spanish municipalities are among the most autonomous in Europe when it comes to introducing local political innovations, and are required to facilitate the participation of all citizens in political, economic, cultural and social life. In many cases, this has extended to delegating budget decisions to local residents (Dias, Enriquez, & Júlio, 2019, p. 182; Kersting, Gasparikova, Iglesias, & Krenjova, 2016, pp. 320-321).

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with WP1MABP11

This relatively high level of institutional discretion allowed the change agents in each case to frame their innovations within existing legislation, or sometimes to slightly bend the rules in their favor. The result in all three cases was a form of layering. *Si din mening* in Oslo did not push any boundaries of institutional rules, but rather fulfilled the requirements of the national Planning Act. It merely added an electronic version. In Melbourne, the platform was part of a program that aimed to realize the obligation of local governments to regularly and systematically consult the population, without — formally at least — violating the rule that local councilors take decisions. It added more channels of citizen participation. Interestingly, not even *Ahora Madrid* confronted institutional boundaries, but simply bypassed them by committing itself to follow majority views on the *Decide Madrid* platform. This is within institutional rules in Spain, which allows local government to practice certain forms of direct democracy in co-existence with representative democracy. It had to go through the representative channels, however, and relied on elected politicians to voluntarily adopt policies decided on by online users.

### **Highly varying political contexts and veto-possibilities**

The divergent political contexts of the cities are especially revealing of choices regarding citizen engagement. These contexts not only gave rise to very different change agents as shown earlier, but also created the potential for institutional defenders to veto the adoption process. Oslo's political life has been characterized by stability, with high levels of support for representative institutions, which in turn have not encouraged institutional challengers nor weakened its defenders. Norwegians in general trust their political institutions and participate in relatively high numbers in both national and local elections (Haugsgjerd & Segard, 2020; Oslo kommune, 2020). Residents in Oslo do not believe they have much

opportunity to affect decision-making processes, but since they consider voting or being a member of a party as the most important avenues of political participation, and are mostly satisfied with public services, this does not give rise to high levels of dissatisfaction with existing institutions (Kantar & TNS, 2018; Sentio Research, 2014). The context, in other words, placed the defenders of the representative institutions in a strong position, which meant that e-consultation was the most viable political option.

In Melbourne's case, the local authority operates within a stable political environment where trust in electoral systems and politicians, across Australia's three levels of government, is around the global average, placing it between Spain (lower) and Norway (higher) (Dell et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2017). In this context, the processes of representative democracy are fairly assured, and change is most likely to occur within institutional settings rather than by challenge from without. Two particular developments, though, have influenced Melbourne's embrace of e-participation. The first is the encouragement of online consultative mechanisms by the Victorian state government, which has traditionally played a strong oversight role of the Melbourne council. The second, more localised development has been the re-population and densification of inner-urban Melbourne, which has led to increasing challenge by residents over development proposals, and concerns over amenity issues such as late-night noise from established music venues. *Residents 3000* (the number is central Melbourne's postal code) has emerged as a significant lobby group, as a counterweight to the strong influence on the Melbourne city council by the city's business constituency, supported by an electoral system weighted towards business interests (Dunstan & Young, 2011). These tensions are reflected in Participate Melbourne's cautious consultative approach as the platform is increasingly used to moderate conflicting community interests.

By contrast, the political context in Madrid was very different. The recession that followed the financial crash led the Spanish government to cut back on public spending and impose austerity measures on large sectors of the population, while trying to give bailouts to keep the banking sector afloat. Unemployment levels rose to among Europe's highest, especially for the young generation. A wave of house evictions came as people were unable to pay their mortgages. Simultaneously, trust levels in politicians plummeted to around five per cent of the population (Mayne & Nicolini, 2020, p. 3). The combined economic and political crisis spurred a range of new mobilizations. The number of demonstrations in the Madrid region, for example, went up from around a thousand annually to over five thousand in the year preceding the *Ahora Madrid* government (ibid p. 5). *Indignados* mobilized directly around this discontent with the established political elite. This was further accentuated by consensus among the two major parties around neoliberal reforms and austerity measures (Romanos & Sádaba, 2016, p. 3). Not only was the reputation of traditional parties weakened, but this also translated into election results. In both the national and local elections in 2015 the Conservative and the Socialist parties lost votes. In Madrid, neither of these parties could form majorities by themselves to avert *Ahora Madrid's* rise to power. This also meant that they could not veto down the introduction of an e-decision making platform, even though they were highly critical of it.

### **Challengers resources and power struggle**

The *Ahora Madrid* alliance achieved a staggering 31.8% of the vote in their first election. As the major party of the left block in the city council with more than double the number of seats as the Socialists, they could form a government as the senior partner. This was the power base they needed in order to adopt something as radical as an e-decision making platform and stave

off resistance from opposition parties. The digital democracy advocates inside *Ahora Madrid* had the support of the mayor and the rest of the councilors in the government. As mentioned by an activist who was employed to develop the direct democracy processes within the administration, “we were lucky because all of the other councilors in the government agreed that we need these kind of processes. [...] The mayor who is also very crucial was always a total fan of democracy and she always said ‘more, more, more’ to everything we can do.”<sup>12</sup> The importance of this power base became evident through what happened to *Decide Madrid* after the 2019 elections. Since the Socialist party lost further seats in the local council, a coalition government was formed between the conservatives and liberals supported by the votes of a far-right party in the city council. When the new government took over, it did not dismantle the platform. Instead, participation was focused around territorial councils, and new processes online were presented as consultations and not votes with binding consequences. By and large, the e-decision making platform was turned into an e-consultation and e-information tool.

In Oslo, however, the adoption of the platform went under the political radar. Due to the minuscule changes the platform involved the initiative and decision could be taken by a relatively autonomous project group. This group’s resources came from its strategic position in the bureaucratic hierarchy where it had support from the Agency’s Director. Since the platform was adopted inside a digitalization project and had been already funded from the city government, it was reframed from a deliverable to something that was politically desired.

In Melbourne the support from the top manager — the CEO — played a vital role for the change agents, and constituted their power base for implementing their program, including the

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with WP1MABP11

adoption of *Participate Melbourne*. The decision to commission the platform needed endorsement by the city councilors. The engagement manager describes the adoption process as “one of those things that took up many business cases and presentations to convince council to spend the money on an external digital platform.”<sup>13</sup> Resistance especially came from the IT team who felt that they could do the job themselves. The CEO was pivotal to gaining support from the councilors, who were more skeptical of the engagement program rather than the platform itself. People who later came into the organization observed that the council “had a very dynamic CEO who was incredibly passionate about deliberative engagement and enabled the organization” to adopt the new community engagement framework which included *Participate Melbourne*<sup>14</sup> In 2014, when a new CEO took over, several innovations introduced by the community engagement team were altered — most significantly the experimentation with mini-publics that verged on having decision-making powers. The platform, however, remained intact since in general it was a digital consultation tool that could be used without interfering with the councilors’ authority.

### **Lessons from the comparison**

One key lesson from this article is that although conventional adoption theories successfully predict governments’ propensity to adopt innovations such as e-participation technologies (see for example Lee et al., 2011; Ma, 2014), they have a harder time explaining differences between those that adopt e-consultation and e-decision making. This is evident when looking at the the differences between Oslo, Melbourne and Madrid. Take size, for example. Not only are all the three cities in this study large in comparison to other cities in their countries, but the relative ease of reaching broad sectors of the population was never a prime motivation for

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with WP1MEBI3

<sup>14</sup> Interview with WP1MEBP6

any of them to introduce e-participation technologies. Nor is pressure from higher-tier authorities relevant, as national and state legislation obliging local authorities to regularly engage with the citizenry is relatively similar in all three cases. Neither does inter-city competition play any role in comparison. Citizen pressure, however, is also crucial in our study, but not in the sense that it is conventionally used by adoption theory. The inhabitants in all three cities have among the highest education levels, incomes and internet connections rates in the world, meaning that the pressure to adopt these technologies – if coming from the citizens – must erupt from something else than them just being resourceful. In fact, it was not the resources, but the relative deprivation and subsequent discontent among *Madridenos* that gave rise to a pressure to open up political institutions to the citizens in Madrid, as demanded by *Indignados* movement and promoted by *Ahora Madrid*.

A subsequent lesson from our study is that systemic factors, such as a municipality's resource slack or the level of education and internet connection rates among its citizens, may play a role, but primarily as necessary conditions for a city is to successfully adopt e-participation technologies (necessary conditions). Another necessary conditions is also an institutional framework that allows local governments enough discretion to adopt either e-consultation or e-decision making tools. The main difference between Spain and the other countries is that Spanish local governments also have liberties to delegate political decisions to citizens. It is difficult to assess to what extent this inhibited the adoption of e-decision making in Oslo or Melbourne, since this was not on the charts of the change agents, but judging from studies of participatory budgeting in Norway and Australia there are reasons to believe that attempts to delegate budget decisions to citizens at the scale that was done in Madrid, would have been deemed illegal by state and national authorities (Dias et al., 2019, p. 190; Legard, 2018).

A third lesson is that the sufficient conditions for e-participation adoption are contextual. First, the context give rise to very different change agents. The relative stable political climate in Oslo and Melbourne nurtured ‘symbionts’ and ‘opportunists’, using Mahoney and Thelen’s (2010) typology, whereas the economic and political crisis in Spain and Madrid, on the other hand, nurtured ‘insurrectionaries’ who had an ambition to replace the existing representative institutions with a direct and participatory democratic platform. If insurrectionaries were to arise in Oslo and Melbourne, moreover, the relative stable political climate would have afforded the defenders of the representative institutions with the ability to prevent more radical changes from taking place. In Spain and hence also Madrid, on the other hand, the political establishment had been seriously weakened in the wake of the economic crisis, to the extent they were unable to block the establishment of *Decide Madrid*. Finally, the context was also important for the change agents’ resources, especially in Madrid where the power base *Ahora Madrid* achieved through citizen mobilization was the muscles they needed to overcome the opposition and adopt the platform.

A forth lesson is that any explanation for the differences between adoption of e-consultation and e-decision making, needs to begin with the change agents and their agendas – or what is sometimes referred to as ‘motivation’ (Berry & Berry, 2007). The symbionts in Oslo wanted to improve existing consultation practices, and the opportunists in Melbourne to expand them. Unsurprisingly, therefore, these lead only to the adoption of e-consultation schemes. Only Madrid had actors promoting e-decision making, which reinforces Åström et al.’s (2013) point that elite-challenging models of e-participation tend to originate outside of government in civil society initiatives. But change is not achieved by ideas alone, which brings us over to the fifth and final lesson in this article: That the outcome of adoption processes must be understood as an elaborate interplay of change agents and their agendas, the level of

institutional discretion, the strength of institutional defenders, and the resources of the change agents. This is particularly evident in Madrid where the new philosophy promoted by *Ahora Madrid*, needed a certain institutional elbow room, weak opponents, and support from the political majority to realize its e-decision making platform. This study therefore suggests new variables that affect the adoption of e-consultations and e-decision making schemes respectively, including changing levels of trust in political institutions and civil society mobilizations, economic or political crises, and the emergence and electoral gain of new political parties or alliances.

Once again, we emphasize that these lessons do not undermine e-participation studies of the factors that determine the adoption of e-participation in general, but rather adds factors that can explain why cities adopt practices that differ on the e-participation spectrum. The hypotheses we have generated through our inductive approach can be tested against a larger number of cases. A natural place to begin is to compare these cities to seemingly similar cases to check for these findings' validity, such as other cities on top of the UN's e-participation index. This can either be done through in-depth comparisons with a select few cases of the sort we have done here, or a relatively high number of cases applying qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 2014). It is even possible to include a variant of these variables in more quantitative censuses, such as the comprehensive approach proposed by Steinbach et al. (2020). We believe that our findings are not only relevant to researchers. For practitioners they provide valuable insights into the pathways that other cities have take, and the level of mobilization and support required to adopt more significant levels of institutional change. It also shows that e-participation beyond mere window-dressing is possible, even in cities within a global market economy.

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Table 1: Overview of the platforms

<i>City</i>	<b>Oslo</b>	<b>Melbourne</b>	<b>Madrid</b>
<i>Name</i>	'Si din mening' (Have your say)	Participate Melbourne	Decide Madrid
<i>URL</i>	<a href="https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/sidinmening/">https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/sidinmening/</a>	<a href="https://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/">https://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/</a>	<a href="https://decide.madrid.es/">https://decide.madrid.es/</a>
<i>Established</i>	2017	2013	2015
<i>Policy areas</i>	Urban planning	All municipal services, but primarily urban development	All municipal services, but primarily urban development
<i>Functionalities</i>	Open feedback (restricted to 4000 letters)	Survey, interactive maps, discussion forum, tools for idea generation	Discussion forum, voting, collaborative legislation, survey, budgeting