

**HOW VAST OR HOW GOOD IS E-DEMOCRACY?  
A REVIEW ON THE “DIGITAL DEMOCRACY DATABASE”  
BY THE EUROPEAN DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE**

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Recently a new source of data on democracy has been released. The Digital Democracy Database (Khutkyy 2021) published by the European Digital Development Alliance is announced as an evolving project “designed to identify and analyse cases of digital democracy aspiring to consolidate global democracy by discovering and sharing good practices of open participatory governance worldwide.” This first edition is a collective pro bono initiative of an international team of analysts. In sum, the database lists over 1 000 digital democracy cases of nationwide scope from 50 countries.

The database is similar to several other available datasets of democratic instruments and cases such as the Direct Democracy Database (International IDEA 2021), Participedia (2021), or OGP Toolbox (Open Government Partnership 2021). In particular, it systematically reviews democratic instruments in multiple countries as the Direct Democracy Database, structures data by instruments and cases, provides datasets in open data format and positions them on map as Participedia, and embraces transparency, accountability, and participation in digital realm as OGP Toolbox.

Yet, it is different in conceptual framework, data processing methodology and scope. From theoretical viewpoint, the project defines digital democracy according to van Dijk & Hacker (2018) rather broadly: “As the collective use of information and communication technology for practices of politics and democracy in both online and offline environments.” Furthermore, in addition to transparency, accountability, and participation the database also includes civic education as an e-democracy aspect, which is rather uncommon. Also, it relates cases to the stages of policy cycle: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. This helps to locate cases within the whole policy making process. As each type of instrument is automatically ascribed an aspect and stage, this warrants inter-concept classification consistency within and across countries. The project applies a peculiar classification of digital democracy instruments, presented in greater detail in a respective conceptual supplement (Khutkyy 2020). These instruments range from such common as basic public information websites to such exotic as AI-enabled analytics. Each case is accompanied by 10 variables including location information, name, hyperlink, administering institution, instrument type, aspect of digital democracy, stage of policy cycle, description, and comments. Methodologically, it is notable that the data was validated by blind review and cross-checks by three researchers (analyst, reviewer, and project leader). This ensures some level of coding consistency at least within each country. With regard to the level of public policy, cases are calculated as websites dedicated to a digital democracy instrument of a nationwide scope. Geographically, the first edition covers pan-European

macro region – countries of Europe according to the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. Overall, this combination of theoretical perspective, classification framework, methodological techniques, and geographical scope makes it an original source of open data on digital democracy.

The source is free to use and distribute the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license, so it can be used for non-commercial purposes by diverse audiences. In particular, it can be utilized as a dataset for academic research by scholars, as a model database for teaching by lecturers, as a toolbox of practices for civic activists and policy makers, or as a platform for adding new tools used by practitioners. The dataset in open data formats (both in non-proprietary CSV and proprietary XLSX) can be imported and processed by major social science statistical analysis software. In particular, it is possible to analyze individual cases or a group of cases employing common or similar types of tools. Moreover, one can compare digital democracy instruments within a country or across several countries. Also, it is feasible to scrutinize a particular country in terms of proportions of public and civic administering institutions, aspects of democracy, or stages of policy making. Besides, after opening in a statistical software, one can use sorting options to select target data or search the dataset using keywords. The searchable collection of typical instruments and real cases of their applications in different countries accompanied by short descriptions and comments about the structure and content of each case can be examined by practitioners to learn about suitable tools and serve as a source of inspiration or even as a catalogue of IT-solutions to be applied for own policies.

Notwithstanding all its strength, the database has some inherent limitations. In terms of geographical boundaries, the pilot version is pan-European and therefore covers countries of Europe as defined by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. These are sufficiently clear criteria of country sampling, although of course, readers would like to see more countries included. In temporal dimension, data collection lasted during May 2020 – February 2021, which is understandable for a volunteer project of such ambitious scale. Yet, in such a vibrant domain as digital democracy this means that some cases might have become inactive, while others might have emerged. At least, as of the publication date, all the hyperlinks were functional. In terms of scope, the unit of analysis is a dedicated website of a nationwide digital democracy instrument. Therefore, the dataset neither includes subnational or supranational e-democracy tools nor promotes specific organizations or campaigns. Although this limits the number of potential cases, this also gives the project a clear national focus and ensures greater objectivity. Considering that project analysts applied manual online search and content analysis, one may inquire how deep was the search and how many cases were included. The database description reads:

[T]his project focuses on a reasonable number of the most easily searchable online and hence the most visible ones, instead of venturing to catalogue all existing e-democracy websites. (Khutkyy 2021)

Also, each national dataset was set up to include at least one case of the parliament, the president, the executive government, and the judiciary. As a result, some countries (like

Vatican) have as few as 3 cases, while others (like Ukraine) comprise as many as 60 cases. However, these numbers may be attributed to multiple causes: the prevalence of e-democracy tools in those countries, the easiness or complexity of finding them online, language proficiencies or efforts of individual analysts. Therefore, strictly speaking, the number of cases per country should not be used as an assessment of country's level of democratic development. Probably, the most contested part is the coding of cases. The project website admits this challenge:

[T]he research team did its best to classify cases according to common definitions, yet of course, for some cases there might be different interpretations. (Khutkyy 2021)

Finally, at the current stage, the database presents the cases, their classification according to a conceptual framework, their description, and some basic infographics of the entire sample (the proportions of administering institutions, aspects of digital democracy, and stages of policy cycle), but lacks deeper examination of either individual cases or general patterns. The available collection of digital democracy cases is presented "as is" – without an evaluation of their implementation. On one side, this is more objective, while on the other side, best practices are not distinguished so far.

Nevertheless, the project team plans to expand the database in geographical and institutional scopes and to accompany it with analytical articles about generic digital democracy instruments and specific instances. For this aim, the European Digital Development Alliance (2021) calls for case-related and analytical contributions.

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