

RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
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E-democracy in Finnish municipalities

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Key messages

- **The Internet offers new possibilities for involving citizens in the political decision-making through e-democracy.**
- **Municipal websites can support different perspectives on democracy by easing communication between inhabitants and representatives.**
- **Finnish municipality websites have a strong emphasis on providing citizens with information on current topics and the political decision-making, but other forms of e-democracy could be advanced.**

The Internet offers new possibilities to advance the democratic involvement of citizens. Through various measures of e-democracy, the Internet provides easy and cost effective solutions to authorities at national and local levels of government for keeping citizens informed and allowing them a greater say in the political decision-making.^{1,2}

Finland has traditionally had a strong local representative democracy.³ Nonetheless, levels of turnout in local elections have generally been low compared to the national level suggesting citizens are less involved in this level of government. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the prospects of municipal reforms give further impetus for deepening democracy at the local level. Especially considering these challenges to the local Finnish democracy it is therefore of interest to examine whether the Finnish municipalities have taken advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet. Although the possibility of resuscitating democracy via the Internet has long been known, there is a lack of systematic knowledge on the extent to which the authorities have taken advantage of these possibilities.

This study has been conducted to map the extent of e-democracy found on the websites of Finnish municipalities. The results show that the municipal websites offer possibilities for gaining insights into the political decision-making. Nevertheless, a number of opportunities for deepening democracy are not exploited to any greater extent.

E-democracy and citizen involvement

Several studies have found that citizens in the established democracies are growing increasingly disengaged from the political sphere, which has raised fears over the sustainability of democracy.⁴ The Internet offers possibilities that have been presented as a mean to combat this development by offering possibilities for reinvigorating the dated democracies.^{1,2}

The Internet can alter the relationship between citizens and authorities in slightly different manners. The term e-democracy refers to all efforts that aim to increase the involvement of citizens in the political decision-making through new information and communication technologies, where the Internet occupies a central position.^{5,6,7} A related topic concerns studies of e-government, where individuals as clients or consumers make use of public services via the Internet or related digital technologies.^{8,9,10} In these studies, the principal interest lies in assessing the possibilities for performing electronic transactions and the user-friendliness of the websites. It is not always possible to neatly separate e-democracy and e-government since the ease of which citizens can access public services is also a democratic concern. Nonetheless, it is important to observe the principal differences that exist between them. Although both are of importance when considering the relationship between citizens and authorities, the involvement of citizens in the political

decision-making is of primary importance from a democratic perspective.⁵

Another central distinction should be made based on who instigates the initiatives of e-democracy. In *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship*, the authors Coleman and Blumler make a distinction between two essentially different forms of e-democracy.¹ E-democracy from below refers to initiatives initiated by citizens themselves to be heard in political matters, whereas e-democracy from above concerns the online possibilities the authorities offer citizens for taking part in politics and the extent to which these efforts can help reinvigorate democracy. It is the latter forms of e-democracy that are of central concern here where the aim is to scrutinize how the local authorities in Finland use their webpages to promote e-democracy.

Perspectives on democracy and the Internet

The authorities can support e-democracy from above by launching a wide range of democratic initiatives on their websites. These initiatives can help promote different notions of democracy and the role of citizens in the political decision-making by subscribing to different normative theories of what democracy ought to be like.^{6,7} There is no definitive categorisation in the literature on e-democracy, but a basic distinction can be made between

Table 1. Perspectives on democracy and indicators of e-democracy

	Representative	Participatory	Deliberative
Conception of democracy	<i>Democracy needs free and fair elections where citizens elect their representatives</i>	<i>Democracy needs active citizens who give input to elected representatives</i>	<i>Democracy needs continuous dialogue among citizens and with elected representatives</i>
Role of website	<i>Disseminate information from decision-makers to citizens so they can make informed electoral choices</i>	<i>Information from citizens to decision-makers so these can take decisions in accordance with citizen preferences</i>	<i>Information feedback loop between citizens and decision-makers to help form and transform preferences</i>
Website indicators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contact information to members of local council 2. Schedules for council meetings 3. Agendas and protocols of meetings 4. Webcasts and/or recordings of meetings 5. Electronic newsletter or RSS-feeds 6. Link to profile on social media 7. Decision-makers write blogs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online initiatives (§28) 2. Vote on current events through e-polls 3. Gather e-signatures 4. Comment on proposals under consideration 5. Information on how to influence decision-making 6. Give feedback 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forums for citizen discussions 2. Regular online discussions between officials and citizens 3. Ask questions and receive answers in public 4. Online efforts to mobilize marginalised groups

representative, participatory and deliberative democratic perspectives on e-democracy. A central question involves the direction of information between citizens and the authorities. The major differences between the three perspectives are presented in table 1.

The representative perspective concerns efforts that empower citizens in their capacity as voters in a representative democracy. Since a well-functioning democracy should make it possible for citizens to make informed electoral choices, the primary task of the municipal websites is to create a continuous flow of information from the authorities to citizens. The participatory perspective accords citizens a more active role in the political decision-making, since this stresses that participation leads to more democratic outcomes. Accordingly, the municipal websites ought to include features that allow information to flow from citizens to representatives by making it possible to provide input into the political decision-making. The deliberative perspective emphasises the need for information to flow freely to and from citizens and representatives, but also among the citizens to help transform preferences. The municipal websites should therefore encourage continuous dialogue among citizens and decision-makers to help develop preferences by including features that support this endeavour.¹¹

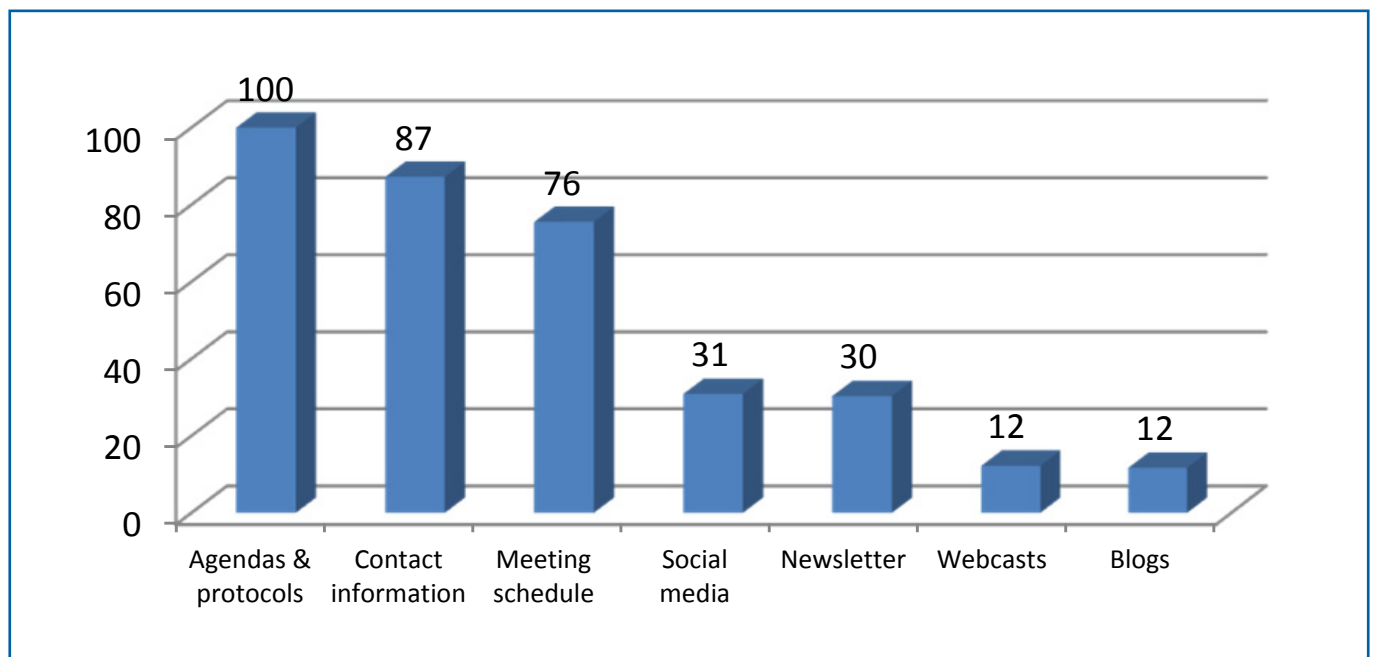
As is also displayed in table 1, a number of e-democratic initiatives help promote each perspective on democracy. The question is to what extent the Finnish municipalities have adopted these measures and what perspective on democracy is dominant in the Finnish local e-democracy.

The state of e-democracy in Finnish municipalities

To examine the extent to which the Finnish municipalities have implemented initiatives to support the three perspectives on their webpages, I did an exploratory study of 188 municipal websites in municipalities with more than 5000 inhabitants. Although the situation is not static since the webpages of the municipalities are in constant development, the study provides a fairly accurate portrait of the current state of e-democracy in Finnish municipalities.

Some clear patterns emerge in the extent of e-democracy in the Finnish municipal websites. Most efforts have been put into disseminating information to residents in accordance with the representative perspective on e-democracy.

Figure 1. Percentage of municipal websites that include initiatives related to representative e-democracy

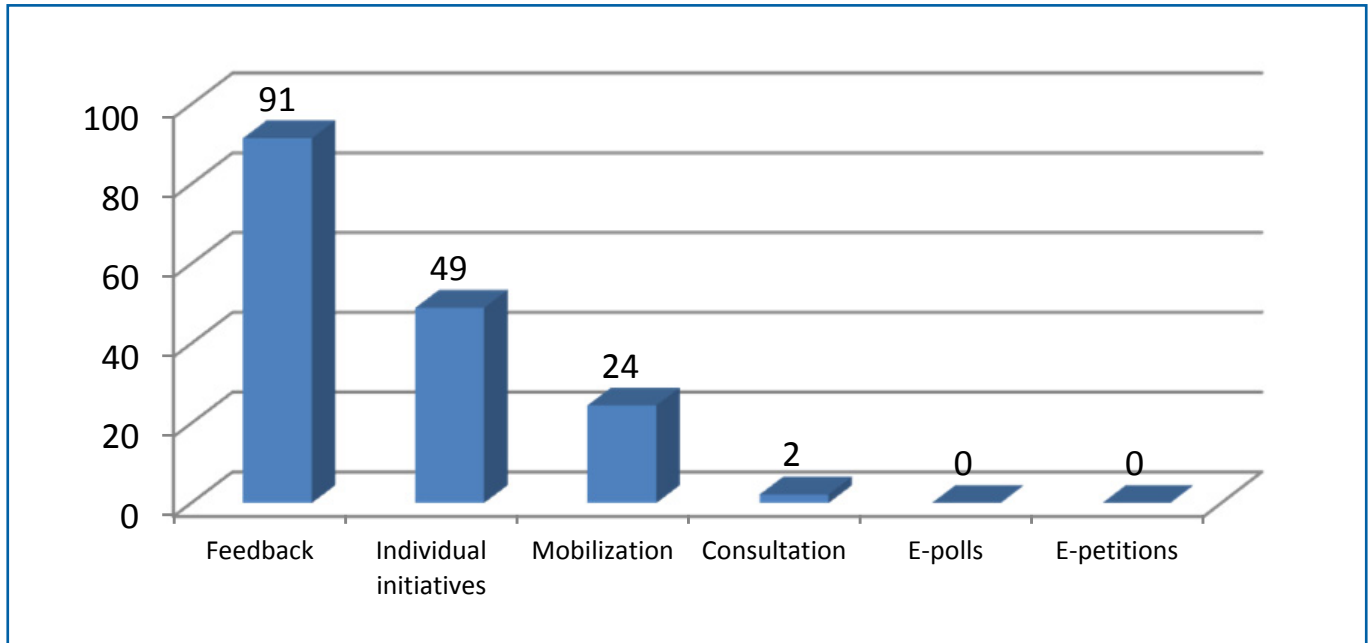


As can be seen in figure 1, the municipal websites provide high levels of information to inhabitants. This is particularly pronounced for the first three bars in the figure concerning information on city council members and meetings. All or almost all municipalities discern contact information, meeting schedules and provide the protocols and agendas for the meetings of the city council. Other information channels such as social networks and newsfeeds are less frequent. Nevertheless the Finnish municipalities in accordance with the representative ideal use the websites to disseminate information from

the authorities to the inhabitants of the municipalities. Although not directly comparable, these efforts are impressive in international comparison judging by a study including several countries.¹² This is in line with the conventional wisdom that the Finnish local democracy is a strong representative democracy.³

Figure 2 shows that the Finnish municipality webpages include fewer initiatives that give inhabitants the chance to channel information to the local authorities in accordance with the participatory perspective.

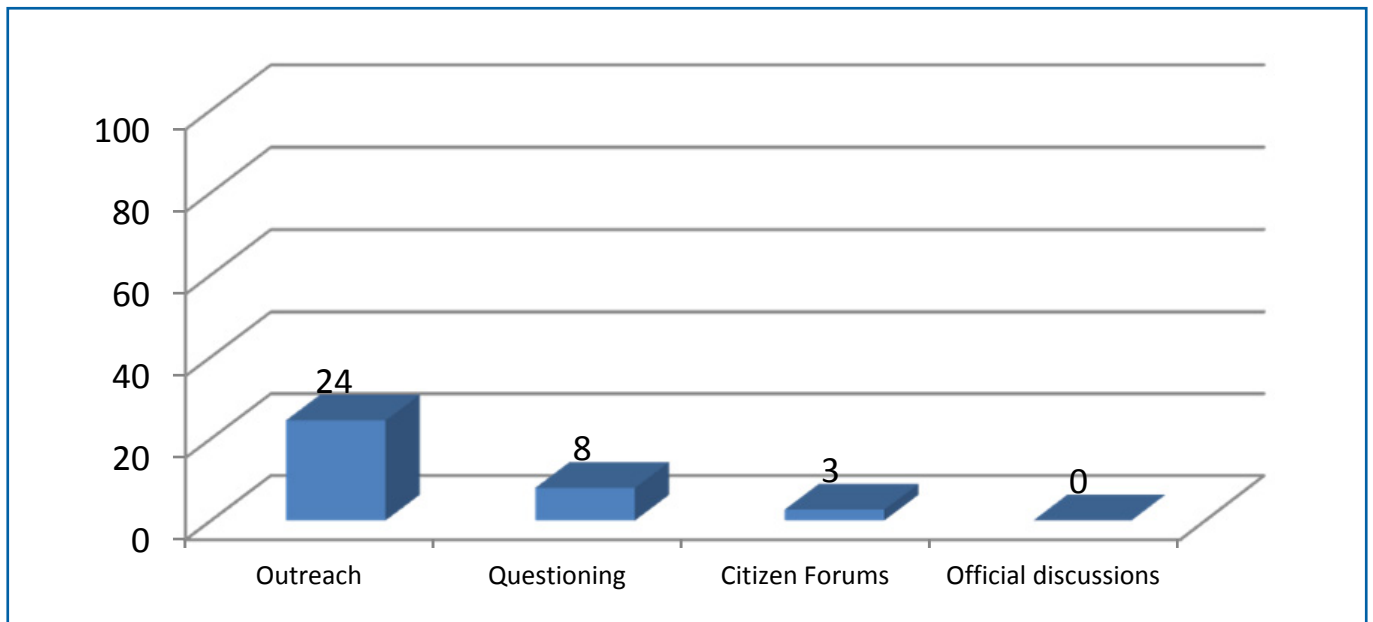
Figure 2. Percentage of municipal websites that include initiatives related to participatory e-democracy



Two initiatives are popular on the webpages. Slightly less than half of the municipalities include the possibility for submitting a citizen initiative through the municipal webpage in accordance with the possibility provided in § 28 of the Finnish Local Government Act. This figure only includes the websites where it is actually possible to submit the initiative electronically, but more municipalities include instructions for how to do it offline. In addition to this, a large majority of 91 % of the websites make it possible to give feedback on current matters in the municipality. This is a normally a general possibility that makes it possible for inhabitants to give feedback provided they are informed about the on-going political

processes. However, few municipalities give a possibility to comment on specific proposals through consultation measures. There are also no means available for directly taking part in the political decision-making by way of e-polls or gathering signatures. Although some participatory measures of e-democracy are enacted, this perspective is generally given less emphasis in the municipal websites.

For the deliberative perspective on e-democracy and efforts to support a continuous dialogue, the results in figure 3 show that there are even fewer initiatives that support this perspective.

Figure 3. Percentage of municipal websites that include initiatives related to deliberative e-democracy

Only few initiatives support an on-going dialogue among citizens and their representatives. The most frequent initiative concerns efforts to mobilize marginalised groups in society. This in particular to get younger citizens involved in politics, although sometimes it also concerns immigrants or the elderly. Other than this the efforts are sporadic and are virtually only found in the largest cities examined. It should also be noticed that in several of the instances where the municipality did provide a citizen forum for discussions, the use appeared to be very limited.

The way forward for e-democracy in Finnish municipalities

These results show that the Finnish municipalities predominantly use their websites to grant inhabitants easier access to information. Hence, they mainly function as a platform for communication to citizens, which is undoubtedly an important part of democracy. Nevertheless, the findings also show that many possibilities for deepening e-democracy have not been used to any greater extent. Most municipalities can exploit the democratic potential of the Internet to a greater extent by engaging citizens in the political decision-making in a more direct and continuous fashion.

From a democratic perspective, it is important to stress that the use of ICT should not be considered just another

channel for communication from decision-makers to citizens. The Internet also offers possibilities to involve residents directly in the political decision-making and to give them possibilities to interact with each other and with the political representatives in an enhanced democratic dialogue. To increase the use of such initiatives would certainly add an additional layer to the Finnish e-democracy at the municipal level.

It might be argued that the citizens are not interested in being involved via the municipal websites since previous efforts to initiate citizen forums have largely been futile. Hence, other efforts to increase e-democracy could also be to no avail. However, it is worth pointing out that many municipal websites lacked a coherent vision of the role of the website in the democratic system of the municipality. Although the design and user-friendliness of the webpages did not form part of this study, it was a general impression that several webpages were fragmented and difficult to navigate since various democratic initiatives were added to the previous ones as technological or economic advances made it possible. Such lack of clarity not only makes it difficult to use the possibilities offered, it is also likely to deter citizens from becoming active since it gives the impression that their efforts will not be taken seriously.

Promoting e-democracy is not just about adding more possibilities to the websites. A viable e-democracy needs to include a clear and coherent vision of what role

the website has in the political system and how citizens can use it to gain information and influence the political decision-making. It might be better to offer fewer alternatives that provide citizens with clear and effective

ways of influencing the political decision-making. This involves offering user-friendly websites and an online environment that is in touch with the general vision of democracy in the municipality.

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