

Governance and Democratic Procedures in the Information Society Era

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Abstract: The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in today's democratic societies has always two sides: the well-intended, which is the expansion of the democratic participation, and the bad-intended, the one that causes concentration. This research analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the use of e-democracy and claims that the integration of electronic democracy within a country will be based on the effective use of the political-democratic institutions, on the legitimate frame that will control the use of electronic democracy, and on the technological background that describes the country.

Keywords: Electronic governance, electronic democracy, techno skeptics, techno supporters

INTRODUCTION

The term democracy has Greek origin and is defined as "The dominance of the people", (i.e. of the public). The most significant feature within a democratic constitution is that the majority rules, while the minority controls and imposes criticism on the majority. The majority protects the minority's rights, whereas, the latter accepts the political system and functions within its limits^[1]. The first shape of democracy is met in Ancient Athens between 500-321 B.C in the form of a country-state and had the pattern of direct democracy. Today, this model has been replaced by representative democracy through the election of representatives^[2].

The classic model of democracy, which used to be dominant in ancient Athens, was mostly featured by the citizens' direct participation in the legislative function, better known as the assemblies^[3]. This was indeed the most powerful means of dominance during that time. Besides the assemblies, multiple elective methods were used for the public postulates, such as: instant election, voting, draw, selection^[3].

In modern politics and governments, direct democracy - as the example of ancient Athens - has been replaced by the representative democracy. In particular, decision making concerning the whole of the country is not reached by the public, but is now reached by democratically elected representatives, who come from various parties via national elections. Current shapes of parties appear at the end of the 18th century in Great Britain, while the existence and function of political parties that secure the equity of opportunities is

one of the most fundamental features of the pluralist democracy^[4]. Today's liberal-democratic systems are distinctive for the existence of more than one political party; the open access to political procedures and open participating activity^[5]. Liberal democracy is based on a historical tradition that is in favor of human rights, in favor of social welfare, of equity before the law and of the principle of national dominance^[6]. Open dialogue and exchange of views upon matters of policy is one of the most fundamental principles of the function of democracy.

Theoretical background: Nowadays, democracy is stable in many countries of the West, whereas governments appear to be ineffective and distant^[7]. The function of liberal democratic institutions in many countries depends on backstage agreements and customary affairs^[8]. The use of ICT within the social and informatics borders, which responds to the problems of modern democratic procedures regarding the boost of democratic procedures and the expansion of the democratic participation, resulted in two significant schools of thought. The primal scientific dispute focuses on the positive and negative consequences of the use and application of new information and communication technologies upon the political-democratic procedures. More analytically, in international bibliography we locate two basic tendencies of thought regarding the use of new technologies: Techno supporters and Techno skeptics^[9].

As for those who are fond of technology (Techno supporters), the lower cost of communication and convention is due to decrease the cost of participation,

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since the citizens wish to do so and the Internet may give an end to the dominance of television and radio transmission that curtailed political parties and made the whole political procedure extremely costly, since it is necessary to get capitals arranged^[10]. To be more specific, people keen on the use of ICT on political procedures, regard that it is a basic mean, which is able to forward the width of participation in the common democratic procedure and the political procedures, during elections and people's voting for crucial national matters. They claim that it is also a technological mean to eradicate the political corruption, bureaucracy and political apathy.

Different vies aired by Techno skeptics claim that the Internet is the acclamation of centralization and this happens because there are some cases where employees, students and citizens are able to be supervised by others: administrative officers, teachers, employers and central governments^[11]. Thus the privilege of free expression and conveyance of ideas is being diminished, along with the right to protect personal data^[11]. They also support that no certain change is going to take place and that the force of politics will remain in the hands of political aristocracy while its benefits, will remain in the hands of economical and social elite. In this case, governments may observe and control people's actions and communication, resulting in a new world and society which will be digitally screened by central governments through the close scrutiny of thought that would depend on the use of an electronic two-way device, that looks like a television and is not apparent to the citizen. Thus ,according to George Orwell's book "1984", the citizen was not aware of the fact that he was being observed^[12].

ICT as a tool for democratic expansion or a democratic utopia? The term electronic democracy is defined as the use of ICT that aims to expand the democratic procedures, such as the participation in elections, the political update, and the establishment of dialogue. The paradox of the use of the Internet is, that although, during the Cold War it was at first created and used to serve military purposes, nowadays, it is considered to be a way to expand democracy and reduce the democratic gap in common decision-making^[13].

The use of ICT may theoretically give a solution to a list of democratic problems that are widened in the name of economical rivalry. Internet may be an important element for an effective communication between the people and parliamentarians^[14] making it possible to access the procedure of decision-making and legislative files^[15]. The constant efforts by international organizations and especially by the Global Bank and the United Nations reflect and enhance the

use of ICT as a technological answer to the social, financial, political and democratic problems faced today by all countries.

Furthermore, all positive suggestions regarding the role of new technologies as a tool, which will be able to decrease the democratic deficit, the political jostle and apathy, the effective application of ICT in political procedures should be viewed separately by each country, not in a general (international) political frame^[16]. Even though there must be certain rules-statutes, so as to achieve a successful access and participation to the political procedures, there are still no apparent alterations about the growth of participation in the reduction of the democratic deficit. On the contrary, political impurities, political corruption and financial scandals aggravate peoples' rage against governments and political parties. The Internet is here to alter the present condition of total or partial lack of information and the procedure of collective decision-making between governmental media and citizens. Information methods become more instant and direct with the use of the Internet, whereas each citizen is able to be posted in full detail about every governmental decision and future blueprint through relevant websites.

Information and communication technologies and the Internet within the limits of Information Society and e-government enforce the features of modern democratic systems in the following ways:

A. Electronic political notifying: Open access to political procedures and progress is now much easier with the observation of political actions by people through governmental web sites. The flow of information is no longer a privilege owned by political or economical elites of a country but governmental programs and legislative decisions are open to the public.

B. E-voting and e-decision making: One of the most important benefits of the Internet use is the fact that the public will be able to express its opinion with the use of e-voting, while governments may record the public opinion upon disputed issues through e-voting and thus, minimizing the political expenditures.

Today there are two kinds of e-voting:

- a. The official e-voting elections: during which the public-voters may elect legal representatives with the use of an electronic poll.
- b. The unofficial e-voting that only takes place on the Internet and each citizen may vote while being at home. This kind of voting may reflect the public opinion upon political, financial and social matters^[17].

With the use of e-mail, the citizen is able to receive information, to ask and state one's remarks and objections by oneself or through representatives. Governments are now able to create a new pattern and process for the public participation with electronic meetings that concern future governmental courses of action and social matters^[18]. Thus, the public is capable of being informed of political matters and of obtaining a new method to air views and opinions^[18]. Most importantly, the public may simultaneously participate in the ruling of politics^[19]. For instance, USA's President Bill Clinton and the vice-President Al Gore would receive comments by the American people-voters with the use of e-mail on how to expand their political action^[19].

Summary of the basic features that describes e - democracy

- * Electronic vote (official and unofficial voting)
- * 24 hours electronic communication concerning political affairs
- * Creation of an electronic public sphere, so as to exchange views and diminish distances. *

Use of e-mail to achieve communication with the elected representatives and the political authority.

The use of ICT over the democratic and political procedures contains both negative elements and hazards. There are some objections and negative opinions that claim that the use of the Internet on this procedure will result in the disappearance of the public debate, which gives the citizens the opportunity to make themselves heard or hear different aspects and opinions. On the contrary, the so called e-citizens will be able to socialize with other people with whom they will share same views and interests through chat rooms. There, they will be able to locate and visit websites, aiming to conclude to the polarity of ideas and aspects^[20]. The new communication media with the use of ICT, will enable the powerful technological countries to observe emails and internet login communication (the so called Echelon). As a result, the whole potential conduct of the electronic voting, official and unofficial, is deforcing the right of the secret election as a basic democratic process. Last but not least, the Internet is the acclamation of centralization and this happens because there are some cases where employees, students and citizens may be supervised by other executive officers, teachers, employers and central governments and consequently there is no longer the ability of free expression and distribution of ideas along with the right to protect personal data.

As for the problems of e-voting, these can be summarized in two categories:

- A. Technological problems and Internet security: According to the most well-known hacker K. Mitnik, what locks can be unlocked^[21]. Therefore, the danger of vitiation of the voting results remains a crucial problem to conduct e-voting and manifest representatives^[21]. Today, governments attempt to solve these problems with the use of biometric methods, such as recognition of fingerprints, ability to use an electronic identity with special codes given by the government, and maintenance of the validity of the vote. These actions are about to be taken in the forthcoming elections.
- B. Social and Reliability issues such as digital divide and the disappearance of the public sphere within family: Many claim that electronic voting will be a privilege that belongs to the rich and to the technologically insiders, while at the same time citizens of lower financial or social classes will have no access to these new technologies. In result, social and political imbalances will be increased. Within the limits of e-voting at home, financially or socially weak citizens-such as the elderly or children-will not only be controlled, but they will also have to undergo some kind of psychological or physical violence during the voting procedure, that of which is responsible for the collapse of the secrecy.

Summary of the most important problems of electronic democracy

- * Technological security problems with the danger to alter voting results
- * Polarity of opinions and ideas with the ban of the democratic dialogue (disappearance of the global sphere)
- * Danger of observation of the whole political activity by hackers or governmental observation teams.
- * The existence of the digital divide and the lack of information about the new technologies on behalf of a large part of the population.

CONCLUSION

Electronic democracy initially aims at the boost and the establishment of a reliable environment between governments and voters-citizens. Also, it aims at a full co-operation, through the citizens' electronic access in political actions and decision making process and the diffusion of the political information. Finally, via electronic communication, the main goal is the creation of a public sphere in order to achieve the exchange of views. New technologies (ICT) transform the traditional and conventional affairs between governments and their citizens-voters. The Internet is

here to alter the condition of partial or total shortage of political information and the procedure of collective decision-making. Information methods have become immediate and more instant with the use of the Internet and each citizen may be informed in full detail of all political actions with a visit to the official website of each Ministry. With the use of e-mails s/he is able to require information, ask and submit comments or objections. The use of electronic democracy is a useful tool to widen the democratic participation and the reduction of the democratic deficit. Significant problems for the effective establishment and use of electronic democracy are: the technological security problems, and different political-institutional environment that prevail in every country.

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