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E-Democracy
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**CASE STUDY**

E-Democracy: Strategies and New Horizons for the European Union Policies

Mariagrazia Forcella

**ABSTRACT.** The European way to Information Society is user-centric. The ambition of the European Union (EU) in promoting e-Democracy is to improve the public participation to decision making.

The EU reflection on e-Democracy rose in an historical moment where governments were looking for new forms of governance, as a result of various cultural and social changes converging to the understanding that a “democratic deficit” is taking place.

Since the aim is to face the current democratic deficit, the accent is on the new forms of communication able to allow the expression of citizens’ political will. Whereas voters are constantly less inclined to participate in the elections and lesser in political parties, the new technologies permit to establish new relationships between politically elected representative bodies and citizens.
It is a matter of a new model of governance, where political decisions that are polycentric take place at several levels, by new approaches to negotiations.

E-democracy may permit the participation to the political debate and to decision making by groups and individuals which are otherwise unreachable. E-democracy allows access to decision making by groups with scarce resources and limited possibilities to organise consensus through direct lobbying. The typology itself of these groups changes, since they can be constituted despite geographical distances. These groups are in fact often de-localised. Online, all the stakeholders can easily contribute to the decision making and legislative initiatives can be based on new foundations.

The fundamentals of democracy are challenged. At stake is the restoration of citizens’ ownership on political decision-making processes, in the framework of the upheavals brought up in the society by the new ICT. We could affirm that the kernel of e-Democracy from an European Union’s perspective is its potential for the creation of a new political model: multi-centres democracy. doi:10.1300/J399v03n02_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. European Union, user-centric, participation, decision making, citizens’ ownership, multi-centres democracy

The European way to Information Society is intrinsically democratic. While the American strategies—starting from the “Information Highways Action Plan”—are focusing on the technological aspects of the issue, the European Union approach is user-centred. The same applies for the strategies concerning e-Government, the broad chapter where e-Democracy is considered at EU institutions level.

The core of the Commission’s Communication on the role of eGovernment¹ is that the Internet allows new forms of participation to the policy making, the real time consultation of the public opinion and the systematic gathering of feedback on citizens’ needs. Therefore, the aim of adopting a strategy towards eGovernment is the improvement of the democratic processes and the strengthening of the public participation to decision making.
The economic perspective is vital to this Communication of 2003, but the citizens’ perspective is also taken into account. Greater transparency in the decision making, the need for public services tailored on users needs and public participation in the definition of policies are focused. According to this Communication, the EU intervention should concentrate on two elements:

1. guaranteeing access to everyone, through the multiplatform access and the application of the principles “design for all” (i.e., through optimised interfaces with the users)
2. promoting trust on online services, through the protection of personal data, network security, a “culture of security” as promoted in the Action Plan e-Europe 2005,
3. improving the use of information in the public sector, through the legislative and technical harmonisation (interoperability) at European level.

The Plan “eEurope 2002: an information society for all,” presented at the European Council of Seville of June 2002, concerns e-Government and designs initiatives to improve social participation, offering new opportunities to all. The objective is again socioeconomic: “This plan of action aims at creating a favourable context to private investment and new jobs, increasing productivity, modernising public services and guaranteeing the participation in information society to all citizens. eEUROPE 2005 is intended to promote safe services, applications and contents, based on a broadband infrastructure widely available.”

The European Union reflection on e-Democracy rose in an historical moment where governments were looking for new forms of governance, as a result of various cultural and social changes heading to the understanding that a “democratic deficit” was taking place, due to the decreasing participation to voting and to political parties activities. In this context, e-Democracy is considered as a “chance” to improve public opinion’s trust in politics through active participation and citizens involvement in decision making. Greater information and better informed citizens are regarded as necessary consequences of e-Democracy.

It is a matter of a new model of governance, where political decisions are polycentric, taking place at several levels, by new approaches to negotiations. We could affirm that the kernel of e-Democracy from an European Union perspective is its potential for the creation of a multicentres democracy.
Therefore, the guidelines of the EU strategies on e-Democracy are the same as those concerning “good governance”: (1) A transparent public sector, responsible towards the citizens and open to public participation and democratic control; (2) a public service at the service of everyone, user-focused, able to offer personalised services; (3) a productive public service valorising resources and taxpayers’ money.

The European Commission has an important role on the Member States policies concerning e-Democracy, co-ordinating national efforts, pushing governments to common strategies and aims, organising “peer reviews” and public evaluations on the activities undertaken. Moreover, the Commission plays an excellent role in the protection of data as well as freedom of information. Last but not the least, the Commission sustained 20 innovative projects on e-Democracy concerning solutions for the enhancement of civil participation and e-Voting, with 30 million Euros funding in RTD\textsuperscript{5} budget. The projects financed by the Commission aimed at the promotion of a better transparency of political processes, an increase of citizens’ participation, a better-informed public opinion. The efforts are nevertheless still insufficient, as a workshop organised by the Commission in February 2004 permitted to highlight, and an handful of strategic visions guide research. New developments are needed in the European research on e-Democracy.

Regarding the Community initiatives, “Your voice in Europe” (www.europa.eu.int/yourvoice) offers a single point of access to all the online consultations by the Commission. Some Council Presidencies launched initiatives in the field of eDemocracy, such as—for example—the website of the Greek Presidency of first semester 2003 on e-Vote, an experiment of online vote on fundamental matters regarding Union “policies.”

The basic concepts developed at European level sustaining these initiatives are the most advanced. The target are not only “user-friendly” technologies, but also the redefinition of decision-making processes by Governments, Parliaments, Ministries, political parties on one side, and the organisations representing the civil society, on the other.

The idea is not simply to transform public institutions and political parties to make them more transparent and better suitable to adapt to the citizens’ needs. E-Democracy is openly considered as a mean to increase citizens’ power.\textsuperscript{6} As Manuel Castells said, Internet can be used by citizens to control their governments rather than vice versa.

Since the aim is to solve the problem of democratic deficit, the accent is on the new forms of communication able to allow the expression of citizens’ political will. Whereas voters are constantly less inclined to participate in elections and lesser in political parties (that tend to lose
part of their role of mediators in building public opinion), the new ICT permit to build new relationships between citizens and politically elected representative bodies.

The fundamentals of democracy are challenged. If e-Democracy is mainly a means to increase direct participation, its impact does not necessarily imply the diminution of the role of representative bodies. On the contrary, Parliaments can benefit from it, for example when exercising their role of controllers, ensuring that principles of good governance are effectively implemented.

At the core of e-Democracy is the restoration of citizens’ ownership of political decision-making processes. The concept of “restore ownership” implies two elements—two guidelines for the future strategies of the European Union:

- restore public institutions’ accountability, and
- restore participation to political processes, where the new groups formed online should be considered as partners in decision making.

**Restore accountability.** First, it is a matter to restructure the information in two senses:

1. *making it bilateral* (not top-down, but interactive)
2. *making it multilateral*: The communication exchange should not only take place between two parties (the institutions and the public) but the interaction among several participants (interest groups, NGO, individual citizens) should be made possible.

If the target is “restore accountability,” the kernel is communication. Offering online services is not a guarantee for their utilisation. People have to know that these services exist, are accessible and easy to use. What matters is how the public perceives these services and the benefits they may bring. The knowledge concerning democracy online is limited and inhomogeneous within the EU. A study on e-Government in Europe and in the USA demonstrates Finland is the only country where citizens prefer to use online rather than traditional services, while the Irish are the Europeans who are less appreciative of e-Government.

For the time being, at Member States level, the focus of the ongoing initiatives simply consists in making information accessible online. The aim is to permit the citizens’ understanding of how taxes are spent and how decisions are taken. It is a matter of eliminating obscure procedures in decision making and the “one-size-fits-all” approach.

If the essential feature of the EU policies is e-Enclusion (allowing everybody to benefit from the new services offered by the ICT), the new
technologies permit to adapt communication to the citizens’ needs in a way that was unthinkable before. Public services have to be “inclusive” by connecting all citizens online, independently from their education, income and geographical position. Since this implies the creation of various access modes, several are the governments’ developing programs to allow online access in public areas and by mobile phones, training programs and research on user-friendly technologies such as e-Vote and e-Participation. The EU is working on research concerning security to protect privacy and anonymous freedom of expression (so that records on citizens expressing online their opinions or vote could not be stored).

The evaluation requested by the Commission—“Evaluation of the use of new technologies in order to facilitate democracy in Europe. E-Democratising the Parliaments and parties of Europe”—depicts the state of the art. The study demonstrates that the bigger States generally have more advanced websites and that the Parliaments’ sites are of higher quality in comparison with those of political parties, probably because of better financial and human resources. A relation between a State’s wealth and a more advanced development of Democracy services has not been identified. The majority of the political parties in Europe use their websites to inform and to diffuse newsletters rather than introducing e-Participation.

*Restore participation.* As Christine Leirtn\(^\text{10}\) affirms, “The era of stable governments institutions ruling a given population on a given territory in a top-down way has come to an end: current socio-economic trends of globalisation ‘from above’ and the strengthening of civil society ‘from below’, with institutional reforms involving increasing Europeanisation ‘from above’ and increasing regionalisation and decentralisation ‘from below’ have had an impact on the governing processes of Europe.” A public sector, based on decisions agreed among all the stakeholders, implies a democracy based on participation and the weakening of representative democracy. The era of intermediary bodies, typical of the mass media culture, is fading. New forms of direct intervention by the public appear. Democracy itself changes its distinctive features.

The initiatives implemented up to now at Member States level are concentrated in two directions. The first is more classical, from the conceptual point of view. It is e-Vote. Two are the types of e-Votes yet experienced: the first simply consists in substituting vote bulletins with machines registering votes and transferring them to Interiors Ministries; the second permits to vote from any terminal or personal computers connected to the Internet. The aim is to make it easier to vote, thereby in-
creasing participation in the elections. This is, for example, what happened in the Canton of Geneva, where the introduction of e-Vote registered a remarkable success in increasing voters participation. The European Commission is developing research on e-Voting concerning the check of the voters identity as well as measures against hackers’ attacks.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that the importance of the vote itself is diminishing. More articulated forms of expression of citizens’ “desiderata” appear. It is a matter of eParticipation. Fundamental to it is the publication of the results and the replies to the public consultations. We could say that e-Participation is made of two complementary elements: online consultation and a feedback mechanism. In this area the research funded by the European Commission regards the transfer online of the traditional ways to political participation, such as the debates to solve controversial issues, including the development of methods to develop the public opinion and not only to express it.

At EU Member States level, experiments have been developed on e-Consultation and e-Petition. “e-Consultation” refers to the invitation to answer via the Internet questions concerning a decision to be taken, often on the basis of a Green Book, addressed to the general public, experts and interest groups. Made easier, public opinion consultation increases its role. This is particularly true with regard to the EU institutions, that have to inform and make acceptable a political entity—the Union itself—that is not only a novelty, but that also represents a new level—the supra-national one—of decision making.

A particularly interesting example is the website “Futurum,” the online forum of the European Convention that prepared the text of the European Constitution. At EU level, the consultation via the Internet has been successfully experimented on the new legislation on chemical products. The Commission received 6,500 contribution via e-mail and on its Interactive PolicyMaking Web Tool.

“e-Petition” consists in the use of the Internet to launch a petition on a matter of general interest, inviting to support it and submitting it to Parliaments. A well-known experiment is that of the Radical Party in Italy, offering not only the possibility to sign petitions online, but also to introduce comments. In the UK, it is already possible to send an ePetition directly to the Prime Minister. The website “10 Downing Street” accepts petitions online and replies to them. The organisers of these petitions are invited to prepare a website where the petition’s motivations are explained and where signatures can be gathered online. In Portugal, an association for disabled people (GUIA) promoted an effective cam-
campaign, resulting not only in a change of the law the petition was about, but also of the law regarding the gathering of signatures for a petition, making it legal to do that online.

E-Fora permit the exchange of opinions online with the target of improving the processes of public opinion formation. They are an instrument still scarcely used by political parties and Parliaments in the EU, while usually the media are those who launch this type of debates (as it was the case for the fora promoted by the Polish newspaper “Rzeczpospolita”11 and by “Origo”12 in Hungary). Good exceptions are the three fora of the Hoogenen13 city in The Netherlands: the first is the “digital consultation hour” when a member of the local government replies to the questions of his fellow citizens on a particular subject; the second is the “digital debate” organised for the electoral campaign of 2002 and the third is the “24 hours online discussion platform” gathering discussion lists via the Internet. At regional level, remarkable are the initiatives realised in Spain by a coalition of left and green parties offering a forum of debate on regional matters (“Y tu que opinas”).

In Denmark, “DenmarksDebatten”14 is a forum where citizens, administrations and political representatives participate in debates on themes of public concern. A peculiarity of the project consists in the attempt to develop local democracy through a platform common to all levels: local, regional, national. An alert system via e-mail allows to inform about debates that are going to be launched. The system includes opinion polls and the gathering of statistical data. The forum also includes analyses of the opinion expressed.

One of the most exciting results of e-Participation experiments in the Member States is the online forum of the Finnish government “Ota kantaa” (meaning “share your opinion”), a public “agor…” where citizens can freely discuss, make comments and debate about legislative projects, giving the Government the opportunity to benefit from the citizens’ capital of knowledge and ideas in all stages of decision making. Fundamental to its success is that “ota kantaa” proposes to the forum a legislative project before it is formulated officially, when it is only an item on the Parliamentary agenda. This allows taking into consideration the public opinion since the beginning, so that it can have an effective impact on the result of the legislative process. Moreover, “ota kantaa” permits the participation of the individuals and of groups scarcely organised. Last but not the least, it allows interacting in real time. Three measures keep the level of discussion high: (1) The initial definition of the matter to be discussed by the project leader, (2) the information kit
(reports and web pages on the subject), (3) media and NGOs interested to the theme under discussion are informed.

Certainly e-Democracy permits the participation to the political debate and to decision making by groups and individuals otherwise unreachable. E-Democracy allows access to decision making by groups with scarce resources and limited possibilities to organise consensus, groups that would never be able to express themselves through direct lobbying. The typology itself of these groups changes, since they can be constituted despite geographical distances. These groups are in fact often de-localised. Groups with limited resources can mobilise thousands of individuals—even if distant—on a specific cause. Online all the stakeholders can easily contribute to the decision making, legislative initiatives can be based on new foundations.

It is a new frontier: the change of the participators to the decision-making identity. The institutions of the EU should better take it soon into consideration.

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NOTES

2. The study conducted by Rand Europe on “Benchmarking eGovernment in Europe and the USA” shows that the best mean to make eGovernment accepted by the citizens is to ensure the protection of the privacy and the security of the networks.
3. Information and Communication technologies.
5. Research and technological development.
7. Information and Communication Technologies.
9. Information and Communication Technologies.
13. www.hoogeven.nl, the initiative is called “Hoogeven Digital City.”

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