



## **Making eParticipation policy: a European analysis: social and political trends in eParticipation: the public policy and the civil society perspectives**

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**D14.2 and D 14.4 Demo-net Booklet.**

**Social and political trends in eParticipation:  
the public policy and the civil society perspectives.**

**“Making eParticipation Policy.  
A European Analysis”**

*Draft version*

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**Abstract:** The creative and disruptive characteristics of digital networks have profound consequences for the production of citizenship, which has always been technologically constructed, but now derives its significance from a tension between elite intentions and network flows. Our aim in this paper is to explore this tension empirically by interrogating the process of policy-making with regard to eParticipation in six European countries.

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This DEMO-net booklet derives from the activities carried out for two previously scheduled deliverables (D.14.2 and D.14.4). The parallel development of the tasks 14.2 and 14.4 - also through three Workshops\*, in Leeds and Bergamo (on task 14.4) and Orebro (on task 14.2) – persuaded the research team to converge around a newer and more convincing project, which integrates together the strand related to policy perspective (Task 14.4) and the strand looking at civil society initiatives (Task 14.2). *Co-leaders of the related project's Tasks (14.2 and 14.4):* Stephen Coleman, Anna Carola Freschi, Peter Mambrey.

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<http://www.demo-net.org/services/workshop-and-conference-organization/processes>

<http://www.demo-net.org/services/workshop-and-conference-organization/empowerment-and-participation-in-civil-society-workshop>



## **Executive summary**

This Demo-net Booklet proposes a new way to look at eParticipation. By now, eParticipation has become a field of policy itself. Thus, there is a growing need to go beyond (and behind) the analysis of its practices and to seek to investigate the logics and the strategies implied, explicit as much as 'latent'. Crucially, within the frame of network society, eParticipation is a relevant ground of deployment of the dynamic nature of the institutional and non institutional processes of agenda setting and decision making. This fact has important implications for research about the transformations of polity, public policy and democratic participation.

The Introduction of this booklet (1) is devoted to explain such main idea. A better comprehension of eParticipation requires to contextualize the emerging practices with reference to different political system, social and communicational settings. A first step in this direction is provided through Chapter 2, which is focused on the institutional and social contexts of eParticipation in six European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, UK). For each country, institutional and political conditions, eParticipation infrastructure and policy, eParticipation initiatives initiated by civil society are sketched. Chapter 3 offers an introduction about the political role of civil society in network society and five brief case-studies about a range of quite differentiated experiences, promoted by non institutional actors in the different countries. The final Chapter proposes some methodological and comparative considerations, and a new research approach to cope with the growing complexity of this field.

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# 1 Introduction

This is a study of the techniques, technologies, schemes and strategies that are adopted to make democratic citizens in a digitally-networked era. Following Castells, we propose that societies based upon digital networks are qualitatively different from those in which state power is centralised and communication flows are mainly linear. The creative and disruptive characteristics of networks have profound consequences for the production of citizenship, which has always been technologically constructed, but now derives its significance from a tension between elite intentions and network flows. Our aim in this paper is to explore that tension empirically by interrogating the process of policy-making with regard to eParticipation.

eParticipation is especially relevant to an understanding of how citizenship is constructed because the latter is rooted within mediated practices. Long before the era of digital networks, civic connections were mediated through print, radio and television. In a digitally-networked society such as ours, citizenship is mainly realised through processes that could not exist without technologies of time-space mediation. As Castells (2004) puts it,

The socialization of society, that is the construction of a shared social practice that allows individuals and social groups to live together (even in a conflictive togetherness) takes place nowadays in the networked, digitized, interactive space of communication, centered around mass media and the Internet. Thus, relationship between citizens and politicians, between the represented and the representative, depends essentially on what happens in this media-centered communication space.

There is a need, however, for research that can illuminate this process of civic construction, not only in the context of one nation-state (usually the USA or UK are wrongly considered as typical), but in terms that are both comparative and generalisable. This paper is a first endeavour to produce such research, with a view to developing our findings into more nuanced theory that can itself contribute to the shaping of future policy. But before moving on to empirical findings, we need to be clear about the terms of our investigation. What do we mean by policy? What do we know about the capacity of policy to shape participatory behaviour? And to what extent should our search for such

drivers and effects move beyond the realm of the state at its various levels of operation? These are the questions to which we turn in the following three sections of this introduction.

## **1.1 Policy as technology**

A common misconception is to see policy as acting upon, regulating or governing technology, as if the latter were a remote object, defined in terms of hardware, software and circuits of energy. According to this perspective, policy is a socio-political move conducted in response to inert technologies. This is completely mistaken and circular, for policy *is* a form of technology, insofar as technologies are systems of scientific knowledge applied intentionally to set procedures for performance in a reproducible manner. In this sense, schools, prisons, censuses and public service broadcasting are materially cultural technologies. The systematisation of social intentions, supported by skills, resources and measured outcomes, is both a policy and a technological process.

It is in this sense that we speak of technologies of eParticipation. Computers, modems and software do not in themselves constitute such technology. For eParticipation to possess true meaning, beyond the utopian fancies of those who have always longed for perfect human communion, these material capacities must be put to work in ways that reflect social intentions. Just as schools are not simply the buildings in which education takes place, but spaces organised around culturally specific notions of pedagogy, so e-technologies cannot acquire a socio-political function without policy intentions. Sometimes such intentions are tacit or under-articulated, in which case it is the task of critical researchers to interrogate their discursive construction and help practitioners to become more aware of the outcomes they are unknowingly working towards. In the case of eParticipation, policy goals have tended to be expressed in rhetorical terms, employing a highly normative policy language that is too often evasive about crucial questions of power asymmetry and conflicting interests. A function of critical research is to expose such evasions and inconsistencies with a view to sharpening the clarity of policy articulations.

Policy analysts have become sceptical in recent years about the metaphor of linear policy stages: agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. As Lindblom

famously argued, in opposition to Lasswell and Simon's incrementalist rationalism, policy-making is often a matter of 'muddling through' (1959) and

Deliberate, orderly steps ... are not an accurate portrayal of how the policy process actually works. Policy-making is, instead, a completely inter-active process without beginning or end' (Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993:11).

This is especially so in the case of eParticipation, where a number of otherwise distinct policy realms – technical, constitutional, communitarian, industrial – converge around normative aspirations for political democracy. Rather than assuming that technologies of eParticipation are produced in a singular fashion, as *a policy*, it makes more sense for us to look for such developments in broad and dispersed settings out of which emerge a semblance of *policy*. In this sense, technologies of eParticipation are best understood as discursive patchworks rather than linear procedures.

## **1.2 Policy and democratic participation**

Speaking about technologies of democratic citizenship suggests that we know how policy can shape civic forms of behaviour. That would be to claim too much. As Metler and Soss (2004:55) have rightly observed,

As political scientists, we ought to be able to tell our fellow citizens something – however uncertain or contingent – about how government actions affect their quality of political life. Yet aside from some notable exceptions, political science has had little to say about the consequences of public policy outcomes for democratic citizenship.

They go on to state that

Political scientists ought to be able to explain why some policies draw citizens into public life and others induce passivity. We should have a sense of how living under a given policy regime affects citizens' goals, beliefs and identities and hence, the possibilities for future political action. (Metler and Soss, 2004: 56).

These reflections have profound significance for the study of eParticipation policy. It suggests that the making of democratic citizens as an aspiration, often expressed in the normative terms of democratic theory, is not the same as empirical evidence to show that

certain technological affordances actually generate civically desirable behaviour. Apart from the value-laden problem of how to define ‘democratic citizenship’, this raises a methodological challenge: how can we discover whether policy arrangements affect the identities, capabilities and political aims of individual citizens or social groups? Identifying causal effects is notoriously difficult for social scientists, particularly in non-experimental situations. Skocpol’s (1992;58) well-respected advocacy of the study of policy feedback encourages political scientists to explore how ‘policies, once enacted, restructure subsequent political processes.’ This offers a promising foundation for our study of the effects of eParticipation policy. Unlike conventional evaluation studies (which can also have some use), we should be less interested in gathering data and establishing metrics to show that policy initiatives have had a quantifiable impact, and should set out to explore the ways in which politics, participation, citizens’ identities and democracy themselves have been conceptually and practically reconfigured as a consequence of new technologies being employed in particular ways.

Taking ‘participation’ as an example, we know from studies of offline civic behaviour that people engage politically for instrumental, expressive and symbolic reasons. We know that there are major differentials characterising those who do and do not engage. We know that such engagement has varying effects upon levels of institutional and interpersonal trust, as well as internal and external efficacy. What we know very little about is how the introduction of different technologies (from computer-mediated-communication to citizenship education to changes in the size of the ballot paper) affects or reconfigures these motives, stratifications and effects. Understanding these entails systematic research which, we suggest, needs to move beyond quantitative surveys. Substantive conceptual and behavioural changes of the kind we are interested in call for qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups. John Kingdon’s seminal study, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (1984) would serve as an exemplary model for such research.

For the purposes of this paper, we are interested in identifying the structural and constitutional bases of eParticipation policy. By pursuing a comparative study of different European polities, we hope to be able to say something about how different political cultures, regimes, media ecologies and legal systems seek to produce democratic citizenship in slightly different ways. This will not enable us to answer the questions

raised by Metler and Soss with any great sophistication (which we hope to pursue in the next phase of our research), but at least sets out a framework for explaining why eParticipation has taken root and been promoted in some countries, in particular ways, while being relatively sidelined in others.

### **1.3 Policy sources: top-down and ground-up**

A first question for any policy research is where to find the source of a particular process. Political science has tended to be state-centric, looking to political institutions as the obvious sources of policy. As March and Olsen (1988:35) put it, ‘Institutions ... provide physical, cognitive and moral frames for joint action; capacity for intervention; conceptual lenses for observation; agenda, memory, rights as well as duties as well as conceptions of justice; and symbols you may identify yourself with.’ Indeed, institutions do all of that, and yet, in a network society they are increasingly compelled to take into account the priorities, values, agendas and resistances of networks external to themselves. The most forceful of these external networks are global, and these are relevant to the study of European eParticipation policy. But there are also other influential networks operating at local and regional levels, as well as increasingly powerful deterritorialised communities of interest and passion. Facilitated to a great extent by online, many-to-many communication, grass-roots or ground-up networks play a significant role in the reconfiguration of democratic citizenship. They do so firstly as reflexive performers of citizenship, reshaping their civic identities as they enact them. And secondly, they act politically to initiate agendas and make claims upon resources, forcing governments to negotiate with them about the appropriate allocation of values.

We do not want to move too far away from the study of political institutions, which still control vast resources, powers and communication networks. We are mindful of Schattschneider’s (1960:105) observation that ‘It is not necessarily true that people with the greatest needs participate in politics most actively – whoever decides what the game is about will also decide who gets in the game.’ Both political institutions and networks are skewed in favour of richer, better educated, more confident citizens. But, as we have seen with some eParticipation projects initiated by civil society (sometimes in opposition to government intentions), Schattschneider (1960:69) was also correct when he observed that ‘the definition of the alternatives is a supreme instrument of power.’ Although that instrument is typically wielded by state actors, networks are becoming increasingly more

adept at setting and revising the terms of policy agendas. Indeed, one might argue that the transition from e-democracy's emphasis upon technocratic voting systems to participatory norms is, in part, an example of citizens being more enthused by one agenda outcome than another.

In recognition of the significant role played by civil society in promoting, designing, managing and aggregating eParticipation initiatives, the latter part of this paper will turn from an examination of national polities to grass-roots case studies. We shall conclude by suggesting that both need each other; that is to say, neither top-down nor ground-up eParticipation projects and policies have the capacity on their own to deliver the outcomes that their promoters intend. On their own, state institutions are unable to generate sufficient public trust to serve as feasible substitutes for autonomous collective action; while grass-roots projects are in danger of becoming echo chambers for homogeneous groups and risk becoming constitutionally marginalised. The fact that most eParticipation thus far has been either top-down or ground-up in character explains why most of these projects have met with political failure. Our tone is not pessimistic, however, for we shall argue in our conclusion that it is through a synthesis of institutional and grass roots approaches that eParticipation policies might stand more chance of fulfilling their intentions.

## 2 Country Summaries

### 2.1 Austria

#### 2.1.1 Institutional and Political Conditions

The Republic of Austria is a federal democracy with a parliamentary form of government. Legislative and executive powers are divided between the Federal Parliament/Government and the nine Provincial Parliaments/Governments. The National Council (*Nationalrat*) is the principal chamber in the formation of legislation (members are elected using a proportional representation-list system). The Federal Council (*Bundesrat*), representing the various states (*Länder*) of Austria, reviews legislation and can delay but (generally) not veto its enactment.

Austria has a political culture of consensus-orientated democracy, characterized by strong co-operation between the government and major economic interest groups (e.g., the Trade Union Federation, the Federal Economic Chamber, the Federal Chamber of Labour, and the Chamber of Agriculture). This system of co-operation, known as ‘social partnership’ (*sozialpartnerschaft*), is well established, even though it remains a voluntary arrangement. Social partners have the right to evaluate proposed legislation, make recommendations to law-making bodies and draft texts for legislation in line with the interests they represent. Economically, this has contributed to stable labour relations and extensive welfare benefits, even though, politically, it may diminish the status of parliament. The Austrian constitution also provides for direct democratic procedures: petitions, referenda, and official opinion polls. Participation processes operate at different levels of policy making, in planning activities, program development, and in specific projects. Examples of Austrian acts and statutes that feature arrangements for public participation include trading regulations, the statute on water and waterways, and the individual provinces’ statutes on land use.

In a study of political participation and education in Austria, Walter and Rosenberger (2007: 10) distinguishes between three major categories of political participation: (1) *Voter turnout*; (2) *Elite-directed activities* (‘affirmative, hierarchically structured, and representative elite-directed’ activities’, such as working in a political party, donating money to political organisation, contacting politicians or government officials); and (3) *Elite-challenging activities* (‘confrontational, egalitarian, and self-determined elite

challenging forms of political activity’, including signing petitions, ethical consumption, attending lawful demonstrations and participating in illegal protest activities). Within these categories, public participation in Austria has changed shape somewhat over the past thirty years: while both voter turnout and elite-directed activities have been declining, surveys indicate a significant increase in elite-challenging activity. This general trend, however, could easily be overstated. Comparatively speaking, Austria still ranks among the top European countries for voter turnout and elite-directed activity, while levels of elite-challenging activity remain low. Voter turnout for the 2002 national elections in Austria was 84.3 per cent (Source: Eurostat, 2007).

### **2.1.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy**

Across the six European countries considered here, Austria scores averagely in terms of both Internet access and e-government usage. In 2007, according to Eurostat data, 60 per cent of the Austrian population had Internet access (with 46 per cent of households using a broadband connection). Meanwhile, 27 per cent of the population (aged 16 to 74) had used the Internet, in the past 3 months, to interact with public authorities. The Austrian government has made considerable efforts to modernise its public administration with an advanced ICT infrastructure and online services. Reflecting this investment, Austria was placed first for e-government in the most recent European benchmarking study in terms of both the availability and sophistication of online government services for citizens and businesses (Capgemini 2007).

While there has been a clear emphasis on using ICT to improve administrative functions and make government more efficient, e-participation has so far remained the poor relation of e-government. A recent study of e-participation in Austria, for instance, finds that e-mail was the only real online communication channel available at the national government level (Fuchs 2006). There are signs, though, that concrete policies in the area of e-participation are being developed, and a recently established *Working Group on eLaw and eParticipation* in the Austrian Federal Chancellery is currently preparing a report on ‘E-Democracy & E-Participation’. A draft of the as yet unpublished report clarifies basic definitions of terms and different forms of e-participation, and considers how e-participation might relate to existing political institutions. It also provides a set of recommendations to help guide future policy. According to the report, e-participation does not mean working towards a plebiscitary, direct democracy that will substitute or



compete with representative democracy. The aim, instead, is to complement representative democracy and to enhance the engagement of citizens and civil society organizations with an 'interactive state'. This is depicted as an evolutionary transformation from a monolithic state to governance networks or webs that stretch across state, economy and civil society and which improve governance by bringing a greater number of actors and organizations into the process of policy making and implementation.

While e-participation policy in Austria is still to be developed, several noteworthy regional e-participation initiatives have in practice been introduced. Good examples include URBAN, an urban development project in Graz<sup>1</sup>; the Viennese urban development project EDEN ("Electronic Democracy European Network"<sup>2</sup>); and the online platform "klasse:zukunft"<sup>3</sup> (operated by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture). Many of these e-participation projects are addressed specifically to young people.<sup>4</sup> As most of the projects are still at an early stage of development, no data is currently available on the outcomes of these projects or about the number of participants and their socio-demographic characteristics.

Barriers to the use of e-participation in Austria are connected both to socio-demographic factors that structure political participation in general and to more specific issues that relate to the 'digital divide'. In Austria, the digital divide is discussed primarily as a divide between urban and rural areas of the country, given the lack of countrywide broadband coverage (while the coverage of broadband access in urban and suburban areas reached almost 100% by the end of 2006, the coverage in rural areas was only 79% (IDATE 2007, 42). The Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Telecommunication launched a *broadband initiative* in 2003 and this is supported by similar initiatives at Länder level.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.urban-link.at/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/eu/eden/index.htm> and discussion boards of the City of Vienna (<http://www.wien.gv.at/index/foren.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.klassezukunft.at/>;

<sup>4</sup> Examples are [www.salzblog.at](http://www.salzblog.at) initiated by the City of Salzburg, [www.cyberjuz.at](http://www.cyberjuz.at) and [www.cybermag.at](http://www.cybermag.at) initiated by the province of Upper Austria, [www.jugendbeteiligung.cc](http://www.jugendbeteiligung.cc) initiated by the "Working Group Participation", [www.mitmachen.at](http://www.mitmachen.at) initiated by the Federal Data Processing Centre, [www.entscheidend-bist-du.at](http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at) initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Science and Research.

### 2.1.3 Civil Society and e-Participation

In contrast to established political parties, various interest- and issue-based groups in Austria have introduced forms of e-participation (Aichholzer 2006). NGOs like Greenpeace Austria or Attac Austria commonly use technologies such as mailing lists, discussion boards, wikis, blogs, and ePetitions. Filzmaier (2003, 12) notes that online platforms played a key role for organizing civil protest movements against the coalition of the Conservative Party with the so-called Freedom Party in 2000. Since this time, there have also been examples of the use of the Internet for ‘negative campaigning’ in Austria (e.g., the use of satirical e-cards, mail bombings, and fake web sites). Finally, a number of pilot projects and local applications have also been initiated by academics for research purposes (Mahrer and Krimmer).

## 2.2 France

### 2.2.1 Institutional and Political Conditions

France has a semi-presidential political system located somewhere between the American presidential system and European parliamentary systems. The presidential Constitution of the Fifth Republic (adopted in September 1958) increased executive power and limited the role of assemblies in policy making (something called “rationalized parliamentarism”). France is often described as a centralized state. However, since the ‘Deferre laws’<sup>5</sup> of the early 1980s, many state responsibilities have been devolved to local level. In order to limit the fragmentation that may result from devolution (there are about 32000 local municipalities in France), various cooperative structures have been established (i.e., ‘*syndicats de communes*’, ‘*syndicats mixtes*’, ‘*communautés de communes*’, ‘*communautés urbaines, communautés d’agglomération*’). Consequently, the French political-administrative system is a complex system of governance where responsibilities are shared by different authorities.

As is the case with other countries discussed in this booklet, certain indicators in France suggest a growing dissatisfaction among citizens with how the political system works. Distrust in politicians has increased in the past twenty years, while support for political

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<sup>5</sup> Loi n° 82-213 du 2 mars 1982 relative aux droits et libertés des communes, des départements et des régions, *Journal Officiel*, 3 mars 1982, p. 730 ; loi n° 83-8 du 7 janvier 1983 relative à la répartition de compétences entre les communes, les départements, les régions et l’Etat, *Journal Officiel*, 9 janvier 1983, p. 215.

parties at the extreme end of the political spectrum, most notably the National Front, has increased. Having reached a peak of around 900,000 in the early 1980s, party membership dropped to around 450,000 in 2001. Overall many French citizens seem to believe that major parties and elected officials do not accurately represent their interests (this was crudely demonstrated by the 2005 referendum on the European constitutional treaty where 55% of French voters voted no against the position taken on this issue by the major parties). In spite of such trends, voting is still valued in France: while voter turnout in the 2002 national elections was comparatively low at 60.3 per cent, turnout at other elections, notably the recent presidential election, remains high. In addition, surveys demonstrate a strong attachment to democratic institutions and values (Grunberg et al, 2002). Finally, non-conventional participation remains important and direct protest activities (demonstrations, petitions, strikes, sit-ins, and so on) are established parts of French political culture<sup>6</sup>. Over the past decade, and alongside 'traditional' interest groups (e.g., train or electric workers), students, gays and lesbians, homeless, anti-AIDS, immigrants, anti-globalization groups and other single-issue movements have all conducted disruptive political protests.

While representative democracy is still the main frame of reference for French politics, it is currently being challenged in a number of ways. Public policies are now viewed as an incremental result of a continual process of governance and bargaining among stakeholders, in which interest groups play a part in policy formulation and implementation both as representatives of affected groups and as sources of expert information and advice. Mass media have become more prominent in French politics and political representatives are often more accountable to journalists and media experts than to MPs. Finally, the proliferation of opinion polling has also affected how government works. The combination of interest-group politics, media influence and of government by opinion polls could lead to what is known as a *démocratie d'opinion* (a democracy driven by public opinion). Some commentators on French politics question this development in so far as it emphasizes emotions over reason and particular interests over the public interest, and since it eradicates the time required to seriously deliberate issues.

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<sup>6</sup> In February 2007, 42% of French voters said they would be ready to take part in a demonstration (Baromètre politique français, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 33).

## 2.2.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy

In 2007, according to Eurostat data, 49 per cent of households in France had access to the Internet at home (43 per cent of which used a broadband connection). This figure is comparatively quite low, but the percentage of the population aged 16 to 74 who had used the Internet (in the past 3 months) to interact with French public authorities is comparatively high (41 per cent). There are considerable disparities in internet access or usage in France (as is the case elsewhere): people with low education, retired people, and poorer households are much less likely to have access to the Internet. Successive French governments have consistently pursued similar policy objectives in their policy towards the Internet. Policy activity has focused on widening Internet usage, developing an electronic administration, and fostering a digital economy, and on addressing more specific issues that affect these goals (e.g., the digital divide (Curien & Muet, 2004), personal data protection (Truche, 2002), and new regulations needed for digital business (LEN, 2004; Lévy & Jouyet, 2006). E-participation is far from the top of the national public-policy agenda in France and its development is left mostly to local authorities or private organizations.<sup>7</sup> However, acknowledging the priority that has been given to public access, e-administration and digital business, French policy makers argue that the development of electronic administration will provide the material and cultural infrastructure upon which e-democracy can subsequently flourish.

At the national level, the French public policy for Internet development is placed under the general supervision of the CISI (Comité interministériel pour la société de l'information — Interdepartmental Committee for Information Society). Established in 1998, the CISI defines the general priorities and actions for the Information society and assesses initiatives undertaken in the area. Policy in specific domains is then designed and monitored through different directorates and specialized public agencies or committees. To some extent, local policies for e-participation reflect national policy: they seek to develop access to the Internet, to provide online information services, and to mobilize and train citizens and groups at local level. Local authorities play an important role in providing IT equipment in schools. While most local authorities in France now have public web sites, these web sites do not necessarily include consultative functions.

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<sup>7</sup> E-democracy was not even mentioned in the interim report of the RE/SO plan.: *La société de l'information en France en 2004*, octobre 2004, [http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/societe\\_inforSation\\_2004.pdf](http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/societe_inforSation_2004.pdf).

Some local authorities in France, however, have set up specific e-participation programmes that are worth noting here. Two good examples include The E-Agora Program<sup>8</sup> and The Dream Program<sup>9</sup>. Launched in April 2004 with the support of the European Union and led by the city of Issy-les-Moulineaux, the e-Agora program aims to test new tools for local democracy (including weblogs and SMS), and to train local civil servants, young people and citizens in new governance practices. Sponsored by the Regional Council of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the Dream Program aims to raise the awareness of local elected officials and civil servants about the potential of ICT for local democracy, through seminars, training sessions, and a dedicated website. The program has also subsidized a number of pilot projects to test innovative e-participation practices, including, most notably, an online public debate on the development of wind farms in the territorial community of Atrébatie ([www.debat-atrebatie.org](http://www.debat-atrebatie.org)).

### **2.2.3 Civil society and e-Participation**

Civil society organizations play a decisive role in the development of e-participation in France. These organizations act both as interest groups and as providers of information and educational initiatives. Some of these organizations have gathered impressive amounts of data relating to e-democracy and e-participation (e.g., [Ordinateurs-de-vote.org](http://Ordinateurs-de-vote.org) is one of the best sources of information regarding e-voting). Other organizations have supported e-participation initiatives by assessing ‘best practice’ in this area. The “Internet Cities Association”, for instance, encourages the promotion of e-citizenship in cities by awarding an ‘arobase’ label annually to the most outstanding local initiatives. Some other organizations, such as FING or APRIL, are strong advocators of open source applications. Finally, civil society organizations traditionally serve as watchdogs, especially when civic liberties or privacy are at stake, and a number of different French organizations or associations (IRIS, CREIS, [Ordinateursdevote](http://Ordinateursdevote)) have focused on the problem of the Internet and government surveillance.

FDI ([www.foruminternet.org](http://www.foruminternet.org)), funded and supported by the French government, is an important independent body in France for the area of e-participation. Established in May

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<sup>8</sup> Legale E. & al., *E-agera. Le livre blanc de la e- démocratie locale : réflexions et perspectives*, Sem Issy-média, 2006, <[http://www.forum-edemo.org/IMG/pdf/livre\\_Blanc\\_Anglais.pdf](http://www.forum-edemo.org/IMG/pdf/livre_Blanc_Anglais.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> Dream 2 ([www.e-democratielocale.info](http://www.e-democratielocale.info)) and Dream + (<http://aufildedream.over-blog.net>).

2001, FDI aims to bring together relevant organizations and groups (private companies, non-profit organizations, public authorities, and users) to discuss the regulation of online activities, including those relating to e-government. The FDI issues recommendations, conducts surveys, and carries out information and awareness campaigns (Falque-Perrotin, 2004). The Internet Rights Forum is composed of many working groups, two of which deal specifically with issues relating to e-democracy and e-participation: the 'Electronic vote and modernization of the electoral process' working group and the 'Public access to the Internet' working group.

## **2.3 Germany**

### **2.3.1 Institutional and Political Conditions**

The German political system is a federal republic and representative democracy. Executive power rests with the Chancellor and the cabinet (the country's president is only a ceremonial head of state with limited political power). The Parliament has two houses, the Upper House (*Bundesrat*), which represents the constituent states (*Länder*), and the Lower House (*Bundestag*), representing the national electorate. The Bundesrat's sixty-nine members, who are appointed by the *Länder* cabinets, approve federal legislation and administer decrees affecting the *Länder*. Members of the Bundestag are elected on the basis of a mixture of proportional representation and the Anglo-Saxon single-member district system. While the German political system is a representative democracy, some provisions for direct democracy exist at state and municipal level. These arrangements, however, vary considerably from state to state.

Electoral turnout in Germany elections is comparatively high. It has, however, shown signs of declining in recent years (turnout was 82.2 per cent in 1998, 79.1 in 2002, and 77.7 per cent in 2005). More generally, Germany's political culture includes traditions of statism and political idealism, as well as a general orientation towards non-political decision-making and consensual politics (see Sontheimer & Bleek, 2003). These traditions, which hampered certain forms of public participation from emerging and taking hold in Germany in the past, have lost some of their dominance in recent years. Since the beginning of the 1970s, participatory actions have emerged that put these political traditions in question and the student, peace, ecology, and feminist movements have had an impact on the German political system. Public participation and the

democratic reform of the political system have since this time become a permanent policy concern of governments, political parties, and certain civil society organizations.

### **2.3.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy**

Internet access and e-government usage by individuals is comparatively high in Germany. In 2007, 71 per cent of households had Internet access at home. Meanwhile, 43 per cent of individuals aged between 16 and 74 had used the Internet, in the past 3 months, to interact with public authorities. The German federal government is aware of e-participation, and there are indications (e.g., the funding of research studies on e-Inclusion and e-participation by the Federal Minister of the Interior) that e-participation policy might play a more significant role in Germany in the future. Currently, though, there are no clear public policies or strategies for e-participation at federal or state level. The use of ICT and the Internet in the public sector is primarily viewed as means to increase the efficiency and efficacy of administrative institutions and to facilitate ties between government and the economic sector (new integrated processes). The current policy of the German government (Umsetzungsplan 2007 E-Government 2.0) towards the Internet is focused mainly on the issue of user identification and of establishing and maintaining a safe information and communication infrastructure.

### **2.3.3 Civil Society and e-Participation**

Groups and organizations in civil society undertake various forms of e-participation activity in Germany. There are four relevant types of activity that are worth distinguishing here. (1) Some groups seek to influence political debate in Germany by promoting and advocating greater e-participation. This includes groups associated with political parties and trade unions (e.g., Hans-Böckler-Foundation; Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, and Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation) as well as with non-governmental or non-profit organizations (e.g., the Bertelsmann-Foundation or Stiftung Mitarbeit). (2) There are academic organizations and researchers who have conducted experiments in e-participation in order to test different devices, formats, mobilization strategies, and requirements of participation. (3) There is a group of activists and civil society movements that use web 2.0 tools and techniques in order to improve organization, raise public awareness, and gain political influence — in many ways, this broad group is the area of e-participation in Germany. (4) The final group consists of the very many citizens in German who use Internet-based devices and platforms (blogs, chat, fora, news groups,

community networks etc.) for everyday conversations. It is not clear yet whether these episodic conversations in civil society will receive the attention of established political organizations, representatives, and/or the mass media.

## **2.4 Italy**

### **2.4.1 Institutional and Political Conditions**

Italy's political system is a parliamentary representative democracy. Legislative power is vested in the two chambers of Parliament: the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei Deputati*, with 630 elected members), and the Senate of the Republic (*Senato della Repubblica*, with both elected members (315) and a small number of 'senators for life'). Executive power, whose legislative role has notably increased in the last decade, has seen a strong concentration on the hands of the President of the Council of Ministers. In the 1990s, electoral and institutional reforms were introduced in order to give a bipolar shape to the previous highly fragmented party system and to achieve greater political stability, by means of a strengthening of the executive powers. Reforms of administrative structure have followed the same model, consolidating the loyalty relationships between executives and public officials. The failure of the attempt, between the 1980s and 1990s to establish a balanced neo-corporatist model of regulation, makes it difficult to describe the current Italian system as a consensus democracy; on the contrary the system has assumed a bipolar shape. The right-wing and left-wing coalitions have governed alternatively since 1994. The current institutional agenda includes the presidential and the federalist reforms.

In the 1990s local and regional levels of government gained more political importance in Italy. Internal reforms<sup>10</sup>, partly as a consequence of the European policies focused on the socio-economic integration of the regions across Europe, partly as a development of a devolution process originated in the 1970s.. The new local electoral system strengthened local executives (*Giunta*), by means of direct election of Presidents or Mayors, at the expense of the role of representative assemblies (*Councils*). These reforms also contributed to the personalisation of politics at the local level, extending a process already evident at the national level, giving greater political weight to a new generation of Mayors and Presidents of Regions [Vandelli 1997; Legnante 1999; Catanzaro- Piselli *et*

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1993 that of the electoral local system (L.81); and in the 1990 that of the system of power of local authorities: provinces and municipalities (L.142).



*al.* 2002; Brasca - Morisi 2003; Segatori 2003; Baldini 2004]. (This accords with a wider international trend of presidentialisation of politics [Calise 2000][Poguntke – Webb 2007]) More generally, the relationship between the centre and periphery of the political system and the development of a multilevel system of governance is an important feature of Italian politics today.

Voting is a ‘civic obligation’ in Italy (although there is no penalty) and Italy is known for high electoral turnouts. 80.5 per cent of the Italian electorate voted, for instance, in the 2008 national elections. Electoral turnout, however, has been steadily decreasing in the past 25 years.. The explanations given for why voter turnout might have fallen are various. They include the existence of growing anti-party sentiments among the public [Morlino - Tarchi 1996; Mete 2005; Segatti 2006], the diminishing ability of political parties to mobilise their core support, and the instability of the party system in Italy [Corbetta - Tuorto 2004; Fruncillo 2004]. On the other hand, various civil society organisations and social movements and ‘critical citizens’ in Italy have made increasing demands for more public participation [Pharr and Putnam 2000; della Porta, Andretta *et al.* 2003], an argument framed by a specific kind of ‘active’ anti-politics, whose expressions often assume an ‘indirect’ but strong political meaning, as in the case of ‘anti-mafia’ consumerism. [Tarchi 2003; Mastropaolo 2005; Mete 2008]. Citizens’ deliberation in the institutional domain has become a priority in the agenda of the Network of New Municipalities (ARNM), a large association of experts and practitioners.

### **2.4.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy**

The number of Internet users has grown steadily in Italy with the percentage of households that have access to the Internet increasing from 34 per cent in 2002 to 43 per cent in 2007 (Eurostat, 2007). Nonetheless, Internet access and use remains low compared with the other European countries considered in this booklet. The percentage of users who have used the Internet (in the past 3 months) to interact with public authorities is just 17 per cent. This figure is well under the European average and is the lowest of our six countries (Eurostat 2007). To be underlined that the most relevant divide in Italy, as digital as socio-economic variables, regards territorial differences (South is the most disadvantaged area).

In Italy, eParticipation emerged as a new area of public policy early on at local level. In

the middle of the 1990s a number of civic networks were introduced at municipal level, many of which were supported by European programmes designed to develop telematics applications, e.g. the *Iperbole* network in the Municipality of Bologna, which won an award for the most successfully implemented digital city project (the Bangeman Challenge Award, 1997). At the end of the 1990 local eParticipation policy seemed to have lost its impetus. As with other countries considered in this booklet, the use of ICTs in the public sector has been increasingly seen rather as a mean to modernise administration and achieve greater administrative efficiency.

After the launch of the eEurope initiative, the issue of e-democracy was addressed at the national level in the first National Plan for e-government (2002), but the impacts were weak. A turning point arrived in 2004, when the Ministry of Technological Innovation issued a national call for local e-democracy projects. This was accompanied by specific *Guidelines to promote local digital citizenship* (2004). About nine million Euros were given to fund the 56 selected projects. The new call for e-participation projects generated an impressive response, especially from municipalities. The main features of the national policy to promote local e-democracy projects can be summarized as follows: a) e-democracy projects must be connected to a specific decision-making process and part of the policy cycle (from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation of the policy at stake) with reference to appropriate forms of participation (information, consultation and participation); b) participation is a continuous, discursive, inclusive, and deliberative process; c) project designs for participation should integrate off-line and online practices, rejecting a simple technology driven approach; d) projects must draw on the different cultures, competences, and experiences associated with participation, from online based experiences (typically 'civic networks') and from a variety of forms of local governance (participatory urban planning, Agenda 21, participatory budgeting, etc.); e) they should limit the practice of registering and identifying users, in order to protect personal data; and e) e-polling which does not include extensive informative campaigns and discursive practices should be avoided (Freschi 2004). In spite of these interesting premises, it should be noted that only a small number of the 56 projects that were funded by this policy seem to have translated into practice this deliberative and participatory vision of e-democracy (Freschi 2008). The action of the national government to support this policy has appeared weak and bureaucratic.

Certain problems and challenges surround eParticipation in Italy, even in the case of ‘best practice’ examples. Generally speaking, a) the number of citizens who participate is low and the social and political representativeness of those who do opt to participate, given that they are self-selecting, is highly skewed; b) the agenda is always set up by institutions; c) the commitment of politicians to value the participation of the citizens is weak (Freschi 2007). Some of these shortcomings were evident, for instance, in the recent case of the ambitious Electronic Town meeting promoted by the Tuscany Region (this initiative was set up as a main deliberative step toward the drafting of a new regional bill on citizens’ participation). Citizens who participated tended to be well educated, already active in local politics, employed, and almost all politically in accordance with the executive, who had made the agenda (Cellini-Freschi-Mete 2007, Freschi-Raffini 2008a). Also, in relation to online political participation by the young, results don’t fit expectations. Contrary to the simplistic equation that young people are most likely to use the Internet for public participation, since they are most used to using the technology, cultural and social traits often prove to be a better predictor of propensity to participate in institutional contexts than age (Freschi-Raffini 2008b). In sum, given low levels of participation and question marks over political inclusion, and also given the fact that only minor issues are considered during participatory policy processes, the introduction of new forms of public participation by political institutions has yet to show relevant effects on democratic life.

### **2.4.3 Civil Society and e-Participation**

Internet use has had an important role in emerging forms of grassroots mobilization and organization in Italy (Andretta, Della Porta et al. 2002, Freschi 2003, 2008a, Mascio 2008). As noted above, only a small number of specific people choose to participate in government-led e-participation. Propensity to participate in different types of participation is a cultural issue and very many citizens and groups seem to prefer to build and manage their own online ‘spaces’ as an alternative to more official and formal spaces (Freschi 2008). That is the case of a variegated set of social movements: social movements claiming against neoliberal globalization; protest movements arisen on various democratic emergencies (overall information and justice), infrastructural and employment. The diffused perception of a weakening both of the democratic governance legitimacy and of the public sphere openness, has led civil society organizations to made increasing demands for more participation. Among the recent phenomenon of online-

offline citizens mobilizations there is the very popular blog of the comedian BeppeGrillo ([www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)) (Navarria, 2007). A further interesting experimentation of Web 2.0 has been promoted by the no-profit association Deep (Democracy and Public Participation), offering an online database, fed cooperatively by citizens, in order to monitor the Italian politicians ([www.openpolis.it](http://www.openpolis.it)), and a blog on the electoral programs, centered on a 'game' played by about 700.000 users. It is an explicit, but ironic, way to reverse the logic of techno-politics (Freschi-Balocchi et al. 2008) and value new forms of 'political' cooperation among individual citizens.

## **2.5 Sweden**

### **2.5.1 Institutional and Political Conditions**

The Swedish political system is a parliamentary, representative democracy. The government, led by the Prime Minister of Sweden, exercises executive power, and government policy is implemented by state agencies (*ämbetsverk*) run by an autonomous civil service. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the parliament, and members of parliament are elected on the basis of proportional representation (voters choose among individual candidates nominated by the parties and a party must gain 4 percent of the national vote or 12 percent of the vote in any one of twenty-eight electoral districts to be represented in parliament).

Sweden is known for its consensual political culture, characterized by close co-operation between the government and various civil society organizations. The Swedish government contributes substantial financial support to NGOs and these organizations play an important part in government policy-making. Sweden is often cited for its democratic health: citizens are relatively well informed about politics and turnout in elections is comparatively high (approximately 80 percent of the electorate vote in local authority, county council, and national elections). 80.1 per cent of the Swedish population voted in the recent 2002 national elections. At the same time, there is a growing debate in Sweden over the state of democracy. As in many other European countries, the public in Sweden is becoming more dissatisfied with the traditional institutions of representative democracy and with conventional forms of participation. Meanwhile, there a number of key actors promoting the debate in Sweden about how best to address these concerns: the government and its commissions (SOU 2000:1; Government Bill 2001/02:80), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions ([www.skl.se](http://www.skl.se)), and researchers in

Sweden, such as those associated with the SNS Democracy Audit ([www.const.sns.se/dr/english](http://www.const.sns.se/dr/english)).

### **2.5.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy**

Sweden is often considered a forerunner when it comes to Internet access and e-government use. Sweden has the highest rate of Internet access of the six European countries considered in this booklet. In 2007, 79 percent of the Swedish population between 18 and 79 years of age had access to the Internet at home, 67 per cent of which used a broadband connection (Eurostat, 2007). Sweden also has the highest percentage of eGovernment users: in 2007, 53 per cent of individuals aged 16 to 74 in Sweden had used the Internet, in the past 3 months, to interact with public authorities (Eurostat, 2007). However, while Sweden's relatively advanced technical infrastructure and tradition of democracy suggests that it might lead the way in e-participation policy, the Swedish government has not – as of 2008 – taken anything like a clear position on the issue. Again, other policy issues relating to the Internet, such as the digital divide, privacy, and security, have overshadowed e-participation.

The Government Commission on Swedish Democracy (a parliamentary commission appointed in October 1997) provides a reference point for e-participation policy in Sweden. The commission generated 15 research volumes from approximately 100 scholars (across 12 disciplines). The final report was entitled *A Sustainable Democracy* (Government Commission Report 2000:1). A 'Minister for Democratic Issues' was appointed at this time, charged with considering democracy and participation in Sweden. *A Sustainable Democracy* not only indicates the need for more 'participatory democracy' in Sweden 'with strong deliberative qualities', but also recognizes the importance of experimenting with e-participation. While the government and the Prime Minister appeared to welcome the report at the time, the measures that were subsequently proposed in the *Government Bill on Democracy Policy* (Government Bill 2001/02:80) fell far short of the quite radical and participatory proposals made by the commission.

At the national level in Sweden, there is very little to report in the area of e-participation. Two government-funded democracy projects are worth noting though. The first, *Time for Democracy*, had the overall objective of increasing participation and awareness of the political process, focusing particularly on voting in national elections. In a two-year

period from 2000 and 2002, grants were given to 142 educational projects at the cost of about SEK 19 million in total. The second initiative, *Participating Sweden*, is a programme aimed at tackling social exclusion and increasing participation in Swedish society more broadly. SEK 22 million have been set aside for the programme, which is due to run from 2006 and 2009, a proportion of which (SEK 4 million) is dedicated specifically to projects that aim to promote public participation and dialogue among citizens. One e-participation project is due to be implemented in the city of Vara as a part of this programme (Government Offices of Sweden, 2007). Meanwhile, the new right-wing government in Sweden (elected in 2006) has indicated that it will invest more in e-participation during its period of office. There is, however, still no policy programme that specifically addresses e-participation or e-democracy. The absence of a strategic policy direction means that e-participation continues to develop on an ad hoc and limited basis.

At the local level, e-participation policies are few in number and practice in the area has so far developed in an uneven manner. Nonetheless, there are some notable examples of innovative and successful e-participation practices run by Swedish local authorities. A series of online ‘deliberative referendums’, undertaken in cities such as Kalix, Malmö, Vara and Sigtuna, are among the most ambitious. In the city of Sigtuna, ten online referendums were conducted in one year and the results were generally encouraging: a relatively high percentage of citizens took part at some stage in these online referendums (between 30 and 60 percent), the socioeconomic characteristics of participants were fairly well balanced, and the contributions made by participants did have an impact on final policy decisions (Åström 2004; Åström & Granberg 2007; Åström & Norén 2007).

### **2.5.3 Civil Society and e-Participation**

Empirical studies show that civil society organizations in Sweden have used the Internet to strengthen their political influence by facilitating campaign activities and helping to establish networks with other organizations. However, these typically top-down organizations have proven less successful in promoting interactive engagement and participation with grassroots members. This conclusion is supported by Pilemalms’ (2006) qualitative study of The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO): while she reports an increasing use of ICTs by this organizational, she finds no noticeable change in the decision-making procedures or power structure (Pilemalm 2006). Against this background, it is not surprising that it is those e-participation activities that ordinary

citizens can carry out most easily by themselves that are proving the most attractive and which are so far making the clearest contribution: this includes everyday civic conversations, the creation of small-scale forms of political engagement through e-consumerism, direct online activism, and the propagation of political content in issue-based and less formal civil society networks.

## **2.6 UK**

### **2.6.1 Institutional and Political Conditions**

The UK has a parliamentary system of government where legislative power is vested in the government and two chambers of parliament (the House of Commons and the House of Lords). Members of the government are drawn from parliament and are answerable to it, and the head of government (prime minister) is the member of the parliament able to command a working majority (this usually means the leader of the political party with an absolute majority in the House of Commons). The government is then made up by a number of departments led (politically) by a government minister (often also a cabinet member), and the decisions of which are advised upon and implemented by a permanent and politically neutral administration (or civil service). Members of parliament are elected to represent geographic constituencies using a ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system.

The UK is a unitary state, but a recent process of devolution has seen the establishment of a parliament in Scotland and of assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland (systems of proportional representation are used to elect members to these assemblies). Local government is a complex entity in the UK and different arrangements pertain. Local authorities can only do what they are required (duties) or are permitted (powers) to do by way of laws passed in specific Acts of Parliament and central government exercises significant control at local level through national target setting, performance management, ring-fenced and specific grants, and detailed guidance notes and codes of practice (Lyons, 2007). The balance of centre-local government relations in the UK political system — a political system that is more centralised than many European counterparts — is much debated. As advocates of ‘localism’ point out, the lack of meaningful local discretion sits uncomfortably with the frequent calls by government for local authorities to stimulate democratic renewal and greater public participation (Sharland, 2008; Stoker, 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Over the past decade there has been some anxiety in the UK (as elsewhere) that citizens are withdrawing from conventional politics. The most often cited evidence of disconnection is declining turnout. Electoral turnout fell to the lows of 59.8 per cent and 61.3 per cent in the UK general elections of 2001 and 2005. Along with voter turnout, changes in party organization and identification also suggest increasing disconnection from formal politics. Political parties have traditionally played a key role in mediating politically between state and society, and yet today very few citizens make the effort to actively support the general or local election campaigns of parties and party membership and people's sense of identification with political parties has also declined. These recent declines in orthodox measures of political participation do not necessarily mean that UK citizens are politically apathetic or inactive. There has been an overall increase in other forms of participation, such as signing petitions, supporting consumer boycotts, and joining campaign groups. In the past decade there have been major popular protests in the UK over fuel prices, rural issues, and the military invasion of Iraq. More broadly, citizens in the UK are actively involved in a wide range of public activities characterized by a raft of different 'political' issues, identities, and interests. A growing number of commentators argue that, in order to respond to a more critical and differentiated citizenry, new and more qualitatively nuanced forms of public participation must be introduced. Today, calls for greater public participation are often coupled with broader accounts of 'governance' that seeks to describe inter-dependencies between different levels of government and the influence of actors from across the voluntary, private, and public sectors in policy formulation (through policy networks) and implementation (through partnerships).

### **2.6.2 E-Participation Infrastructure and Policy**

Across the six European countries considered here, the UK scores averagely in terms of both Internet access and e-government usage. In 2007, 67 per cent of the UK population had Internet access and 38 per cent of the population (aged 16 to 74) had used the Internet, in the past 3 months, to interact with public authorities. Meanwhile, many households (57 per cent) have moved from slow dial-up connections to faster and 'always on' broadband Internet connections. Of course, these figures leave a large proportion of the UK population without Internet access at home, whether connected by broadband or not. This reflects broader inequalities: the distribution of household Internet access across the UK is skewed according to region (UK National Statistics) and both Internet access



and use are stratified by various ‘digital divides’ in terms of income, education, gender, age, and disability.

The UK government’s first detailed policy discussion of e-democracy was a Green Paper published in July 2002: *In the Service of Democracy: a Consultation on the Policy for Electronic Democracy*. (While various e-democracy networks and practices had already been established, earlier policy documents on ICT and government focused on service information and provision and made only superficial references to the potential of ICT to support participation (Needham, 2004). The consultation document discusses e-democracy against the background of various ‘challenges to democracy’, including, most notably, recent declines in public participation. The government recognized that ICT was not a ‘panacea’, suggesting only that it ‘could’, with an active government policy, facilitate participation. Meanwhile, it was made clear that ‘e-Democracy should be seen as a complement rather than a replacement of existing structures’ (eEnvoy, 2002: 4), and that the aim should be to ‘use people’s energy and interest in politics to support and enhance the traditional institutions of democracy’ (eEnvoy, 2002: 11).

The UK government never returned to the themes set out in the Green Paper in order to develop a clear vision for electronic democracy and a systematic policy for moving towards realizing it. In the case of both e-voting and e-participation, however, the Government has continued to invest in small-scale experimentation. Most e-participation activity has been focused at local level, funded and coordinated through national funding competitions, including, most notably, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s National Project for Local e-Democracy (this national project began in July 2004 with a budget of four-million pounds). Under the auspices of this project, an array of software applications and websites were developed, including software for citizen panels, consultations and forums; for petitioning and campaigning; and for citizenship and decision-making games. The independent evaluation reports to these initiatives reported some evidence of positive outcomes and early enthusiasm among users. Many of the projects, though, proved short-lived and those that are still used (e.g., local issues forums, e-petitioning systems, citizen’s panels, and blogging software) are usually dependent on a handful of enthusiastic individuals, just as previous e-participation practices had been. The sustainability of e-participation — alongside ongoing issues about the political inclusiveness of e-participation practices, the representativeness of those who participate,

and the influence e-participation may have on policy — is a crucial issue. In 2006, the government established the International Centre of Excellence for Local eDemocracy ([www.icele.org](http://www.icele.org)) to take forward the work of the National Project for Local eDemocracy. The future of this centre is currently uncertain, however, and it is unclear how local e-participation policy will develop.

The government's emphasis on small-scale (and more easily controlled) e-participation experiments at local level is explicable in view of the problems government has encountered in undertaking riskier macro public conversations at central government level. Before the publication of *In the Service of Democracy*, central government had hosted large-scale forums on the Downing Street Website and the Citizen Space portal. These forums proved popular, yet they also experienced substantial and embarrassing operational problems (especially surrounding moderation/censorship) (see Wright, 2006a; 2006b; Wright and Street, 2007). The forums were eventually abandoned. Following the Scottish parliament's e-petitions system, the most high profile initiative recently introduced at national level has been the Downing Street's e-petitions system. Meanwhile, politicians are increasingly using blogs and social media as a way to engage with the public. Looking ahead, some of the most interesting developments in national e-participation policy in the UK may surround Tom Steinberg and Ed May's 'The Power of Information' review published in June 2007.

### **2.6.3 Civil Society & e-Participation**

Not all or even most e-participation in the UK is initiated from the centre. Very many civil society organizations and groups have used the Internet to stimulate e-participation. This includes the use of various applications and platforms: web forums and chat rooms, social networking tools, blogging and video sites, and wikis. Social movements and protest groups in the UK have moved online, both for recruitment and to organize dispersed members, as have various self-help networks, comprised of dispersed citizens with common needs. Existing media organizations, such as the BBC, increasingly make use of interactive features and user-generated content on their websites. Meanwhile, a number of research and advocacy organizations in the UK contribute to the debate on e-participation and related issues.

Netmums ([www.netmums.com](http://www.netmums.com)) is a good example of a successful (and now relatively long-standing) grassroots e-participation network. It was established to help support the quality of life for mothers with young children by helping them to find their local parent and toddler group, childcare facilities, or playgroup; suggesting somewhere new to take the kids; recommending a good local GP; or helping them to make new friends in their local area. Netmums reports having over 345,000 registered users throughout the UK, spread over a network of local websites. MySociety (a project of the UK-based registered charity, UK Citizens Online Democracy) is responsible for some of the most visible and successful forms of e-participation in the UK. Their projects not only make use of user-generated content, but also make innovative use of existing sources of data (a process known as 'data mashing'), including information from government organizations. Good examples of MySociety projects include WriteToThem (to help citizens contact elected representatives), TheyWorkForYou (tracks the speeches and activities of Members of Parliament) FixMyStreet (a map based application to enable citizens to alert public authorities about problems that need attention), GroupsNearYou (a map-based application to help people find local community-based groups in their area), and PledgeBank (allows users to set up personal pledges and then encourage other people to sign up to them in order to overcome collective action problems).

## 3 Civil Society and eParticipation

### 3.1 Civil society case studies

As is clear from our country studies, the use of new media by civil society movements is rapidly emerging and creates new opportunities and risks for citizens, governments and political systems. This is an evolving field that needs empirical work on concrete cases in regions and countries worldwide. This section will illustrate a number of recent activities that demonstrate the potential significance of grass-roots or ground-up eParticipation.

The concept of “*civil society*” can be defined from several perspectives, but a widely used definition will be helpful for present purposes:

Civil society refers to the arena of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group (LSE: What is civil society?).

Civil society is therefore understood as the entirety of voluntary civil and social organizations and institutions, which altogether form the base of a society as opposed to power supported structures of the government and commercial institutions (Schmidt 1995). This notion frames the different concepts which underlie the term of civil society in general.

An important assumption is that the primary characteristics of current democratic societies are fragmentation, diversity, identity and individuation. This has led some theorists and commentators to question what keeps society together. One prominent answer is that ‘democratic societies must rely on people with community-oriented skills, who trust one another and who take an interest both in one another and in the welfare of

the community’ (Bertelsmann Foundation 2003, p. 9). A common background of motives and attitudes of the citizen oriented to the common good is necessary: civic-mindedness encourages civic actions. These civic actions open up the social space of a civil society. ‘Mutual interest and trust, together with shared goals and a variety of resources, result in commitment and involvement. People must have a sense that they have something at stake; they must become involved in social life in order to be integrated into society and help society cohere. The key to integration is participation’ (Bertelsmann Foundation 2003, p. 9). This understanding of civil society, with participation as the key action – using new or old media –, is based on shared values, communication and actions. Following this understanding (e)participation is dependent upon (e)communication.

Macintosh and Whyte present a working definition of eParticipation as ‘the use of ICTs to support information provision and ‘top down’ engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or ‘ground up’ efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment’ (Macintosh/Whyte 2006, p. 2). In this working definition the addressees of the eParticipation activities of the citizen are their elected representatives. But there are alternative readings of eParticipation, including forms of direct democracy whereby ICTs are used as means to mobilize protest and publish different alternative opinions, aims and solutions to those offered by the existing political and mass media systems. The underlying idea is to create a new counter-public beyond that which is imagined, shaped and addressed by the mass media. This strategy is available to established civil society groups like Oxfam, GreenPeace and Attac, as well as by ad hoc protests (Metzges 2007).

These two concepts – representative and direct democracy - have been discussed since the 1970s, as government-driven citizen participation in decision-making became more widespread (v. Alemann 1975). Some forms of participation (city planning, urban development, traffic planning etc.) came to be classified as ‘formal participation’, because the means, procedures, actors and roles were prescribed by formal code, while other forms of informal participation, involving grass-roots such as campaigning and protest, existed as a counter-political sphere. These protest actions were directed both towards the

representative political system and the mass media system as well as towards interested citizens and organizations.

The formal and informal participation activities in several European countries in the 1970s and 1980s produced several new formats of participation like future workshops, mediations, citizen forums, public hearings, roundtables, deliberative polls etc. These face-to-face formats required the local presence of active citizens. The emergence of widespread access to ICTs changed this dramatically. The role of time and space changed and collective action strategies were adjusted to the new possibilities that ICTs opened up. Additionally, new formats of eParticipation were invented, such as online-petitions, online-dialogues, citizen wikis, political blogs, social bookmarking, web campaigning, candidate watch etc. Many have come into their own with the advent of Web 2.0 social software. In order to organise internally, represent communities and constituencies and publicise their causes, civil society actors are dependent upon modern information and communication media (Rucht 1994). The existence of a broad array of interactive, increasingly mobile internet tools and features, encourages the thesis, that 'the Internet has certainly reactivated the grass-roots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers' (Habermas 2006). Civil society seems to benefit from the Internet insofar as they establish new forms of public participation in which all topics and players that remain unheard in the established public arenas and the mass media, get a chance of a public hearing. Because of the comparatively low start-up and operational costs even informal initiative groups, which have rarely achieved mass-mediated publicity because of limited staff appropriations and capital, find it possible to reach interested people. Because of their interactivity and non-hierarchic, global structures, Internet applications take advantage of the networked structures and decentralized information and communication means of much of civil society.

Scholars such as Beck (2002) and Castells (2000) therefore assume that not only do affordances for a more flexible and global networking in economy, policy, and culture emanate from new electronic media, but that they create the precondition for civil society to become more politically relevant. Partially valid though this belief is, it is oversimplistic; we need also to monitor and understand the negative social consequences of tools, techniques, applications and conventions intended to give voice to sections of the public beyond the institutional framework of official politics. There are critical

considerations regarding fraud, defamation, fragmentation, segmentation and new hegemonic discourses that can be promoted by some sections of civil society (Offe 2003). With this in mind, we present a series of short case studies.

### **3.1.1 ‘Our city’**

In the city of Bergen the story begins in 2005 with the city council negotiating a contractual agreement with the multinational company, Clear Channel, to supply advertisement-financed street furniture and public facilities. At this point in time Clear Channel already held legal contracts for street furniture and advertising concessions in 25 Norwegian cities, in addition to the Norwegian National Railway, Oslo’s Gardermoen Airport and numerous shopping centres. In Bergen, the contractual agreement included setting up and maintaining 900 bus shelters, 10 so-called SmartBike stations and three public restrooms in the city centre, in exchange for setting up 490 advertising displays. The contract was to be valid for 15 years.

Many people were against leasing public space to private interests as a matter of principle. Others were aghast at how the massive increase in advertising would change the historic look of the city. Clear Channel’s reputation and sheer American-ness motivated others to rally against the company. So, a strong mobilization developed against the contract, and an online activist group was established to prevent its ratification: *Byen Vår* (literally translated ‘Our City’). This *ad hoc* and loosely organized network managed to unite an incredibly diverse group of people in opposition. Their web site ‘Bergen vs. Clear Channel’ was simply designed, precisely because its makers wanted it to have a wide appeal and to seem as though it arose from the grassroots of society. The contents functioned to bring people together, in the sense that no information was presented that would offend any group.

*Byen Vår* used a wide range of information and communication technologies in its mobilization against the contract between Clear Channel and Bergen Municipality. At the very beginning of its activism the group established a blog; they had an online signature campaign; and, perhaps most importantly, they had an email list. This was set up by a student and launched on the University of Bergen’s server. The email list gave a rapid flow of information, a flat structure and a feeling of being among like-minded. From here the core group of activists could figure out who knows what person, who is best suited to

influence this or that group, mobilize and delegate concrete tasks and responsibilities. The time and the tempo of communication made the list a very effective information channel. There was no need to arrange meetings, for whenever one had time, one could present impromptu arguments or send out messages about things that needed to be done. The email list recorded activity at all hours of the day and night. The email list also offered a kind of flexibility that allowed participation by people who otherwise would have difficulty in attending fixed meetings. It was an easy group to join and become part of.

Bergen's activist community pulled together a powerful protest campaign and the mobilization was successful from their perspective. In October 24 2005, the city council reversed its position and voted against the contract. Bergen became the first Norwegian city to refuse advertisement financed street furniture and public facilities. The group worked to achieve a specific goal and when the goal was achieved the network fell apart. Meanwhile, the email list technology can help Byen Vår function as a 'sleeping cell', which, if necessary, can quickly mobilize again.

*Extract from:* Strømsnes, Kristin & Christensen, Dag Arne (2008) The Activist Group 'Byen Vår' and the use of ICT in the Mobilization against Advertisement-Financed Public Furnishings in Bergen Paper presented at the Demo-Net workshop on Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications, Örebro University, Sweden, May 9-10th 2008

### **3.1.2 Beppe Grillo and his Friends**

In Carlo Collodi's classic children tale, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, a talking cricket (*grillo* in Italian) is killed by Pinocchio for trying to impart wisdom to the wooden-headed marionette. In the contemporary Italian media landscape there is another controversial cricket, Beppe Grillo, one of the most popular and controversial stand-up comedians that has ever appeared on Italian television. Grillo began his career at the end of the 1970s and by the early 1980s high audience ratings and critical acclaim made him a national celebrity. Towards the end of the decade he began criticising prominent Italian politicians and big corporations for corrupt practices. Because of mounting pressure of politicians and advertisers against Grillo's satire, TV producers stopped inviting him on their shows.

In recent times, Grillo has been able to transform himself from a popular television comedian into an even more popular blogger. By criticizing the lack of transparency,



accountability and representativeness in Italian politics, Beppegrillo.it has become the number one Italian blog scoring over 1,300 comments per post. However, Beppegrillo.it is more than simply a blog, it functions as an electronic beacon whose signals manage to attract on its virtual shores an otherwise fragmented and geographically dispersed public. The Meetup.com group category 'Friends of Beppe Grillo' has around 66,000 members, themselves organised in 478 groups located in 347 cities in 25 different countries. This technology facilitates people with similar interests finding each other *online*, so that they can get together or "meet up" *offline*, bringing about a new type of hybrid people and technology-based phenomenon, which may be classified as an *e2f* (electronic to face) community. The Beppe Grillo friendship groups have organised more than 8000 meetings, and is slowly shaping up into a self-aware international committed network of political activists capable of organising itself beyond geographical boundaries, independently from the blog.

Beppegrillo.it has organized a number of grassroots campaigns, but two stand out for their success in engaging the public: *Parlamento Pulito* (Clean up the Parliament) and *Le Primarie dei Cittadini* (Citizen Primaries). Clean-up the Parliament aimed to inform the Italian public of a simple but rarely discussed fact: that within the Italian parliament there are several *Deputati* and *Senatori* who although have been convicted by the courts are still allowed to represent their constituents. The ultimate aim of the initiative was to protest against the lack of an adequate legislation for preventing such corruption. In *Citizen Primaries* the campaigners used beppegrillo.it as a platform from where to stir up a political debate among politicians and citizens on topics that according to Grillo, his staff, and his readers, should be at the core of the political programme of Prodi's coalition at the 2006 election. Its goal was to produce a new programme (from below) of political and social reforms that would reflect more adequately the people's needs.

Beppegrillo.it provides a powerful illustration of how civic-minded people with limited access to mainstream media, but who are equipped with a strong sense of civic-engagement, a history of integrity and who are willing to support others, can indeed harness the power of the web to promote innovative modes of political participation and political representation. In a country like Italy, where politicians control both media and government, Beppegrillo.it can be seen as an archetype, a model of a new type of civic engagement that has the potential to reform Italian politics. Facilitated by a direct link

with the online social networking portal Meetup.com the blog offer a first point of call for people who are looking to engage both online and off in fight against the monopoly grip on truth exercised by politically-biased media.

*Extract from:* Navarraia, Giovanni (2008) *Transparency, Accountability and Representativeness in the Age of Blogging: The Complex Case of beppegrillo.it*. Paper presented at the Demo-Net workshop on Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications, Örebro University, Sweden, May 9-10th 2008

### **3.1.3 ‘Feministing’**

Blogs by women, about women, or presenting women’s issues are growing in numbers. Like most blogs, they vary in subject matter, degree of activity, and target audience. Nonetheless, these blogs share a common purpose — to provide a living forum for women’s issues. As one of the most visited feminist blogs on the Internet and recent winner of the 2007 Bloggers Choice Award for Best Political Blog, Feministing ([www.feministing.com](http://www.feministing.com)) stands at the epicenter of debates around the politics of online activism and third-wave feminism.

Taking on such topics as mainstream TV and movies, Feministing.com serves as a conduit of third-wave feminist activism, targeting a young, progressive audience. On Feministing, everything is up for debate: the mainstream, the grassroots, the academic, the pop culture—all are represented and critiqued on the blog.

Many posts on Feministing critique the mainstream media’s perpetuation of gender stereotypes and, in particular, the pervasive hypersexualization of women. Recently, Feministing bloggers linked to an article in Britain’s *Daily Mail* which featured a male reporter’s account of ‘being female’ for a day, which he achieved by shaving his legs, talking about relationships, buying women’s magazines, and cleaning his house. ‘So did Michelson take a pay cut and endure street harassment? Balance work and family?’ Valenti asks. ‘I’m a woman, and if my life was composed of that inane bullshit, I’d kill someone,’ writes a commenter.

In addition to its blogroll, the site features sidebars which provide myriad links to sources of information and news about women and feminism. The sidebar displays a list of progressively-minded, if not explicitly feminist blogs, ranging from more established players like Racewire, an offshoot of *Colorlines* magazine, and Margaret Cho, the famed

feminist comedienne, to grassroots projects like Tennessee Guerilla Women. Feministing's sidebar also includes a list of news sources, once again running the gamut from the relatively well-known – Ms. Magazine, UN Women Watch – to the edgier or more politically radical like Alternet.org and Bitch Magazine. Other categories of links include women's organizations, violence against women, work, legal organizations, reproductive rights, international, political, and women's studies programs. Notably, Feministing seems to make a conscious effort to include widely varying types of blogs, news sources, and organizations, mirroring the site's commitment to all types of news and analysis.

To date, the Feministing blog receives about 100,000 unique visitors per month. Perhaps Feministing will not elect a candidate or push specific legislation, but will instead result in longer-term fundamental changes in how political discourse and activism is carried out and communicated. Interactive sites like Feministing contribute to a broader shift in the way we view media and our role in its production and consumption.

*Extract from: Jessica Mowles (2008) Framing Issues, Fomenting Change, 'Feministing': A Contemporary Feminist Blog in the Landscape of Online Political Activism. Paper presented at the Demo-net workshop on Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications, Örebro University, Sweden, May 9-10th 2008.*

### **3.1.4 'Extreme right e-campaigning: the case of the Anti-Islam Campaign in Germany'**

The fact that a number of civil society activists undermine the foundations of a democratic public such as the mutual respect and dignity of man is not in the central focus of discussions about eParticipation and civil society, but it should be recognized as a significant risk. The Internet is used by the extreme right in Germany as an infrastructure to mobilize resources. It is seen as quick, cheap and clean; Web 2.0 tools can be easily used by each user to generate hate content. With few active participants in their own forums, racist groups have tried to influence the agenda setting and the discussion process by setting agendas and framing issues on other sites. This tactic was already formulated by the US-American Neonazi John Milton Kleim Jr for the USENET forums: 'do not ever post messages which support illegal acts or activities, avoid discussions with the political enemy, use simple sentences and repeat the simple messages. As a strategy of

de-legitimization do not exchange arguments but mock upon the political opinions of others. Contact all those who affirmed your position in a forum via e-mail to integrate them in your network of sympathizers’.

Busch’s analysis of the Blog “Politically Incorrect” shows how nearly all activities are aimed at denigrating Islam and its believers. Another example is Studi-VZ, a social network in Germany, usually used by students.

*Extract from:* Christoph Busch (2008): Rechtsradikales eCampaigning am Beispiel der Anti-Islam-Kampagne. Paper accepted for the Workshop: Elektronische Wahlen, elektronische Teilhabe, Societyware. Informatik 2008 8. – 13. 9. 2008 München.

### **3.1.5 'Voi siete qui'**

During the 2006 general elections campaign, the association Democrazia elettronica e partecipazione pubblica (DEEP - Electronic Democracy and Public Participation) promoted the “Voisietequi” project ([www.voisietequi.it](http://www.voisietequi.it)). It offers an online political self-profiling service in which users fill in a questionnaire about their political preferences related to a set of political issues selected from key themes in the national campaign. Based on a comparison with the official positions of the parties, the questionnaire allows users to ‘measure’ their proximity/distance from the various parties within the given political space, by means of a visualization of their personal position on a graph used in the social sciences (the Multi Dimensional Scaling - MDS technique). The main novelties of this project compared to other services of political profiling on the market are a) that it is managed cooperatively, with participation by individual citizens; b) that the citizens’ profiles are not commercialized; c) that the questionnaire is linked to a means whereby respondents can debate their resulting profiles.

In the 2006 general elections the parties’ positions on 25 issues were defined on the basis of nearly 1.000 sources, ranging from the electoral programs to the leaders’ public speeches. 730,000 users filled in the test and “Voisietequi” became a success story of e-democracy at national level. The experiment obtained a high resonance mainly thanks to the spread of mouth, but also because of the wide coverage offered by the mass media.

The 2008 edition, produced in anticipation of a future general election, proposed a modified questionnaire and new digital tools aimed to extend the role of participants.

During a first stage (22 February-14 March), the users could choose the political issues they thought that were more important (users proposed and voted the issues, in order to provide a ranking; on this basis an editorial board picked up 25 questions). At the same time there was a mailing list opened to discuss the hot political issues emerging in the ongoing campaigning. In the second stage (14 March- 24 March), the selected questions were sent to the political parties, which were invited to provide their positions on the issues. During the third period (24 March-14 April), citizens may filled in the questionnaire. Despite being online fewer days compared to the first edition (14 days against 21), in 2008 about 800.000 people completed the online form.

The communication style adopted was playful and ironic: “Got lost in the electoral campaign? ORIENTATE YOURSELF!”. “Voisietequi” presented itself as a *game*, having the goal of both inform and building relationships. Through the flow of user profiles created by the e-mail exchanges, it started an online process of comparison between participants who discussed the results, the pertinence of the questions, proximities and distances not foreseen or apparently incongruent with her/his-own self perception.

Analyzing the discussions triggered by “Voisietequi” on forums, mailing lists and blogs, it emerges that people had several reasons for using it. Some users found a confirmation of their political positions; others came to realize their distance from the party they previously perceived as the closest to their own views. In further cases, users appeared surprised to discover that they were close to the positions of parties less visible on the mass media (national press and TVs).

*Extract from: Anna Carola Freschi, Luca Raffini, Michela Balocchi (2008), What kind of grassroots e-participation? The uneasy demand of a new politics in Italy: between continuity and innovation, Paper presented at the Demo-Net workshop on Empowerment and e-Participation in Civil Society: Local, National and International Implications, Örebro University, Sweden, May 9-10<sup>th</sup> 2008.*

## 4 Comparative Considerations and Conclusions

### 4.1 The policy field of eParticipation: between strategy and practice

A premise of this booklet is that eParticipation is increasingly coming to constitute a new field of public policy, at local, national and European level, as well as at the global level. The analysis of a public policy domain requires the identification of the main traits of the *policy arena*: its main actors (their orientations, their goals and expectations and visions), the structure of opportunities and constraints to be faced with reference to the goals of the different involved/implied actors, embedded in different social and political (institutional) contexts; and the dynamics of the relationships among the policy's actors. Such an analysis requires us to identify the stakeholders in eParticipation, as well as the issues at stake in the specific arena, the dynamics of the arena, and its outcomes. Furthermore, such a study entails analysis of the *means* adopted as a result of the negotiations, mediations and elaborations made within the policy arena, and analysis of the *implementation* and *effects* (in the short and medium terms) of policy actions. This is a complex research task, best undertaken by a network of researchers in several countries.

Approaching the analysis of eParticipation strategies and implementation is complicated by the presence of technological and cultural innovations, which imply different visions and practices in the way the citizens are involved in the policy making process, within the frame of representative democracy. It may be useful to distinguish between two aspects of studying eParticipation from a policy analysis perspective: *strategy* and *practice*. In the former case, the focus is on visions and related institutional techniques of defining and realising eParticipation, as a field of policy in itself. From the perspective of practice, eParticipation is the tool of specific decision making processes (e.g. environment, education, infrastructure, urban planning, cohesion, unemployment, social policy, etc.) and therefore the research focuses on the specific results of the adopted instruments. The available literature offers valuable material for analyses of eParticipation practices<sup>11</sup> - often revealing the difficulties associated with attempts to widen the forms of citizen participation within the institutional arena -, but at the strategic level eParticipation policy remains largely under-explored. Demo-net researchers (WP 13.3) have already proposed a quite sophisticated model of multilayered evaluation of eParticipation, focused on

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<sup>11</sup> The reader can find a detailed report about the main finding of empirical studies on eParticipation in the institutional domain in the Demo-net Booklet 14.1.

practices and democratic impacts. In this booklet we underline the need for a better understanding of the policy visions and means of realising eParticipation. The notable expansion of this field of public policy, especially at European level, is a further reason to undertake this kind of study. This booklet was conceived as a first step in this direction, starting from a concise look at six European countries. The outline proposed here provides the foundation for a next stage of comparative studies illuminating the relationships between the different institutional, cultural and normative dimensions of e-participation strategies and practices around Europe. To do this effectively requires serious methodological reflection.

The structure adopted in the above country studies derives from an awareness that eParticipation cannot be understood without regarding the wider institutional, political and social frame within which it works – or fails – as well as the diverse forms of institutional, cultural and normative contexts within which eParticipation is envisaged. Beside institutions, civil society and media landscapes relevant components of the context of eParticipation: the features of the civil society mobilizations and the traits of public sphere are strictly intertwined in democratic systems. Our proposed re-contextualization of eParticipation domains expresses a necessary shift from research focused on technological innovation and institutional initiative to a renewed attention to the political construction of diverse and often ambiguous forms of citizens' participation and autonomous expression.

## **4.2 Some considerations emerging from the portraits of eParticipation policies in the six countries.**

Let us consider some of the analytical challenges that emerged from the country studies of Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and United Kingdom. We were impressed by the broad consistency across countries described, despite their institutional variety. However, it is worthy of attention that this institutional variety has been subjected in the last decades to a process of relatively high convergence by the devolution trend; the 'presidentialization' of politics and enforcement of the executives; the ideological convergence of parties. In relation to citizens and democratic citizenship, there has been a wide wave of individualization of the forms of social and political participation which seems to have affected traditional ways of building identities and movements.

From the perspective of policy research, the main common trait emerging from the country studies is the general lack of strategy and the conspicuous fragmentation of practices. The level of implementation of eParticipation initiatives tends to be *local*, mainly municipal, but in some case also regional. In the UK and Italy, national governments have pursued eParticipation within the framework of e-government. In the case of Sweden, national government and local authorities seem to have recognised the the non-technical dimension of eParticipation; from the outset, Swedish policy-makers regarded eParticipation as part of an agenda focusing upon democratic and institutional renewal, rather being placed in the delimited field of e-government. This strategic element may reflect the unusually wide penetration of the Internet in the Nordic European countries, and on a model of the Information society, well elaborated by Castells and Himannen (2001), as socially-centered and supportive of the welfare state. In the case of Austria, a federal eParticipation initiative is being developed, while in France the national government has placed emphasis upon policies relating to the digital divide and online information services. However, the ‘public debate’ introduced in France (one of the most interesting innovations in the field of public participation in Europe) was born in a context within which ICTs did no play a central role.

An emerging level of experimentation is taking place on the regional level. In federal states and countries high levels of regional autonomy, this trend can be understood as an indicator of the ongoing search of new direct channels of legitimatization, consent and recognition by regional political actors who are in competitive tension with national governments and parties. At the same time, in strongly centralized political systems, national governments and parties seek to create better connections with hitherto peripheral citizens.

Initiatives by representative assemblies (national parliaments; regional and municipal councils) appear to lack consolidated strategies and practices, with the exception of the UK, Scotland and Austria. Nevertheless, the direct electoral legitimacy of these institutions fits well with the ethos of eParticipation as a new, more dialogical partnership between law-makers and the public they are supposed to represent. In the legislative context, eParticipation might function as a means of reducing executive arrogance and consolidating popular consent for institutional decision-making.



A striking finding from our country studies is that eParticipation policies seem not to depend upon specific political orientations: governments of both right and left, neoliberal, or social-democrat, 'dirigist', neo-corporatist and pluralist, have promoted and implemented eParticipation policies. To be sure, visions of eParticipation are inflected by political ideology, but not in simply categorical ways. Institutionally-driven eParticipation seems to be perceived by political actors as a necessary response to socio-political transformations that defy traditional political-ideological definitions. Fluctuation between administrative and political conceptions eParticipation is a consequence of elite uncertainty as to whether the challenge is to govern more effectively or to enact democracy in new and uncharted ways. Only an in depth qualitative, diachronic and comparative analysis can say more about how these approaches are being thought through and acted upon.

While innovatory practices of citizen participation in some parts of Europe (Agenda 21, participatory budgeting, participatory urban planning, strategic cities, etc.), the development of innovatory forms of online deliberation, consultation and knowledge-sharing is limited to a few examples, nearly always of an experimental rather than a sustained nature. Stronger instruments, such as the introduction of new online institutions, legal frameworks and protected spaces, have been adopted in very few national (and regional) cases. Consequently, it is at the pan-European policy level that the most focused and sustained resources have been devoted to eParticipation. European programs have funded a range of eParticipation projects. These have been crucial in drawing the attention of national, regional and local political institutions to the possibilities of eParticipation, as well as in supporting innovatory technical developments. The purpose, design and implementation of these EU initiatives is an important dimension about which there is a need of research, not least in order to highlight the inconsistencies and incompleteness of the fragmented visions of different actors within and beyond the EU.

But what about the results of the existing policy *strategies* on eParticipation in the countries considered here? National governments have promoted studies of particular projects and specifically targeted outcomes, such as the civic engagement of young people or policies to reduce digital inequalities. Findings from this very fragmented research are not easily integrated within a general picture. Individual case studies present a rather discouraging account of eParticipation practices in the institutional domain. Even

if data do not exist allowing for an in-depth comparison between eParticipation experiences in different political, cultural and communicational contexts, there is enough common evidence of the disproportion between expectations and results to justify a cross-European research agenda. One problem that certainly cuts across most countries and projects relates to political inclusion; the citizens involved in eParticipation are few, mostly self-selected and in many respects unrepresentative of national populations of which they are a part. In the normative context of representative democracies, this is, to say the least, a problem.

Another problem, which seems to underlie all attempts to introduce eParticipation, is that politicians and public administrators, while seeming transfixed by the need to digitise their operations, are sceptical about the risks and effects of 'letting the public' in to the institutions of policy formation and decision-making, albeit it virtually. The adaptability of elite actors depends upon idiosyncratic factors, including leadership profiles, micro-conditions of the structure of political opportunities and the tension between the legal framework of representative democracy and new parallel arena. In sum, citizen eParticipation – indeed, citizen participation *tout court* – does not appear to be a real priority for the great majority of the political elite, even though lip service is often paid to the notion. The double risk of 'symbolic' eParticipation, unable to affect public decision making, and populist or manipulative usage of the new means, should be faced seriously.

While government-driven eParticipation initiatives have not aroused widespread enthusiasm amongst most citizens, eParticipation initiated by civil society, determined individuals and new and old social movements, have witnessed an extraordinary expansion in recent years. This phenomenon remains a crucial development in the way citizens participate in the contemporary public sphere – and, indeed, raises questions about the extent to which a transnational public sphere might be at least partially located online. The specific features of this flourishing of eParticipation 'from below' varies according to levels of broadband access, degrees of media freedom and trust, the diffusion of non-conventional forms of participation, the kind of political culture, and a number of structural variable (education, welfare, employment) are different. This extension of the public sphere could potentially nurture relevant practices and spaces of informal deliberation, but these are likely to be blighted by classical problems of fragmentation, colonization, stratification, trivialisation. From the perspective of

eParticipation policy, the most crucial issue seems to become how these new forms of citizen participation can interact with the established political institutions and actors. The case studies we have presented in this booklet suggest that there still remains a cultural chasm between the modalities of expression, activism and solution-seeking adopted by grass-roots e-participants and those recognised and respected by institutional actors. A process of translation is required. This is the objective for the next stage of our research.

### **4.3 Conclusions and future directions for research**

The aim of the next phase of our research will be to explore the differentiated ways in which eParticipation is justified, produced and appraised within a range of cultural contexts, from national polities to institutional actors. A cultural context describes an historically or organisationally situated process of making sense and sharing meanings. (Geertz, 1973; Bourdieu, 1993; Somers, 1995) The meaning of terms such as citizenship, participation and technology are socially constructed; that is to say, they are conceived and developed from the perspective of different mental structures, world views or discourses. (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Mannheim, 1936) A discourse is an institutionalised way of thinking about social reality which sets boundaries upon acceptable meanings. Foucault famously defined discourses as ‘systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak.’ (Foucault, 1972; see also Fairclough, 1992; Talbot, 2007) Discursive analysis is particularly important in policy areas that are not well defined or developed, as it is highly likely that different actors will be using the same terms in quite different ways, often without being aware of other discursive perspectives that might undermine or enhance their strategic intentions. Many policy analysts now argue that the success or failure of policy is a consequence of an ongoing battle between competing discourses: a battle to assert and act upon one set of meanings rather than another. (Litfin, 1994; Hajer, 1995; Gottweis, 1998)

In the case of eParticipation, there has been hardly any systematic work conducted with a view to identifying and interrogating competing discursive positions. It is too often assumed that all actors involved in eParticipation share a common set of meanings about the nature of participation, politics or technology. The aim of this research strand will be to go beyond – or behind – simple policy analysis with a view to understanding *how*

different actors use and apply a range of terms and practices related to the implementation of eParticipation. Specifically, the research will explore four contexts:

1. National polities. A comparative analysis of meanings of eParticipation will be conducted. This study will select a sample of countries within the Demo-net network and pursue systematic research to reveal the cultural and political specificities that determine their orientation towards eParticipation.
2. Politicians and civil servants. An analysis of meanings attached to eParticipation by these two groups is likely to reveal differences of emphases, perceived risks and desired outcomes. Earlier studies of Dutch interactive policy-making found similar differences between political and administrative actors.
3. Governing institutions and civil society organisations. The former discourses will be identified from research under 2 above. A range of civil society actors will be interviewed to see how their conceptions of eParticipation match or contrast with those of the official promoters.
4. Old and new media. Mass media organisations have taken an interest in eParticipation, initiating a range of interactive opportunities for citizens to challenge information, tell their stories and enter into debate. Journalists, producers and editors will be asked to explain how they see these interactive features relating to political democracy, and their responses will be contrasted with responses from new media producers and activists.

The principal method that will be employed for this research will be in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These will be conducted in Germany, Italy, Sweden, the UK, France and one east European country. The interview questions will be designed collaboratively and the discourse analysis will be supported by semantic software, such as NVivo. It is hoped that this research will help us to answer the following questions:

- i) Does the concept of 'political participation' have common meanings across different parts of Europe and amongst different social actors?
- ii) Does eParticipation have common meanings across different parts of Europe and amongst different social actors?

- iii) How do various actors understand eParticipation and how do they expect it to contribute to representative democracy?
- iv) Where are the key misunderstandings amongst the various actors and how might conceptual translation be developed?
- v) How are key terms relating to eParticipation used and applied by various actors? (For example: citizenship; democracy; power; politics; technology; deliberation; public; media)
- vi) How have policies promoting eParticipation reflected particular discursive positions and constitutional structures? (As well as our interview research, this will entail a systematic review of documents.)
- vii) Can a synthesis between top-down and ground-up conceptions of eParticipation be achieved?
- viii) What are the particular features of eParticipation that distinguish it from offline political participation?

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