

Chapter 1

Digital Participation: The Case of the Italian “Dialogue with Citizens”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the initiative named “Dialogue with Citizens” that the Italian Government introduced in 2012. The Dialogue was an entirely Web-based experiment of participatory democracy aimed at, first, informing citizens through documents and in-depth analysis and, second, designed for answering their questions and requests. During the year-and-half life of the initiative, roughly 90,000 people wrote. Additionally, almost 200,000 participated in a number of public online consultations that the government launched in concomitance with the adoption of crucial decisions (i.e. the spending review national program). From the analysis of this experiment of participatory democracy three questions can be raised: (1) How can a public institution maximize the profits of participation and minimize its costs? (2) How can public administrations manage the (growing) expectations of the citizens once they become accustomed to participation? (3) Is online participatory democracy going to develop further, and why?

1. ONLINE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN ITALY: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In the last decade Italy has become the center of community-driven, mostly web-based and social-oriented experiments of participatory democracy. Public institutions, both at the central and the local level, as well as political parties and private bodies (i.e. banks, businesses) have introduced various forms of online debate and consultation within their policy-making procedures.

Alongside the classic reasons that might explain this phenomenon – specifically the faster and widespread Internet connections, the explosion of mobile users, and the extensive access to public data – in the Italian case prominence has to be given to the economic crisis and the scandals in which a number of public institutions have been involved over the years. Both gave rise to a widespread discontent towards the public power, and to a general disillusion towards politics. According to the *Istituto Cattaneo* – an Italian think-tank devoted to political analysis – since 1955 the

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number of political parties' official supporters has halved (IC, 2013). There were 4,2 millions official supporters in 1955. In 2012 the 4 major parties (PdL, PD, Sel, LegaNord) did not reach 2 million supporters altogether.

The consequences are evident. Two in particular are worth to be mentioned. The first one is purely political and relates to the 5 Stars Movement (M5S) exploit at the March 2013 political elections. This civic party led by former comedian Beppe Grillo has strongly opposed the traditional political parties and leaders. Accordingly, it has promoted the idea of a web-democracy in which every citizen gets the chance to be active part in public decision-making. In July 2013 the M5S introduced its long awaited "electronic Parliament" platform (named "Five Star Parliament"), which allows citizens to vote, comment and even write pieces of legislation. The site was launched just weeks after 15 members of the Italian parliament had unveiled their own interactive platform, *Tu Parlamento*. The M5S site differentiates itself from *Tu Parlamento* by allowing citizens not only to comment and vote on laws but to also help in writing it (TechPresident, 2013).

The second consequence – which is also the most relevant – is the rising role of participatory democracy at the public level. Public institutions have progressively become to experiment new channels of participation or, rather, to reshape old channels of participation into groundbreaking forms.

Indeed, not every practice of web-based participation tells us a successful story. In frequent cases, the "public" that participated in online consultations was a very narrow slice of the entire citizenry. Not rarely, citizens complained because, given the lack of direct access to the web, they felt they were excluded from online consultations. Arguably, while younger citizens show familiarity with the use of Internet, older ones might feel uncomfortable with it, and thus feel discouraged from participating. In other cases the public institutions realized too late how

costly and time-consuming such experiments of e-democracy can be, and eventually abandoned it.

Nevertheless, participatory democracy has become a widespread practice in the Italian public administrations, aimed at pursuing three goals. (1) In the first place, it is aimed at encouraging citizens' awareness towards public governance. (2) Secondly, and in close consequence, it aims at fighting back the legitimacy-deficit by giving access to the widest possible range of stakeholders. (3) Finally, the fulfilment of both goals, namely inclusion and legitimacy, is meant to enhance the effectiveness and the soundness of public policies.

In order to fully illustrate such complex topics, and to understand whether and to what extent web-participation is helpful in shaping efficient ways of administration, the article will initially provide a general overview of online public participation both at the central and the local level. The purpose is to quickly illustrate a few relevant experiments of e-democracy that have taken place in previous years. The central part of the article will be topical in that it will involve an in-depth analysis of the "Dialogue with Citizens". The initiative is discussed through its most interesting facts and numbers. The investigation will also revolve on a selected number of online public consultations lead by the government in the same period. Building on the analysis set forth in the first part, the article will conclude developing a theoretical framework for reflection on the peculiarities and problems of the web-participation. It will also speculate on its possible future evolution in the Italian scenario.

1.1 Experiences of Online Participation at the Central Level

The number of online public participation's initiatives that took place at the central level during the last decade is wide. Two are particularly illustrative. The first is named "*Burocrazia diamoci un taglio!*" (it can be roughly translated into "let us cut the red tape"). The second has been called "*LineaAmica*".

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