View of Electronic Participation and its Application in the Present Conditions of Democracy

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Abstract

Recently we have witnessed declining confidence of citizens in public authorities in developed countries. The paper provides an insight into the tools of e-democracy as a critical component of a developed democracy. We claim that one of the possible reasons for the loss of confidence of the citizens is that the traditional mechanisms of democracy do not often comply with the decision of those who govern. Only the citizens who show interest by watching and following current events, and who know where to look for this information, get to the final output in the form of regulations, decrees, laws, etc. Publication of the outcomes of public administration and governance on their web sites enables to keep track of the news and at the same time, creates a space for the development of the active participation of citizens in the management of public affairs with a feedback.

Key words

E-participation, e-democracy, information a communication technologies and e-government

JEL Classification: I22, I25

Introduction

Since electronic participation is a relatively new concept and the means for achieving superior public decisions, the problem can be seen in the civic ignorance of its actual existence and usage possibilities. An important part of the practice is undoubtedly the functioning of its instruments. Ensuring the functionality and maturity of the tools of e-participation and currency of relevant information on specific web portals plays a crucial role. Only after the fulfilment of these conditions, it is possible to start to inform the citizens about the existence of these new electronic options. Modernization and acceleration of information and communication channels between citizens and authorities, as well as between authorities themselves, are in the interest of the state administration and self-government. However, the other side of the coin consists of citizens´ feedback. Even though the e-participation tools have been in practice for several years, only a small number of citizens uses them (e.g. employees of the authorities who deal with the issue on a daily basis), but the general public is not in-

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formed enough about this possibility or citizens are sceptical about the use of the Internet to handle official affairs.

1   Methodology

The aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of the use of the tools of modern e-democracy and to point out the possibility of their use in terms of the accessibility of electronic resources provided by the public administration and self-government to citizens. An important role is played by the participation in decision-making in public matters, where the citizens themselves can no longer be co-authors of the decisions that deliver results and outcomes for the whole society. Euripidis (2012) distinguishes three groups:

- the provision of on-line services via the Internet (e-consultation)
- the use of ICT by the government of the country, not only as the basic provision of services and procedures, but also in a wider meaning of government activity
- the means capable of changing public administration using ICT, in particular via the Internet.

According to the OECD document mentioned above, the e-government is defined as the use of ICT, especially the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government. In a broader sense, the OECD considers e-government to be the tool enabling better policy results, better quality of services and their effectiveness, improvement of the public involvement in public matters. E-government enables greater efficiency in total expenditure reduction, funds allocation to regions with higher priority for the government or the requirements for resources (Kováč, 2013).

The benefit of ICT in public administration is also the reduction of costs of internal processes by creating interdepartmental information channels (Polakovič, 2015a). Quality is represented by the customer-focused approach, which is about the provision of information and communication with citizens, without necessarily having to navigate in the structure of public administration. ICT also reinforces public confidence to the government. The decision-making process becomes more transparent due to the existence of information and communication mechanism along with an instrument providing feedback.

Another definition provides the World Bank that understands e-government as the use of information technologies by the government agencies which have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other parts of the government. The aim of e-government is to create an interaction between the government and the citizens (Government to Citizen), the government and businesses (Government to Business enterprises) and intergovernmental agencies (Government to Government) (Finger, 2007). The concept of e-government and information policy strategy within the EU were for some time known as eEurope, within which the action plans were raised. The result was to make public spots with a possibility of connecting to the Internet for people who do not have this opportunity at home or at work (Chapellet, 2005). At the same time were created programs of e-learning (teaching and access to modern digital devices at each school and university) and e-health (standardised medi-

cal record). The essence of the programs was in particular the idea of introducing ICT in practice and e-government was defined by basic electronic services. i2020 has become a follow-up strategy which works on the principle of innovation, investment and the integration of ICT into everyday life (Blummer, 2009).

2   Results and discussion

In an attempt to specifically define the e-participation in accessible literature we come across multiple approaches. The European Commission considers it to be relinking of ordinary people with politics, policy making and with the processes associated with decision-making in order to better understand and use information and communication technologies (Kováč, 2014). The OECD presents similar view, a relationship based on a partnership with the government in which citizens are actively involved in defining the process and content of policy making. It recognizes the equality of the citizens in the program settings, suggests the possibility of policy and shaping the political dialogue, even though the government is responsible for the final decision. A working definition is also provided by Wimmer (2007) who by e-participation means the use of ICT in order to provide the information, and submits a two-way top-down model of involvement.

The opportunity to participate online in political decisions is one of the characteristics of modern democracy. E-engagement, the rate of citizens´ engagement in public affairs is one of the options for the implementation of the modern democracy, and on the basis of current technical possibilities (Polakovič, 2015b). The condition of functioning of the e-engagement is the existence of a relationship between the government and the society. A study Citizens as Partners (2001), carried out by the OECD, presents three basic components on which it is possible to build up this relationship:

1. information – represent a one-way relationship between a government and citizens, where the government brings information for citizens on its own initiative, for example access to public records, official journals and government internet sites.
2. consultation – a limited, two-way relationship, where the government calls for a feedback, but selects opinions that will be taken into account, for example comments on the draft legislation, public opinion polls.
3. participation – a two-way relationship based on a partnership with the government, where citizens interfere with the policy-making and interact the government officials. Thus they take part of the responsibility, however, the final decision remains within the competence of the government, for example open work groups.

To strengthen civil-government relations, it is possible to choose from a range of different approaches in the use of digital tools (Polakovič, 2015c). Government officials have the opportunity to contact the citizens either actively, in the form of a dialogue and a debate, or passively, through anticipation of possible civil responses to given documents. Other options represent the on-line (real-time) or off-line tools, methods based on ad hoc, where communication can take place for all citizens or with a limitation to certain groups.

Graph 1 E-participation index of top 20 countries
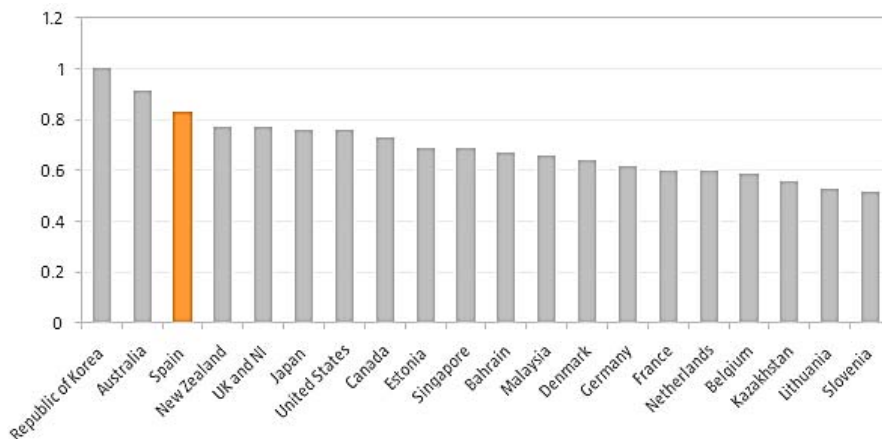
Interaction rate presents another choice, where the government either creates a free space for citizens or limits it in some way. The tools used in practice are mostly a mixture of different approaches and characteristics, which brings forward possibilities for their wider application and functionality. The three-stage model of e-engagement, presented in a study by the OECD, Citizens as Partners, which forms the basis of categorization of e-engagement degrees, is followed by the distribution of the e-democracy tools. The basic e-methods of e-participation include (Wimmer, 2007):

- electronic petitions (e-petitions) – web-based system allowing participants to support a petition and write their names and addresses on-line. The petition system used in Scotland is called e-petitioner and shows the on-line petition text, supplementary petition materials. It allows petition participants to insert their name and address into the system, and it also includes a discussion forum where all citizens can express their opinion for or against the petition.
- electronic referendum (e-referendum) – a referendum initiated by citizens is a simple way of bringing a problem to the higher authorities. Like with the e-election, it is possible to use devices as SMS, interactive digital TV, electronic voting kiosk or a portable electronic election device.
- e-panel – it is represented by a set of hired participants who agreed to periodically reflect on matters related to information and communication technologies. In the scope of e-panels it is possible to use other tools, e.g. discussion forums, etc.
- discussion forums, chat rooms – places on websites where it is possible to discuss specific topics. Discussion forums differ from chat rooms by dealing with the threats to society and their duration is within days or weeks. By contrast, chats take place in real time. Citizens remain mostly anonymous, but some discussion groups cannot come without registering. Some sites offer the opportunity to communicate with people involved in the particular area within on-line "contact hours" of elected representatives.

- electronic communities (e-communities/virtual communities) – on-line sites which gather groups of citizens initiating discussions on selected political issues and formulate alternative proposals.
- electronic citizen juries – this tool is similar to consensus commissions, where a group of selected people interrogates experts on the political agenda. Then they discuss the issue among themselves and in the end they announce conclusion (consensus). Compared to commissions, the time of the questioning and discussion shorter, and the conclusion does not necessarily lead to a consensus.
- frequently asked questions (FAQ) – a list of frequently asked questions assists the government in terms of orientation and needs of citizens. By their nature, they are not sufficient to communicate on a complex issue.
- webcast – live broadcast of parliamentary sessions or offices via the Internet. Individual broadcasts can be run again offline from an archive – podcast.
- blog – web sites where data inputs are in a chronological order. Contributors, so called bloggers, focus on members of boards or government officials.
- alert services – serve to inform citizens about new events and ventures.

Table 1 Electronic participation tools

Instruments	Macintosh (2005)
The main instruments of e-participation	e-petition forums chat room electronic community e-panel electronic civil jury e-referendum
Tools fixing of e-participation	electronic voting order simulation of decision-making quick survey surveys
Supporting tools of e-participation	frequently asked Questions webcast blog warning service

Source: Macintosh, A. (2005). *E-methods for Public Engagement.* p. 31. Retrieved from http://www.iseing.org/egov

2.1 Electronic engagement and electronic voting

E-engagement helps to produce better politics, the restoration of trust, ac-ceptance of that politics and, last not least, broadens the base of responsibility for de-cisions taken. Public supervision over the government activities, curbing corruption, active citizenship support, etc., can be classified as positives. Electronic voting is one of the ways how the election could take place, other than the classic way (Clift, 2004). For e-voting we can simply regard the use of a computing device in order to display a ballot and a voting record. According to the OECD, it is such a vote, which can be done from any location, whether it's a business, home or a public place like a library and a

cafe, and at the same time, that works with the protection of and the need for civil legitimation. Clift (2004) also defines the number of exploitable technologies to this kind of voting, such as SMS, digital TV, an electronic stand or a remote sensor (remote electronic voting).

Electronic voting is not yet very widespread way to vote. The arguments for the introduction of electronic voting place emphasis on the accuracy of the election results, and the speed of their publication. General political discussion also cites arguments, according to which Internet voting can help increase voter turnout.

The term electronic voting is in Estonia used to refer to voting via the Internet remote access. The expression is normally used also for the electronic option of voting directly at the polling station. Because of terminological clarity both types of voting can be differentiated as I-voting (electronic voting with remote access, i.e. Internet voting, or remote evoting) and e-voting (electronic voting in the polling station, the non-remote e-voting). The idea of an Internet vote in Estonia emerged in 2001. In 2005 Estonia as the first country in the world exploited binding Internet vote in municipal elections. In 2007 it gained world leadership in the use of Internet voting in the parliamentary elections. There have been seven elections in Estonia since 2005, in which they could vote via the internet. These were the municipal elections (2005, 2009, 2013), parliamentary elections (2007, 2011) and the elections to the European Parliament (EP, 2009, 2014). The classic voting is, of course, retained. The electronic voting is a bilateral communication between a voter and the National Electoral Commission, which receives and processes the votes. From a security perspective, the weakest link is the voter´s computer, because it is impossible to make sure that only the user-voter has control over it. Testing the contestability of individual computers took place in 2013. The introduction of the mandatory verification of the eligibility of voters´ computers is expected in 2017.

Conclusion

The authors of the paper understand e-participation as a set of tools that use ICT to ensure greater involvement of citizens in the process of making public policies (from the preparation of the decision until the achieved results check). A prerequisite for a good government is the respect for democratic principles. A new form how to support and actively create democracy is the usage of ICT to strengthen relations and bonds between citizens and their elected representatives. The OECD brings its own view on e-democracy in a number of documents. E-democracy is seen as the use of modern technology in order to cement relationships between government and citizens. Such a definition of electronic democracy, coupled with the fact that there are also problems in the interaction and it is therefore necessary to create processes and tools to ensure that the views and needs of citizens were taken into account in decision-making, is essential for the further use of the term.

A confusion of so-called e-terms in the general area of public interest is typical for the current period. Therefore, in the conclusion of the paper it is necessary to attempt to give a brief and clear definition of certain concepts related to the e-participation. E-participation is often incorrectly considered to be a synonym of the so-called e-voting,

which stems primarily from the limited understanding of democracy as a process that only concerns the citizens in a moment when they carry their ballot to the ballot box. Therefore, all the processes involving citizens in public decision-making processes by using the ICT beyond e-voting, which itself is a part of the e-participation, fall within e-participation. E-democracy itself can be understood as one of the two basic components of electronic public administration (e-governance). The second component is nothing other than e-government, so the electronic processes in the framework of the professional public administration staffed by human entities, whether they are elected representatives or designated officers (executives).

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