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Citizens' Engagement Using Communication Technologies

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INTRODUCTION

The Edelman trust barometer measures, since 2001, public trust in businesses, governments, non government organizations and media, across 25 countries. The 2012 survey (Edelman, 2012) showed that, in more than half of the studies countries, citizens distrust their own governments. According to their opinion there are two main actions governments must implement in order to improve public trust: (i) incorporate listening and feedback mechanisms within the governments, as well as (ii) develop transparent and open practices.

Since the 1960s public participation has been an effective instrument used by governments in order to obtain citizens' support, guarantee transparency of decision making processes as well as improve public trust in government policies. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has enabled new cost-effective and convenient ways of citizens' engagement, resulting in the emergence of the *electronic participation* (*e-participation*) concept.

E-participation is believed to be a key strategy so governments can improve the efficiency, acceptance, and legitimacy of political processes as well as public trust.

The main objectives of this work are to present and discuss the e-participation concept, analyze different classifications of e-participation, identify the main existing e-participation frameworks and explore integration between Web 2.0 and e-participation research fields. It is believed that this can be of interest to researchers and practitioners new to the e-participation area, in order to get familiarized with the fundamentals inherent to this domain. Moreover, this work presents ground for future analysis and investigation of the e-participation field.

BACKGROUND: E-PARTICIPATION RESEARCH

E-participation is generally defined as an area where ICTs are used in order to support citizens' engagement in defining the process and content of policy-making through deliberation and active decision-making initiatives (OECD, 2003; Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008; Wimmer, 2007).

In spite of being frequently considered as an independent area of research, e-participation has a strong connection with e-government and e-democracy fields of investigation. Nevertheless, the interplay between these three domains is still not clear and the researchers' points of view on this topic vary. Some authors state that e-participation is a key element of electronic government (Panopoulou, Tambouris, Sanchez-Nielsen, Zotou, & Tarabanis, 2011) and democratic government (Åström, Karlsson, Linde, & Pirannejad, 2012). Accordingly, Islam (2008) classifies e-participation as a sub-set of e-government and e-democracy areas, supported by ICTs. However, Sanford and Rose (2007) state that, despite of being categorized as a branch of e-government, e-democracy is the most direct precursor of e-participation.

E-democracy and e-participation concepts were awhile considered equivalent (Peristeras, Mentzas, Tarabanis, & Abecker, 2009). It was Macintosh (2008) who clarified the concepts by stating that e-participation together with e-voting are two areas of e-democracy, addressing the process of citizen e-participation in the democratic decision-making and in the electoral process, respectively. Susha and Gronlund (2012) also support this approach though highlight the discrepancy between focuses and themes in the e-participation and e-democracy fields. Hence, e-participation is considered to have a broader scope than e-democracy as it goes beyond political and governance related fields. Besides, methods and tools used to study e-participation are focused on the socio-technical aspects of this phenomenon (e.g.: user-centered design, usability and accessibility, etc.), while the methods and tools in the e-democracy domain are mainly used to assess democratic effects of ICTs application (e.g.: stakeholder analysis, policy analysis, etc.).

E-participation encourages fair and efficient society and government support through increased participation enabled by ICTs (Sæbø et al., 2008). E-participation is thus fundamental for e-government as it provides electronic democracy promotion and strengthening (Spirakis, Spiraki, & Nikolopoulos, 2010), improvement of legitimacy of policy making processes and enhancement of their efficiency and acceptance (Sæbø et al., 2008; Sanford & Rose, 2007). Thereby, e-participation enables legislators and governments to be more effective and credible, replenishing the deficit of citizens' trust.

However, e-participation initiatives can also bring serious obstacles to the democratic process as they may cause harm to national security and social stability. Some of those initiatives are referred by Airong and Xiang (2008) as illegal participation (e.g. hackers attacks), irrational participation (conducted under strong emotional state) and unbalanced developing e-participation (triggered by digital literacy gap or differences in the levels of education). To avoid or reduce the negative effects of e-participation, governments should improve the quality of web management, take preventive technical measures, increase investment in national informationization, guide citizens to correctly use information technology and express their opinion in a rational and legal way.

Definition and Main Characteristics of E-Participation

E-participation is a young interdisciplinary research area that is currently addressed by researchers as an independent investigation field with a growing number of publications from different related subjects such as social sciences, information systems, political sciences, sociology, management, psychology, economics and media studies. It is focused on ICTs use by stakeholders composed by citizens, government representatives, politicians and administration in order to accomplish a set of objectives like improvement of citizen engagement and dissemination of policy planning information (Anadiotis et al., 2010; Macintosh, 2008; OECD, 2001, 2003; Sæbø et al., 2008; Tambouris et al., 2007; Wimmer, 2007).

Since the concept of e-participation is still under development, there is no commonly accepted definition for the term (Peristeras et al., 2009). Table 1 provides a summary of the purpose or scope of e-participation initiatives as described by some authors.

According to Sanford and Rose (2007), Islam (2008) and Sæbø et al. (2009), e-participation initiatives are focused on the individual citizen and on the way to motivate, engage and keep him/her involved in order to achieve strong public participation in decision making processes. E-participation enables citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives (Macintosh, 2008; Panopoulou, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2009; Tambouris et al., 2007), resulting in a less isolated system of democratic governance (Coleman & Gotze, 2001) and higher decision making quality (Smith & Dalakiouridou, 2009). Therefore, it meets the needs of both citizens and governments. On the one hand, e-participation provides citizens with enhanced instruments to access information and political issues that are debated, discussed and legislated, and thus satisfying their requirements in being heard and involved in democratic processes. On the other hand, it enables the development of new ways of promoting and encouraging public engagement that provide governments with facilitated access to the public knowledge (McDermott, 2010).

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