Chapter 7

# ICT in Direct Democracy:
## E-Referendum, a Well-Structured Direct Democratic Participation Evolvement or a Democratic Illusion?

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents and analyzes the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in public participation and more specificly in e-referenda as an aspect of direct democratic participation. It aims to explain the correlation between ICT and e-referenda. Referendum, used as an instrument to accept or deny a proposed political decision, has a strong function of controlling political power and securing the openness of political power structures. It serves as an instrument of division of powers and opens roads to opposition outside parliament. In general, it provides the people with veto positions (Schiller, 2003, p. 12). By presenting the evolvement of the ICT and the technological developments that resulted an impact on the way democracy is being exercised in the modern societies, there is an attempt to provide ideas and solutions on the use of e-referenda in modern democracies. The dangers, the advantages, and the disadvantages of the use of ICT in democracy are presented and analysed as well. All these issues are being discussed, as this chapter tries to give a clear and objective perspective regarding the role of e-democracy and the problems that come along with its implementation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term democracy originates from the greek word δημοκρατία, which can be directly translated as the rule (κράτος) of the people (δήμος). In its primary form, democracy was introduced in an-cient Greece and particularly in Athens as Direct Democracy. This procedure, through which people had the ability to determine the decision making of policies and laws without any representatives, was achievable in small societies. In the latest centuries, the form of democracy that is mainly

used is representative democracy, in which eligible for voting citizens remain the sovereign power, but political power is exercised indirectly through elected representatives. However, the evolvement of technology may give the opportunity to modern societies to diminish the obstacles that led to representative democracy.

Technology is a part of our everyday life. Through technological evolvements people communicate, get informed, work, purchase, invent innovations. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is highly connected to unified communications and integration of telecommunication, computers as well as necessary enterprise software, which enable users to create, access, store, transmit, and manipulate information. This is a result of the evolvement of information and technologies throughout the years, which nowadays interferes with almost every aspect of our everyday life. Internet and access to it is regarded to be one newly structured human right.

Democracy, as an ideal that touches upon every aspect of our life, interferes with technology as well. But democracy in its direct meaning, which is participation in democratic procedures, such as referenda, is being nowadays correlated to ICT. E-referendum is a new and very fast growing idea of direct democratic participation in societies of 21st century, where the physical practice of direct democracy is not an option.

## 2. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

In recent years, increased computing power, improved wireless and reduced telecommunication costs have contributed to lowering barriers to information access and exchange. The internet and ICT can change society and support democracy itself, by changing and improving the relationship between governments and citizens by supporting democratic freedoms, democratic accountability, and effective governance (Kroes, 2012).

It's only recently, through the internet and ICT that big movements against tyranny are spreading instantly and call for more democracy and open data is demanded more strongly and passionately. ICT has played a leading role in communicating the lack of democracy in repressive regimes. Internet has made it easy to blog, tweet and generally publish content that could attract massive interest and could get great attention.

Democratic societies have been widely influenced and benefited a lot from the development of ICT. Citizens can now easily get involved in discussions and get information about decisions, through blogs, articles and social media. Involved and better informed citizens, means healthier and more democratic society, since more people have the opportunity to improve the society by being active citizens. Furthermore, through the recent "open data" move, people are getting more transparent governments, which builds trust and confidence. Societies have become more technologically oriented and as a result the most important functions of the society have acquired a more IT dimension; e-education, e-governance, e-communications, e-democracy... E-democracy is defined as the use of ICT to support the democratic decision-making processes (Macintosh, 2004, p. 1).

## 3. THE RIGHT TO INTERNET

The right to Internet access, also known as the right to broadband, is related to the availability of people's access to the Internet in order to exercise and enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and opinion and other fundamental human rights. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council report, which examined the important

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