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Digital Participation, Deliberation and Legitimacy: A Theoretical Account of Civic Technology, Algorithmic Mediation and Citizen Voice in Public Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT

Governments and civil-society organisations increasingly use digital platforms to consult citizens, crowdsource priorities, report service failures and deliberate on budgets, and artificial intelligence is now being added to summarise submissions, cluster opinions and moderate discussion. Enthusiasm has outrun theory. E-participation research treats participation mainly as an input channel, deliberative theory says little about public administration, and work on AI-assisted deliberation is split between promise and rejection, so no account explains what digital and algorithmic mediation do to participation and to the legitimacy participation is meant to produce. This article supplies one. It uses a conceptual, theory-building design based on an integrative review of 33 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2023 and 2026 and one primary statute, combined with typology construction, proposition derivation and an illustrative application to African local government. Drawing on deliberative-democratic theory, participatory-governance scholarship and recent research on civic technology, it distinguishes three functions of participation: informing decision-makers, legitimating decisions and developing citizens. It argues that digital participation serves the first efficiently, the second ambiguously and the third poorly, because reciprocity, reflection and the obligation to justify are precisely what platform and algorithmic mediation economise on. Seven propositions specify when digital participation enhances rather than simulates legitimacy, how algorithmic summarisation and opinion clustering shift whose voice is heard, and how digital channels interact with ward committees, town halls, traditional councils and participatory budgeting. Applied to South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana, where participatory mandates are expanding while digital access remains uneven, the account locates the decisive weakness in the link between forums and decisions rather than in the channel. The article recommends published justification registers, hybrid sequencing of digital and synchronous deliberation, contestable algorithmic mediation secured through procurement, and formal recognition of ward-level and traditional intermediaries, and it sets out how each proposition can be tested.

Keywords: digital participation; civic technology; e-participation; deliberative democracy; legitimacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a municipal official in Limpopo who receives four thousand comments on a draft Integrated Development Plan. She has a problem that a ward councillor holding a meeting in a school hall never had. The meeting produces a small number of voices, some of them loud, all of them attached to faces, and it obliges the councillor to answer in the room. The portal produces a great many voices, almost none of which expect an answer, and it hands the official a sorting task. Increasingly she would be offered software to do the sorting: topic models, language-model summaries, clustering tools that report which statements "bridge" opinion groups. Each step makes the participation more manageable. Each step also changes what the participation is.

This article asks what that change amounts to. The question matters because participation mandates are spreading faster than the institutions needed to honour them. South Africa's Municipal Systems Act requires municipalities to build a culture of community participation (Republic of South Africa, 2000), Kenya's 2010 Constitution treats participation of the people as a national value and devolved power to forty-seven counties whose assemblies must facilitate public participation, and Nigerian civic-technology organisations such as BudgIT and its project-monitoring platform Tracka have made budget scrutiny a citizen activity (Zisengwe, 2024). Meanwhile AI tools for summarising public input have become procurement options, and experiments suggest that language models can draft group statements participants prefer to human ones (Tessler et al., 2024). Enthusiasm has outrun theory.

The relevant literatures do not meet in the right place. E-participation research values participation mainly for the volume of what it collects, deliberative theory says little about administration, and work on AI and deliberation is polarised. I argue that the impasse dissolves once we stop asking whether digital participation is good or bad and ask instead which of participation's jobs it does. Participation informs decision-makers, legitimates decisions and develops citizens. Digital and algorithmic mediation serve these functions very unequally: informing efficiently, legitimating ambiguously, developing poorly. The reason is not incidental. Reciprocity, reflection and the obligation to justify are costly, and they are exactly the costs that platforms and algorithms are built to economise on.

The purpose is to build a theory of digital participation organised around its functions. Three questions guide it. Which functions do digital and algorithmic mediation serve, and why so unequally? Under what conditions does digital participation enhance rather than simulate legitimacy, and whose voice survives algorithmic summarisation? How do digital channels interact with the older participatory institutions of African local government, whose fate will decide whether expanded participation means anything?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Digital participation (or e-participation) refers here to the use of digital channels by public bodies or civil society to bring citizens' input into public decisions. Legard et al. (2023) speak of its "degree", from online consultation to shared decision-making. *Civic technology* is the narrower set of tools and organisations, often outside government, that build such channels; in Africa it includes budget-monitoring initiatives as well as projects run jointly with governments (Zisengwe, 2024).

Algorithmic mediation is the insertion of automated systems between citizens' contributions and decision-makers. Following Jungherr's (2023) advice to study narrow systems performing specific tasks, I distinguish three points of entry. Algorithms moderate (filtering abuse, flagging misinformation), aggregate (clustering opinions, ranking statements) and represent (summarising, drafting consensus statements). Representation is the least discussed and the most consequential.

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Legitimacy is the justified acceptance of a decision by those bound by it. The analysis distinguishes input, throughput and output legitimacy and attends to perceived procedural legitimacy among non-participants, the form Webb et al. (2026) measure. *Citizen voice* denotes what a participant communicates, including its intensity and mode (oral, written, translated, mediated), since these are what mediation tends to alter.

The argument also depends on three *conditions of deliberation*. Reciprocity is the expectation that one's contribution will be heard and answered by others, and that one will in turn hear and answer them. Reflection is the time and occasion to reconsider one's position in light of what one has heard. The obligation to justify is the requirement that those who decide give reasons that participants can recognise as responsive to what they said.

2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Four bodies of theory are used. The first is deliberative democracy in the tradition associated with Habermas, for which legitimacy derives from the exchange of reasons among those affected, and with Gutmann and Thompson, for whom reciprocity is central. Its systemic turn stopped demanding that every forum be fully deliberative and asked how the parts of a political system combine to produce legitimate decisions, which locates digital participation as one component among many. Yet Dean (2024) shows that deliberative-systems accounts were built around law-making and import their legitimacy concepts into administration in ways that produce significant omissions. Administrators coordinate through hierarchy and procedure, not only through talk. Opitz (2024) adds that administrators' attitudes towards participatory policy-making are shaped by organisational programmes, communication channels and personnel structures. If that is right, what happens to a submission after it enters a municipal inbox is an organisational question as much as a deliberative one, and theories that stop at the interface miss most of the action.

The second is legitimacy theory, from Scharpf's input and output legitimacy to Schmidt's throughput legitimacy, which I use to locate where digital participation is strong (input) and where it is nearly silent (throughput). The third is participatory democracy, whose developmental claim, associated with participatory democrats from Rousseau to Pateman, holds that participation makes citizens more informed, more tolerant and more efficacious. The fourth treats algorithmic systems as objects of democratic contestation. Alnemr (2026) locates the democratic response to algorithmic harm not only in institutional reform but in ordinary citizens' capacity to contest algorithms, and Oleart and Palomo (2025) argue that treating AI as a fix for deliberation depoliticises participation and ignores the political economy of a technology dominated by a few large firms.

Public-administration writing lists participation's benefits as if they were joint products of one activity. They are not: a survey can inform without legitimating, and an angry town hall can develop those present while delegitimating the decision it was convened to support. The framework therefore maps informing onto input, legitimating onto throughput and justification, and developing onto the participatory-democratic claim.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Empirical work on civic technology has been strongest on input. Shin et al. (2024), analysing 116 digital participation tools, find that they move information from citizens to governments well but rarely give citizens accountability information about how decisions are made, implemented and evaluated. The dominant design is a one-way pipe. Sieber et al. (2025), reviewing civic participation in AI, find that much of what is called participation is a by-product of automation or a form of quantification, and that few authors challenge expert authority or the status quo. Legard et al. (2023), comparing Oslo, Melbourne and Madrid, explain the degree of e-participation less by resources or mandates than by the agenda of change agents, institutional discretion and the strength of institutional defenders. Santolamazza et al. (2025) find that in Rome's digitally supported participatory budgeting the tools mainly enabled low-cost information sharing and basic participation, while features that could have supported deliberation, evaluation and monitoring were largely absent.

A second stream concerns AI and deliberation. Romberg and Escher (2024) judge computational

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thematic grouping and argument detection promising, while warning about result quality, performance on non-English corpora and the scarcity of usable software. Tessler et al. (2024) report that UK participants discussing divisive issues preferred statements written by an AI mediator to those written by human mediators, that the AI statements reduced division, and that they did not marginalise minority views on the measures used. McKinney (2024), mapping eleven uses of AI in citizens' assemblies, concludes that AI could strengthen them only with cautious implementation and mitigation of bias, hallucination and opacity; Summerfield et al. (2025) belong to the same strand that sees in AI a means of scaling deliberation. Friess et al. (2025), reviewing 171 studies, find that AI research on online discussion mostly addresses rationality and civility, while work on equality and reciprocity is sparse. Lazar and Manuali (2026) find a mixed record for proposed uses of language models, including summarising public input. Ohren et al. (2026) propose a "democracy-in-the-loop" approach that builds contestation and participant agency into AI systems through "meaningful frictions".

A third stream addresses legitimacy and durability. Webb et al. (2026), in a nationally representative vignette experiment in Australia with 4,225 respondents, find that news of a citizens' panel informing a parliamentary committee modestly increases perceived procedural legitimacy among non-participants; gains are larger when input is visibly taken seriously, and legitimacy falls when it is ignored. Doherty et al. (2024) find that Cook County residents uninterested in participatory budgeting cannot reap the broader benefits its advocates hope for. Gugliano (2026) attributes the erosion of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting to weakening political will, institutional restructuring and civil-society demobilisation; Pudar Drasko and Fiket (2026) argue that institutionalising democratic innovations requires parallel effort by state, civil-society and professional actors; and Wang et al. (2025), comparing thirty cases, find several distinct configurations that achieve high deliberative capacity.

African scholarship mostly documents constraints: broken promises and non-attendance (Matloga et al., 2024), uneven digital access (Astuti & Ayinde, 2025; Chirwa et al., 2023), weak assembly structures and resources (Dzakaklo et al., 2023; Mohammed et al., 2023) and the varied orientations of civic technology (Zisengwe, 2024). The gap is clear. No account explains why digital participation performs well on some of participation's purposes and badly on others, how algorithmic representation alters whose voice reaches decision-makers, or how digital channels should relate to the dense older institutions of African local government.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a conceptual, theory-building design. It collects no primary data and involves no human participants, so ethics approval was not required.

The "population" is the peer-reviewed journal literature on e-participation, civic technology, deliberative democracy and legitimacy, AI in deliberation and public participation, and participatory local governance in Africa. Sources were identified through keyword searches of scholarly indexes and publisher platforms and through citation chaining. Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2023 to 2026, including online-first articles; relevance to the constructs above; and English language. Preprints, conference papers, books and chapters, editorials, items whose bibliographic details could not be confirmed and retracted items were excluded. One primary document, South Africa's Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, was included because it establishes the statutory participation mandate against which the South African application is read.

Each reference was checked against its publisher or DOI landing page, or an institutional repository or bibliographic-index record (PubMed for two articles), for authors, title, journal, volume, issue, pages or article number, DOI and any retraction, correction or expression of concern. A log of the page used for each check forms the audit trail. The final corpus comprises 33 journal articles and one primary document.

The analysis proceeded in three steps. An integrative, thematic synthesis grouped findings into the streams in Section 2.3. A three-part typology of participation's functions was then constructed, relating each function to the deliberative conditions it

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requires and to what mediation economises on. Propositions were derived from the interaction of these mechanisms and stated in falsifiable form. African local government, anchored in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana, was chosen because it combines expanding participatory mandates, uneven digital access and active traditional institutions, and because the four countries present different configurations. The cases are illustrative and theory-probing, not representative.

Judgement rested on transparent criteria, the verification audit trail, triangulation across literatures, explicit boundary conditions and falsifiable propositions. A conceptual design cannot establish causal effects.

The key constructs are the three functions and the three deliberative conditions. Informing can be operationalised as the share of input reaching decision documents; legitimating as perceived procedural legitimacy among participants and non-participants; developing as change in participants' knowledge and efficacy; and contestability as whether summaries are published, linked to sources and open to challenge.

AI usage disclosure: A generative AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic) was used to support literature searching, reference verification against bibliographic records, drafting and language editing. The author(s) reviewed, revised and verified all content, checked every reference against its publisher or index record, and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 RESULTS

4.1.1 An uneven performance across the three functions

Digital participation is very good at informing, and it is worth saying so without hedging. Submissions are cheap to make and store, reporting applications locate a broken water main more precisely than a petition, and budget-transparency platforms convert inaccessible appropriation documents into searchable data. Within the limits of quality and language that Romberg and Escher (2024) identify, the volume problem that once made mass consultation unmanageable is increasingly tractable. But this is an efficiency in the transmission of preferences and facts. It treats the citizen as a sensor. Nothing in the informing function requires that the citizen learn anything, hear anyone else, or receive a reply.

Legitimation is harder, because digital participation can raise perceived legitimacy and can also counterfeit it. The second finding of Webb et al. (2026) deserves more attention than it receives: the legitimating effect of participation is conditional on visible uptake, and participation followed by visible disregard is worse than none. A platform that collects submissions without reporting what became of them borrows legitimacy it cannot repay. Residents of Vhembe stayed away from service-delivery meetings because government had repeatedly failed to keep its promises (Matloga et al., 2024). That is an offline finding, but digital channels intensify the dynamic: they lower the cost of asking while leaving the cost of answering untouched.

Development, the function that does most to justify participatory budgeting rhetorically, is where digital participation performs worst. In Rome, citizens did not become co-creators of public value (Santolamazza et al., 2025), and the pattern is typical. A ballot cast through a phone develops nothing except perhaps a habit of voting. The capacities participatory democrats care about, such as understanding trade-offs, encountering opponents and revising a view, are formed by exposure to other people's reasons under conditions that require a response.

4.1.2 What mediation economises on

The functions perform unequally because each depends to a different degree on the three conditions of deliberation. Informing needs none of them. Legitimating needs the obligation to justify and benefits from reciprocity. Developing needs all three.

Each condition is costly, and platform and algorithmic mediation are largely devices for reducing those costs. Asynchronous submission removes the need for participants to encounter each other, which economises on reciprocity. Upvoting and ranking compress judgement into a click, which economises on reflection. Automated summarisation transfers the labour of reading from the decision-maker to a model, which economises on the encounter between official and citizen through which

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justification is owed. The research agenda has followed the efficiencies, as the imbalance documented by Friess et al. (2025) shows.

This is the article's core claim, stated in its strong form. The economies that make digital participation scalable are not side effects to be engineered away; they are the product. A platform that restored full reciprocity, reflection and justification would cost roughly what a well-run citizens' assembly costs. The design question is where to accept the trade-off and where to refuse it. Table 1 summarises the framework.

Table 1. The informing–legitimating–developing framework for digital participation

Function	Conditions required	Digital performance	What mediation economises on	Design condition
Informing	Accurate transmission and aggregation	Efficient	Reading time, manual coding	Quality-assured, multilingual aggregation
Legitimating	Justification, visible uptake, some reciprocity	Ambiguous	Official's encounter with contributions	Response ledgers, contestable summaries
Developing	Reciprocity, reflection, justification	Poor	Encounter between citizens, time to revise	Sequencing with synchronous deliberation

4.1.3 Algorithmic mediation and the politics of the summary

Aggregation already shapes voice. Consider the Polis tool used in vTaiwan. Participants vote on one another's short statements; the system groups them by voting pattern and highlights statements that attract agreement across groups. In Taiwan's deliberations on regulating ride-hailing, this structure was credited with surfacing points of consensus that a conventional comment process would have buried. The design is ingenious, and it rewards bridging. Statements that win across clusters rise; statements expressing an intense minority position do not. That is a defensible choice for a process aimed at workable compromise. It is a questionable default for a process whose function is to discover who is being harmed.

Large language models extend the logic from ranking to authorship. The study by Tessler et al. (2024) is careful, but its setting is a small group in which every participant reads the output and can endorse or reject it. Municipal summarisation of thousands of submissions differs in kind: most contributors never see the summary, and nobody is positioned to say that their point has been lost. Lazar and Manuali (2026) conclude that, under unequal power and deep disagreement, models should not automate the parts of democracy that matter for their own sake. I draw a narrower conclusion. A summary is a representation of a representation. When a councillor summarises a ward meeting, the summary has an author who can be questioned at the next meeting. When a model summarises a consultation, authorship is diffused across a vendor, a prompt, a training corpus and an official who may not have read the inputs. The obligation to justify does not disappear; it loses its addressee.

Three predictable distortions follow. Summarisation favours the modal and the articulate, because frequency and fluency are what compression preserves. It favours text over other modes of voice, which matters wherever participation happens orally, in several languages or through intermediaries. And consensus-seeking aggregation underweights intensity, because a hundred mild preferences can outvote ten people who will lose their homes. McKinney (2024) frames the risks as technical failure. The deeper risk is a correctly functioning tool that does exactly what it was designed to do.

4.1.4 Propositions

The framework yields seven propositions, each stated so that it could in principle be shown false.

> **Proposition 1.** Digital participation enhances the legitimacy of a decision only to the extent that it is coupled to a visible and specific justification duty, under which decision-makers report what was received, what was accepted and why the rest was not. Without such coupling, legitimacy gains are short-lived and are followed by losses below the pre-consultation baseline. The reasoning follows from Webb et al.'s (2026) conditionality and the accountability gap Shin et al. (2024) identify. Silence is informative.
>
> **Proposition 2.** Increases in the volume of digital submissions, holding decision-makers'

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responsive capacity constant, reduce rather than increase the legitimating value of a consultation. A larger pool of unanswered submissions does not signal openness; it widens the gap between contribution and response. The implication is uncomfortable: a consultation that attracts more input than an administration can answer may be better redesigned as a smaller, deliberative process with a representative sample than expanded.

Proposition 3. Algorithmic summarisation and consensus-oriented clustering will systematically shift represented voice towards frequent, fluent and text-based contributions and away from intense minority positions, oral and translated contributions, and dissent that does not bridge clusters, unless contributors can inspect and contest how their input was represented. The reasoning rests on the compression logic above and on the neglect of equality and reciprocity in AI research on deliberation (Friess et al., 2025). Tessler et al. (2024) do not contradict it; their design included the inspection and endorsement that mass consultation lacks.

Proposition 4. The legitimating effect of AI-mediated participation depends less on the accuracy of the model than on the contestability of its outputs. Two systems of equal accuracy will produce different legitimacy outcomes if one publishes its summaries, links summary claims to source submissions and allows contributors to flag misrepresentation, and the other does not. Accuracy is a property of the tool; contestability is a property of the relationship between the tool's operator and the public, which is where legitimacy lives (Ohren et al., 2026; Webb et al., 2026).

Proposition 5. Developmental effects arise from digital channels only when they are sequenced with synchronous deliberative encounters, in person or online, in which participants hear and respond to one another. Used as substitutes for such encounters, digital channels produce informing benefits without developmental ones. Santolamazza et al. (2025) show the substitute pattern in Rome; the proposition predicts that participatory budgeting designs combining online proposal and voting with neighbourhood assemblies will show stronger gains in participants' knowledge and efficacy than online-only designs of similar scale.

Proposition 6. Where digital access is uneven, adding digital channels to statutory participation changes the composition of the participating public and, more importantly, redirects officials' attention towards the digital record. Offline forums do not need to be abolished to be weakened; they need only to become the less legible input. Chirwa et al. (2023), using Afrobarometer data from 36 countries, find that internet and mobile-phone access are positively associated with several dimensions of political participation and that digital inequalities are geographically clustered. Astuti and Ayinde (2025) show that across 48 sub-Saharan African countries mobile subscriptions have grown while fixed broadband has stagnated. A municipality that analyses its portal with software and its ward meetings with handwritten minutes has already decided whose voice is easier to count.

Proposition 7. Digital participation strengthens rather than displaces traditional participatory institutions when those institutions are given a formal role as intermediaries that carry offline voice into the digital record and carry decision-makers' justifications back out. Where digital channels bypass them, the result is parallel publics with unequal access to decision-makers. The reasoning draws on the translation work that ward committees, traditional councils and community forums already perform, often informally (Rautenbach & Ferreira, 2023), and on the finding that e-participation in South African municipalities depended on the socio-technical agency of front-line participation officials (Ayodele et al., 2025).

Two conditions qualify all seven. Durability depends on organisational embedding, as Porto Alegre's experience shows (Gugliano, 2026; Pudar Drasko & Fiket, 2026), and no single design feature is necessary for high deliberative capacity (Wang et al.,

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2025). The propositions describe tendencies, not recipes.

4.2 DISCUSSION

4.2.1 African local government: expanding mandates, uneven access

South Africa illustrates the institutional density. Ward committees sit alongside the annual review of the Integrated Development Plan, budget consultations, imbizo meetings and, in former homeland areas, traditional councils, within a statutory framework that requires a culture of community participation (Republic of South Africa, 2000). The difficulty has never been a shortage of forums. It has been the weak link between forums and decisions, which is precisely the justification gap. In municipal e-participation pilots, success depended on front-line officials' agency, adaptable technologies, peer learning and a system-wide view (Ayodele et al., 2025). Read through the framework, e-participation succeeded where it was built into the municipality's throughput rather than bolted onto its front end.

Traditional authorities complicate the picture. Rautenbach and Ferreira (2023) argue that South African traditional leaders, while not organs of state, perform functions resembling state functions at local level. Matsiliza (2024), comparing Botswana and South Africa, finds that constitutional democracy has curtailed their roles. The significance for digital participation is practical. In many rural wards the traditional council is the forum where people actually speak, and Proposition 7 predicts that platforms routing around it will collect thin input from a connected minority while the substantive conversation continues elsewhere, unrecorded.

Kenya combines a constitutional mandate strong enough to generate litigation with a youthful, highly connected urban public. Muthomi and Thurmaier (2024) surveyed trained citizens in 34 counties, who generally rated social media as effective in drawing residents into budget forums and providing access to budget proposals, though village-level budget champions were more sceptical than area-level facilitators. That gradient supports Proposition 6. Akallah and Tap (2026) ask why residents of Nairobi's Kibra constituency abstain from participatory budgeting when it is offered. The 2024 protests against the national Finance Bill, organised substantially online by young Kenyans and ending in the bill's withdrawal, informed government about the intensity of opposition very efficiently, but by bypassing the participation procedures that had preceded the bill, which suggests those procedures had failed the legitimating test well before the streets filled.

Nigeria's experience centres on monitoring rather than consultation. Platforms such as Tracka invite citizens to verify whether budgeted projects exist, and BudgIT has worked to connect state governments to open-budget portals (Zisengwe, 2024). This is the informing function turned around, with citizens informing each other and the media about government. Its legitimating effect depends on whether authorities respond, and Zisengwe's interviewees describe influence that is mostly indirect and seldom acknowledged; South African initiatives, by contrast, lean more towards helping government. The framework predicts that monitoring platforms will have least traction where elected councils are weakest, which in Nigeria means local government.

Ghana is a reminder that the binding constraints are often not digital at all. Dzakaklo et al. (2023) attribute low participation in Ketu South to citizens' lack of information, inadequate assembly structures and inadequate resources, and Mohammed et al. (2023) find that participation in planning in Sawla-Tuna-Kalba was undermined at implementation by limited funding, commitment and capacity. Participation that does not reach implementation cannot legitimate anything, whatever its channel.

4.2.2 Relation to prior studies

The framework agrees with Shin et al. (2024) and Sieber et al. (2025) that existing tools are strong on input and weak on accountability, and extends them by explaining why: the weakness follows from what mediation economises on, not from immature design. It agrees with Webb et al. (2026) on the conditionality of legitimacy and extends the finding from deliberative panels to mass consultation, where Proposition 2 predicts that volume itself can erode legitimacy. It follows Dean (2024) and Opitz (2024) in placing legitimating work inside administrative throughput.

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It departs from two positions. Against the optimism of work on scaling deliberation with AI (McKinney, 2024; Summerfield et al., 2025), it holds that the main risk lies in correct functioning rather than failure, and that the favourable results of Tessler et al. (2024) depend on an inspection condition mass consultation lacks. Against Oleart and Palomo (2025), it resists blanket rejection. On political economy they are right, and the point bears with particular force on African municipalities that will rent rather than build these tools. But rejection leaves officials with four thousand submissions and their own unaided reading, which in practice means most are never read; the relevant comparison is with that alternative. Ohren et al.'s (2026) "meaningful frictions" names from the design side what this article identifies from the theory side: the frictions that mediation removes are the ones that carried democratic value. Fischli and Muldoon (2024), drawing on the European D-CENT and DECODE projects, are persuasive about what movement-built platforms could do, less so about what municipal procurement typically delivers. Finally, where African studies document constraints country by country, the framework shows that broken promises in Vhembe, sceptical village budget champions in Kenya and unacknowledged influence in Nigeria are versions of one justification gap.

4.2.3 A design-and-review framework

The framework implies a design-and-review approach organised around functions rather than technology, with four elements. A *justification register* publishes, for every consultation, a record mapping categories of input to decisions with reasons for non-adoption; it follows most directly from Propositions 1 and 2 and is cheap relative to the platform. *Proportional sequencing* uses digital channels for agenda-setting, information and voting, with synchronous deliberation in between, wherever developing citizens is an aim, and stops calling pure service-failure reporting "participation". *Contestable mediation* requires that AI summaries be published, linked to source submissions, tested on the languages residents use (Romberg & Escher, 2024) and open to correction, with participation data kept in public ownership. *Intermediary recognition* formally tasks and resources ward committees, traditional councils and community organisations to carry offline contributions into the same record that digital submissions enter, so that analysis does not privilege what was typed.

4.2.4 Limitations and future research

The propositions are untested, and the three functions, though analytically distinct, are empirically entangled. Institutional variation within South Africa alone, between metropolitan and rural municipalities, may exceed the variation between countries. Summarisation models change quickly; the framework is pitched at what mediation economises on, which should change more slowly.

Propositions 1, 2 and 4 lend themselves to vignette experiments in the manner of Webb et al. (2026), varying the presence of a justification register, the volume of input relative to response, and the contestability of an AI summary. Proposition 3 can be tested by auditing model-generated summaries of real consultation corpora against independent human coding, oversampling minority positions and submissions in isiZulu, Kiswahili, Hausa or Twi, and measuring which contributions disappear. Proposition 5 calls for comparison of participatory budgeting designs with and without synchronous deliberation, using pre- and post-measures of knowledge and efficacy. Propositions 6 and 7 require municipal-level process tracing of whose input reaches decision documents, comparing municipalities that have and have not given ward committees or traditional councils a formal intermediary role. Longitudinal data could examine the durability conditions drawn from Gugliano (2026) across political turnovers.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital participation has been asked to do three jobs and has been judged mostly on the easiest. It informs well. It legitimates only when someone answers, and it develops citizens only when they meet. The conditions that make participation democratically valuable, namely reciprocity, reflection and the obligation to justify, are the conditions that platforms and algorithms were designed to make cheaper, and cheaper here often means absent. That diagnosis does not counsel rejection. It counsels deciding, consultation by consultation, which function is being served and protecting the frictions that function

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requires. For African local governments facing expanding mandates and uneven connectivity, the most important design choice may be the least technological: whether the older forums where people already speak become partners in the digital record or casualties of it.

Municipalities and county governments should attach a published justification register to every consultation before investing in new platforms, and size consultations to their capacity to answer.

Public bodies procuring AI tools for summarising or clustering input should write contestability into the contract: published summaries linked to sources, a route to flag misrepresentation, testing in local languages, and public ownership of participation data with freedom to change vendors.

National and provincial governments and legislatures should give ward committees and traditional councils a formal, resourced intermediary role, and should require participatory budgeting to sequence online stages with synchronous deliberation where citizen development is a stated aim.

Oversight bodies, such as provincial departments of local government, county assembly committees and audit institutions, should review participation against all three functions rather than counting submissions. Donors and civic-technology organisations should fund throughput, the link between input and decision, which is the weakest part of the chain. Researchers should begin with audits of algorithmic summaries in African languages.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

Theoretically, the article replaces the question of whether digital participation is good or bad with a functional account. By separating informing, legitimating and developing, and tying each to the deliberative conditions it requires, it explains why digital participation performs unevenly and identifies the economies of reciprocity, reflection and justification as the mechanism. It adds an account of algorithmic representation in which the risk lies in correct functioning and in the loss of an addressee for justification, and it offers seven falsifiable propositions linking deliberative theory to public administration.

For the African and developing-state literature, it connects findings usually reported country by country, showing that broken promises, sceptical intermediaries and unacknowledged civic-technology influence are expressions of one justification gap, and it brings ward committees and traditional councils into the theory of digital participation as intermediaries rather than obstacles.

Practically, it provides a design-and-review approach (justification registers, proportional sequencing, contestable mediation and intermediary recognition) that municipalities, procurement officials, oversight bodies and donors can apply without waiting for new technology.

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