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E-media: game changer for local and regional politicians

Governance Committee

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Summary

The relationship between elected representatives and citizens, civil society and political authorities is evolving. While traditional linkages between citizens and politicians are weakening, e-media, including Internet and social media sites, can help mobilise voters and increase citizen participation in new and different ways to reinforce the legitimacy of elected representatives.

This report examines the impact of the increasing use of e-media on the work of political representatives at local and regional levels. It examines 'good practices' that show how e-media can help to improve the political involvement, interest and knowledge of citizens and enhance their participation, as well as ways in which new technologies can help citizens contribute to policy making. The aim is to analyse the changes, opportunities and challenges that IT-usage can bring.

However, there are also hurdles to overcome including the risk that not all opinions are taken into account, that political debate using e-media is not always balanced and that generated data is not secure and that in some case the privacy of participants is not guaranteed.

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1 L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Not registered

RESOLUTION 394(2015)[2]

1.   Political awareness, involvement and adherence to democratic norms by citizens are essential elements of an authentic democracy. Internet use and Internet penetration in society can have a positive impact on democratisation and democratic attitudes. The information that is exchanged through e-media tools can have a mobilising effect on voters.

2.   The Governance Committee, which has taken stock of recent developments in its 2014 seminar on 'Deepening democracy with e-media', focussing on open data in local government, web applications for voters and combining on-line and off-line democracy, believes that the development of e-tools, including websites, blogs, forums, discussion groups and social networks, can help mobilise voters and increase citizen participation to reinforce the legitimacy of elected representatives.

3.   The increasing accessibility and use of broadband, combined with the profusion of portable devices and smartphones, enable citizens to browse for politically relevant information and interact with politicians at any time and from anywhere.

4.   It is important that elected representatives take advantage of the possibilities to influence and guide topical political debate through e-media, which has the advantage of making a debate more transparent and accessible; giving participants a sense of control, which in turn, can increase trust and acceptance.

5.   E-media can also help voters to be better informed about what local and regional authorities actually do and can help elected representatives to remain informed about the expectations and levels of satisfaction of citizens. E-technologies, such as survey techniques and sentiment analysis of online content, are useful for authorities to keep a 'finger on the pulse of society'.

6.   Local and regional authorities need to move beyond uni-directional communication, merely providing information to citizens via the Internet. Information needs to be provided in a more interactive manner, allowing input and involvement by citizens. E-technologies, and in particular integrated digital platforms, can enable tailor-made delivery of information and reciprocal communication, so that citizens learn about politics, and politicians get to know more about the opinions and the priorities of their citizens.

7.   Elected representatives and their authorities need to be proactive in creating an on-line presence. It is no longer enough to be available to constituents off-line. The quality and standard of political debate on-line is the responsibility of all elected representatives and political parties. Online debates that take place in a 'political vacuum' will have little impact.

8.   An important challenge for e-democracy is to ensure an 'equal hearing' of all groups. Efforts should be made to engage the elderly and those less inclined to participate in politics, including youth. Since the Internet is a domain where younger generations tend to be well represented, e-engagement initiatives can help to mobilise them, which can in turn bring a new energy to local and regional politics, which traditionally have lower levels of youth participation than national politics.

9.   Local and regional authorities need to be prepared for increasing levels of online activity. If large numbers of people participate in a public debate using e-media, consideration needs to be given as to how all positions and opinions on the issue can be taken into account. The quality of a deliberative process depends partly on its ability to take minority opinions into account. Such opinions are a valuable source for policy-makers, who also have a responsibility for ensuring that minority interests are respected.

10.   It is important to regard e-media tools as complementary to traditional forms of citizen participation, rather than their replacement. While the web is fundamentally changing how people think and participate, it is not affecting everybody, everywhere, at the same pace.

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2 Debated and adopted by the Congress on 22 October 2015, 3rd sitting (see Document CG/2015(29)14FINAL, explanatory memorandum), co- rapporteurs: Leo AADEL, Estonia (L, ILDG) and Josan MEIJERS, Netherlands (R, NR)

11.   Engaging voters through e-media is easier when it concerns an issue that they understand, which is important to them and has a direct impact on their life. It has also been shown to be more effective if an e-democracy project is promoted through national, regional and local media. Citizens can only get involved if they know that an initiative exists.

12.   The Congress therefore recommends that associations of local and regional authorities:

a.   encourage local and regional authorities to develop the use of online consultations in their deliberative activities;

b.   offer support, training and guidance to elected representatives on how to create an online political presence;

c.   encourage more use of sharing and pooling of applications, programmes and e-media tools;

d.   promote the innovative use of open data at the local and regional level.

13.   The Congress resolves to:

a.   encourage political parties to get involved in on-line debates thereby demonstrating to citizens and civil society groups, that an issue deserves serious discussion;

b.   continue its efforts to ensure that people who are less e-literate and less digitally active are not excluded from the political process;

c.   take a proactive approach to new e-media tools and to continue to develop its online political presence.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Introduction[3]

1.   This report examines the impact of the increased use of e-media on the work of political representatives at local and regional levels. It also provides some 'good practices' that show how e-media can help to improve the political involvement, interest and knowledge of citizens and enhance their participation, as well as ways in which new technologies can help citizens contribute to policy making. The aim is to analyse the changes, opportunities and challenges that IT-usage can bring.

2.   The relation of representatives with citizens, civil society and the executive branch of government is changing. While traditional linkages between citizens and politicians are weakening, Internet connectivity can help mobilise voters and increase citizen participation in new and different ways to reinforce the legitimacy of elected representatives.

3.   E-democracy, in the form of e-engagement tools, can increase the legitimacy of local and regional authorities by involving citizens in democratic governance in varying ways. Yet, there are also hurdles to overcome to ensure that all opinions are taken into account, that there is room for deliberation, that elected representatives make well-informed and considered decisions, that the generated data are secure so that they cannot be manipulated and that the privacy of participants is guaranteed.

4.   Building on the existing literature on e-democracy and the role of political representatives, this report provides a framework in which the varying attempts to increase citizen involvement in political decision- and policy-making can be categorised. Several examples of e-engagement tools are given that show how local and regional authorities can help involve citizens.

5.   By comparing these projects, to see to what extent e-engagement tools are able to satisfy the objectives and to increase political engagement and trust in the political process, the rapporteurs are able to draw some conclusions about how the work of local and regional representatives may be transformed by e-media usage and e-participation initiatives.

Part 1: E-democracy and the legitimacy of representatives

6.   There are many ways in which e-technologies are affecting the links between political representatives in the legislature and the executive, the voters, organized interest groups and the media. Much of this influence is positive: digital technologies and e-democracy tools can help citizens acquire the political information they need to participate in the democratic process; public deliberation can be improved with e-technologies; political participation can be boosted through creative use of the web.

I.   Citizens, representatives and executives

7.   The changing role and functions of representatives in democracies is not a recent phenomenon. Social, economic, technological and institutional innovations are constantly transforming their relation to the citizens they represent and towards the executive branch of government that they need to control. This constant renewal of representative-voter relations is crucial for maintaining the legitimacy of the role of elected representatives. Despite all these changes, however, the core roles and functions of political representatives remain relatively stable and can be grouped as follows:

   a. *Mobilisation*: agenda-setting, campaigning to amass (electoral) support for political projects, representing the interests and values of citizens and developing political alternatives (political competition);

   b. *Deliberation*: contributing to the public political debate and policy development; and

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3 With thanks to Dr André Krouwel, University Lecturer of Comparative Politics and Communication at Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands and Academic Director of Kieskompas (Election Compass), and his team for their contribution to the preparation of this report.

    c. Authorisation: authorize legislation, expenditures and officials, scrutinizing officials in the executive branch, monitor government activity and effects of policy implementation.

8.   These core functions all help representatives to maintain their legitimacy; that is, the explicit or implicit consent of the people. In order to assess the impact of e-technologies, we can distinguish three types of legitimacy that coincide with these three core functions and their related tasks: input-legitimacy, throughput-legitimacy and output-legitimacy. The functions will be discussed in more detail below:

a.   Mobilisation

9.   Central to the mobilisation-function is the relation between citizens and representatives. By setting up successful campaigns, putting issues on the political agenda, and formulating or pursuing political alternatives, representatives gain input-legitimacy. By taking into account crucial (material) concerns of voters and their deeply held beliefs and values, voters can identify with or at least trust representatives to work in their interest. In democracies, citizens choose, as voters, at regular intervals between these alternative views and express their explicit support for at least one of the political alternatives.

b.   Deliberation

10.   Central to the deliberation function are the relations among representatives themselves, but could also include other societal and economic actors, as well as the media. This function primarily concerns the activities of representatives in regional parliaments or city councils. Here, representatives work to build coalitions and consensus in order to get legislation passed or revoked, so that the lives of citizens will improve. Since citizens are often not directly involved in these deliberations and policy formation processes, other organized interests often provide the input and the media reports on them, so that citizens become well-informed and even intervene if necessary. Needless to say, representatives can improve citizen trust by developing transparent and traceable procedures. This often-tacit approval is referred to as throughput-legitimacy.

c.   Authorisation

11.   The authorisation function concerns the relationship of representatives with the executive branch of government, the office-holders. Local and regional representatives and authorities can gain implicit and explicit legitimacy by taking the right decisions, implementing policies that deliver the goods and services citizens expect. Representatives gain legitimacy by authorizing the budget, approving legislation and closely scrutinizing the execution of these policies and expenditures. This is referred to as output legitimacy.

12.   While these core functions are part and parcel of all liberal democracies, the way in which representatives fulfil these functions is subject to constant and often radical transformation. Moreover, over time the emphasis may shift from one function to another. It is also worth mentioning that, although a theoretical distinction can be made between input, throughput and output, in practice politics is a more muddled process, in which these activities often occur simultaneously, blurring the distinction between them.

13.   Furthermore, not all representatives devote equal time to each function or may not even be skilled or interested to perform some of them. Some, for example, would rather debate and campaign to mobilize support than work on drafting new policies and legislation. However, this theoretical categorization serves to show how the different activities of representatives have been changed by new e-technologies and how this transforms the process of attaining legitimacy.

II.   Developments in citizen-representative relations

14.   The success of any attempt to increase citizen participation depends entirely on the ability of local and regional parties and authorities to respond adequately to a changing social and political environment. Modern European societies have undergone fundamental transformations, rendering traditional patterns of legitimacy insufficient or even dysfunctional. Before examining possible solutions to this legitimacy gap using digital technology, it would be useful to outline the relevant trends in citizen-representative-government relations.

a.   Input-legitimacy and Web 2.0

15.   An important socio-political trend that has affected the relationship between representatives and citizens is the decline in traditional socio-political divisions. Until the 1960s (or in some countries the 1980s), the electoral preferences of citizens were largely determined by their social profile, particularly social class, religious belief, education and region, and to a lesser extent age and gender. Political parties were the vessels that politicized these societal divisions and sought allies to cater to the interests of their core electorate. Through strong institutional linkages and high levels of identification of voters with the ideology of the party, these 'mass-parties' could count on a solid and loyal base of support. Yet, due to processes such as increased wealth, secularization and an opening of the media-landscape, these traditional social divisions have become less distinct.

16.   Today, citizen political preferences and opinions tend to depend less on their social characteristics. Voters have weaker ties to social organizations and their representatives, including parties and are less loyal in their support. Party identification and particularly membership is declining in practically all democracies, while most countries also show decreasing levels of voter turnout and trust in the major political institutions and actors.[4] This organizational and mental disconnect between citizens and representatives and the transformed, commercialized media-landscape means that representatives can no longer communicate with their supporters in the same manner. On the other side of the coin, citizens also face different challenges when they need to contact a politician or want to place an issue on the political agenda.

17.   E-democracy – the use of Internet connectivity and digital technology in democratic political processes – provides new opportunities to bridge the gap between citizens and representatives. Representatives can make use of e-media to consult citizens through much cheaper and faster survey software packages, and citizens can contact them more easily. Through websites, blogs, forums, discussion groups and other social network sites, representatives can inform voters of their policy positions and even their private lives. Over the last two decades, political campaigns have become increasingly Internet-based and cyber-campaigns are now a crucial feature of political mobilisation. While many party and candidate websites remain primarily 'digital flyers' and static platforms of uni-directional communication, there is an increasing use of interactive features that allow voters to ask questions, participate in polls or online debates and provide other input to the political discourse.

18.   Digital technologies provide citizens with opportunities to communicate both synchronously (in real time, as in a telephone conversation) and asynchronously (not concurrently, as in e-mail) at the individual or mass level. The particular strength of the web lies in the possibilities for many-to-many communication, hypertext linking and networking, where the users are not restricted to a mere recipient role, but are able to coproduce and broadcast information themselves. This active connectivity through several communication channels and involvement can facilitate political debate, by being more flexible in allowing comments and feedback, more transparent and more accessible, giving participants a sense of control, which in turn can increase trust and acceptance.[5] The widespread diffusion and decreasing costs of broadband access have resulted in an exponential increase in online connectivity. Web 2.0 platforms, with social media, blogging and video and photo sharing capabilities, make it possible to move beyond textual-based political communication to more visual and multimodal types of interaction.

19.   Moreover, the diffusion of portable devices and smartphones has opened cyber-society up to more rapid and frequent exchange of information. Citizens can browse for politically relevant information and interact with politicians at any time and from anywhere. Whereas the arrival of the Internet has challenged the organisation of information according to geographic borders, the advent of Web 2.0 platforms has intensified the possibilities of real time responses and deeply transformed the temporal dimension of interaction. There is a real danger, however, of information overload: voters can be swamped in political information. Some academics and media-outlets have responded to this problem by using the web-infrastructure to directly help voters pick the party or candidate that best matches their own political opinions. Such Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have become an influential part of political campaign periods in many European democracies.

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4 Mair, 2013
5 Medimorec *et al.*, 2011

b.   Throughput-legitimacy and virtual deliberation

20.   Policy-making processes face potential erosion of their legitimacy if those who sit at the negotiating table can no longer automatically claim to 'represent' societal groups or interests. Social interests have become more fragmented as a consequence of globalization, specialization and the ever-increasing complexity of society. As a result, the process of policy-making and political contestation is shifting outside of the traditional political institutions.[6] Policy-making has become increasingly 'multi-level', comprising processes at the local, national or even inter- or supranational level. The multitude of interest groups, NGOs, trade-unions, action groups, citizen's initiatives, multi-national companies, professional associations, lobby groups and civil-society organizations are interacting in ever more complex networks. It is impossible for the individual citizen to be fully involved in all these processes and therefore increasingly difficult to make informed decisions. As traditional political institutions continue to lose ground, as the main arenas of political contestation and policy formulation, and as the multitude of processes makes decision-making decreasingly transparent, there is a need to re-connect and involve citizens in a different manner. If citizens do not know where policies are coming from and are unable to influence them or at least express their consent or protest, political legitimacy will decline.

21.   Here also e-technologies can help to democratically involve citizens and civil society organizations in policy-making. Furthermore, an adequate provision of information about what is going on in parliament or the city council also serves to increase legitimacy. Legitimacy can be improved top-down by initiatives of political representatives using enhanced e-engagement tools, while there may also be a bottom-up demand from citizens and civil-society organization to get access and involvement in policy making processes. ICTs can help to structure the involvement and input of different actors and thereby not only enable participation, but also increase transparency. A significant advantage of e-engagement tools is that they allow people to participate in the issues that they are most interested in, at times that are convenient for them, with the necessary information being available at all times.

c.   Output-legitimacy through online policy consultation and co-production

22.   The most important source of political legitimacy is the output of national and subnational tiers of government. Citizens are more likely to give their consent and to trust political institutions and actors when they are satisfied (or at least not dissatisfied) with the goods and services that the authorities 'produce'. Scholars have shown[7] for example that citizens increasingly judge representatives and authorities on their results rather than on the preliminary input process; for them 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. Citizens who do not participate actively in the democratic process nevertheless monitor the public services and goods that are delivered. They also have strong opinions on the functioning of state, regional and local bureaucracies. Rather than begin pro-active citizens they are more likely to be re-active 'consumers', ready to voice discontent when the gap between expectations and actual delivery becomes too large. With the increasing activism and capabilities of governments in recent decades, public expectations have also risen, making it much easier for citizens to be disappointed.

23.   To counter political cynicism and avoid a complete rejection of the democratic political system, it is important for governments to communicate on the functioning of public services and to be responsive to changing needs. However, there are signs that the gap between the ability of political parties to deliver and the expectations of citizens is widening, even in those parts of Europe with high state capabilities and a good track record in the delivery of a wide range of high-quality social goods. This is evidenced by the fact that parties in power are increasingly being punished at the following elections.

24.   E-democracy can help to increase output legitimacy by informing citizens about how public services are delivered on time and with positive effects. Local authorities often limit their communication to explaining when things go wrong or demands supersede the supply of public goods. Many regional and local governments deliver a wide range of high-quality services that citizens are unaware of. These achievements and results need to be communicated on a continuously basis, rather than in response to criticism from citizens, which may then only increase public anger. E-engagement tools enable governments to closely monitor the needs and wants of citizens, public knowledge about current government output and to enable citizens to express their level of satisfaction with the volume and quality of delivery. E-technologies such as survey techniques, but also sentiment analysis of online content, are

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6 Beck, 1992
7 Schudson, 1998

useful for authorities to keep a 'finger on the pulse of society'. E-technologies can also help voters to be better informed about what authorities actually do and those in power to remain informed about the expectations of citizens.

25.   These three types of legitimacy, the related developments in democratic processes and the possible ways of using e-technologies to improve citizen engagement are summarized in table 3.1. It is worth noting that these functions can overlap and e-technologies can impact on more than one type of legitimacy.

Summary of trends, functions and possible solutions

Legitimacy	Function	Developments in democratic relations	E-democracy can be used to:
Input	Representation and mobilisation	Loosening linkages between citizen and representative	Consult citizens; provide information
Throughput	Deliberation	Widening political arena and decreasing transparency	Enable citizens or civil society to participate in policy-making
Output	Authorisation and control	Increasing gap between citizen expectations and delivery of public goods and services	Provide information; enable citizen to express (dis)satisfaction

III.   Objectives of e-engagement

26.   Over the past decade, several attempts have been made to increase citizen involvement in political decision-making by the use of innovative information and communication technologies. While the aim and methodology of various 'e-engagement tools' differs substantially, three core objectives can be distinguished.[8]

a.   Information

27.   The most self-evident action that local and regional authorities can take is to provide accessible information to citizens via the Internet. Often this information takes a uni-directional form, such as listing public services, related policy documents and the future political agenda. Representatives also use online (social) media to express their views and inform citizens about their activities. However, studies have shown that the gains from such uni-directional information tend to be low, as it primarily reaches those citizens who are already well-informed and politically interested. A wider audience is reached when the media picks up posts or tweets by elected representatives, but this has little direct influence on the political process, as news-outlets tend to focus on conflict news rather than on substantive information. Information needs to be provided in a more interactive manner, allowing input and involvement by citizens. E-technologies, and particular the integration of digital platforms, allow for more tailor-made delivery of information and reciprocal communication, so that citizens learn about politics and politicians get to know more about the opinions and the priorities of their citizens.

28.   The potential of the Internet to spread ideas and information, to get in touch with politically like-minded people, and to put pressure on governments, suggest that online access and activism can be powerful instruments for forming democratic citizens. The diversity of online spaces for political discussion and the widespread access of ordinary citizens and activists may help citizens get acquainted with democratic norms, further their knowledge of political issues and become more interested in politics. Political knowledge, political involvement and adherence to democratic norms among citizens are essential elements of a healthy democracy (e.g., Nisbet, 2008). Several studies have established a link between democratization, democratic attitudes, Internet use and Internet penetration: information can have a mobilising effect.

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8 OECD, 2003

b.   Consultation

29.   E-technologies allow national, local and regional authorities to consult citizens and other stakeholders. This consultation is often initiated from above, with the authorities selecting the issue at stake and developing a framework in which debate takes place. E-technologies make possible more open and modular, even permanent, consultation channels, which enable individual citizens and civil society organizations to provide input in a way that both sides learn more, and whereby more opinions can be taken into account. While online opinion polls are a good starting point and tend to be more flexible than traditional survey techniques, more interactive and flexible 'e-engagement' tools have been developed that allow citizens to set the agenda and draw attention the issues that they want addressed. Even discussion platforms, where citizens can simply express opinions that are not directly linked to local authorities, can reveal what their main concerns are and what is going on in society. But interactive processes on the web can also be linked to more political activities, ranging from the development of party platforms, to developing the agenda of a new term of an executive, to open systems that allow popular agenda setting.

c.   Participation

30.   Many local and regional authorities make substantial efforts to actively involve citizens in processes of agenda-setting, policy development, decision-making and implementation. There is added value to be gained when the exchange between representatives and citizens is dynamic, interactive and flexible. One of the main benefits of e-participation is the flexibility that it offers to citizens in terms of time and location, as well as the range of choices that can be offered to participants. This 'virtual' public space is also flexible in that online platforms can be set up quickly, adapted to different needs and more up-to-date. A variety of e-engagement tools are available that can increase conventional types of participation, such as voting or participation in debates during an election campaign. Political parties themselves can use e-engagement to connect voters to their political project and to recruit them for the campaign.

31.   The 2008 Obama campaign is often quoted as the golden standard of online mobilisation, as it combined a traditional grassroots campaign with a professional online effort. Potential voter databases were integrated into a digital system that was used to organize volunteers as well as send out digital messages. This combination of digital and on the ground campaigning allowed volunteers not only to extract, but also to integrate their own local knowledge with information already possessed by the party. This information was then processed within the platform, offering volunteers and sympathizers multiple methods to contribute to the campaign – from emailing/digitally contacting fellow students, residents, co-workers to visualizing maps of geographical areas to canvass. The Obama campaign exploited the potential for narrowcasting and message tailoring offered by digital media. A similar 'open source' platform, developed in the United Kingdom by the Labour party to recruit and manage volunteers, has proven an effective tool in the face of the financial superiority of the Conservative party.

32.   Whereas some people consider information technologies to be little more than another means to provide useful information to citizens, others argue that these technologies are the key to enabling full-fledged citizen participation and that they are making a vital contribution to democracy. E-technologies and online tools also facilitate unconventional political participation, such as petitioning or protesting. With regard to self-mobilisation of citizens, social media are increasingly used as Internet spaces where opinions and information are exchanged and used for bringing people to protest venues and as a means of keeping in touch during protest events.[9] Although Internet spaces often serve as tools for reinforcing a political consensus tools, but they also have a clear mobilisation potential (Klandermans, 1984).

33.   Popular uprisings are increasingly seen to be either initiated or at least enhanced through the use of network media.[10] The revolts in the Middle East and North Africa have been referred to as the "Twitter-revolutions." It is unrealistic, however, to attribute protests to the technologies themselves: they are more the 'carriers' of human interactions than the prime 'movers'. There are several ways in which social media contribute to political mobilisation: (1) an informational function (spreading knowledge, awareness and news); (2) a networking function (coordinating and organizing protests); (3) a cultural function (e.g. spreading adherence to democratic norms and a critical attitude towards the object of contestation) and (4) behavioural (stimulating citizens to engage in acts of protest). Research suggests that social media

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9 Aouragh & Alexander, 2011
10 Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Dunn, 2011.

are used for spreading information and networking, but that other news media, such as television, are more important for staying informed about the uprising. Moreover, traditional networks and institutions – such as political parties and unions – have proved to be crucial in the actual realisation of protests, their duration and success.

34. While there is ample evidence that using the Internet as an information source is related to the political activism of citizens, the links between digital technologies and political behaviour are complex. The extent to which e-technologies can be used to increase citizen participation depends on many factors and circumstances. E-technologies, especially the Web 2.0 tools, which enable citizens to interact, have a clear mobilizing potential. This reciprocity, particularly when it includes governments and other power-holders, makes an e-tool move beyond mere information collection.

IV.   Challenges of e-engagement efforts

35. Nevertheless, authorities and representatives that wish to increase citizen participation through e-engagement tools face several challenges:

a.   The digital divide

36. A first challenge to e-democracy and online political activity is that not everyone has equal access to the information and communication technologies. Some scholars fear that the 'digital divide' between those who have access to information and communication technologies and those who do not, makes any attempt to increase citizen participation using e-engagement tools counter-effective. The result is that when more people get involved, only some groups get more involved and this can lead to even larger biases and inequalities. Those that become involved tend to consist primarily of groups that are already more engaged in politics and empowered – the higher-educated, higher income groups with higher levels of political interest. As a result, the gap between the participating and non-participating citizens only deepens instead of being bridged.

37. Therefore, an important challenge for e-democracy is to ensure an 'equal hearing' of all groups; particular focus and effort should be directed at groups which are less present on the Internet, such as the elderly, and/or less inclined to participate in politics, such as younger generations, the lower educated and those with lower levels of political interest. On the other hand, the bias sometimes works in favour of mobilising less politically active groups. Since the Internet is a domain where younger generations tend to be over-represented, e-engagement efforts can serve to mobilise those who are least involved in politics. This effect is even more pronounced with respect to regional and local politics, which traditionally have even lower levels of youth participation and interest compared with national politics.

b.   Informed citizens

38. Another important challenge relates to the pre-existing information of citizens. When it comes to consultation, it is arguable to what extent online opinion polls can improve the political process. People can be consulted at any moment and are not always well-prepared or informed about the issues that they are asked to comment on. Complex issues require some study before a deliberate opinion can be formed. Citizens who are consulted online without preparation often lack such knowledge. Research[11] suggests that online consultations need to be accompanied by important information of the issues relating to the consultation. It is also important to note that not all citizens have the same level of 'political efficacy', the political self-confidence to voice an opinion or make a decision. E-engagement projects should take into account that 'an equal playing field' is not automatic but needs to be created and maintained, to avoid a project being dominated by a select few who have a relatively high degree of political self-confidence and knowledge.

c.   Deliberation

39. A third challenge for e-engagement tools is to make sure that there is still space for deliberation. While deliberation is regarded by many as an essential part of the process of policy and decision-making to ensure considered judgment, when citizens only engage in politics using e-media, the deliberative

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11 Fishkin, 1995

elements in democracy can become overshadowed. If decisions can be taken online, there is a risk that deliberative processes will increasingly be regarded as unnecessary. Although the rise in e-media has resulted in the development of a variety of online debating platforms, the online discussions that take place often lack depth and degenerate into polemics.

40.   There is also a problem of scale. If hundreds or thousands of people participate, how can one ensure the discussion does not turn into a cacophony? How can the contributions be aggregated into an outcome that fairly reflects what has been expressed? Solutions for these problems are emerging in active moderation of debates and the creation of e-communities to structure discussions. However, there remain a number of hurdles to be crossed before a fruitful debate can be realized. The challenge is therefore, not only to provide sufficient information, but also to encourage a public debate in which all positions and opinions on the issue can be voiced and taken into account. A related problem is that many online tools are simply geared to identifying majorities – the opinion that is most often voiced – but a majority opinion is not necessarily a correct one. A majority of people used to believe that the earth was flat. The fact that a lot of people think something does not make it true, and a line of reasoning adopted by the majority could equally be false. The quality of a deliberative process also depends on its ability to take minority opinions into account. Minority opinions are a valuable source for policy-makers, who also have a responsibility for ensuring that minority interests are respected.

d.   Privacy, manipulation and IT-reliability

41.   Another important challenge relates to privacy and the security of processed or stored data and the reliability of information technologies. Although the reliability of technologies is increasing, there is always a risk of cybercrime, hacking, bullying other participants and other types of distortion. On the one hand, one might argue that "If e-banking works, why should people distrust e-voting systems?"[12] On the other hand, e-voting systems, like e-banking, require major investments in order to guarantee security, which have to be offset against the rewards of greater efficiency. Because there can be large interests at stake, authorities always need to be aware of the risks and interpret the data cautiously. However, this issue relates primarily to e-voting and is less problematic with other forms of e-participation.

42.   Furthermore it is important to mention that the open character of e-engagement tools makes them vulnerable to manipulation. Potential threats range from attempts to influence the debate by (automatically) reacting on discussion forums, to the hijacking of opinion polls. Yet it is likely that if such attempts are uncovered and become generally known, the public will punish such parties or interest groups. Therefore, the incentives to cheat are counteracted by the risk of detection. Even so, appropriate technologies need to be in place to prevent such manipulation.

43.   Some scholars have pointed out[13] that e-media (especially Web 2.0) can also be used as a weapon against democracy. For instance, repressive authorities can monitor the Internet to identify its opponents and secretly trace them. Although such problems mainly occur outside the European context, it is important to bear in mind that there is always a potential threat. In non-democratic countries, e-engagement tools are more likely to establish democracy when they are initiated by non-government actors. E-engagement tools that are initiated by the government are more likely to be successful once democracy is established and authorities have gained enough legitimacy.

V.   Homo Technologicus versus Homos Sapiens

44.   These four major challenges are not exhaustive. Some argue that the Internet makes 'real democracy' impossible because of the lack of face-to-face personal interaction, making it possible for a person to assume another 'identity' and use other forms of human deception. The Internet's potential for anonymity and 'human-less' interaction may undermine the very essence of what constitutes a community: direct contact with others, the multimodal nature of human communication, including facial and bodily expressions and gestures. Online interaction makes developing empathy for the sentiments and interests of fellow-citizens much harder. The Internet is also increasingly used by extremists to disseminate propaganda and hate-speech, to mislead and radicalise people and promote non-democratic

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12 Dubuis *et al.* (2011)

13 Notably Morozov, 2012

practices. Although the web is undoubtedly a transformative technology, it does not follow that it will automatically develop in the right direction. It has been pointed out that the web does not only liberate; authorities also use it to monitor, invade our privacy and repress citizens.[14] Criminals use the Internet to steal and hackers can bring down entire security systems.

45.   These surveillance implications and the possibilities of deception may also make people reluctant to be open and participatory. Many citizens may not want to make use of the e-engagement tools or simply do not trust them. Problems of commitment may occur when power holders are unwilling to adopt citizen contributions that go against their own interests or value systems. To these must be added the problems of scale and how to aggregate the varying opinions into a decision or outcome. It must be underlined that democracy is not only about deliberation and voting: power holders are bound to respect the laws and constitution in their political processes. If the outcome of a participatory process does not follow the legal requirements, who will inform the citizens that their choice will not be respected?

46.   Some local and regional authorities will have difficulty dealing with these challenges. However, it is important to regard online e-democracy tools as complementary to traditional ways of citizen participation, rather than their replacement. Traditional processes of citizen involvement, interest aggregation and electing political leaders will remain in place for some time into the future. With time, current institutions and practices may become obsolete, as the web is fundamentally changing how people think. But it is not affecting everybody, everywhere, at the same pace. There is evidence of a generational difference between how young people and their parents consume information online. Experiments have shown that life-long use of the web transforms the (neurotransmitter) connections in the brain and how an individual takes decisions. Homo Technologicus is already competing with Homo Sapiens.

47.   While this report cannot predict how, and at what pace, democratic practices will be transformed by web technologies, it can contribute to the debate by drawing attention to experiments and projects in several countries, regions and municipalities. By providing a few examples, this report will show some of the possibilities for local and regional authorities to involve citizens in politics using information technologies.

Part 2: Examples of citizen participation

48.   This section discusses seven examples of use of digital information technologies in democratic processes. They are categorized according to the objectives described above: information, consultation and participation. Several criteria were used to select these examples: some were pioneering projects (such as the e-petitioning in Kalix, Sweden), while others represent an improvement on existing technologies and ideas (such as e-voting in Estonia). Some projects attract millions of participants (such as Vote Advice Applications), while others are small-scale and very local (like chatting with the mayor in Obuda-Bekasmegyer), but one thing that they have in common is that they have all had a measureable impact on the political community and have served to empower citizens. We have included examples from across Europe, including the United Kingdom, Sweden and other Northern-European countries, where Internet penetration is high, as well as Hungary and Egypt, where Internet access is lower and in the case of Egypt large parts of the population are excluded because of illiteracy. In short, the examples differ with regard to the scope, effort, technology and participants.

VI.   Information: Voting advice applications

49.   In many democracies, a substantial part of the electorate experiences difficulty when deciding which party to vote for.[15] As traditional party loyalties decline, new parties are emerging, party systems are fragmenting and policy stances of traditional parties are changing to the extent that they cause voters to doubt between various political alternatives.[16] Voters are increasingly browsing the web for political information and several initiatives to help citizens pick the party or candidate closest to their own preferences have emerged. These Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) are digital tools containing a list of

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14 Morozov (2012)
15 Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Van der Brug and Pellikaan 2003
16 Lucardie and Krouwel 2008; Walgrave *et al.*, 2008

party standpoints on issues relevant in a certain election in an accessible, time-efficient and user-friendly manner.

50.   VAAs depart from the rational assumption that voters should vote for the party they most agree with on salient issues (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). After simply answering a number of questions, a user's opinion is compared to formal party positions, followed by a suggestion on how to vote. Typically, VAAs calculate the (average) level of agreement with each party on the statements, often ranking parties from the highest level of agreement to the lowest. Others, like Kieskompas, place the user and parties in a political landscape that consists of two or more dominant (economic, social, cultural) dimensions of political contestation and users can see which party is closer to them in the political landscape.

51.   In several countries, such as the Netherlands and Switzerland, voting advice applications (VAA) have also been used in municipal and provincial elections. In 2014, Kieskompas collaborated with Koc University to develop a VAA for eight Turkish mayoral elections. In sub-national elections, voters may be even less informed about the positions of parties or candidates than in national elections. Voter advice applications add an interactive, deliberative dimension to political participation, enabling voters to link to the policy manifestoes and party websites and see what arguments parties use to adopt their position. Voters can zoom in on issues that they deem particularly important. Research suggests that VAAs increase political knowledge, interest and participation in elections, particularly among young voters.

52.   In Dutch municipalities up to a third of the electorate have consulted the VAA Kieskompas and it has become one of the most popular campaign tools of local councils, which pay for its development. The issue list is drawn up in consultation with all parties in local or provincial councils and their given position on an issue is checked against their formal platform. This deliberative process encourages parties and candidates to reflect on the issues that set them apart from their competitors, how to make their arguments clear to a large audience and where their positions are blurred. In some countries, politicians are less willing to adopt a clear position on some issues and decline to reply to requests by local experts and journalists to identify their position. This shows how a VAA project can also affect the political process, encouraging parties to be more open and deliberative. VAAs can therefore have a positive effect on political awareness, public debate and political mobilisation.

Technology

53.   There are a variety of VAA platforms, some developed by authorities and parties themselves (Stemwijzer, Wahl-O-Mat), while others are developed by academics (Kieskompas, PreferenceMatcher, SmartVote, HelpMeVote).

Evaluation

54.   VAAs originated in the Netherlands, where the two largest VAAs (Stemwijzer and KiesKompas), attract millions of voters in each election, with up to 40%of the electorate these tools. In other countries, such as Finland, Belgium and Switzerland, the most popular VAAs reach about 20% of those entitled to vote. In Germany, the VAA Wahl-O-Mat was used seven million times in the recent election, corresponding to 11% of the German electorate.[17] These figures indicate that VAAs are more than just gimmicks[18] and meet a real information need on part of the citizens.[19] Recent studies show VAAs considerably increase their users' knowledge about political parties and their standpoints and this, in turn, has a positive effect on the likelihood of VAA-users actually voting in elections.[20] There is also a noticeable reinforcement effect on voters who already considered voting for a party[21] and on voters low on political knowledge.[22] While traditional ways of mobilizing voters (i.e. handing out leaflets on markets) increase the turnout with only 0,5%, VAA's have been shown to boost the number of people casting their vote from with two and 13% – depending on the election.[23]

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17 Garzia and Marshall 2012
18 Ladner *et al.*, 2010
19 Mykkannen and Moring, 2006
20 Ladner & Pianzola, 2010; Ladner *et al.*, 2012; Ruusuvirta and Rosema, 2009; Walgrave *et al.,* 2008
21 Wall, Krouwel, & Vitiello, 2013
22 Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2007
23 Boogers, 2006, Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2007; Cedroni and Garzia, 2010; Garzia and Marshall, 2013

VI. Consultation: chatting with the mayor in Hungary

55. Not all e-engagement initiatives are so complex and large scale: some are relatively simple and straightforward. Such basic projects do not require high levels of Internet penetration and high-speed connections..

56. One such example is the initiative of a local newspaper in the second-largest district of Budapest, Obuda-Bekasmegyer, in which citizens can talk to the mayor online.[24] Four times a year they can put questions to the mayor, which are answered and made public. Local and regional media pay much attention to the exchanges, which is also published on the website of the local government. In other municipalities in Hungary such as Komló (ibid.), forums that were developed by the local government or local press have proven to be beneficiary to democratic development and citizen participation. Some of these forums have proven so successful that representatives have felt compelled to respond to the issues raised and opinions voiced. Several of the concerns raised have ended up on the formal agenda of the city council.

Technology

57. The local newspaper developed a simple online tool. The newspaper editor selects the sequence of the questions. Subsequently they are forwarded to the mayor's office, who replies to the questions.

Evaluation

58. Although the exchanges between the mayor and citizens have generated high Internet traffic, not many citizens have been able to participate, due to the low levels of Internet access in the region. Yet, because a local newspaper editor took the initiative, it has received a lot of media attention, which has boosted traffic to the discussion. The examples of discussion or chat forums in Hungary show how the development of local online forums can help citizens with agenda-setting and deliberation.

VIII Consultation: (annual) citizen consultation in Kalix, Sweden

59. One of the pioneering local authorities that has successfully attempted to involve citizens in decision-making is the municipality of Kalix in northeast Sweden, with about 16,000 inhabitants. Kalix first attempted to involve citizens in discussions about the restructuring of the city-centre. To consult the population, the municipality sent an open questionnaire to its citizens, which could also be filled out on the Internet. Around 8% of the citizens responded, of which 86% via the Internet. This proportion far exceeds the normal number of participants at city planning meetings, where usually around ten people attend. The municipality followed up the first consultation with another one of a different design. Citizens were presented with three pre-defined alternatives, including an indication of tax raises. Since it was possible to 'vote' online for each alternative, the consultation received a lot of attention in regional and national media, which generated additional (online) debate among Kalix citizens.[25] Ultimately the 52% of the citizens that participated (of which 28% on the Internet) showed themselves constructive and responsible by opting for a change of the policy and a minor tax increase.[26]

Technology

60. All citizens received a letter by regular mail, which provided them with a password that could only be used once. A consultant company named Votia, that was specialized in such consultations developed the information technology. For both consultations (2000 and 2001) there were online discussion forums, which where attended much more during the second than in the first round of the consultation.

Evaluation

61. After the first consultation, it was questioned as to whether the 1,200 participants were representative for the whole electorate. Still the fact that there would normally about ten participants led

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24 Pearts and Diaz, 2007: 14-20
25 Grönland, 2003
26 Becker and Ohlin, 2006

to a positive evaluation. The second consultation was unambiguously named a success by the representatives. Shortly after the consultation, the parties (of which some had not taken a position yet) made a decision in line with the outcome of the consultation.

IX.   Consultation: debating democracy and the new constitution in Egypt

62.   E-democracy is also expanding in North Africa and the Middle East. After the 2011 uprisings, Egypt sought to develop democratic institutions (an electoral system and a constitution), yet citizens were largely left out of this process. A commercial company then developed an innovative discussion forum named Naqeshny (literally "debate with me"). The purpose of this platform was to make it possible for users to create one-one-debates, as well as 'public' debates where all Naqeshny members could discuss topics of their choice. A special feature of the forum was that all users were given an 'ideological colour' that reflected their world view after answering asking several questions when they registered themselves. The colours were designed to cover all dominant views in society and create a sort of 'party system'. The idea behind this was that political pluralism and public debate are crucial features of a vibrant democracy. In every debate, users were expected to choose a side before entering the debate. Users could create debates and allow others to join, or jump right into active public debates, giving their point of view, and voting on the position they like best. Naqeshny strongly emphasized the importance of substantial differences and discouraged nepotism; as the website itself put it: "Users are connected through their views rather than their friendships" (Website Naqeshny). Users could substantiate their views not only by writing a text with their arguments, but also by adding links, photos and videos. Ultimately the debate was 'won' by the participant whose arguments got most votes from other users. Naqeshny aimed to involve the wider population in debates in crucial issues at stake in Egypt.[27] The website was bilingual (English-Arabic), so that non-Arabic speakers could contribute to and follow the debates.

Technology

63.   The website was developed by the commercial company Mash. To assign the 'ideological colours' to the users, Naqeshni collaborated with (political) scientists from several universities. The platform can easily be used in other countries and the tool was already developed in multiple languages.

Evaluation

64.   While there are no studies on the impact of e-democracy in developing countries and Internet penetration is low, Naqueshny was able to involve thousands of unique users. Through collaboration with large media-outlets and by developing controversial debate topics traffic with journalists, NGO's and scientists, traffic to the site was increased. The scope of the debates went beyond mere political issues as people also developed debates about football matches (which are sometimes related to political orientations), social and cultural events, TV programmes, other websites, operating systems and many more things were debated. An analysis of online users during the debate on the constitution revealed that people with very different orientations, from liberals to salafists, were part of the public discourse on Naqueshny, which in itself is an achievement.

X.   Participation: online voting in Estonia

65.   Estonia is widely considered to be a pioneer in e-democracy and e-governance.[28] During the 2005 local elections, it was possible to cast a vote via the Internet, instead of going to a polling station, making Estonia the first country to offer this voting method nationwide to its citizens. Electronic voting (often referred to as 'i-voting') has now been carried at seven Estonian elections, including local, parliamentary and European Parliament elections. The number of voters using the method increased from 2% at the 2005 local elections to 31% at the 2014 European Parliament elections.

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27 Abu-Jbara *et al.,* 2013: 32
28 Madise & Martins, 2006

Technology

66.   Internet voting is allowed from the 10th until the 4th day before the election day. This is in order to ensure that there is enough time to eliminate double votes on Election Day. Estonia still uses an IT-system that was developed in 2005. Although security and reliability is and was of central concern when the system was put into operation, it is also continuously questioned by parts of the public, political parties and scholars. In order to gain voter trust in the system, e-voting systems need to be able to convince voters that their electronic votes have correctly reached their destination. An e-voting system has to meet the criteria of privacy, fairness, democracy, accuracy and verifiability.

Evaluation

67.   Since it was introduced, the Estonian e-voting system has been continuously the subject of debate. To some, it is a flagship of the advanced Estonian IT-sector. Others would prefer to abandon the system. It is often suggested that foreign actors might seek to influence Estonian politics by hacking the system. The effects on turnout have also been subject to debate, with little evidence to date that electronic voting has increased voting figures. Some scholars have argued that e-voting encourages voters on the margins of society,[29] whereas others have found no evidence of a significant difference between the characteristics of e-voters and "normal" voters. Most recently a study stated there were serious security problems with the 'outdated' Estonian voting system.[30]

68.   However, the popularity of e-voting is increasing and it is most likely to be used in more elections. Two of the benefits of online democracy platforms identified by Hilbert (2009) apply to e-voting. Firstly, it allows for asynchronous information management, meaning that people do not have to participate simultaneously; people get more time to cast their vote. Indeed, during offline elections, some people will not show up at the polling station, simply because out of lack of time on Election Day. This problem is solved with e-voting by giving the voters several days to cast their votes, as well as making voting less time-consuming. Secondly, computers make the voting process neutral and value free. During regular elections, human beings count votes, which increase the risk of mistakes or even malevolent intentions. E-voting reduces this problem by using computers (although in theory the software can also be manipulated or hacked).

XI.   Participation: Political campaigning in Manchester, United Kingdom, using Web 2.0

69.   An example of democracy where the Internet has played a major role in decision-making comes from Manchester in the United Kingdom. In 2008, 1.9 million voters from the municipality of Manchester were given the possibility to vote for the 'Congestion Charging Scheme', when a toll tax that was proposed to reduce traffic congestion and pollution on the highway surrounding Manchester. The referendum was held in a conventional way using the ballot box. However, the political campaign was mainly conducted online. Governmental and non-governmental organizations launched several different websites. Some of these claimed to be neutral (although the neutrality was questioned during the campaign), whereas others expressed a strong opinion.

70.   An interesting aspect of the referendum is that, whereas a Mori poll taken before the referendum reported that 53% supported the charging scheme, at the referendum itself, about 80% voted against. According to Hepburn (2012), the success of the campaign by the opponents of the charging scheme, was mainly due to the use of Web 2.0 applications. Organizations supporting the charging scheme (mainly consisting of shop-owners from the city centre and environmental organizations) tended to campaign in a traditional way and used the Internet mainly as another channel to provide information and arguments. Opposing organizations (shopping malls and large companies on the outskirts of the city) developed websites that were highly visited during the campaign. A controversial tool developed by the BBC presented citizens with a map where they could select the area they lived in. They were then asked: "how would the congestion charge affect your behaviour?" and could choose between five options: drive and pay the charge; drive at different times; use public transport/motorbike/bicycle; work or shop elsewhere; and, not affected. If a visitor chose the option 'work or shop elsewhere', part of the map turned blue. As most citizens chose this option, the map ended up almost entirely blue. When opponents of the charging scheme exploited these results, proponents of the scheme complained about the tool,

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29 Trechsel and Breuer, 2006
30 Springall *et al.*, 2014

forcing the BBC to issue a disclaimer that it was developed purely for scientific purposes. Nevertheless, the tool had an effect on the outcome of the referendum.[31]
Technology

71.   Websites and tools were developed by different interest groups, local media, governmental and non-governmental organizations. It should be noted that the opponents had more financial resources than the proponents of the charging scheme. The government (and the ruling Labour party) was relatively neutral on the issue.[32]

Evaluation

72.   The experience from Manchester shows that political contestation and decision-making increasingly takes place at (or is affected by) the Internet. The case exposes the benefits and the challenges to e-democracy. Beside the websites with lots of information and tools, there were also two highly visited discussion forums. This example shows how Web 2.0 applications are able to bring political activity on the Internet to a higher level. Although the neutrality of the public media and information on the government website can be (and was) questioned, the campaigns and tools used provoked much discussion and debate, which ultimately led to a historic turnout of over 50% (compare to average turnout at local elections of about 30%.

XII.   Participation: e-petitioning in Kingston and Bristol, United Kingdom

73.   In the early 2000s, the EU and several countries made several attempts to increase citizen participation using different e-engagement tools. To date, the EU, aware of its democratic deficit and that it is perceived as physically distant from its citizens, has made considerable efforts to developing online tools for e-engagement.[33] When it comes to e-petitioning, Scotland has been a pioneer in the field. The only aspect in which e-petitioning differs from normal petitioning is that the petitions are placed in a particular web-environment, and citizens can sign for the petitions online by filling in their name, e-mail address or other information. The success of the Scottish experiment encouraged the government of the United Kingdom to start a large program to support e-democracy at the local level. The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and Bristol City Council served as pilots, after which e-petitioning grew more popular at the local level.

74.   The number of government initiatives for e-petitioning also increased in other countries, notably in fourteen municipalities in Norway.[34] Petitioning is classified by political scientists as 'unconventional participation', because the activities do not pass through normal government channels. This is not to say that governments and representatives cannot facilitate petitioning. Petitions provide input and help to monitor government activity and thereby increase legitimacy if authorities respond adequately. However, during the first experiments on a local level, it became apparent that some government departments lacked the necessary experience to respond adequately to petitions and had no clear procedures in place to respond to them.[35] Hence it is important for authorities not only to develop adequate ICT-tools, but also to integrate their e-engagement tools into the whole process of policy making. In many countries and municipalities, there have also been some bottom-up movements that conducted online petitions.

Technology

75.   In Kingston, the software was administered by its own IT department; in Bristol, an IT consultancy company was hired.

Evaluation

76.   The pilot projects in Kingston and Bristol were considered a success by the government, representatives and citizens. Over a period of about a year Kingston received seven e-petitions (and nine paper ones), Bristol received nine e-petitions (and 22 regular ones). Despite the fact that participation

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31 Hepburn, 2012
32 Hepburn, 2012
33 Mosca and Santucci, 2009: 126-9
34 Mosca and Santucci, 2009: 122
35 Adams *et al.,* 2005: 277.

was relatively low - 173 citizens in Kingston and 890 in Bristol signed a petition – they all were about local issues and the local council was able to respond to them and influence the issue at stake. An evaluative report even stated that: "E-Petitioner was used by hundreds of citizens in each Council area, and showed early signs of impacting on decision-making."[36] After these pilot projects, the popularity of e-petitioning both in and outside the United Kingdom increased tremendously. In 2009 the United Kingdom laid down in law that all local governments should have their own e-petitioning tool.[37]

XIII. Conclusion

77. This report has examined how the work of representatives is being transformed by digital technologies and the extent to which e-democracy applications can help to increase citizen involvement in democratic decision-making, with reference to the three core functions of representatives: mobilisation, deliberation and authorisation. The central issue is whether and how such changes can preserve the democratic legitimacy, the explicit or implicit consent of the people of the activities of their elected representatives, in face of developments in advanced democracies that are threatening to reduce the legitimacy of elected officials, such as the weakening relation between citizens and their representatives, declining political participation and the shift of political contestation and activity outside traditional institutions, as well as the increasing difficulties for governments to meet citizen expectations.

78. The crucial questions to be asked with respect to e-engagement tools are: did the tools meet the objectives of improving democracy?; are the tools able to overcome the challenges?; and, how does the use of e-media and e-engagement tools change the roles of local and regional representatives?

Do e-engagement tools meet their objectives?

79. In many ways e-democracy can help elected representatives and local or regional authorities to increase legitimacy. At the very least, local and regional authorities can provide accessible and well-structured information on the Internet, including the use of social network media. Digital technologies allow for more flexible, interactive and reciprocal information exchange than merely archiving. Web 2.0 differs from conventional e-media (Web 1.0) in the respect that it enables users to interact with each other or with the moderator, whereas conventional e-media merely provides users with a one-way stream of information. A wide range of applications and platforms are developing that can be used to consult citizens and other key stakeholders and to enable them to participate the decision-making process. Some of these applications allow citizens to get involved much earlier in the decision-making process and to contribute to the political agenda, changing politics from a top-down to a bottom-up activity. As the examples have shown, there are a variety of tools available that can increase citizen involvement.

80. E-democracy is not just about city-wide consultations or online voting leading to final decisions. Small applications, such as the chatting forum in Hungary or e-petitioning websites, can lower the threshold for acquiring information or citizen participation. Some of these examples can be easily transferred and implemented in other regions, while others would require some investment. Nevertheless, these examples show that 'traditional actors' still have an important role to play. Political parties still need to adopt positions on the issues at stake and get involved in the debates, demonstrating to citizens and organised interests alike that an issue deserves serious discussion. Online debates that are held in a 'political vacuum' will not last and do not have an impact. The main decision-makers need to be involved in online debates to ensure that there does not develop a parallel world of real decisions versus a virtual world of meaningless online chatter. Representatives of political parties, as well as organised interest groups, need to provide a link between the online debating platform and the formal institutionalisation of the outcome.

Are e-engagement tools able to address the challenges?

81. The most widely discussed challenge is that of the digital divide. In most of the cases that have been discussed, this challenge has been addressed, but the gap is not easily bridged. One reason for this is that online services are often complementary to the 'analogue' possibilities for participation. In the cases of e-voting in Estonia, the consultation in Kalix and to some extent the contact with the Mayor in

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36 Adams *et al.,* 2005
37 Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2011

Hungary, citizens were also able to gather information, express their opinions and cast their votes without making use of the Internet. In such cases the digital divide does not constitute a problem to participation or consultation. Nevertheless it must be emphasized that a digital divide can appear if important information is only provided online. As political campaigning activity increasingly shifts to the web, responsible governments need to ensure that people who are less e-literate and less digitally active are not excluded from the political process.

82.   The challenge of e-engagement in relation to informing citizens and guaranteeing effective and egalitarian deliberation depends on both the topic and the degree of involvement of traditional media. Engaging voters is easier when it concerns an issue that they understand is important to them and has a direct impact on their life. Simply opening channels of communication will not work and will only attract those citizens who are already involved and politically interested. In addition to the saliency of the issue, it has been shown to be more effective if an online democratic project is also promoted through traditional media. Such cross-media communication was crucial to the success of the Kalix or Manchester examples. A lesson for local and regional representatives from this is that using national, regional and local media can improve the chances of success of e-engagement projects. Citizens can only get involved if they know that an initiative exists. Using the traditional media can also help avoid online debates being dominated by the 'camp' with the most resources. Involving traditional media-outlets is no guarantee of an equal playing field and representative participation, as the example of the Manchester referendum has shown, but it is important that local authorities do everything in their power to create transparency and parity.

83.   It will be easier to get the media involved and citizens mobilised when the issue at stake is perceived as important, rather than e-engagement projects that only attract 'passionate minorities'. Those who organise initiatives for e-democracy need to be aware of the demand side of politics, not only the supply side. Most citizens have limited political knowledge and interest and only become involved when they perceive that a crucial issue is at stake. There needs to be a real choice to be made, otherwise the attempt to engage citizens is misleading. Authorities should not expect that through the simple introduction of digital technologies political interest will automatically and immediately increase. Democracy has to be learnt, as does e-democracy.

84.   Authorities need to accept that there is a significant degree of distrust of both government and digital technologies. This is not unfounded: these technologies have high monitoring, surveillance, memory and storage capacities. While these characteristics have huge potential, there is also a danger of abuse. While every citizen can check whether a ballot box is empty at the beginning of Election Day and see the entire content during the count, few citizens will understand what is going on inside a computer. Information is as easily manipulated as it is processed. E-engagement projects should be aware of these issues and make sure that appropriate security measures are in place, privacy is guaranteed, data stored safely and that procedures are totally transparent. The processes must be politically neutral and the outcomes verifiable by people who are not specialists. Otherwise the debate might become a debate about e-democracy itself, and not about the substantive issues.

How does e-democracy impact the work of representatives?

85.   Digital technologies can help boost democratic participation, but they cannot and should not replace all traditional institutional guarantees of the democratic process. E-democracy should not be reduced to merely increasing the volume of democratic participation, but should focus on improving its quality. As several scholars have noted,[38] most e-democracy activities co-habit with traditional 'analogue' democracy. This is a good thing, as legal and constitutional guarantees need to be respected.

86.   There are good reasons for representatives of political parties to get involved in digital technologies for political campaigning and connecting citizens. Several projects, such as Voting Advice Applications and modern campaign techniques, have proven effective in reaching large numbers of citizens and mobilising them during election campaigns. In particular, Web 2.0 tools enable citizens to interact with each other and with their representatives in a meaningful manner. Yet, the quality of the debate still depends on the quality of the participants. The "Junk in, junk out" rule also holds true with e-democracy.

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38 Macintosh, 2008; Hacker and van Dijk, 2000

87. The traditional carriers of political ideas and policy initiatives need to be preserved and developed: especially political parties, associations and interest groups, issue movements and individual political activists. E-technologies are empty vessels that need to be loaded with content. E-engagement tools have great potential for increasing connectivity between representatives and citizens and can boost citizen participation, but for this to be meaningful, well thought-out and formulated political issues need to be on the agenda. Active citizenship precedes e-democracy; digital technologies do not automatically produce active citizens.

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