Rethinking electronic participation categories: an analysis of Legislative Assemblies' websites*

Repensando as categorias de participação eletrônica: análise dos *websites* das Assembleias Legislativas

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Abstract

This article presents a proposal for categorizing electronic participation (e-participation) based on an analysis of the websites of the 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies. From the perspective of a "representative democracy seen from below", with different forms of relationship between the citizen and the State, and varying degrees of impact on the legislative process, this study identifies six levels of e-participation. Four levels correspond to a renaming of categories already proposed in the literature (Macintosh, 2004; Gomes, 2005; Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis, 2007) – informative, advisory, collaborative, and decision--making –, and two levels correspond to two new categories proposed in this study – citizens' manifestations and propositional.

Keywords: digital democracy; political participation; e-participation levels; legislative assemblies.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma proposta de categori-zação da participação eletrônica (e-participação) a partir da análise dos websites das 26 Assembleias Legislativas brasileiras. Na perspectiva de uma "democracia representativa vista debaixo", com diferentes formas de relação entre o cidadão e o Estado, e grau de incidência variado sobre o pro-cesso legislativo, este estudo identifica seis níveis de e-participação, quatro deles correspondem a uma redenominação de categorias já propostas na lite-ratura (Macintosh, 2004; Gomes, 2005; Tambouris, Liotas e Tarabanis, 2007) – informativo, consultivo, colaborativo e decisório – e outros dois níveis cor-respondem a duas novas categorias propostas neste estudo – manifestações dos cidadãos e propositivo.

Palavras-chave: *democracia digital; participa-ção política; níveis de e-participação; assembleias legislativas.*

Introduction

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of a major technological revolution that changed how people produce, trade, conduct financial transactions, and even affect interpersonal relationships with the advent of the commercial internet on a global scale. Information and communication technology (ICT) and digitalization have also been absorbed by the State and its branches, as well as by the academic field, which started adding the adjectives "digital" or "electronic" to democracy, to describe this transformation process. Although the literature, for the most part, does not advocate the use of technology as a simple antidote to the crises and problems of liberal democracies, one of the facets highlighted by these studies is the potential to expand citizens' political participation beyond voting. This potential facilitates access to different stages of public policy-making and decision--making, though unequally distributed among citizens. This dimension of e-participation can be analyzed both from the perspective of citizens and civil society and from that of the State, analyzing how this potential is utilized or employed by States and their various powers. In this article, we focus our analysis on the forms of ICT usage employed by the State and, more specifically, by the Legislative Power, with a focus on electronic participation.[1] By centering on the ICT-mediated channels made available by the 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies on their portals for citizens, we aim to understand what these channels tell us about their possible use for expanding participation.

The question is based on the diagnosis of the crisis of representative liberal democracy and the prerogative to expand citizens' political participation beyond voting as one of the ways to strengthen existing democratic systems. The crisis of liberal and representative democracy has become such a popular topic that books dealing with it have become bestsellers and translated into several languages (Mounk, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This literature in Political Science analyzes the crisis of democracy on two fronts. The first is anchored, albeit not exclusively, in the concept of political culture and, through national surveys, captures individuals' perceptions of democracy as an ideal and its operationalization through democratic institutions and elected representatives. The diagnosis generally points to a democratic recession, expressed in declining confidence in the democratic regime, its institutions, and elected representatives, a trend present in various countries worldwide, both in the Global South and the Global North (Mounk, 2019). Although these analyses propose explanations that combine institutional and cultural aspects for such a crisis, they provide little information about democratic alternatives from the citizens' critical perspective on the current state of liberal democracies.

Another branch of studies points to the processes of democratic deconsolidation, which consist of the gradual erosion of the three basic conditions of democracy by democratically elected far-right governments: the opposition's ability to win elections and take power; the loss of independence of existing institutions to control the Executive Branch; and the prohibition or restriction of protests (opposition,

rule of law, and free expression) (Przeworski, 2019). This process has been detected in countries like Venezuela, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and the USA (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018). Since the erosion occurs within the rules of democratic institutions, the voice of civil society and an opposition by political parties, along with reliable sources of information, constitute important instruments to prevent this process from resulting in the end of democracy.

The alternatives to representative liberal democracy, on a theoretical level, are abundant. The deepening of democracy, as a horizon, has already brought proposals such as deliberative democracy (Gutmann, Thompson, 2007), participatory democracy (Pateman, 1992), the reformulation of political representation (Young, 2006; Phillips, 2001), the introduction of Participatory Institutions (Almeida, Carlos, Silva, 2016), and the redistributive effects of democracy in terms of social accountability (Fox, 2015). Several of these proposals have been implemented. Brazil, for example, was a pioneer in the establishment of Participatory Institutions, expanding them to various sectors of public policies and at all three federal levels. Participatory budgeting, which allows local communities to decide on part of the public budget, was elevated to good practice by the UN and implemented in many countries. Thus, one way to democratize representation, as Urbinati (2006) suggests, is to ensure spaces for citizen participation in the political arena, allowing social demands to be expressed. This can reduce the gap between democracy and representation, as well as provide governments more responsive to these demands. In representative democratic contexts, this

participation can also be promoted and enhanced through the Internet, which leads us to the approach of Digital Democracy and, subsequently, to the analysis of technological devices that foster some form of electronic participation (e-participation).

The theoretical discussion on digital democracy and e-participation explores how ICTs, especially the internet, foster new forms of political participation and reinforce democratic practices. The international literature incorporates terms such as e-democracy, teledemocracy, cyberdemocracy, and digital democracy, highlighting different approaches to the use of technological tools to expand civic engagement. Models like those of Hagen (1997) and Macintosh (2004) classify levels of e-participation, from access to information to citizen empowerment with a direct impact on policy formulation. In Brazil, authors like Wilson Gomes and Rafael Sampaio highlight the potential of ICTs to enhance citizen participation in representative contexts, addressing aspects such as deliberation, transparency, and inclusion.

In summary, this literature establishes a hierarchy of e-participation forms, ranging from information access to decision-making participation, incorporating levels such as consultation, collaboration, and electronic engagement. This set of categories was compiled by us into a scale and applied to the channels found on the portals of the 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies.[2] However, the application of existing categories proved insufficient to cover all the empirical instances encountered, which led us to propose two additional categories - "Citizen Manifestations"

and "Propositional" - and to advocate for their inclusion as specific elements in a hierarchical scale of electronic participation.

The empirical study was conducted based on qualitative and quantitative research that analyzed the access and interaction channels available on the websites of the 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies for citizens. The objective was to identify which participation channels, referred to in the investigation as technological participation devices (TPDs), were offered by the websites of state legislative houses, and to analyze what they effectively allowed in terms of citizen participation. The research included two data collections carried out between August 2021 and March 2023. In the first stage, we used netnography (Kozinets, 2014) as a data collection technique, identifying the channels disclosed on the legislative websites and categorizing them based on four levels of e-participation present in the literature, which were used as analytical categories. In the second stage, through an exploratory study, we sought to verify if and how these channels worked and what they effectively allowed citizens in terms of participation. In this article, we follow the conception of participation shared by the authors we engage with (Macintosh, 2004; Gomes, 2005; and Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis, 2007) which involves means to be informed, inform one's vision to politicians, present complaints and criticisms, and co--formulate political decisions.

It was precisely in the first data collection, where we identified eight empirical channels of participation offered on the accessed legislative websites – Information Request, Deputies, Committees, Legislative Proposals, Public Hearings, Public Consultations, Ombudsman, and Submission of Legislative Suggestions – that we realized that not all these technological participation devices could be associated with the analytical categories of electronic participation we used, based on four levels of e-participation present in the literature. This prompted us to introduce two new e-participation levels, forming new analytical categories in our study.

With this overview, we begin this article with a brief discussion on the use of ICTs in democratic practices, revisiting approaches related to Digital Democracy, with an emphasis on the perspective that discusses the opening of spaces for political participation. Next, we compare electronic participation in the political arena, based on discussions on the topic found in literature. As the study that originated this article analyzed the participation channels available on the websites of the 26 Legislative Assemblies, we make a brief reference to recent studies that also analyzed these legislative portals. Finally, we present and justify the proposal for a new categorization of e-participation, whose different levels can serve as analytical categories for future academic research focused on studying the different participation channels made available by the State through digital mechanisms.

Digital democracy and political participation

The use of information technologies, including the internet, in democratic practices is part of both international and Brazilian academic debates. In the international context, where this approach originated, authors do not unanimously use a single term to refer to this discussion. Instead, there is a variety of expressions such as electronic democracy (e-democracy), teledemocracy, cyberdemocracy, and digital democracy. In the national debate, however, we observe that among Brazilian researchers, there appears to be a consensus around the term "digital democracy" to refer to this phenomenon. Despite the different expressions, it is evident that from the beginning, when the discussion about the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in the political arena became part of the academic debate, there was a reference to the issue of political participation.

Starting with the international literature, Martin Hagen (1997), one of the first to address the use of the Internet in the political arena, used the term "electronic democracy" to refer to this phenomenon. He argued that the concepts corresponding to it should be understood as contemporary theories of political participation. Based on an analysis of specific historical, institutional, and cultural attributes of the U.S. political system, Hagen suggested introducing a typology of three different concepts of electronic democracy – Teledemocracy, Cyberdemocracy, and Electronic Democratization – that take into account the technology used, the form of democracy assumed (direct or representative), and the dimension of political participation, which he considered the most vital for democracy and the political agenda to be followed.

Two other authors who used the term "electronic democracy" (e-democracy) were less optimistic about the expansion of participation. Clift (2004) argued that, despite the possibilities of expanding citizen participation through the Internet and the potential benefits for democratic practices, ICTs could also be used to protect and perpetuate the interests of already established actors. Subirats (2016) did not directly refer to the opening of spaces for social participation. For this author, electronic democracy refers to the "intention to improve, using the Internet politics, that is, the concrete form of the political system or regime and the relationships between institutions and citizenship" (Subirats, 2016, p. 59).

Using the concept of digital democracy, Hacker and Dijk (2000) addressed the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) "for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication" (ibid., p. 1).

Pérez Luño (2014), referencing teledemocracy, associated the projection of New Technologies with "processes of political participation in democratic societies" (ibid., p. 13). Regarding the object of teledemocracy, this author argued that it relates to processes of political participation and "cybercitizenship," which does not only refer to the right to vote but encompasses everything related to the condition of being a citizen in democratic societies.

In the Brazilian academic debate, the first theoretical approaches to digital democracy emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, marked by references to societal participation in the political sphere through the Internet. Gomes (2005), considered the leading authority on the topic in Brazil, also discussed the expansion of citizen participation as one of the benefits of using the Internet in the political arena within contemporary democratic contexts. For this author, digital democracy corresponds to "the experience of the internet and compatible devices, all aimed at enhancing the potential for civil participation in the conduct of public affairs" (ibid., p. 217).

In this vein, Sampaio (2013) defined digital democracy as "the use of technologies to energize the political and democratic life of the nation, seeking constitutional modernization, decentralized decision-making, increased transparency, and the rights of citizens" (ibid., p. 59). Angelo et al. (2014) related it to the use of "new Information and Communication Technologies by democratic sectors to promote a more active and direct citizen participation in public decisions" (ibid., p. 3). This perspective highlights that social participation, mediated by ICTs, implies a potential to influence political decision-making.

The context in which the use of the internet is introduced into democratic practices is emphasized by Farranha (2016), who identifies spheres of political participation such as public control and debate. This author points out that the 1990s were characterized by State reform, which led to the introduction of a set of new procedures, including:

> [...] the possibility of using the internet as a means to ensure greater access for citizens, dissemination of information, streamlining of services, and, to some extent, the intention to build mechanisms for consultation and participation. These mechanisms should provide greater interaction, control, engagement, and public debate, constituting a form of democracy that has come to be called digital democracy. (Ibid., p. 22).

We perceive that the various approaches in the literature highlight the possibilities of opening spaces for social participation in the political arena, through the tools offered by technological devices, with different degrees of impact. Interested in comparing digital democracy from the perspective of opening channels for citizen political participation, through digital mechanisms, in the next section we direct the discussions to the theme of electronic participation, through a brief literature review on the topic.

E-participation

Electronic participation or e-participation is addressed by authors, such as those compared in the previous section of this article, who discuss the use of Information and Communication Technologies in democratic practices. It is worth questioning what type of participation these authors refer to. According to the type of participation, is there a difference in terms of the possibility of impacting political decision-making processes?

In the search for answers to these questions, we take, as a starting point, the presentation and analysis of the categories of electronic participation, found in the international and Brazilian literature, from three publications: (a) the article *Characterizing E-Participation in Policy-Making*, by British researcher Macintosh (2004); (b) the article *A Framework for Assessing eParticipation Projects and Tools*, by Greek researchers Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007); and (c) the article *Digital Democracy and the Problem of Civil Participation in Political Decision-Making*, by Gomes (2005), which inserts this theme into the Brazilian debate.

In Macintosh's (2004) article, three levels of e-participation are presented, organized from the lowest to the highest degree of impact on political decision-making – e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering – based on a study for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in which the author participated in 2001. The e-enabling level is related to access to information; e-engaging refers to consulting public opinion by the State, based on agendas pre-determined by it; and e-empowering is related to the active participation of citizens as producers of politics, therefore, with the power to influence policy formulation.

Gomes (2005) offers a categorization comprising five levels, which the author called degrees of digital democracy. From the 1st to the 5th degree, the possibilities of participation

via ICTs are described. Succinctly, based on the author, the degrees of digital democracy (DD) refer to: 1st degree of DD – the offer of online public services, to increase management efficiency; 2nd degree of DD – the political sphere open to consulting public opinion; 3rd degree of DD – the provision of information and accountability (public transparency); 4th degree of DD – online deliberation (the State is more open to social participation and the public can intervene deliberatively in the production of political decision); and, 5th degree of DD – the implementation of models of direct democracy and political decision-making by the public.

And the article by Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007) presents an evaluation framework for e-participation projects and tools, developed as part of a European Commission-funded initiative that applied the framework to 19 e-democracy projects across Europe. The researchers recognize the three levels of e-participation, contained in the OECD report – and disseminated by Macintosh (2004) – and extend the categorization by adding two additional levels. For Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007) e-participation is presented in five levels: e-inform, e-consult, e-involve, e-collaborate, and e-empowered.

The e-inform level corresponds to access to information; the e-consult is for public feedback to the State; the e-involve level comprises online work with the citizens to ensure that public concerns are understood and taken into account; the e-collaborate level

involves partnership between the government and citizens throughout the policy production process; and the e-empowered level comprises electronic participation in processes in which the final decision is in the hands of the public.

By appropriating ourselves in this literature, we realized that it was possible to group the categories presented under different nomenclatures, by the authors consulted, from what they encompassed, or allowed, in terms of electronic participation. In Chart 1, we present, from the discussions of the three publications consulted - Macintosh (2004), Gomes (2005) and Tambouris et al. (2007) – a categorization of e-participation that, from the scope, presents four distinct levels that we chose to organize them in an order that contemplates categories that go from the lowest to the highest level

of impact in the political decision-making process, following the logic used by the authors. Alongside the scope, we present, in the table below, the nomenclature used by the consulted authors.

The level of e-participation, related to access to information, is referred to in Macintosh (2004) as e-enabling, in Gomes (2005) as the 3rd degree of digital democracy, and in Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) as e-inform. For British researcher Macintosh (2004), this level of electronic participation requires making information accessible and understandable – in terms of ease of access and content of the information, respectively. Gomes (2005) associates it with providing information and accountability, aiming to promote public transparency for the citizens. For the Greek

Chart 1 – Scope and equivalence in the literature of e-participation categories

Abrangência	Equivalence in the literature
Access to citizen information	• Macintosh (2004): e-enabling. • Gomes (2005): 3rd degree of digital democracy. • Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007): e-inform
Citizen consultation	• Macintosh (2004): e-engaging. • Gomes (2005): 2nd degree of digital democracy. • Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007): e-consult.
Citizen collaboration	• Gomes (2005): 4th degree of digital democracy. • Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007): e-collaborate.
Citizen political decision-making	• Macintosh (2004): e-empowering. • Gomes (2005): 5th degree of digital democracy. • Tambouris, Liotas and Tarabanis (2007): e-empowered.

Source: own elaboration, july 2021).

researchers, the level of information access is described as a participation channel that provides "citizens with important information concerning policies and citizenship online" (Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis, 2007, p. 7).

These three terminologies introduced by Macintosh (2004), Gomes (2005), and Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) correspond to the level of e-participation concerning access to information, involving a state action towards citizens to account for its actions, promoting public transparency by ensuring access to public information.

The level of public opinion consultation is referenced in all three consulted publications. Macintosh (2004) calls this level e-engaging, Gomes (2005) calls it the 2nd degree of digital democracy, and Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) refer to it as e-consult. In Macintosh (2004), e-engaging aims to "the top-down consultation of citizens by government or parliament" (ibid., p. 3). When defining the 2nd degree of digital democracy, Gomes (2005) highlights that it corresponds to consulting citizens by the State to gauge public opinion on already established topics or those that may become part of the public agenda, demonstrating some level of the political sphere's permeability to public opinion. Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) e-consult ratifies the idea of gathering feedback and alternatives from the public. The level of public opinion consultation is limited in that it is a channel for reactive social participation in a state initiative that holds the political agenda.

The level of collaboration is referred to as e-collaborate in Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007). These authors emphasize that

electronic collaboration requires a partnership between citizens and the government, where citizens actively participate in developing alternatives and identifying preferred solutions. Gomes (2005), defining the 4th degree of digital democracy, does not specifically mention collaboration but refers to online deliberation spaces where "the State becomes more permeable to popular participation, allowing the public not only to stay informed about the conduct of public affairs but also to intervene deliberatively in the production of political decisions" (ibid., p. 219). In other words, this level depends on collaboration between the two: the State, which needs to open up to active social participation; and the citizens and/ or civil society, who are invited to participate, no longer reactively as in the consultation level, but actively with the power to intervene in political decision-making.

Finally, the level of political decision-making power, which Macintosh (2004) and Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) refer to as e-empowering, and Gomes (2005) names the 5th degree of digital democracy. Macintosh emphasizes that, at this level, citizens emerge as producers and not just consumers of policy, meaning that by allowing citizens to participate in policy formulation, there is a facilitation for upward ideas to influence the political agenda (Macintosh, 2004). For Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007, p. 7), this level "is the placement of the final decision in the hands, thus implementing what the public decides". And, to Gomes (2005), at this level, the citizen not only controls but also produces the political decisions. The Brazilian researcher highlights that, as a result of the implementation of a 5th

degree digital democracy, "a State governed by online plebiscites would leave exclusively the functions of public administration to the political sphere" (ibid., p. 219).

We emphasize that two categories, one presented in Gomes (2005) – 1st degree of digital democracy – and another in Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) – electronic involvement – are not included in Chart 1, one because we consider that it does not promote e-participation and the other because we believe it is an implicit aspect, and therefore, already covered in other categories.[3]

The analysis of the categories (levels) of e-participation found in the literature allowed us to establish a table (see Chart 1) showing that there is equivalence between them in the three consulted publications, even under different nomenclatures, in addition to other common points: the presentation of e-participation categories is done hierarchically – in increasing levels, supposedly starting from those in which social participation has no direct impact on political decision-making to those in which this participation can effectively influence or mean the political decision-making power of citizens, individually or collectively – and the use, in the explanation of most categories, of expressions such as State (broad expression), government, public administration, public management, suggesting that these categorizations are aimed at electronic participation initiatives promoted by the Executive Power.

Understanding that e-participation is one of the areas of discussion within the broader field of Digital Democracy studies, and that, according to Sampaio et al. (2022) and Mendonça (2023), most studies in this field in Brazil focus on analyzing initiatives involving the use of ICTs by the Executive Branch, the research that gave rise to this article turned its attention to the use of digital mechanisms in the Legislative Branch, specifically the 26 State Legislative Assemblies, through their websites. Before doing so, however, we sought to identify the approaches already taken in other studies that also chose the portals of Brazilian Legislative Assemblies as their object of analysis.

Recent studies on legislative portals

In searching for academic research on state legislative websites in the two largest databases of theses and dissertations in Brazil—the portals of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) and the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD)—using the search terms "portals of Legislative Assemblies" and "websites of Legislative Assemblies," we encountered just over half a dozen works, all recent. We observed that most of these studies focus on analyzing channels of access to information and public transparency in one (or a few) specific Legislative Assembly portal(s), such as the studies by Medeiros (2023), Ferreira (2023), Vasconcelos (2022), and Cruz (2022). Medeiros (2023) studied the management of legislative information and proposed the development of a policy for accessing bills in

the Legislative Assembly of Rio Grande do Norte (ALRN); Ferreira (2023) analyzed the portal of the Legislative Assembly of São Paulo (Alesp) from the perspective of public transparency and social control; Vasconcelos (2022) examined the oversight and public transparency of the Legislative Assembly of Ceará (Alece); and Cruz (2022) analyzed the use of the Access to Information Law from 2020 to 2022 in the Legislative Assemblies of the states in Brazil's northern region.

We highlight that studies that examined all the portals of the Legislative Assemblies also focused on issues strictly related to access to information and public transparency. This was the case with the investigation by Costa (2021), which identified the provision of information in the transparency sections and open data on the websites of the Legislative Assemblies, as well as the portals of the Federal Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and five Municipal Chambers – Curitiba (PR), Goiânia (GO), Manaus (AM), Salvador (BA), and São Paulo (SP). However, when examining the influence of citizens in proposing laws through the portal of the Legislative Assembly of Minas Gerais, the research by Ladinho Júnior (2019) opened another perspective for research on legislative websites.

In addition to the search for academic research developed in Master's and Doctoral programs at Brazilian educational institutions – the seven works found and described above were produced in Master's courses – we need to reference the article by Braga, Mitozo, and Tadra (2016), which publishes the result of a study that analyzed the websites of the 26 Legislative Assemblies and the District Chamber to verify

data, on these portals, about the fulfillment, in the online environment, of the parliament's functions in terms of legislation, legitimation, representation, supervision, education, and participation, referring to the years 2014 and 2016. This work took into account the influence of socioeconomic and political factors on the performance of the parliaments' functions in the online environment and deepened the analyses, mainly, in the educational functions of the legislative houses.

The study published in this article differs from other approaches, which also analyzed legislative portals, by comparing the participation channels offered on the websites of the 26 Brazilian Legislative Assemblies with the analytical categories of e-participation present in the consulted literature, verifying that these were not sufficient to account for all the channels found in the empirical instance, we suggested a new categorization of e-participation, which encompasses the four existing levels in the literature (see Chart 1) and includes two new levels of electronic participation. This proposal for a new categorization of e-participation is presented below.

Proposal for a new categorization of e-participation

The academic research that led to a new proposal for the categorization of e-participation had the participation channels available on the websites of the 26 Legislative Assemblies as its study object. Eight different participation channels were found, which,

in the research, we called Technological Participation Devices (TPDs). As we did not find, in the literature, specific categorizations of e-participation aimed at the Legislative Power, we chose to collect the data using, as analytical categories, the four levels of e-participation found in the literature, which we described in Chart 1, and include: access to information, consultation, collaboration, and the political decision-making power of citizens. However, when trying to relate the participation channels identified on the 26 legislative websites with the four levels of e-participation described in Chart 1, we realized that of the eight channels found empirically, two did not correspond to any of these levels. In Chart 2, we specify the eight different channels identified on the legislative portals and the function of each in the perspective of promoting e-participation.

We emphasize that we associate the channels "Request for Information," "Deputies," "Committees," and "Legislative Proposals" with the level of e-participation that encompasses citizens' access to information; while the channels "Public Hearings" and "Public Consultations" are associated with the level of e-participation corresponding to citizen consultation. However, when accessing the legislative websites, we did not find any channel that could be associated with the levels of collaboration and decision-making power of citizens.

Chart 2 – Participation channels found empirically x function of e-participation promotion channels

Name of participation channel found on the websites of the legislative assemblies	Function of the channel in promoting e-participation
Public hearings	Allow citizens to participate online in public hearings promoted by the Legislative Assemblies, enabling the legislative houses to access public opinion.
Public consultations	Allow citizens to participate in online public consultations promoted by the Legislative Assemblies, enabling the legislative houses to access public opinion.
Committees	Allow citizens to access information online about parliamentary committees, such as their functions, member deputies, and the activities carried out.
Deputies	Allow citizens to access information online about the parliamentary activities of state deputies.
Ombudsman	Allow the online submission of various manifestations of citizenship to the Legislative Power.
Submission of legislative suggestion	Allow citizens to submit legislative proposal suggestions online.
Legislative proposals	Allow citizens to follow the progress of legislative proposals.
Request for information	Allow users to send requests for access to information.

Source: research data (August/2022).

With the identification, on the Legislative Assemblies' portals, of the channels "Ombudsman" – intended for the registration of various types of citizen manifestations, such as criticisms, complaints, denunciations, and compliments – and "Submission of Legislative Suggestion," which enables citizens to specifically submit legislative proposal suggestions via the websites, we suggest including levels of e-participation that we call citizen demonstrations and proposals. In that case, on their initiative, and not to respond to a demand from the State, citizens can position themselves in different ways before the Legislative Branch; and in the latter, because we believe that this is what citizens do (they propose), concerning the Legislative Branch's core activity, when sending law proposals through the legislative suggestion channel.

Based on the participation channels found empirically, we suggest a categorization of e-participation that includes: (1) the four levels of e-participation already present in the literature – which share essences but appear with different nomenclature, described in Chart 1; (2) the two new levels of e-participation that we propose. We also highlight that, when thinking about nomenclature for the six levels of e-participation, we observe the perspective of this investigation, which is that of "representative democracy seen from below," aiming to understand what the channels provided on the legislative portals enable for citizens.

The categorization we propose, therefore, consists of six levels of e-participation,[4] arranged hierarchically, from levels we evaluate as having the least power of influence to those with the greatest power of influence on political decision-making, as shown in Chart 3, which we present below.

We renamed *Level 1* of this categorization as *Informative*. It encompasses the information access channels provided by the State to citizens; already covered by Macintosh (2004) as electronic enabling; by Gomes (2005) as the 3rd degree of digital democracy; and by Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) as electronic informing. In our empirical case, it corresponds to the channels: Request for Information, Deputies, Committees, Legislative Proposals.[5]

Level 2 as *Citizen Manifestations*. This level corresponds to citizens' initiatives to actively send various contents to the State from their agendas, thus amplifying their voice. We found on the legislative portals the possibility of sending 22 different types of manifestations through the Ombudsman channel, such as acknowledgment, evaluation of actions or omissions of Parliament, criticism, unclear demand, denunciation, doubt, compliment, e-SIC; information (request for access to information or Request for information-document), request, call drop, questioning, issues related to the Deputies' performance in the exercise of the mandate, complaint, protocol resubmission, representations, simplify, request, request for action, unanswered request, suggestion, and others.[6]

Level 3 as *Consultative*. It refers to the consultation of the State with society, already presented by Macintosh (2004) as electronic engagement; by Gomes (2005) as the 2nd degree of digital democracy; and by Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) as electronic consultation.[7]

Chart 3 – Proposal for categorizing e-participation into six levels

Level	Name	Presence in literature	Examples in empirical instance
1	Informative	• Macintosh (2004) e-enabling • Gomes (2005) 3rd degree of digital democracy • Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) e-inform	Channels: Request for Information, Deputies, Committees, Legislative Proposals
2	Citizen manifestations	Proposed new category	Ombudsman channel
3	Consultative	• Macintosh (2004) e-engaging • Gomes (2005) 2nd degree of digital democracy • Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) e-consult	Channels: Public Hearings Public Consultations
4	Propositional	Proposed new category	Legislative proposal submission channel
5	Collaborative	• Gomes (2005) 4th degree of digital democracy • Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) e-collaborate	Channel: online interactive and deliberative meetings (forums)
6	Decision-making	• Macintosh (2004) : e-empowering • Gomes (2005) 5th degree of digital democracy • Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) e-empower	Channel: online plebiscites

Source: own elaboration (January/2023).

Level 4 as *Propositional*.[8] It encompasses the possibilities for citizens to propose something to the State and, in the case of the Legislative Assemblies, it refers to the exclusive channel on the websites for submitting legislative suggestions.[9] This level of e-participation that we suggest demonstrates an empowerment of citizens who start to find space in some legislative portals to propose new law projects on topics that interest them.

Level 5 as *Collaborative* because it brings forth the essence of collaboration between the State and citizens, already addressed in Gomes (2005) as the 4th degree of digital democracy and in Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) as electronic collaboration, which implies joint deliberation between the State and social actors.[10]

Finally, *Level 6*, as *Decision-Making,* which corresponds to electronic participation where citizens have political decision-making power, as discussed in Macintosh (2004) and in Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) as electronic empowerment, and in Gomes (2005) as the 5th degree of digital democracy.[11]

Listing all the levels of the categorization we propose, in terms of the possibility of influence on political decision-making, and justifying the hierarchical arrangement of the levels from informative to decision-making, we assess that:

a) Informative has the least power of influence, as it only corresponds to citizens' access to public information;

b) Citizen Manifestations, which encompasses citizens' initiatives, based on their own demands, to express themselves before the State, such as sending criticisms, denunciations, complaints, has more potential for citizen influence on political decision-making than Informative;

c) Consultative can influence more than Informative and Citizen Manifestations, as it refers to an initiative that comes from the State towards citizenship (the State submits some issue for citizens' evaluation to access public opinion);

d) Propositional has more influence than the previous three, as it refers to citizens' submission of legislative suggestions, encompassing the main activity of the Legislative Power, which is to propose and approve new legislation within its scope;

e) Collaborative can influence more than the previous four, as it involves socio-state interaction, including the process of joint deliberation;

f) Decision-making has more influence than the previous five, as it is the citizenship that is responsible for the political decision-making process.

Despite not identifying, in the analyzed empirical instance, e-participation channels corresponding to the collaborative and decision-making levels, we believe that these categories remain valid for other studies that analyze electronic participation channels in the political arena.

Final considerations

In concluding this article, we highlight that the discussion about the availability, by the State, of political participation channels through electronic means takes place in a context of contemporary democratic innovations, within a scenario where the crisis of representative democracy or representative institutions is being discussed. This debate belongs to the field of studies in Brazil known as Digital Democracy, which pertains to the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, in democratic practices.

The theoretical debate around the levels of e-participation reflects the complexity and diversity of approaches to the use of ICTs in democratic practices, particularly regarding political participation. International and Brazilian literature recognizes different dimensions and categories of e-participation, organized in hierarchies that range from basic levels, such as access to information, to more advanced levels, such as citizen empowerment in political decision-making. Macintosh (2004) was a pioneer in establishing three levels of e-participation – electronic enabling, electronic engagement, and electronic empowerment, which range from simple access to information to active participation in policy formulation. Other studies, such as Gomes (2005), expanded this categorization to five levels, encompassing

everything from the provision of online public services to the implementation of direct democracy. The research by Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis (2007) offered a similar view by highlighting the growing citizen participation in the decision-making process. These different theoretical approaches reveal a dynamic panorama, in which the degree of citizen influence on political decisions varies according to the technological tools provided and the participation spaces opened by the State, reflecting the multiple forms of digital participation in the democratic context.

In addition to what the literature already contemplated in terms of levels of electronic participation, the identification of participation channels provided on the 26 legislative portals in Brazil we analyzed led us to realize that those levels, discussed in the literature and used as analytical categories, did not account for what we found empirically. In this sense, we suggest two new levels and, finally, a new categorization of e-participation.

The first, named Citizen Manifestations, broadens the range of possibilities for citizens' positions, from criticism to denunciation. The second, Propositional, enables citizens and civil society to submit legislative proposals.

Our proposed categorization consists of six levels: four previously discussed in the literature (Macintosh, 2004; Gomes, 2005; Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis, 2007), and two newly introduced by us. This new categorization suggests a specific nomenclature for these six levels, based on the perspective of "representative democracy seen from below,"

considering what each level represents for the citizen. In this sense, we propose the following categorization of e-participation:

• Level 1: Informative – encompasses all channels that allow citizens access to public information.

• Level 2: Citizen Manifestations (a category we propose to include) – includes the channel(s) that allow citizens, based on their own agendas, to express themselves before the State.

• Level 3: Consultative – encompasses the channels that allow the State to access public opinion.

• Level 4: Propositional (category we propose to include) – refers to the channel(s) that enable citizens to propose legislative suggestions.

• Level 5: Collaborative – encompasses the channels that allow socio-state interactions, in which citizens participate deliberatively.

• Level 6: Decision-Making – includes the channels through which citizens exercise political decision-making power.

In conclusion, we emphasize that the e-participation categories presented in this article were initially intended for analyzing electronic participation in the Legislative Power. However, we consider that they can also be used to analyze e-participation in Executive Power initiatives, as Executive Power websites, at different levels, even by law,[12] have the Ombudsman channel. Additionally, there are websites, such as the Federal Government's, that offer platforms like Fala.BR,[13] allowing citizens to submit suggestions for improvements in public service delivery.

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Notes

(*) The proposal presented here is originally discussed in the thesis "De panfletos eletrônicos a canais efetivos: uma análise dos dispositivos tecnológicos de participação dos websites das Assembleias Legislativas", de Melo, L. V. (2003). Available at: https://repositorio.jesuita.org.br/handle/UNISINOS/12947

(1) In the research presented here, we opted to consider the electronic participation channels made available by the State and not those that could be used by civil society, such as electronic petitions, for example. This justified the focus on the feasibility of the research, which covered 26 Legislative Assemblies.

(2) The Legislative Assembly is the legislative body of each state in Brazil, with the function of elaborating, discussing and approving legal norms, as well as supervising and controlling the actions of the Executive Branch, in its area of competence.

(3) In the case of Gomes (2005), we consider that the 1st degree of digital democracy – related to citizens´ access to online public services, encompassing initiatives that seek the efficiency of management and the reduction of Public Administration costs through the replacement of state bureaucracy with what the author called "digital bureaucracy" (p. 219) – analyzes the use of digital tools from the perspective of public management and not electronic participation. For the Greek authors, the category of electronic involvement encompasses "working online with the public throughout a process to ensure that the public concerns are understood and taken into consideration" (Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis, 2007, p. 7). However, our understanding is that electronic involvement is implicit in other analytical categories of e-participation, such as those that encompass citizen consultation (allowing the State to access public opinion) and citizen collaboration (implying joint discussion and deliberation between the State and citizens).

(4) Four of them correspond to a renaming of categories already proposed in the consulted literature (Macintosh, 2004; Gomes, 2005; Tambouris, Liotas, and Tarabanis, 2007) – informative, consultative, collaborative, and decision-making - and the other two levels correspond to the new categories we propose – citizen manifestations and propositional.

(5) Among the 26 legislative portals analyzed, we found a total of 107 participation channels, of which 74, corresponding to about 70% of the total, belonged to level 1 of e-participation.

(6) The Legislative Power is not yet subjected to an Ombudsman law, as is the case with the Executive Power. However, there is Bill 10.844/2018, which addresses the issue, currently being processed in the Chamber of Deputies.

(7) In the universe of 26 assemblies, we found only eight consultative channels, with 3 for public hearings and 5 for public consultations. These 8 consultative channels correspond to 7% of the total e-participation channels found in the empirical research.

(8) The Propositional level differs from the Citizen Manifestations level, as the former receives exclusive suggestions for legislative proposals, while the latter receives general suggestions such as, for example, the organization of a public hearing to discuss a topic of public interest or the submission of a bill   for public consultation

(9) Out of the total of 107 technological participation devices identified in the empirical research, only three were propositional, which represents about 2% of the total devices identified empirically.

(10) In the empirical instance of the researched universe, we did not find any channels at the Collaborative level of e-participation.

(11) We did not find any channel in the empirical instance, such as an electronic plebiscite, that corresponded to this level of e-participation.

(12) Federal Law 13.460/2017 provides for the participation, protection, and defense of the rights of users of public administration services. Available at: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2015-2018/2017/lei/l13460.htm.

(13) Available at: https://falabr.cgu.gov.br/web/home.

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