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DAY 3 - 11:45 - Assembly Area

Success factors of local e-participation in Germany

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Session recap

At a glance

Nadja Wilker, a political scientist at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf who has researched political participation for almost 15 years (including at the Düsseldorf Institute for Internet and Democracy, now evolving into a broader institute on resilient democracy), presented a two-and-a-half-year research project with the universities of Dresden, Leipzig and Koblenz. The project mapped the 'supply side' of digital participation: whether and under what conditions Germany's more than 10,000 municipalities offer it. After presenting the main findings, she opened a discussion on drivers, obstacles and what success means, with researchers, municipal staff and civil society practitioners in the room.

Key messages

- Roughly one third of responding German municipalities offer digital participation, 1 percent tried it and stopped, and two thirds do not offer it or plan to.
- Adoption is mainly a matter of capacity: municipal size and fiscal capacity matter. Broadband access does not (probably due to saturation), nor does the existence of a state-provided central platform.
- Maturity (the number and variety of processes) depends on organisational factors: specialised offices and teams, and the importance given to democratic goals, rather than mayoral support or a dedicated budget.
- Municipalities rate transparency, acceptance of decisions and involving more people as the most important goals, and improving decision quality as the least important.
- Digital participation is an organisational and governance innovation, not just a tool. It must become institutionalised practice and a participation culture.
- What is lacking is less technology than courage: to experiment, accept failure and put genuinely relevant decisions up for participation.

Facts, figures and references

- Partners: universities of Düsseldorf, Dresden, Leipzig and Koblenz. Survey from March to October 2025, about 2,300 responses (more than 22 percent of municipalities).
- About one third offer digital participation, 1 percent stopped, two thirds do not offer it.
- About 10 percent of responding municipalities already use AI in participation.
- Four German states provide a central participation platform for municipalities.

Takeaways for the community

- Supporting small municipalities requires shared infrastructure ('participation as a service') and easy, bundled tools.
- Investing in specialised teams and a clear democratic purpose is more decisive for maturity than budget alone.
- Peer networks and collections of good practice, such as the project dashboard, can help municipalities learn from similar peers.