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# Open Governance in Authoritarian States? A Framework for Assessing Digital Participation in the Age of Mass Surveillance

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**Abstract.** With the growing utilization of “smart” technologies, social media and “Internet of Things” applications, citizen-government interactions are rapidly changing. These changes have substantially transformed participatory models where governments apply e-participation measures not necessarily for participatory goals. As cosmetic e-participation applications and mass online surveillance increase in scope, there is a critical need to re-assess the applicability of dominant frameworks of analysing participatory practices. The paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of the internet in citizen-government interactions in authoritarian contexts based on a critical assessment of dominant participation models. It first maps key analytical typologies and models of public participation based on an extensive literature review. This is intended to help identify potential models that explain public participation—or lack thereof—in authoritarian contexts. The outcomes of this review are 1) revealing a scholarly gap of substantial policy relevance on e-participation in authoritarian contexts, and 2) assessing the applicability of dominant e-participation analytical models in such contexts. The findings indicate that, in the digital era, the transformations in citizen-government interactions lack contemporary understanding. Based on this comparative review, an analytical framework is proposed which extends and adapts Arnstein’s ladder of participation to the digital era. The paper argues that the proposed model helps better understand emerging practices of citizen-government interaction, especially in authoritarian contexts, but also in some democratic contexts where e-participation measures are utilized for mass-surveillance or as political façade.

**Keywords:** e-Participation · Authoritarian States · Digital Governance · Citizen Engagement · Citizen-Government Interaction · Surveillance

## 1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, studying the multifaceted impact of digital technologies on governance has become an essential part of multidisciplinary research and policy agendas. In policymaking today, it is widely accepted that “digital governance” has become central to contemporary governance [1, 2]. With more than 3.2 billion individuals online, a critical mass of the world’s population is gaining access to a wide range of

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digital technologies, leading to increased social acceptance of technological means as interfaces between governments and citizens [3]. More recently, with 8 billion “things” connected to the internet, this growth has been coupled with disruptive advances in internet applications and innovative uses of social networking and “smart” technologies, which influenced further changes in the ways citizen participate in governance worldwide [4, 5].

These fast-paced changes in technological fields have increased the complexity of contemporary policymaking. For example, the adoption of social media by governments, and by society to interact with government, present numerous challenges to the centrality of government and its ability to remain the connecting node in the state. They challenge governments’ organizational capacity, specifically, the adequacy of human resources and technology. They also challenge governments’ authority, as the only legitimate and official power, with numerous other societal forces increasing their organizational capacity and societal influence through the use of such technologies. In addition to loss of *de jure* authority, governments are also faced with an important shift of *de facto* power away from public institutions [6-9]. In reaction, some governments were pushed to adapt, accommodating increased public participation in governance through technological means. In many cases, the outcome of this adaptation in democratic states meant widening public participation in governance. However, in some authoritarian states this lead to further enforcement of authoritarian rule with governments extending their controls to the digital sphere. In others this enabled substantive opportunities for public participation in governance for the first time. How are these authoritarian states adapting; and are they really becoming more open towards public participation in policymaking in the digital era?

This paper is both a critical review of related literature and a foundation for exploring this question. The objective is to explore the scholarly foundations of digital governance and citizen participation in key social science disciplines, and critically assess their applicability to these emerging changes in authoritarian contexts. The scope covers multidisciplinary scholarly literature, as well as influential policy reports produced by established international organizations.

The paper is ordered as follows: The first section provides a review of influential models of citizen participation and citizen-government interactions before and after the digital age. It then provides discusses authoritarian uses of participatory measures in the digital age as discussed in the literature. Based on the comparative review, a framework is then proposed by extending and adapting Arnstein’s ladder of participation for the digital era, with focus on authoritarian states.

## **2 Public Participation and the “Ladder of Participation”**

Citizen participation in policymaking is an established cornerstone of democratic governance [10]. Over the past fifty years numerous models have been developed to analyse contemporary public participation in multiple aspects of governance [e.g. 11, 12, 13]. The “ladder of citizen participation” proposed by Arnstein, continues to be one of the most influential [11]. The eight stages of the “ladder” conceptualize the changes

in balance of power between citizens and government in participatory engagements. The model describes a redistribution of power in such interactions, in which citizens gain power as government loses it in the participation process. The eight rungs of the ladder are grouped into three stages:

1) Non-participation stage. This stage includes the “manipulation” and “therapy” rungs of the ladder, where no public participation takes place, but a perception of participation may exist.

2) Tokenism stage. This includes the “informing”, “consultation” and “placation” rungs, in which “tokens” of participation are provided, in what can be described as cosmetic attempts by government.

3) Citizen power stage. Including “partnership”, “delegated power” and “citizen control” rungs, where meaningful levels of public participation are actually happening.

According to Arnstein, this eight-level typology of citizen participation—or lack of—starts from a stage where the government introduces what seems to be participatory means, with the aim of controlling or manipulating the public, with no citizen participation actually taking place. In contrast, the upper rung of the “ladder” then describes a stage where even “have-not citizens” gain a voice over government decisions.

Over the past four decades, Arnstein’s ladder was extended to numerous disciplines in the aim of explaining public interactions with government [for example: 14, 15, 16]. However, as modes of public engagement developed, the model has been critiqued on several fronts. For example, the “ladder” design indicates evolution and progression and implies that the upper rungs on the ladder are “better” than lower ones. While this may be true in numerous cases, in others, “consultation” for example, may provide much better outcomes than full “citizen control” [13]. Moreover, the zero-sum power balance the ladder implies, where the government loses power as citizens gain it going up the ladder, is limited and one-dimensional. In reality there are cases where the process of public participation itself may lead to increasing social learning, knowledge sharing, social capital or trust generation [17]. In such cases, the participation process itself may lead to increasing both citizens’ and governments’ power, or at least does not undermine government’s power. Overall, the common critiques of Arnstein’s ladder can be summarized in 1) its sole focus on the power dimension between government and citizens, where the governments and citizens struggle for more share of power in decision-making, 2) its focus on the outcomes of the participation process, without considering the value of the process itself, and 3) its limited focus to citizen participation within democratic environments [13, 16, 17].

However, despite its criticism, a key contribution of Arnstein’s ladder is its sophisticated view of the power relations in which citizen-government engagements take place. It recognizes the possibility of government manipulation of public engagements, compared to the overly optimistic view of citizen participation as an unequivocal good [13]. In authoritarian contexts, this is particularly useful where the “non-participation” and “tokenism” stages of the ladder are often prevalent.

### 3 Public Participation in the Digital Era

The impact of technology on citizen participation in governance has been addressed long before the internet emerged as an interface between the public and government. As early as 1977, Laudon proposed a typology of three ways that communication technologies are changing the interface between citizens and government, namely “data transformation”, “managerial democracy” and “mass participation” [18]. A decade later, DeSario and Langton explored the role of technology and information in public policymaking and its impact on “technocratic” and “democratic” citizen participation. They argued that government decisions are increasingly affected by technology, and that citizen participation will be an outcome of the intrinsic characteristic of information as a resource that can be shared without being depleted [19]. In the digital era, numerous models have been further developed. For example, Chadwick and May used a three dimensional model to explain citizen-government interactions within digital governance contexts: 1) The “managerial” efficiency model, borrowed from Laudon, which focuses on the delivery of efficient public services, 2) the “consultative” model which aims to develop better policies through engaging different interests in society through digital technology, and 3) the “participatory” model which involves engagement in the democratic process. The authors argued that the focus on public service efficiency (or “managerial”) model of digital governance is marginalizing its participatory and democratic potential [20]. Observations from authoritarian contexts suggest that the “managerial” view is a prevailing political agenda with regards to the role of digital governance [21].

More recently, with the growing influence of social technologies, Fung et al., proposed an explanatory model of citizen-government interactions, specifically in political participation. They argued that political interaction between government and citizens in the digital sphere is taking place in six distinct ways, but that the three most likely to occur are “truth-based” advocacy, crowd-sourced “social monitoring” and constituent mobilization [22]. The increased adoption of social media by governments expanded the citizen participation theme beyond merely the political level. The critical mass of users and growing sophistication of big data tools are reducing scepticism about the effectiveness of participatory digital governance, compared to a decade ago [22, 23]. An increasing number of frameworks and explanatory models are emerging to evaluate the impact of social media utilization in different aspects of civic engagement [for example: 24, 25, 26]. Today, governments’ use of social technologies in co-design, co-production and co-delivery of public policy and services is common practice in numerous countries.

Beyond the citizenry, the use of the social media by governments to engage with international communities is also growing. For example, government engagement in “digital diplomacy” or “e-diplomacy” initiatives through social media is growing in sophistication. This ranges from diplomats and embassies reaching out to citizens in host countries for social and political objectives, to foreign affairs departments running international campaigns to push political agendas or analyse perceptions on a global scale. Social media is becoming institutionalized in foreign affairs departments and

used by diplomats and politicians to affect international relations and generate “soft power” in the application of foreign policy [27, 28].

Today, participatory digital governance, or what is commonly referred to as “e-participation”, is considered an important pillar of maintaining the “quality of government” by numerous governments, policy organizations and scholars [1, 4, 22, 29, 30].

## **4 e-Participation in Authoritarian States**

This paper is primarily concerned with changes in public-government interactions in authoritarian states in the digital age. For the purpose of exploring the research question proposed, this paper utilizes a well-established conceptualization of authoritarianism as a point of reference. According to Linz, a democratic system is a political system that provides the public with a free space for political preferences to form by using basic freedoms of information, communication and association for the objective of enabling non-violent competition by political leaders to validate their claim to rule at set intervals. Accordingly, authoritarian systems are defined as political systems with limited political pluralism and a lack of extensive mobilization, in which a leader or a small group exercises power within ill-defined— but predictable—limits. As such, authoritarian states in this paper refer to countries in which the system of governance is characterized by, strong central power, limited political pluralism, minimal social mobilization, ill-defined legitimacy, vague executive power structure [31]. Today, there are currently at least 44 countries categorized as “authoritarian” [32]. These countries host a large percentage of the world population. Many of them are increasingly utilizing participatory digital technologies in policymaking.

However, in fast-evolving digital age, the powers that technological advancements, such as Internet of Things (IoT) applications and advanced big data analytics, hand to governments and societal powers alike, are blurring the line between how digital technology is used in authoritarian and democratic contexts [33, 34]. For example, in numerous cases, what seems to be participatory digital governance applications are utilized in mass online surveillance, breach of privacy and other human rights supposedly protected by the rule of law in democratic contexts. These transformations are creating increased similarities in the ways participatory digital technologies are implemented, regardless of the nature of the state [35, 36].

Generally, the literature on public administration and digital governance has viewed the impact of participatory technologies on citizen-government interactions from two key angles. First, in established democratic systems, main streams in the literature viewed the increased penetration of technology, and more recently the use of social media, as another channel or influencer of democratic participation and digital citizenship [for example: 22, 37, 38-40]. This thread led by political science and related disciplines, largely narrows “e-participation” to the political dimension, where technology facilitates or improves an existing democratic process. Second, in non-democratic contexts, where no formal channels of political or civic participation exist in the first place, the literature has largely dismissed online citizen participation as non-existent or irrelevant. Instead, it primarily focused on what can be referred to as the “collective action

thesis”, or the role of digital technologies in enabling collective action against authoritarian regimes through citizen empowerment, mobilization, organization and revolt [for example: 7, 9, 41, 42-44]. However, there is little discussion in this thread of the literature, beyond the collective action thesis, on the role participatory digital technologies are playing in citizen-government interactions in authoritarian states where such technologies actually exist. Both of these main threads in the literature have narrowed down the scope of e-participation’s definition, overlooking the potential for participatory digital governance beyond the democratic political process or popular collective action.

Digital technologies are being used by governments in a wide scope of civic engagement activities, which imply neither existence of deliberation nor undermining the power of the government. These include, for example, contribution to public administration activities, policymaking, government decision-making and service improvement, among many others. Several socioeconomically advanced authoritarian governments are increasingly providing participatory governance initiatives to engage citizens in policymaking and government decision-making. In such contexts, unlike the case of democratic states, there is little room to use these technologies in democratic political processes, which are rare in the first place. Also, in many of these socioeconomically advanced authoritarian states, there is arguably little citizen demand for democratization, and little appetite to use these technologies for anti-government collective action, let alone revolt. This is unlike the case of brutal military dictatorships and classic autocracies. A more nuanced understanding of the emerging uses of participatory technologies in such authoritarian contexts is needed.

A critical examination of the few existing studies on this emerging phenomenon in authoritarian states indicates several shortcomings. First, much of the literature subscribes to a technology-deterministic view [45], following a prevailing trend in the wider digital governance literature. Second, it largely focuses on the supply of participatory technologies by governments, regardless of the level of adoption by citizens of such technologies, the quality of use, or whether the uses are actually enabling participation. Third, a large number of these studies assume that “democracy”—in its western incarnations—is the intended and ultimate outcome of public participation through technology. The latter shortcoming may be due in part to the classic coupling of democracy with development in the western-dominated development literature, influenced by the “modernization theory” [46, 47]. This shortcoming also led to a prevailing confusion in terminology. The terms “e-participation” and “e-democracy” have been used interchangeably in the literature tackling citizen participation and digital governance, whether in democratic or authoritarian states, without serious attempts to understand the distinction. These shortcomings suggest that there is room for nuanced studies of the roles participatory digital technologies play in authoritarian contexts.

## **5 Assessing Citizen Participation in the Digital Era**

The “e-participation” area of research remains an emerging and relatively young field of study. It still suffers from disciplinary and geographic biases, lack of depth and theoretical clarity and wide inconsistency in definitions [48].

Analytical models assessing participatory digital governance have largely focused on “developed” and democratic countries [48]. Considering the limitations of existing “e-participation” research, especially with regards to authoritarian states (as discussed in section 2.2 and 2.3), few models may be applicable when analysing citizen-government interactions in authoritarian contexts. Table 1 provides a comparison between three influential citizen participation typologies, which are not internet-specific. It lists the stages of participation proposed according to each of Arnstein’s ladder, the OECD’s three-stage citizen participation model and the International Association for Public Participation’s “spectrum” of citizen participation [11, 30, 49]. This is followed by Table 2, which provides a summary of four internet-focused models of citizen participation which have also been influential [4, 39, 50, 51]. Clearly, all typologies and models share the basic pillars of citizen participation, with some variation in sophistication and scope.

**Table 1.** Citizen participation analytical typologies (non-internet specific)

Public Participation Frameworks	(Arnstein, 1969) [11]	(IAP2, 2014) [30]	(OECD, 2009) [49]
Stages	Manipulation		
	Therapy		
	Informing	Inform	Information
	Consultation	Consult	Consultation
	Placation	Involve	
	Partnership	Collaborate	Participation
	Delegated Power	Empower	
	Citizen Control		

**Table 2.** Citizen “e-participation” analytical typologies (internet specific)

e-Participation Frameworks	(Neuman et al., 2011) [39]	(Macintosh, 2004) [50]	(European Commission, 2013) [51]	(UN DESA 2014) [4]
			Information	e-Information
	Inclusion on platform	e-Enabling	Consultation	e-Consultation
	Capacity to influence agenda	e-Engaging	Cooperation	



Stages	Platform's capacity to enable collective will formation	e-Empowering		e-Decision Making
	Platform's equality attributes (participation not influenced by contributor's status, language)			
	Absence of external coercive constraints			
	Absence of systematic distractions from participatory deliberations			

Most of these typologies have either been designed with democratic processes in mind, or to be neutral towards the political processes. None has been designed to take into account a potential participatory process in an authoritarian context. If we are to design, or extend, a model for analysing technology-driven public participation in authoritarian states, it needs to accommodate the balance of power and all possible explanations for adopting participatory technologies in such contexts. Arnstein's ladder provides a suitable and inclusive starting point, given that the spectrum implied includes possible stages which are non-participatory. Considering the potential explanations for the adoption of participatory digital governance in authoritarian contexts, and the nature of some of these in the digital era (surveillance, control, etc.) as found in the literature, Arnstein's ladder provides a suitable starting point for developing a model to help understand participatory approaches in authoritarian states.

Building on Arnstein's ladder, an extension is proposed here as a basis for an analytical model to assess participatory approaches in authoritarian states. The proposed ladder (Table 3) introduces new "rungs", namely "government control", "surveillance" and "façade". A few other rungs are renamed for more clarity ("selective participation" instead of "placation", and "empowerment" instead of "delegated power"). It is safe to assume that it will be highly unlikely that in authoritarian states, the "citizen control" rung of the ladder will be ever used. Indeed, this would be impossible *ex hypothesi*. For if citizen control occurs, the state is no longer authoritarian by definition. As such, that top rung of Arnstein's ladder is removed from the proposed extension.

Based on this discussion, there has been some residual dissatisfaction in all of these attempts with regards to applicability to authoritarian contexts. Adapting and developing the ladder of participation, to take into account the specificities of citizen participation in authoritarian states in the digital era is a starting point towards a better model for analysing public participation in the digital era, within authoritarian contexts.

**Table 3.** A proposed preliminary extension of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation for the digital era, considering authoritarian contexts

Participation Level	Stage	Example
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Non-Participation	Government control	No participation process exists and the government practices firm control on policymaking
	Surveillance	Online public-government interaction processes and platforms may exist, but serve only as sources of information for government surveillance, monitoring and profiling, with no contribution to policymaking taking place
	Façade	Public-government interaction platforms and initiatives are signalled to the public but they do not function or merely serve as a cosmetic layer
Tokenism	Informative	Some types of information and datasets are made open for the public to be able to make decisions (though not necessarily always updated or in useful formats)
	Consultative	Initiatives are put in place where the public are consulted and crowdsourced but government does not commit to include input in policymaking
	Selective Participation	Selected members of the public are invited (not necessarily based on merit or expertise) to take part in closed online participation processes
Participation	Collaborative (Partnership)	Functioning public initiatives and online platforms are established for public contribution to policymaking, where policymaking takes place interactively
	Empowerment	A transparent process (and platforms) exists where the government reports details and outcomes of the participatory process, including outcomes which do not fit government stated agendas

## 6 Conclusion

Studying the impact of participatory technologies on policymaking and government-decision making is critical to widen the understanding on how citizen-government relations are being transformed in the digital era. This is especially important in authoritarian states, where dominant literature has largely been defined by the collective action “thesis”. This paper provided a critical review of dominant frameworks for assessing participatory digital implementations and citizen-government interactions in an ever changing digital world. The proposed framework here arguably provides a novel perspective to assess e-participation in authoritarian contexts. However, with the increased exploitation of participatory tools for non-participatory practices, such as mass surveillance, even in democratic contexts, the utility of this framework can be universal.

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