

Chapter 14

E-Government and the EU: Democratisation through Technology?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the efficacy of The European Union's e-government initiatives in addressing a key problem of European integration – a lack of democratic legitimacy. Citizens of the European Union witnessed endemic corruption in the EU's governing institutions in the late 1990s. As part of a long-term project to ensure greater transparency and accessibility, the EU launched an e-government initiative, the "Information Society." This chapter addresses the unique challenges for e-government and citizen participation at the supranational level. In a polity such as the EU, concepts of citizenship and democracy take on new dimensions. Technology as a social process is examined, and its relationship with public policy explored. It is in this context that the effectiveness of the EU's e-government initiative is considered. As this chapter argues, the ability of e-government initiatives to increase citizen awareness does not necessarily correspond to an increase in democratic legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union has a democracy problem. That there exists a problem is not in dispute. It is an immutable factor in almost any discussion of the European Union – a theme of constant debate. This discussion and debate culminated in the "Convention on the Future of Europe" - also referred to as the European Convention. The Convention is the

product of the Laeken Declaration of December 2001 on the Future of the European Union. The declaration summarises the problem succinctly:

...the European institutions must be brought closer to its citizens. Citizens undoubtedly support the Union's broad aims, but they do not always see a connection between those goals and the Union's everyday action. They want the European institutions to be less unwieldy and rigid, and above all, more efficient and open... ..More importantly

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however, they feel that deals are all too often cut out of their sight and they want better democratic scrutiny. (Communities, 2001b)

As the Convention declares in its mission statement, “the purpose of the Convention is to propose a new framework and structures for the European Union which are geared to changes in the world situation, the needs of the citizens of Europe and the future development of the European Union.”¹ At present, the European Union claims to derive its legitimacy from the democratic values it projects, the aims it pursues and the instruments of governance it possesses. It freely admits that this is insufficient. The function of the Convention on the Future of Europe is a need to determine, “how we can increase the democratic legitimacy of the present institutions, a question which is valid for the three institutions [the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, and the European Commission].” (Communities, 2001b).

As policy developers, these three executive institutions play a central role in the development of the European Union as a polity. They are responsible for the implementation of policy designed to promote the European Union’s e-government initiative, the Information Society (IS). They are also responsible for the social management of technology, in cooperation with the member-states.

The history of the executive institutions of the EU is that of a bureaucratic elite, with a demonstrable leaning towards technocratic practices. (Hayward, 1995; Siedentop, 2000; Stirk, 1996; Teivainen, 2002; Young, 1984) If such a historical context is an appropriate one, then the democratising agenda of the Information Society faces significant obstacles. This is not necessarily a failure of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an instrument for social change, but of the unique political infrastructure that characterises the EU.

In order to make a compelling case for this proposition, several steps are necessary. First, an

overview of recent institutional history provides a context from which we can establish that the European governing institutions have been identified as elite-oriented and inward looking. Second, the importance of social participation in technology must be addressed. The ability of technology to shape the dialog between a governing body and a citizenry, or public sphere, is an important factor when considering the impact of ICTs on a political process. Third, a democratic ‘yardstick’ must be established. What constitutes the citizenry or public sphere of the EU? Does it differ from national publics? Based on these questions and their answers, at what point can the democratic potential of ICTs have been said to be realised? A reasonable indicator of success is a prerequisite to determining how effective the “Information Society” e-government initiative has been as a democratising influence.

The availability of public opinion statistics via the Eurobarometer series of public opinion analyses provides a clear measure that allows us to establish several vital points. First, that satisfaction with democracy in the EU is declining. Second, while awareness of institutions has risen, trust in them has not. Third, that access to communication technologies has increased sharply in the 1993-2008 period – coinciding with the establishment of e-government programmes at the EU level. Fourth and finally, that the Internet and electronic media are fast becoming the preferred methods of accessing information on the EU.

The compilation and comparison of these statistical measures allow us to draw some conclusions about the success of the Information Society e-government initiative as a means of democratising the EU. A primary goal of the Information Society has been achieved - greater access to and use of ICTs in bringing the EU closer to its citizens. While this goal has been met, the anticipated consequences of EU e-government policy have not resulted in democratisation. The opposite has occurred – as citizens learn more about the EU, they tend not to like what they see. E-government

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