Motivation and central research topic
The central research topic is how binding electronic participation (E-Voting) can be introduced and implemented legally on the municipal level in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). Both elections and referenda are covered.

Approach and current status
Focal point is the decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court (BVerfG) of March 2009 – while declaring the machines used unconstitutional it upheld the general idea of possible valid and legal E-Voting. In addition to introducing the principle of „transparency“ the BVerfG also applied the state structure principles of „Democracy“, „Republic“ and „Rule of Law“ upon the electoral process. This landmark decision is expanded upon by two rulings of the Thuringian High Administrative Court which deal with Online-Voting at the University of Jena. In addition to these judicial rulings numerous scientific publications are given consideration. Little has been published about whether the rules for mandatory elections/referenda also apply to non-mandatory, but legally binding participatory processes. This if of particular importance with regards to the inclusion of § 27a into the NRW Community Order. § 27a GO NRW provides for representation of special interest groups like the elderly or persons with disabilities in a non-mandatory, but nevertheless binding, in political participation with the municipalities deciding up on the exact process.

At the comparative legal level Estonia as leading nation with regards to Online-Voting and E-Democracy is looked at to see whether and to which extent the mechanisms used there can be legally implemented in Germany. Estonia introduced Online-Voting on all levels in 2007 and almost all interactions citizen-state can take place Online.

The topic was approached in a longer legal essay 2015 („Können elektronische Wahlen verfassungsmäßig sein?“) and shorter essay 2016 („Constitutional Parameters for E-Voting in Germany“). Findings were also presented at various conferences nationally and internationally, in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary context. The thesis will be finished and handed in early 2018, the completion/oral examn is planned for the summer or fall of 2018.

Inter- and transdisciplinarity
The dissertation focusses on legal aspects while the topic also encompasses issues of Political Science (Implementation of Guidelines in the political process, issues of low voter turnout etc.), Sociology and Communications (e.g. possible effects of E-Voting on voter turnout, issues of the „digital divide“ and persons from „underprivileged educational backgrounds“ in political participation) as well as Computer Science (Cryptography, technical possibilities of electronic devices etc.). Alongside the central research question general issues like the importance of political participation for Democracy, legal and other aspects of voter turnout, inclusion of all groups into the democratic process etc. are covered.

These aspects and issues are reflected both in the choice of the supervisors as well as the content of the thesis, which nevertheless is aimed at obtaining a Juris Doctor degree.

The thesis is a cooperative endeavor by the University of Applied Sciences for Public Administration (FHöV) NRW at Cologne and the Heinrich-Heine University, Düsseldorf. In addition to this transdisciplinary approach, the City of Cologne, specifically its experts on elections, have been a partner from the very start to ensure applicability, feasibility, viability and usability of the theoretical findings in practice.

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