

Chapter 6

eParticipation in Europe: Current State and Practical Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

During the past few years, information and communication technologies and especially the internet are increasingly used in a vast range of human activities, including citizens' interaction with government. In this context, advanced technologies are also being used to more actively engage citizens in democratic processes, which are termed as electronic participation (eParticipation). eParticipation has attracted considerable attention worldwide. In Europe, a large number of initiatives have been funded providing valuable lessons. The aim of this chapter is to map the current state of eParticipation in Europe and provide practical recommendations. More specifically, the authors first present the results of a review of policy documents in the European Union in order to understand how eParticipation fits into European policies. They then present an analytical framework to aid theoretical understanding of eParticipation, followed by the results of a European study on eParticipation initiatives. Based on all these, the authors propose a number of recommendations on eParticipation for policy makers, practitioners, evaluators and research funders.

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INTRODUCTION

Governmental processes are not limited to citizen-related top-down government services but also include citizen involvement in decision-making processes. In this context, it can be argued that electronic participation (eParticipation) is an integral part of electronic government (eGovernment). Today, European Institutions are sensing an increased demand by all sections of society for participation in EU level decisions as they realise that some citizens feel alienated from policy making and that the type and strength of citizen involvement in legislative processes is far from desirable. There are a number of specific Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which can contribute to the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, in co-shaping the public services they receive or in public debate that prefigures formal decision making and service design. This is the context for the current interest in eParticipation.

The proliferation of eParticipation offerings during the past years as well the variety of forms in which eParticipation manifests itself, require a solid conceptual and empirical understanding to provide a foundation for future endeavours. eParticipation evolved by evangelising the reconnection of citizens to policy, claiming to reduce the complexity of decision making and legislative processes, contribute to better legislation, broaden citizen participation in decision making and advance transparency so as to reduce the perceived democratic deficit. A significant number of national and regional authorities of the EU Member States as well as civil society have undertaken actions in these areas. However, these are not being systematically mapped, and even those which are have not yet been analyzed for their potential impact at the European level, or for developing good practice and policy for wider dissemination. Although assumed, it has not yet

been demonstrated how these activities could be used and operationalized for positive contributions to achieving the Digital Agenda 2020 goals and the renewed goals of the Europe 2020 strategy.

The overall objective of this chapter is to provide a synoptic but coherent overview of the current state of European eParticipation in order to produce recommendations which can assist policy-makers to harness the benefits of ICT for better legislation and better decision-making at all levels of government, and for enhanced public participation in such processes. More specific objectives include:

- To identify and study European Union eParticipation policies and conceptualize how eParticipation is perceived by European Institutions.
- To construct a framework for analysing eParticipation initiatives. The framework identifies the key variables of eParticipation and serves as a conceptual-analytical tool for understanding eParticipation offerings and settings.
- To survey European eParticipation initiatives in order to map the current state of play.
- To derive a set of recommendations on the use of eParticipation.

The chapter is organized as follows. We start by presenting a brief background of eParticipation and explaining the motivation for this study. Then we present the main contribution of the chapter which refers to eParticipation in Europe. More specifically, this includes the methods employed, an outline of relevant policy documents, the theoretical foundation of the study, the results of a survey on eParticipation initiatives and relevant guidelines and recommendations. Finally, future research directions are presented before concluding.

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