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Digital Public Consultation and the Opportunities for Participatory Democracy: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The decision-making process involves different stages in which the authorities should ensure that citizens' views and concerns are voiced by encouraging citizens to become directly involved in policy areas and issues so that they can actively engage in collective public choices. Public consultation therefore plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values and strengthening the legitimacy of decision-making processes in governments and organizations. This study aims to analyze young people's reaction to the general trend towards digitalization and the extent to which young people are willing to adopt new digital methods of public consultation. The results show that the digitalization trend is sparking enthusiasm for innovation and efficiency among our respondents, but they also highlight concerns about data security and the impact on jobs. Our study finds a generally positive attitude towards the use of online platforms for public consultations, highlighting the role of online platforms in increasing the trust of European citizens in the European legislature, but at the same time questioning the importance the European Union would attach to opinions expressed through digital platforms and the representativeness of the group of participants. The results of this study have strong administrative and managerial implications and can provide important insights into the search for solutions regarding the implementation of digitalization and online consultation in EU legislation.

Keywords: digitalization; public consultation; participatory democracy; decision-making; legitimacy



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1. Introduction

Decision-making is a process that involves several stages, starting with agenda setting and public policy initiation, and has the main aim of solving public problems and ensuring good governance. Within this process, through public consultation, which is a procedure whereby government bodies, organizations, or institutions seek input, feedback, and opinions from the public on matters of public interest, policy decisions, or proposed initiatives, authorities ensure that the perspectives and concerns of citizens, stakeholders, and communities are taken into account. Hence, participative democracy involves the direct engagement of citizens in numerous policy areas and issues, encouraging individuals and groups to be actively involved in collective decision-making and public choices (de Tocqueville 2000; Rousseau 2003).

Public consultations can cover a wide range of topics, including legislative changes, environmental issues, urban planning, and public service improvements, and they strive to initiate extensive discussions and collect perspectives from all stakeholders. Citizens, non-governmental entities, civil society organizations, businesses, and administrations, representing a wide and diverse range of individuals and groups, should be involved in public consultation so that their voices are heard. Inclusiveness is an essential aspect of the public consultation process and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at stake. Another key aspect of this is transparency, with the public consultation process involving the provision of clear information on the issue in question and on matters

beyond its scope. The purpose of the consultation should be known to all parties, as should the way in which the public's input will ultimately be used. Regarding accessibility, another issue of concern, efforts should be made to make public consultations accessible to as many people as possible by using different communication channels, such as online platforms, public meetings, surveys, and written submissions, to respond to different preferences and accessibility needs. Finally, as a key aspect of public consultation, we should stress that involving the public in decision-making processes increases accountability by making decision-makers responsible for taking public input into account and for demonstrating how it has influenced the final decision.

Public consultation, therefore, plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values and enhancing the legitimacy of decision-making processes within governments and organizations by fostering inclusiveness; contributing to a more representative and inclusive governance process; promoting transparency via the provision of information about the process, its objectives, and potential implications; empowering citizens and strengthening their sense of connection; and increasing responsiveness to community needs and preferences.

At EU level, the European Commission is responsible for planning, formulating, and proposing new EU laws and regulations. Moreover, the Commission is involved in all stages of the public policy cycle, being responsible for evaluating EU laws, proposing improvements, and monitoring the implementation and application of those initiatives already adopted. Moreover, Article 11 of the Treaty of the European Union requires the Commission to perform broad consultations, giving citizens and other stakeholders an opportunity to contribute to policymaking. Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union on participatory democracy mentions that "the European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent" ([Treaty on European Union 2012](#)).

As technology advances, public consultations are becoming increasingly important, with online platforms and digital tools being frequently used to facilitate broader public engagement. As mentioned in the 2023 Communication from the European Commission, "the Digital Decade target on electronic identification provides for 100% of citizens having access to secure, privacy-enhancing eID by 2030" ([European Commission 2023](#)). In this area, it should be noted that, at the EU level Estonia is the country that has positioned itself as an e-country in recent decades, being the first and only country with nationwide internet elections. The country has introduced an eID system, and citizens have been using internet banking, filling tax returns online, and carrying out various other electronic transactions remotely for many years. At the other end of the spectrum, Romania is far behind with these innovations and the use of them. In 2023, Romania had the lowest percentage of people using a public authority website or app in the last 12 months among EU countries ([Eurostat 2024a](#)). In addition, according to the DESI index, Romania ranks last in Europe, being the country where digital public services are least dominant and performing poorly in terms of the integration of digital technologies and digital public services ([European Commission 2024](#)).

Therefore, this study addresses the topic of public consultations, focusing on young people in Romania. We aimed to analyze the extent to which young people are willing to adopt new digital methods of public consultation and the extent to which this implementation would be desirable. The results have strong public, administrative, and managerial implications and could provide an important point of view in the search for solutions for the implementation of digitalization and online consultation in EU legislation.

2. Literature Review

The issues of civic engagement, public participation, and consultation touch on a vast field of knowledge which have been deeply investigated. The main goal of public consultation is to offer insights about ongoing policy discussions. Without these inputs, politicians make decisions which they believe align with their constituents' view, but these

decisions might not accurately represent what constituents would choose if they were well informed and had time to deliberate. Therefore, the political philosophical thinking of humanity has always had as its proposed ideal the widest possible participation in public decision-making. For the Greeks, citizenship automatically implied civic obligations involving participation in debates (Muscă 2002). For this purpose, the Greeks chose the centre of the city as the meeting place for the fulfilment of democracy, constituting a secular, profane, egalitarian, and common space (Vernant 1995). Thus appeared the *agora*, an established term for a space for the expression of all, in which the word and oratory decided the orientation of the city (Noica 1997). In this way, the Greeks were the first among the peoples to reach the mentioned ideals of generalized debate and *Isonomia*, i.e., equal participation in the exercise of power (Vernant 1995). The Romans, later on, took over the Greek model of isonomy, with the Campus Martius or the public square in Rome taking the place of the *agora* (Rousseau 2006). The next period in human history with consistent concerns for democracy and its ideal, equal participation, was the Enlightenment. The constitutional parliament and the general assembly of representatives are the two institutions imagined (Ivanciu 1997) with the purpose of expressing the general will (Brun 2002). Around the same time, liberalism came to accept the pre-eminence and importance of general opinion (von Hayek 2016). This led to active participation by citizens who could shape new policy decisions in partnership with governments. To better understand these processes, specialists also investigated deliberative polling and public opinion polls, putting an emphasis on the difficulties in recruiting a representative sample because of location or unwillingness to respond (Fishkin et al. 2000). Moreover, the ways in which the different consultation methods relate to democratic decision-making were examined, highlighting differences and different roles of group representatives (Catt and Murphy 2003). Also, a review of the value and techniques for public consultation was offered by Shipley and Utz, uncovering the theory and rationale for public consultation. In their study, the authors mentioned that a considerable emphasis has been placed on qualitative research methods and analytical techniques, underlining the lack of quantitative analysis (Shipley and Utz 2012). Additionally, as technology advances and civic engagement becomes digital, scholars are trying to identify new models and platforms that would allow for further exploration of citizens' preferences, such as the use of open-source online platforms or the combination of conventional face-to-face interactions with ICT-based approaches (Bassetti et al. 2023; Hsiao 2021).

Currently, in the online realm, traditional identification methods that use physical IDs and appearances are not feasible. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a functional equivalent of a public ID in the virtual world. Thus, the concept of electronic identity has also been long debated and researched. In their paper, Kubicek and Noack focused on comparing four national electronic Identity Management Systems (eIDMSs) by highlighting the similarities and differences between them with regard to the eID, the eID cards, the authentication process, and procedures for distribution and personalisation, among other areas (Kubicek and Noack 2010). Other specialists investigated electronic identity management in specific countries by summarizing the development of the national electronic Identity Management System and reviewing the history and current status of electronic identities and eID management (Martens 2010; Grönlund 2010; Rissanen 2010). A different approach was the investigation of electronic identity (eID) and electronic signatures for eGovernment services by comparing the approaches of Austria, Liechtenstein, Germany, and the Swiss Canton Zug. Using a comparative law methodology, various legal frameworks were analyzed, highlighting different legislative possibilities for regulating electronic procedures, with a particular emphasis on the legal framework (Lentner and Parycek 2016). There were researchers who investigated the technological trends in notified electronic identity schemes and how the schemes used by Member States satisfy the requirements of the eIDAS regulation, offering valuable lessons to the security community and the efficient protection of national digital identities (Sharif et al. 2022). The model implemented in Estonia should be underlined as a model of best practice, stressing the existence of digital

tools and comparing the digital civic engagement solutions integrated by this country (Vargulis 2021).

The confirmation of all these trends, especially the opportunities that exist from the perspective of the ideal decision-making model, received official recognition, especially in recent years, and concerns were translated into the official documents of the European Union. This led to the declaration of the European Digital Decade, which aims to provide European citizens with access via personal devices to the digitized information base and services. On 16 September 2000, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, specified, in her speech on the state of the Union, the European Commission's intention to propose a secure European electronic identity, which any citizen can use in Europe for any operation. She mentioned that such a technology will allow citizens to control in what ways and how personal data are used (European Commission 2020). Therefore, the European Union took the first steps towards creating a common Union Toolbox for a coordinated approach towards a European Digital Identity Framework. In 2021, a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council to amend Regulation (EU) No. 910/2014 as regards establishing a framework for a European Digital Identity was elaborated with the aim of supporting the Union's transformation in terms of the digitization of public and private services (European Commission 2021).

Starting from two obvious premises, the digitalization process and the desire of citizens to be consulted in decisions that concern them, we will seek to answer the following research questions through our work:

- (1) What is the reaction of young people to the general trend of digitalization and how much time would they give to participate in digital public consultations?
- (2) To what extent would young people be willing to use electronic identification and to participate in online consultations, debates, referendums, and elections?
- (3) What do young people think about making online consultation compulsory through European legislation?

The research questions were formulated with the aim of finding out the opinion of young people in particular. Factors such as privacy, trust, and the media that influence digital participation, and disadvantages such as gaps and access to technology, have been highlighted in various other studies (Balaskas et al. 2022; Van den Berg et al. 2020; Yuan et al. 2023), while the impact that other people's opinions have on the decision to use technology has also been underlined in the literature (AlHadid et al. 2022; Chan et al. 2010). Considering the case of Romania, the literature highlights the current research conducted on digital public services and Romanians' perceptions on these services, emphasizing the current state of research in the field of digital public services and the factors that influence the attitude of Romanian citizens towards the adoption of digital public services (Popescu et al. 2024). Our study fills in these gaps by focusing, more specifically, on young Romanian students and their perception of online public consultations at the national and European levels. In this way, we try to understand why people tend to support and want to participate in online consultations, but the actual use of these participatory tools is very low. Thus, the following three hypotheses were tested:

H1. *There is a positive reaction to digitalization among young people, as digitalization offers quick access to information, services, and communication and contributes to improving the quality of services provided by public authorities, but the intention to use digital platforms is directly influenced by data security and privacy concerns.*

H2. *Young people's participation in online debates about future EU legislation is directly correlated with their perceived ability to influence the decision-making process, with a greater perceived ability leading to greater engagement in civic activities.*

H3. *The general belief of respondents is that mandatory participation in online consultation should only be imposed when the majority of the population has the skills and technical capacity to access online platforms.*

3. Materials and Methods

This research was carried out with the aim of identifying the opinions of young Romanian students towards online public consultations and was based on a preliminary analysis of secondary data on digitalization, electronic identity, and public consultations. Based on the findings, a three-part questionnaire was designed. The first part consisted of general questions related to the concept of digitalization and digital public consultation. The second part aimed to identify the extent to which young people would be willing to use electronic identification and participate in online consultations, debates, referendums, and elections, while the third part referred to the levels and areas considered desirable or mandatory for digital consultation. Questions about the extent to which people would be willing to participate in online debates and actively engage in public consultation databases were constructed using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means very unlikely and 5 very likely. There were also open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was pre-tested on 12 respondents to identify possible misunderstandings.

This empirical study was conducted among undergraduate and postgraduate students from three large universities in Romania (according to ranking data) located in three different regions of the country (Cluj, Iași, Timișoara). For a better understanding of the extent to which students would participate in online consultations, we carried out a quantitative analysis using a questionnaire as the main instrument for collecting the necessary data. The questionnaire was launched online via Google Forms. The sample consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in different semesters (bachelor's and master's studies). The survey was conducted between January and May 2024 and a total of 228 questionnaires were received. The ratio of male to female students was 39.9% to 60.1%, respectively. All participants were informed about the scope of the questionnaire, according to European Regulations, and no personal information was requested. Data analysis was performed using Excel.

4. Results

4.1. Knowledge and Attitudes Toward Digitalization and Digital Public Consultation

The first question in the survey was related to the respondents' reactions to or feeling about the general trend towards digitalization. When asked about this, some respondents found the process to be exhilarating, offering opportunities for increased efficiency and innovation. Most of them mentioned that digitalization and technological advances bring many benefits that can significantly improve living conditions and contribute to the modernisation of society. They agree that rapid access to information, services, and communication through technology increases efficiency and convenience in everyday life. Moreover, they also underline that emerging technologies in health, education and mobility enable innovations that can save lives, improve the quality of education, and facilitate transportation. In addition, automation and increased efficiency in business can contribute to job creation in technology sectors and economic growth, while easy access to online entertainment, information, and services can provide a sense of control and connectedness in an increasingly interconnected world. The opinion of the young population is that quick and easy communication with friends and family through digital platforms maintains social ties, while technology also provides tools for effective time and task management, reducing the stress associated with certain aspects of daily life. In essence, they assert that technology brings psychological benefits by creating an environment that facilitates access to resources and social connections, thus contributing to an individual's mental comfort. Moreover, one respondent stated that the whole process of digitalization is an aspect of technological progress that cannot be stopped.

Some students emphasized that digitalization simplifies everyday life in terms of work and helps to improve the quality of services that public institutions provide to citizens. In other words, digitalization at the institutional level and beyond will have a positive impact as it will streamline all administrative processes.

On the other hand, there were some responses in which the words “fear” and “reluctance” were used. Thus, some respondents adopted a circumspect or cautious attitude, acknowledging the opportunities offered by digitalization, such as efficiency and access to information, but emphasizing the need to carefully manage such data due to security reasons. Therefore, the opinion expressed was reserved, in the sense that there is a positive feeling about technology so long as it incorporates advanced cybersecurity mechanisms. Thus, the shortcomings and challenges of digitalization, such as privacy and data security, the digital divide, and the diminishing importance of physical interactions, have not gone unmentioned by part of our respondents. As one respondent wrote, “I am fascinated by the technological advancement and I am glad that all this development has also positive aspects in our lives, such as the streamlining of tasks through digitalization. On the other hand, limiting inter-human interactions and labelling us as people by codes or IDs somehow «robotizes» life and makes it monotonous, which in the long run I don’t think can have a positive impact on society”. Another respondent stated that “to a certain degree, it can be useful for today’s society if used for useful purposes”, while another one argued that “it is fascinating to see how technology is transforming and simplifying our lives, but it is important to be aware of its implications and to approach these issues with care and responsibility”.

In general, most of the cautious respondents are not entirely against digitalization, and they consider it a good idea and beneficial for the development of many areas, but think it should be used “in moderation” because not everything should be digitized, and argue that people should not become dependent on it. For instance, in one view, learning methods were more effective as they used to be, i.e., on paper rather than online.

The results show that 175 respondents (76.75%) consider digitalization to be a good, positive, and beneficial process, while 29 (12.7% of respondents) express both its advantages and disadvantages. Only 14 respondents (6.15%) express distrust, anxiety, or reluctance towards digitalization, and the remaining 4.4% have a neutral or indifferent attitude.

Regarding young people’s views on platforms for public consultation and debate, respondents think that platforms provide opportunities to express opinions, suggestions, and concerns on various issues or projects. The advantages of online platforms would, in their view, include increased accessibility, inclusive participation, and increased transparency in terms of government processes. However, there are also concerns about data security, information handling, and fairness within these platforms. Assessing the success of these platforms depends largely, in their opinion, on how the platforms would be managed and integrated into the community or government decision-making process. There are also concerns about a lack of will and investment to bring platforms up to the level of attractiveness of other social platforms and attract public attention, as well as a lack of willingness to engage. The fact that these platforms have the potential to improve government transparency and accountability by facilitating access to information and allowing citizens to be involved in decisions that directly affect them should be underlined. Through these instruments, authorities can gain diverse perspectives and knowledge, contributing to more informed and representative decision-making. They can be valuable tools for involving citizens in decision-making processes and promoting transparency and democratic participation. The concerns are that platforms should be carefully designed and managed to ensure the fair participation of all citizens, to guarantee effective and respectful communication, and to avoid distortion or manipulation. In addition, concerns have been raised about the platforms not being properly disseminated, leading to the involvement of a limited number of citizens. Conversely, many individuals are not familiar with digital platforms, so many would find it difficult to access them. Another respondent pointed out that online platforms could help more anxious people to communicate and in this way

more people could express their opinions without having to be present in a particular place. This brought the concepts of social inclusion and accessibility to the fore.

The responses show that 83.3% of respondents (190 respondents) considered digital platforms to be useful and practical tools, using positive words to describe them and highlighting their benefits such as transparency, accessibility, inclusiveness, participation, representation, accountability, and legitimacy. Some 4.8% of respondents displayed a positive but reserved or pessimistic attitude, considering the existing digital platforms to be inefficient and ineffective tools, while 7.5% of respondents expressed a neutral and indifferent attitude towards digital platforms, citing a lack of interest or knowledge. A small number of respondents (4.4%) were against platforms, including specific words like chaos or insecurity in their answers. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is confirmed: "There is a positive reaction to digitalization among young people, as digitalization offers quick access to information, services, and communication and contributes to improving the quality of services provided by public authorities, but the intention to use digital platforms is directly influenced by data security and privacy concerns".

4.2. Assessing the Extent to Which Young People Would Be Willing to Use Electronic Identification and to Participate in Online Consultations, Debates, Referendums, and Elections

One of the questions addressed to the respondents was related to their opinion on a possible platform through which they could directly express their opinion on EU legislation. The respondents stated that such a platform would allow citizens to express their views and concerns directly on proposed or existing legislation, giving them a stronger voice in the decision-making process. In this way, the legislative process would become more transparent and accessible to citizens. They would be able to follow legislative proposals, debates, and comments from other citizens or experts in real time. Moreover, EU authorities would be able to obtain feedback and diverse opinions from citizens more quickly and efficiently, which could help to improve the quality and relevance of legislation. Such a platform, in their opinion, could strengthen citizens' trust in the EU institutions and increase the legitimacy of decisions taken at the European level by involving citizens directly in the whole process. Therefore, hypothesis H2 is confirmed, which states that "Young people's participation in online debates about future EU legislation is directly correlated with their perceived ability to influence the decision-making process, with a greater perceived ability leading to greater engagement in civic activities".

A few respondents pointed out the difficulties that would have to be overcome when using such tools, as they are more difficult to administer. In the same vein, in our society, there might be a discrepancy between the number of rural and urban participants, which would not make homogenization effective and would put more emphasis on urban issues. However, respondents believe that, administered in the right way, such platforms could be very beneficial.

There are also responses highlighting the role of these platforms in increasing European citizens' trust in the European legislature, but at the same time questioning the importance that the European Union would attach to opinions expressed via digital platforms. Conversely, a few respondents expressed doubts about the number of active participants on such platforms and how representative the group of participants would be in relation to society as a whole. Another view expressed by one respondent is that only experts in the field should have the right to influence legislation, while another respondent believes that such action should be preceded by much better public information, without which there will be many uninformed opinions.

Out of the total respondents, 88.6% were strongly in favour of participating in online consultations when discussing future EU laws, while 4% were very much in favour but reserved about the number of citizens who would be actively involved or the quality of responses and the extent to which they would add value to the whole process. An additional 2.2% of respondents were neutral or did not answer the question, while 1.3% felt that such an approach would only bring difficulties. Another 2.6% of respondents were

sceptical about the whole process, and 1.3% of respondents were against expressing their opinion on EU legislation through online consultation.

Another question addressed concerned the possibility that, through digital identity, young people could be consulted in order to participate in debates and vote online at all levels. Respondents were asked to choose one of the ready-made answer options, namely: very good/worth encouraging; good/I would participate; reserved/I would not trust; unfavourable/it should not be encouraged. Out of a total of 228 respondents, a large majority (90.35% or 206 respondents) chose the first two options, thinking that eID is a tool that would favour their engagement in online consultations, and were also in favour of participating in online debates and elections. Only 7.9% of respondents took a reserved attitude and 1.75% were against such a possibility and felt it should not be encouraged (Figure 1).

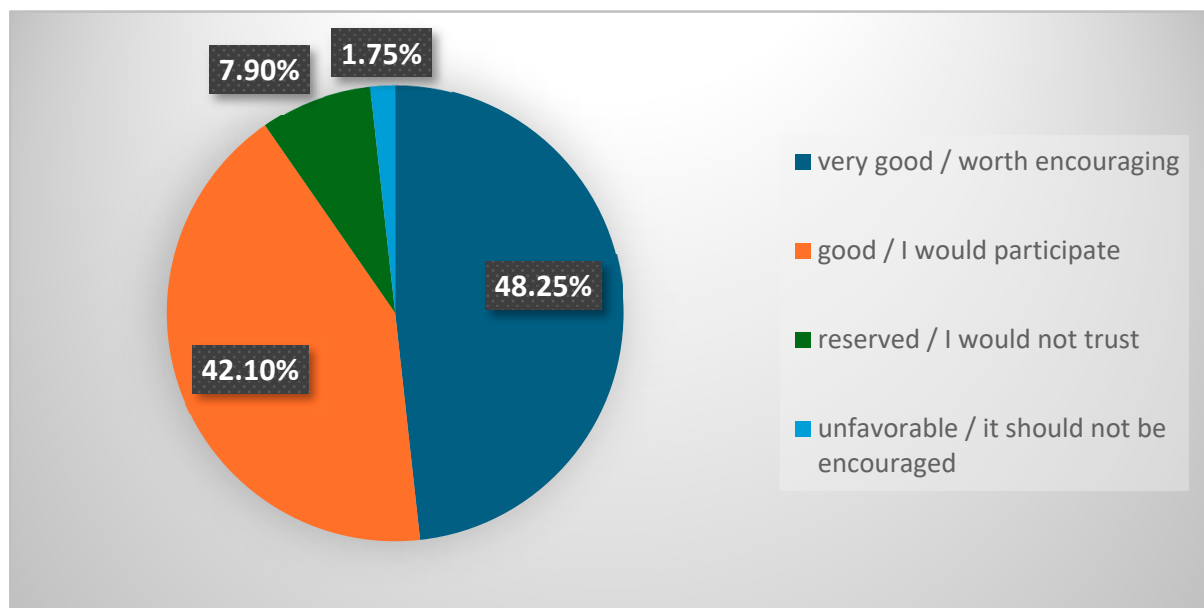


Figure 1. What do you think about the possibility that, through digital identity, you can be consulted to participate in debates and vote online at all levels?

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unlikely and 5 is very likely, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they would be willing to participate in online consultations, debates, referendums, or elections. Out of a total of 228 respondents, 79 respondents chose the “very likely” alternative, meaning that they would be willing to participate in online consultations, while 73 of them chose the “probably” option. So, 66.65% of respondents would be willing to engage online in consultations and debates and would even be in favour of online voting during elections. Meanwhile, 9.25% of respondents said that they were not in favour of participating in online consultations and debates, while 24.1% were undecided, not knowing whether they would participate or not and instead choosing “neither likely, nor unlikely” (Figure 2).

When asked to indicate how much time they would be willing to devote to participating in online consultations, 97 respondents (42.54%) answered that they would be willing to devote one hour per month to such activities, while 67 respondents (29.4%) would allocate one hour per week.

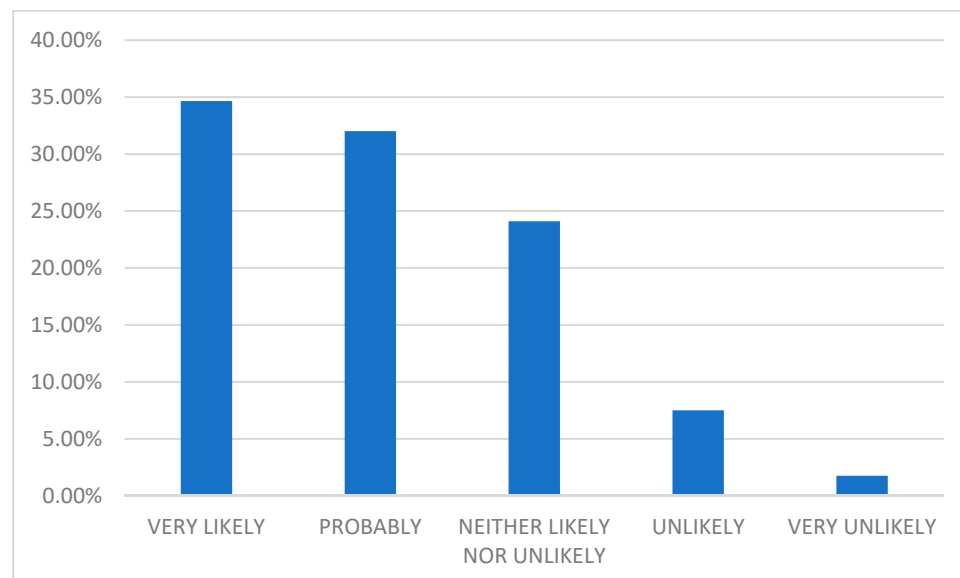


Figure 2. Indicate the extent to which you would be willing to participate in online consultations/debates/referendums/elections.

4.3. Youth Segmentation According to Levels and Areas Considered Desirable or Mandatory for Digital Consultation

Another area of interest for our study was online public consultations and elections, and so students were asked to name the level they considered most desirable for online public consultations, choosing between the local, regional, national, federal, and European levels (Figure 3a). They were also asked whether online elections should be held at all these levels in the near future (Figure 3b). The results show that 39.5% of respondents consider the European level to be the most desirable one, while 34.3% consider the national level to be the most desirable. Only 1.9% mentioned the federal level. An explanation for the results regarding the federal level could be the fact that, in Romania (respondents' country of origin), the highest level of administrative organization is the national level. Regarding the organization of online elections at all levels in the European Union, 53.5% of respondents agreed with this option, while 30.7% disagreed, and 15.8% said they did not know.

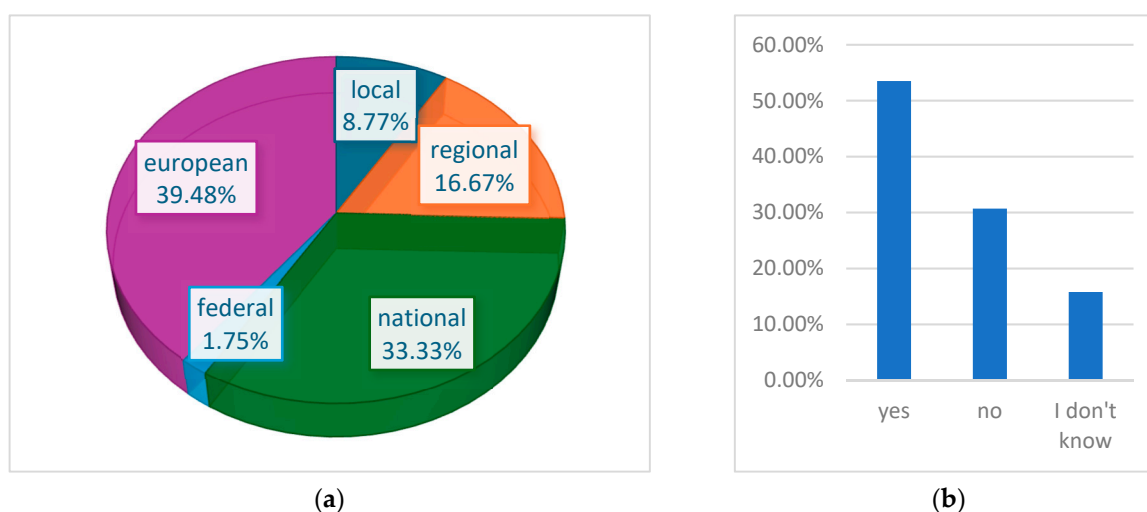


Figure 3. (a) To what level do you think online public consultations would be desirable? (b) Do you think future elections in the EU should be held online at all levels?

Another question asked the students about the level they think is the most appropriate level to impose and organize online consultations and debates, i.e., the European or national level. Opinions were divided, with some believing that mandatory regulation at the European level would ensure consistency and standardization across Member States, leading to a more coherent approach to public engagement. It was also pointed out that EU legislation takes precedence and could provide a uniform framework for online debate and consultation, avoiding significant discrepancies between different national regulations. In the same vein, people felt that European legislation could encourage greater participation and the involvement of citizens, giving them the opportunity to influence decision-making processes at this level. However, it should be kept in mind that the EU member states have different cultural and legal contexts, which leads to different levels of citizen involvement. A flexible approach at the national level could therefore help to better consider the specificities of each country.

Some respondents argued that decisions on methods of consultation and civic participation should be left to sovereign nations, reflecting the diversity of European democracies. This view was also shared by those who considered that EU Member States have different systems and different levels of digitization and, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, decisions should be taken as close to the citizen as possible. In this spirit, it is stressed that European cooperation and the exchange of best practices could be more effective than binding European legislation, thus avoiding possible resistance to the implementation of uniform rules. Other respondents stated that online consultations should first be implemented at the national level, and that they should only be implemented at a higher level if they work successfully and if public opinion is positive.

There was a third category of respondent who pointed out that participation in online consultation and debates should not be mandatory, as there is no need to put pressure on civilians to participate in such debates and consultation; this choice should be left to each individual as a European citizen. In addition, mandatory online debates and consultation could lead to a negative public opinion about the practice, as citizens will feel forced to participate in activities that are sometimes not in the interest of certain citizens. Moreover, certain categories of people do not have access to the internet, or do not have the necessary knowledge to use online platforms, or do not want to have a digital profile to vote and prefer the traditional way of doing things. Therefore, hypothesis H3 has been confirmed: "The general belief of respondents is that mandatory participation in online consultation should only be imposed when the majority of the population has the skills and technical capacity to access online platforms". A small proportion of respondents were reserved, saying that it was very difficult to answer, but still considered the possibility that online consultation and debate would be beneficial.

Nearly 75% of respondents believed that a certain percentage of legislation should be subject to mandatory online public consultation. Furthermore, of the 170 respondents who felt this way, almost half said that more than 50% of legislation should be subject to online public consultation, while only 13% thought that less than 25% of legislation should be subject to online public consultation. In terms of the level of government most eligible for online voting, the response options included the election of mayors, presidential elections, national parliamentary elections, the election of MEPs, and other options. Many respondents opted for the online elections in the case of the European Parliament (72 out of 228) and the elections for mayors (73 out of 228).

When asked "Who do you think should be the main promoter of e-voting and e-consultation methods?", the majority of respondents indicated that the European Union, governments, and local authorities should take this responsibility, in that order. Fewer felt that non-governmental organizations and regional authorities should be the main promoters.

A large number of respondents felt that education policy, social policy, and health policy are public policy areas that should be subject to mandatory public debate and online consultation, to the detriment of competition policy, common agricultural policy, environmental policy, transport policy, and cultural policy (Figure 4). Thus, out of

228 respondents, 161 (70.6%) indicated that they support online debates in the field of education policy, choosing the two response options “strongly agree” and “agree”.

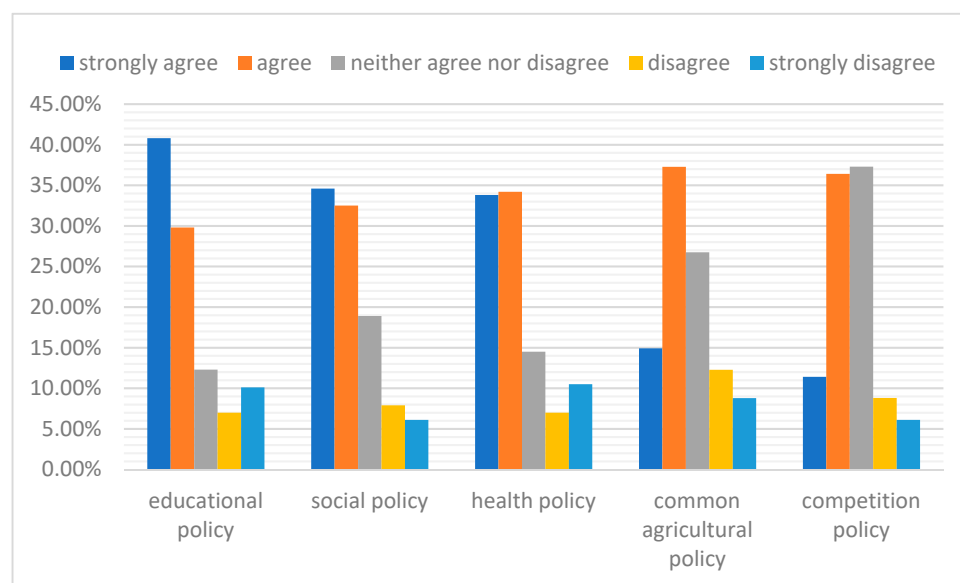


Figure 4. In which of the following public policy areas do you think digital consultations should be mandatory?

5. Discussion

The digitalization trend is sparking enthusiasm for innovation and efficiency, but also concerns about data security and the impact on jobs.

When asked about their reaction or feeling towards the general trend of digitalization, people responded by either referring to the concept of digitalization and its meaning, or by referring to what the digitalization process implies in terms of needs and effects. In the following tables, we have tried to distinguish, by category, the expressions most often used by respondents when referring to the digitalization process, and the less frequently mentioned expressions (Tables 1 and 2). We can see that the most frequently used expressions are positive remarks, with most respondents having a good and very good opinion about digitalization, mentioning that digitalization is about transformation and adaptation, a necessary process which brings efficiency, progress, and development. On the other hand, we can see that among the less used words we can distinguish positive expressions as well as negative and neutral expressions. Thus, the less mentioned positive words were enthusiasm and excitement, while the less mentioned negative words included words such as frustration, distrust, and anxiety.

Table 1. Frequently used words as answers to the question “What is your reaction/feeling of the general trend towards digitalization?”.

The Concept	The Process	The Effects
Transformation		Efficiency
Adaptation		Progress
Positive	Necessary	Accessibility
		Development
		Simplification
		Improvement

Table 2. Less mentioned words as answers to the question “What is your reaction/feeling of the general trend towards digitalization?”.

The Concept	The Process	The Effects
Enthusiasm	Unavoidable	De-bureaucratization
Excitement		Transparency
Challenge		Divide
Frustration		Privacy
Distrust		Security
Anxiety		Threats
Reticence		Harmful
Indifference		

Therefore, many people see digitalization as an opportunity for innovation and for increasing efficiency in business and everyday life. However, there are also concerns about data security, the impact on jobs, and issues of accessibility and sustainability. Ultimately, reactions are diverse and reflect people’s different perceptions and experiences of this global phenomenon. In this regard, Eurostat data and studies show that active citizenship is in decline, one explanation being that younger generations are unwilling to fulfil the obligations necessary for democracy to flourish, particularly in terms of voting ([Eurostat 2024c](#); [Putnam 2000](#); [Wattenberg 2012](#)). Other studies indicate “that civic competences are interconnected: knowledge or information is connected with collaboration, which is connected to communication, which is connected to social initiative [...] and if one of these sub-competences is underdeveloped, it could lead to social inactivity” ([Medne et al. 2024](#)). Therefore, it is important to find more about the willingness and readiness of young generations to engage in decision-making process and the factors that would influence their involvement, especially in countries with low civic engagement, such as Romania ([Eurostat 2024c](#)). As has been pointed out, “uncertainty and fear of possible problems or difficulties that may arise while using digital public services discourage many from using these digitized services” ([Popescu et al. 2024](#)). All these findings may explain why people tend to support and want to participate in online consultations, but the actual use of participatory tools is very low.

When asked about consultation and public debate platforms, respondents mentioned that they “play a crucial role in fostering democratic participation and facilitating informed decision-making. They provide avenues for citizens to voice their opinions, contribute ideas, and engage with policymakers on various issues”. These platforms would be useful for increasing the transparency of public decisions, giving greater legitimacy to decision-makers and enabling greater citizen involvement in public affairs.

An analysis of the responses to the online consultation on EU legislation shows that the words used by respondents were transparency, accessibility, feedback, opinions, quality, relevance, trust, legitimacy, communication, inclusiveness, participation, confidence, and accountability.

When asked about the most desirable level at which online consultations should be held, we can see the segmentation of the group of respondents, with very close values seen for the group of those who consider the European level and those who consider the national level to be the most desirable for organizing future online consultations (39.48% vs. 33.33%). The same trend could be observed when asked about the most appropriate level at which to legislate mandatory online consultations, i.e., the European or the national one. The opinions expressed varied, highlighting the fact that introducing online debates and consultations as a compulsory practice in European legislation could strengthen participatory democracy at the EU level, ensuring uniformity and consistency in decision-making, but that regulating them at national level could provide greater flexibility and adaptability to the specificities of each Member State, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity. A combination of both approaches seems to be beneficial, with basic regulation at European level complemented by adapted rules and practices at the national level.

There is a general understanding that mandatory participation in online consultations/debates could only be imposed after a good majority of the population were not only technically able to access the platform, but also digitally literate, because every citizen should be aware of what is going on and should be able to participate in debates or consultations.

A significant portion of respondents pointed out that education, social, and health policies should be prioritized for mandatory public debate and online consultation, rather than competition, agricultural, environmental, transport, and cultural policies (see Figure 4). Specifically, 70.6% of respondents expressed support for mandatory online consultation in education policy by selecting either “strongly agree” or “agree”. This majority response can be explained, on the one hand, by the fact that the respondents are key participants in the education system, being university students, a segment of population strongly affected by the decisions taken in the education system. When asked to name other areas of public policy where they would propose introducing digital consultations, respondents referred to tax, employment, regional development, sport, housing and urban development, innovation, and research. In this way, the citizens would be able to have their say on proposed fiscal policies, thus increasing transparency and accountability in the management of public finances. Among other benefits, digital consultations could also give the public an opportunity to express their views on employment strategies and provide feedback on training programmes. Moreover, digital consultations could involve citizens in the decision-making process on regional development priorities, the allocation of funds, and implementation of infrastructure and economic development projects at local and regional levels, facilitating citizens’ involvement in the urban development process by including them in decisions on urban planning, green spaces, community infrastructure, and other issues related to housing and urban life. Ultimately, in the field of innovation and research, digital consultation can help to identify citizens’ needs and priorities, and to collect ideas and suggestions for future research directions and technological developments.

6. Conclusions

The present study aimed to understand the view of youth regarding desirable levels of online participation and their feelings when asked mainly about digitalization and public debate platforms. Our study provides some theoretical contributions to the topic of online public consultation, more precisely covering the opinion of young people regarding their willingness to participate in online debates about EU legislation. Youth are important stakeholders in the field of policymaking who have used digital technology from an early age and are familiar with the internet and social media but are not necessarily digitally literate. Statistics show that, in 2023, 98.54% of Romanians aged 16–24 used the internet, compared to 97.96% of those aged 25–34 (Eurostat 2024b).

From policymakers’ perspective, the paper shows that the general trend towards digitalization provokes mixed reactions. On the one hand, there is considerable excitement about the new opportunities it opens in areas such as business, education, and healthcare. Quick access to information and the possibility to innovate and streamline processes are clear advantages of digitalization. On the other hand, there are concerns about data security and privacy. With increasing reliance on technology, the risks associated with hacking and online fraud are becoming increasingly relevant, requiring advanced protection measures. Authorities should therefore be involved in ensuring security and reducing the risks associated with online fraud and data privacy. Moreover, there is a need for investments in quality marketing. It is not enough to have online platforms if the population is not aware of their existence. In the same vein, they should be simple instruments and easily accessible. Since most people use mobile phones, developing a mobile application could make participation in public consultations more accessible. It could provide notifications, up-to-date information, and a convenient way to take part in the consultation process. As with any sale, people are looking for the trade-off of what they receive if they become

involved. The development of ways to encourage citizens to participate is another topic of discussion.

When asked about the platforms used for debate and consultation, some respondents emphasized that a platform that allows the direct expression of opinion on EU legislation would be beneficial for increasing transparency and citizens' involvement in the legislative process. It could facilitate diverse and constructive feedback, contributing to more representative and effective policymaking. However, success would depend on the accessibility, security, and manageability of the platform. Thus, a practical implication of this would be that those in charge of online platforms should ensure access for all, secure data, and proper functioning.

The limitations of the paper mainly concern the use of an accessible sample instead of a statistically determined one, and, therefore, the impossibility of generalizing the results to the whole young population. This study was carried out in three large universities from Romania, from three different regions of the country, and so future research should focus on extending the study by including students from other universities.

Additionally, even if this study is regionally limited, important findings can be derived from it for the European context. In both national and European contexts, civic engagement is crucial for sustainable development and the survival of democracy, with democracy being strengthened when citizens actively participate in political and civic life. In the global and European context, the involvement of the young generation and the provision of a sustainable development go hand in hand, and civic engagement as a student is associated with future civic engagement as an adult.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all respondents involved in this study. The participation in the research was based on anonymity and on voluntary basis, personal data of the participants was not stored.

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