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# CONCEPTS OF E-DEMOCRACY IN AN E-SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

With the increasing digitalization of society, many new concepts have emerged. In addition to e-business, e-commerce, and e-government, we now also have e-democracy, e-voting, e-parliament, e-information, and many other e-conceptions. What do these terms mean, how do they differ from one-another, and how do they fit in an e-society? In this paper, we try to define, differentiate, and place these concepts, based on the existing literature.

## Keywords

Definitions, digitalization, e-consultation, e-democracy, e-government, e-information, e-petition, e-parliament, e-participation, e-referendum, e-service, e-society, e-voting.

## INTRODUCTION

As society increasingly adopts digital technologies, transitioning more and more to an e-society, many new concepts have emerged, in addition to the already customary ones like e-business, e-commerce, and e-government. While Magoulas et al. (2007) refer to e-society broadly as a research area that covers various aspects of deploying information and communications technologies for large user communities, Loo (2013) gives a narrower definition of e-society, defining it as a society where e-technologies are so fully integrated into the fabrics of the society that their use no longer entails major household decisions. Accepting this latter definition, we explore an important aspect of the e-society, namely e-democracy, with many associated concepts, like e-government, e-voting, and e-participation.

COVID-19 has had a vast impact on accelerating the digital transformation (Soto-Acosta 2020). Lockdowns, quarantines, and other mobility related restrictions have resulted in many people working from home (e-office), students studying from home (e-learning), and medical professionals consulting with patients virtually (e-health), using established as well as new information and communication technologies. Terms like e-health, e-learning, e-consulting, e-participation, and even e-decision-making are becoming common household expressions. Though most people have some notion about what these concepts entail, many of these terms have not been well defined, are overlapping in their meanings, and often are used differently in different settings, allowing for confusion. Besides potentially causing problems of misunderstandings in public life, there is also concern that these terms may be misleadingly used in academic research and publications.

COVID-19 also contributed to a surge in the utilization of e-government services. A recent study about the use of e-government services in Poland reported that since the start of COVID-19, the demand for and participation in e-voting experienced a substantial increase, while voting with traditional ballots decreased. Specifically, the number of e-voters on civic budgets (in Polish: Budżet obywatelski) in the local community where the study was conducted more than quadrupled (Roztocki et al. 2021). Voting on civic budgets was instituted in Poland to increase civil involvement in local affairs and to address low election participation. Voting on civic budgets is not limited to Polish citizens and all residents in a given locality can vote on their preferences for financing specific community projects, such as constructing a new playground, improving street lighting, installing a more save street crossing, or sponsoring a cultural event.

Moreover, the same study reported that since COVID-19 "...citizens are becoming increasingly more demanding and more frequently voice their discontent..." and seek broader involvement in government. A call by Rodríguez Bolívar et al. (2010), more than a decade ago, for more research on e-government, e-democracy, e-governance, e-deliberation, and e-voting, thus seems more relevant than ever.

Following this call, our motivation for this paper is to introduce more structure in this large inventory of e-concepts, particularly those related to e-government and e-democracy. Consequently, the main objective of this paper is to provide meaningful and differentiating definitions for already commonly used concepts related e-government and e-democracy within an emerging e-society. We do this by looking at the existent literature and sifting through published definitions and usages.

The rest of our paper is organized as follows. After we briefly describe our methodology, we discuss our results and present working definitions of 11 e-concepts. We conclude our work by pointing to several limitations and show several possible future research opportunities.

**METHODOLOGY**

In the initial phase of our study, we searched the literature for e-terms related to e-democracy. We started our search with overview papers related to concepts of e-government and e-democracy such as work by Kneuer (2016), Päivärinta and Sæbø (2006), and Twizeyimana and Andersson (2019), and compiled an initial list of e-concepts. We then expanded the initial list in a snowball process, using already identified terms as new keywords for additional searches.

In the second phase of our research, we searched for definitions related to the previously identified e-concepts. As we found that many of the e-concepts are called by more than one name in different publications, as for example, e-government is also referred to as electronic government or digital government, we also used these additional terms in searching for definitions. We then compared definitions provided by distinct authors and tried to extract a definition that seems most accurate and useful in describing the concept, while also differentiating it from other concepts. We limited our final list of e-concepts to those which seem to be in common use and for which we were able to determine reasonable definitions.

**RESULTS**

We ended up with ten e-democracy and e-government related e-concepts, in addition to e-society. We included e-government concepts, because e-government has a major impact on democracy and society in general, though e-government is not limited to democratic societies. Figure 1 shows these eleven concepts, as well as the hierarchy relationships.

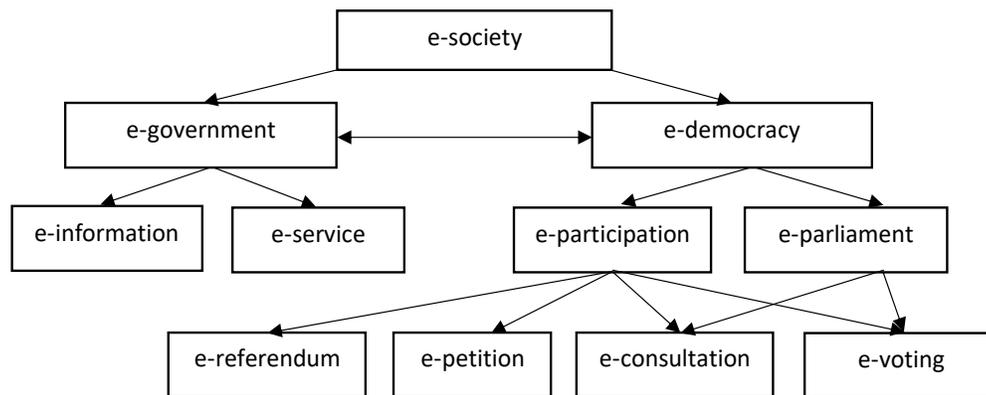


Figure 1. Hierarchy of E-concepts

**E-society**

As stated earlier, Magoulas et al. (2007) use the term e-society broadly to describe a research area that covers various aspects of deploying information and communications technologies for large user communities. Loo (2013) however, defines it as a society where e-technologies are so fully integrated into the fabrics of the society that their use no longer entails major household decisions. In other words, a society where technology is fully accepted by the public in all aspects of daily life. E-society is not limited to e-democracy, but also includes e-business, e-commerce, e-learning, e-health, and other e-concepts. Though our paper is focused on e-democracy, we include e-society in Figure 1 to show how e-democracy is a concept within e-society.

**E-government**

The term e-government emerged in the late 1990s (Grönlund and Horan 2005) and is used to describe a variety of interactions between public authorities on one side, and individual citizens and others residents, or businesses and other non-governmental entities on the other side, using information and communications technology (Reitz 2006). It generally refers to local or national government information and services being made available through the internet via web browsers or mobile apps. Based on the discussion by Grönlund and Horan (2005), we define e-government as the utilization of information and communication

technologies, and particularly the Internet, by central, regional, and local authorities, to provide information and various services to the public.

### **E-democracy**

Macintosh (2004) defines e-democracy as the use of information and communication technologies to support the democratic decision-making processes. Päivärinta and Sæbø (2006) state that the concept of e-democracy refers to the use of information and communication technology in political debates and decision-making processes, complementing or contrasting traditional means of communication, such as face-to face interaction or one-way mass media. Some authors equate e-democracy with e-government, but as we mentioned earlier, e-government is not limited to democratic societies, and furthermore, e-government does not commonly include decision-making by the public. E-democracy, as most e-concepts, does usually involve the Internet, and thus we modify the definition by Macintosh (2004) as follows: E-democracy is the utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, in democratic decision-making processes.

### **E-information**

The term e-information is used widely in academic reports, but seldom defined. Electronic information may simply refer to any information stored or communicated in electronic form. In the contexts of e-government and e-democracy, e-information generally refers to making information available to citizens and other residents via electronic means. The 2020 UN E-Government Survey (United Nations 2020) defines it as "enabling participation by providing citizens with public information and access to information without or upon demand." Based on our surveying of the literature and in particular the study by Khan and Krishnan (2020), we define e-information as the utilization of websites, web forums, e-mail lists, and newsgroups to distribute government data and information about regulations and administrative procedures. Examples of information provided may include new business regulations, announcements of public events, and general updates on current affairs.

### **E-service**

Boyer et al. (2002) define e-services as any interactive services that are delivered on the Internet using advanced telecommunications, information, and multimedia technologies. This includes services provided by private businesses as well as government agencies. In the context of e-government, we define e-services simply as interactive government services provided over the Internet. Examples of e-services provided may include renewal of driver's licenses, payment of taxes, and applications for business permits.

### **E-participation**

According to the 2020 UN E-Government Survey United Nations (2020), e-participation is the "process of engaging citizens through ICT in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery in order to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative." Macintosh (2004) defines e-participation as being "concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy." Wimmer (2007) states that e-participation "is a complex area of applying information and communication technology in the context of citizen engagement in the discourse with politicians and governments." Thus, we define e-participation as the utilization of information and communication technologies to engage citizen in the discourse with politicians and governments.

### **E-parliament**

The 2012 World e-Parliament Report (United Nations 2012) defines e-parliament as a legislature that is empowered to be more open, transparent, and accountable through information and communication technologies. It also states that an e-parliament is an efficient organization where stakeholders use information and communication technologies to perform their primary functions of lawmaking, representation, and oversight more effectively. Olasina and Mutula (2015) write that e-parliament refers to the use of information and communication technologies in the performance of legislative functions by legislators and citizens. Based on all the above, we define e-parliament as the utilization of information and communication technologies in the performance of legislative functions.

### **E-referendum**

An e-referendum is a referendum conducted via electronic communication means, where referendum refers to direct voting on specific issues by citizens, i.e., a form of direct democracy. Musiał-Karg (2012) defines an e-referendum as a form of voting on a specific matter, where voting takes place not by ballot boxes, but rather with the use of information and communication technologies, such as the Internet or mobile phones. Thus, we define an e-referendum as the utilization of information and communication technologies for direct voting on a particular proposal or certain matter.

### **E-petition**

A petition is a request to do something, usually addressed to a government or public entity. An e-petition is a form of petition conducted by electronic means, usually a website. Many governments implemented specific e-petition platforms, where citizens can raise issues or propose specific actions, such as the "We the People" government website created under the Obama

administration, but now dissolved. Such e-petitioning systems are bottom-up applications that provide citizens with a channel to request their governments for making specific changes (Luna-Reyes 2017). As such, e-petitions can be regarded as a form of advocacy democracy (Matthews, 2021). We define e-petition as the utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Web, by citizens to request of their governments specific actions or changes in policies.

### E-consultation

According Luna-Reyes (2017), e-consultation is a top-down approach in which governments ask citizens for their opinions on policy options or pending legislations. E-consultations aim to increase the legitimacy of policies and laws and improve their design, by soliciting input from citizens. We define e-consultation thus as the utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, to solicit public opinion about pending governmental initiatives or proposed regulations.

### E-voting

E-voting generally refers to any type of voting using electronic means (Svensson and Leenes 2003). E-voting may involve stand-alone electronic voting machines that record and count votes in a specific public site, or it may involve personal computers or mobile devices that are connected to the Internet, allowing voting to take place remotely, from any location. There are many types of e-voting, and depending on the type of election, may be used by ordinary people, elected or appointed officials, and government members. E-voting may be used in general elections, such as for president of a country, or a legislative representative, or it may be on specific issues within smaller regions and groups. E-voting could also be used for recall elections, where voters can remove previously elected officials before the end of their terms. Thus, though there are many different types of e-voting, involving many kinds of voters, we use the simple and broad definition, stating that e-voting is voting which involves electronic means.

Table 1 summarizes our findings, listing the e-concepts, our definitions, and the primary sources for our definitions, in alphabetical order of the e-concepts.

<b>E-concepts</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Primary Sources</b>
e-society	A society where e-technology is fully accepted and integrated by the public in all aspects of daily life.	Loo (2013)
e-consulting	Utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, to solicit public opinion about pending governmental initiatives or proposed regulations.	Luna-Reyes (2017)
e-democracy	Utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, in democratic decision-making processes.	Macintosh (2004)
e-government	Utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, by central, regional, and local authorities to provide information and various services to the public.	Grönlund and Horan (2005) Roztocki et al. (2021)
e-information	Utilization of websites, web forums, e-mail lists, and newsgroups to distribute government data and information about regulations and administrative procedures.	Khan and Krishnan (2020)
e-parliament	Utilization of information and communication technologies in the performance of legislative functions.	Olasina and Mutula (2015)
e-participation	Utilization of information and communication technologies to engage citizen in the discourse with politicians and governments.	Wimmer (2007)
e-petition	Utilization of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, by citizens to request of their governments specific actions or changes in policies.	Luna-Reyes (2017)
e-referendum	Utilization of information and communication technologies, for direct voting on a particular proposal or certain matter.	Musiał-Karg (2012)
e-service	Interactive government service provided over the Internet.	Boyer et al. (2002)
e-voting	Voting which involves electronic means.	Svensson and Leenes (2003)

**Table 1. E-concepts with Definitions**

## CONCLUSION

Our objective in this paper was to provide working definitions for the most common e-concepts related to e-government and e-democracy and show the hierarchical relationships between these e-concepts. The definitions we derived from previously published literature are summarized in Table 1, and the hierarchical relationships of the e-concepts, as defined, are depicted in Figure 1. We believe that our work will help clarify these concepts and terms, as often they are being used in academic studies as well as by practitioners without clear definitions, possibly causing confusion or misunderstandings.

A limitation of this work is that we do not define or distinguish between different types of democracy or e-democracy. In contrast, Päivärinta and Sæbø (2006) provide four models of e-democracy with citizen participation in democratic processes and decision making varying substantially in these four models. Thus, some e-concepts, such as e-referendum, defined as direct voting on a particular proposal or certain matter, may be applied more in some types of democracies than others. And not all of the described e-concepts may be applicable in all political systems. But our objective was not to describe or examine political systems, but rather to clarify and simplify the terminology around increasingly important e-democracy concepts.

There are many opportunities for future research projects related to e-society and e-democracy. One research opportunity is related to the everyday acceptance of e-concepts by ordinary people. As observed by Musiał-Karg (2012), there appears to be a steady decrease in citizen turnout for national and supranational elections. It would be interesting to investigate how the e-concepts discussed in this work may affect participation by ordinary people in democratic processes. Will increased availability and awareness of e-voting, e-referenda, and e-petitions increase public interest and involvement in government and policy making? To this end, the increasing availability of technology for large groups of voters makes the e-democratic decision-making processes both technically feasible and politically desirable.

A different research opportunity is examining the role and impact of e-democracy on the influence of global entities such as international organizations and multinational corporations. As observed by Roztocki et al. (2019), international organizations using international agreements and financial means may exercise substantial sway over particular countries and force changes to local government policies. In this context, it will be interesting to investigate how large factions of citizens, using e-referenda for example, may change the willingness of local government to comply with directives from global entities.

To conclude, the primary contribution of this work is offering simple and straight forward working definition of eleven e-concepts. Our work is by no means final. As the list of commonly accepted e-concepts grows, so does the need for further fitting definitions. Concepts, and thus their definitions, may also evolve over time, and updating will be required. It is our wish that other scholars will use and refine, expand, or improve our list of e-concepts while working to expand the general research field of e-society.

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