



AI-Mediated Participation in the Digital Public Sphere: Democratic Opportunities, Algorithmic Risks, and Governance Conditions

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ABSTRACT

Public administrations increasingly use artificial intelligence (AI) to mediate citizen participation through chatbots, participatory platforms, and opinion analytics. While these tools can expand access and administrative capacity, they also embed algorithmic filtering and aggregation into democratic processes. This article proposes an evaluative framework based on four democratic dimensions— inclusion, deliberative quality, transparency and accountability, and data governance—and applies it to a comparative qualitative document analysis (2018–2025) of AI-enabled participation tools. The findings reveal a participation–control trade-off: AI enhances scale and efficiency while concentrating control in design choices that shape visibility, contestability, and feedback. The article identifies governance conditions to mitigate democratic risks, including procedural transparency, human oversight, outcome tracking, and strict purpose limitation of participation data.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence, E-Participation, Digital Public Sphere, Algorithmic Governance, Transparency, Accountability, Data Governance

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is increasingly mediated through digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) systems, transforming how public administrations interact with citizens in the digital public sphere. Online consultations, participatory budgeting, petitions, and civic feedback portals are now embedded in national and municipal digital government strategies across Europe and beyond. In parallel, political communication has become increasingly platformized: Algorithmic ranking, recommendation, and moderation systems structure what becomes visible, credible, and actionable in public debate (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2018; Just & Latzer, 2017). These transformations blur the boundary between administrative infrastructure and democratic mediation, raising questions about how participation is filtered, aggregated, and translated into policy outcomes.

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AI is increasingly used to manage the scale and complexity of citizen interaction. Public organizations deploy chatbots and virtual assistants to automate information provision, guide users through procedures, and triage requests. Participatory platforms integrate algorithmic support for tagging, clustering, search, and moderation to reduce information overload and improve administrative processing. Opinion analytics systems apply natural language processing to infer topics, sentiments, and trends from large volumes of citizen input.

These developments change not only administrative workflows but also the conditions under which citizens encounter issues, deliberate with others, and influence institutional decision-making. The democratic implications of AI-mediated participation are ambiguous. On the one hand, automation can lower transaction costs, broaden access, and enable public administrations to process larger volumes of participation than would be feasible through manual means alone. On the other hand, algorithmic mediation introduces new control points into the participation pipeline. Filtering, ranking, and aggregation may be opaque to participants; engagement-driven visibility metrics can privilege organized or sensational voices; and automated categorization can distort citizen framing when concerns do not fit predefined taxonomies. These dynamics risk producing participation experiences that are inclusive in appearance but limited in influence.

Empirical research suggests that legitimacy problems in digital participation often stem less from low participation rates than from weak accountability and feedback mechanisms. A systematic analysis of digital participation tools finds that many platforms provide limited information about how submissions are used, what decisions are made, and how outcomes are monitored (Shin et al., 2024). Similarly, the Decide Madrid platform—frequently cited as a benchmark in civic technology—has seen its trust decline as citizens have been unable to track how approved proposals progressed toward implementation or why delays occurred (Royo et al., 2020). These findings indicate that participation quality depends not only on enabling input but also on providing traceability and closing the loop between citizen contributions and institutional action.

Against this background, this article asks: How does AI mediation reshape citizen participation in the digital public sphere, and under what governance conditions does it strengthen—or undermine—democratic quality? The article makes two main contributions. First, it proposes an evaluative framework for AI-mediated participation grounded in four democratic dimensions: inclusion, deliberative quality, transparency and accountability, and data governance. Second, it applies this framework in a comparative qualitative document analysis (2018–2025) across three families of participation tools—public-sector chatbots, participatory platforms, and opinion analytics systems—to identify recurring trade-offs and practicable governance conditions for public administration.

Rather than treating AI as an exogenous technological force, the article conceptualizes algorithmic mediation as a set of design and governance choices embedded in institutional arrangements. This governance-oriented perspective aligns with emerging research in public administration that emphasizes organizational capacity, accountability, and regulatory alignment as key determinants of AI outcomes (van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022; Wirtz et al., 2019). By focusing on the participation pipeline and its control points, the article seeks to move beyond binary narratives of AI as democratizer versus AI as threat and toward a more nuanced understanding of how democratic quality is co-produced by technology, institutions, and governance practices.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on platformization, algorithmic governance, e-participation, and public sector AI. This is followed by the presentation of the conceptual framework and analytical propositions. The subsequent section details the methodology, including case anchoring, corpus construction, and coding procedures. The findings section reports cross-case patterns emerging from the analysis. The discussion then derives governance and design implications for public administration, including actionable recommendations. The article concludes with a discussion of limitations and directions for future research.

This article contributes to public administration scholarship in three ways. First, it conceptualizes AI not merely as an administrative support tool but as a mediator embedded across the citizen

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