

Chapter 1

Introduction



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Abstract The introductory chapter provides an overview of the volume ‘European e-Democracy in Practice’. The focus of the volume is on the exploration of the conditions needed to realise the democratic potential of the broad scope of tools, instruments and procedures to strengthen the ties between established processes of representative democratic decision-making and its constituencies, with a particular view to political communication and decision-making at the European level. Part I of the book provides the outcome of a broad literature review covering the scholarly debate on the achievements and potentials of e-democracy and its relevance for policymaking on the EU level. Part II of the book presents 22 case studies on the use of e-participation tools at the local, national and European levels which were carried out to learn about best practices and major challenges and problems of e-participation in practice. Finally, Part III provides a systematic comparative analysis of the case studies, and based on this analysis and the findings of the literature review, options for improving e-participation at the EU-level are discussed.

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The political significance of new means of communication via the Internet has been under discussion for many years, and we can observe widely established use of these means in everyday political exchange and policymaking. Until the 1990s, this discussion featured far-reaching expectations that the new media would induce a fundamental change in existing power relations and hierarchical modes of policymaking by giving the citizens a say (e.g. Rheingold 1993). As an open space for political exchange accessible to everybody, the Internet has been held by many to have the potential to function as a remedy against the crisis of representative democracy. This is represented by phenomena such as the citizenry's disenchantment with politics, the decrease in turn-outs for democratic elections or the failure of the political party system to provide for responsiveness regarding the expectations and needs of the constituency.¹ E-participation, as a generic term covering a wide range of formats, to intensify and increase direct communication among citizens as well as between citizens and political institutions and policymakers was widely seen as a way to improve the deliberative quality of political opinion formation and the legitimacy of decision-making. Among the numerous contributions to the discussion of these democratic innovations, the International Political Science Association's (IPSA) Research Committee 10 on 'Electronic democracy'² has been occupying an outstanding position in e-democracy research since its creation in 2007 (Kersting 2012). E-voting, e-participation and e-governance have all been considered as possible supports in the search for solutions for democratic shortcomings at the European, the national and the local levels of policymaking alike. The option to render the political system more accessible to average citizens via e-participation in particular would strengthen the ties between the sovereign, the citizens and their political representation—both governments and policymakers.

1.1 State and Perspectives of e-Democracy

E-democracy and e-participation are widely applied terms which describe a broad scope of practices of online engagement of the public in political decision-making and opinion forming (UN 2016). As regards theoretical concepts of democracy, e-democracy is mostly based on models of participatory and deliberative democracy. However, far-reaching expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy, through the application of online tools for political participation and public discourse, are vanishing after two decades of e-democracy. Van Dijk (2012) concludes that the primary achievement of e-democracy has been a significant improvement in access to, and the exchange of, politically relevant information. Evidence on the realisation of e-democracy supporting public debate, deliberation and community

¹For an account of the history of scholarly and political debate of a renewal of democracy, see Lindner et al. (2016b).

²<https://www.ipsa.org/research-committees/rclist/RC10>

building was mixed, and—most disappointing from the perspective of direct democracy—‘*no perceivable effect of these debates on decision-making of institutional politics*’ was detected (Van Dijk 2012: 53 ff). Furthermore, he found e-participation was largely confined to the initial and the final stages of the policy cycle and rarely allows for entries into the core stages of decision-making and policy execution. This is more or less in line with the UN report on e-participation (UN 2016), which states that there is a modestly growing focus on citizen involvement in policymaking. Although the initial high expectations have to be adjusted, e-democracy and e-participation have changed communication between citizens and governments in many beneficial ways, for example, by providing better and faster access to all kinds of public information for citizens, procedures of e-consultation or e-budgeting. There is no doubt that e-democracy when applied in the right way and with a dedicated political will can induce beneficial participatory or deliberative elements to the standard procedures of representative democracy.

The sobering effects that have accompanied the developing practice of, for example political online discussions or online public consultations have been increased by the emergence of the political downside of many-to-many communication made available via the Internet, especially with social media becoming a central element of the new electronic ‘public sphere’. In contrast to early expectations of the emergence of a new deliberative mode of democratic exchange instigated by the Internet’s ability to enable citizens to intervene in politics in a way that would improve the quality of political debate, the actual technical realisation of direct social interaction among dispersed persons and publics appears to have developed into a media of distortion, disabling substantial and serious exchange of knowledge and opinions, according to the standards of deliberative democracy. Three main tendencies stand out from the use of social media in political campaigning and political communication: the manipulation of publics through the spread of doubtful, discriminating, sometimes hate-based information; the use of Internet-generated personal data to provide target groups with tailor-made information fitting their specific preferences and expectations; and the enclosure of sub-publics into their prefabricated worldviews and perspectives in ‘Internet echo chambers’, with Internet-based communities willingly excluding themselves from all pieces of knowledge that might unsettle or destabilise their shared worldviews. This is not an openness of discourse to all possible actors and perspectives, but an enclosure into exchanges among the like-minded: It is not deliberation dedicated to exchange of arguments in the interest of finding consensus or sorting reliable from non-reliable information and perspectives, but deliberate manipulation of discourse by inducing false or one-sided information. And this is not bottom-up self-organisation of debate, but top-down feeding and steering of public discourse by political actors who are assisted by the exploitation of private data and the software-based production and spread of selective or prefabricated news.

The book does not ignore these negative tendencies. They are taken account of especially in Part I. The authors, however, hold that there still is a vast potential to enable rational political interaction and improve the participatory quality of the political process via Internet communication. The focus of the present volume is

the exploration of the conditions needed to realise the democratic potential of e-participation, that is of the broad scope of tools, instruments and procedures to strengthen the ties between established processes of representative democratic decision-making and its constituencies, that is citizens as individuals or as organised civil society. This is done with a particular view at the potential of e-participation for political communication and decision-making at the European level. The European Union (EU) and its institutions began to think about fostering their responsiveness to the European citizenry by means of public consultations more than a decade ago, for which the new options of electronic media have a particular importance (EC 2005).

It is not only digitalisation (technology push) that has advanced e-participation. Nowadays, many European citizens are invited, especially by their local governments, to be more involved. At the same time, citizens themselves actually want to be more involved. The UN report (2016: 3) states that *'advances in e-participation today are driven more by civic activism of people seeking to have more control over their lives'*. But at the same time people appear to distance themselves from actively observing and monitoring politics, let alone active forms of engagement, and they do not feel as if their voice counts or their concerns are taken into consideration. For example, in the European Social Survey (ESS 2014), the majority of the respondents gave a negative response to the question: *'How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?'* And in almost all European countries there was an increased number of respondents who disagreed with the statement that the European Parliament takes the concerns of European citizens into consideration. These and other developments appear to indicate a crisis of the political system, with particularly serious features at the European level due to what has been called the *'democratic deficit'* of the EU. EU politics, as executed by the European Commission and the European Council, is a transnational phenomenon suffering from a lack of direct democratic legitimation and responsiveness to European citizens. The executive and administrative branches of the European Union's political system are enacted and controlled by a multilevel system of policymaking which is only indirectly controlled and legitimised by the European constituency. Thus, there is a particular need on the side of the EU to foster its own legitimisation by strengthening ties with the European citizenry. And e-participation is one means that has been in the focus of EU institutions to help in this respect.

1.2 Design of the Study and Layout of the Book

In line with the above-mentioned significance of e-participation for the European level of policymaking, the present volume is based on a study that has been carried out on behalf of the European Parliament's Panel for the Future of Science and

Technology (STOA)³ and has been carried out by the European Technology Assessment Group (ETAG, www.itas.kit.edu/etag.php), a consortium of eight European Institutes active in the field of Technology Assessment. The study—at the request of STOA—was set up to investigate how to continue with e-democracy at the EU level in a way that supports public debate, deliberation and community building and has an impact on political decision-making. The two central research questions were

- What are the conditions under which e-participation tools and procedures can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes?
- And how can we transfer these tools—and the conditions which make them successful—to the EU level?

The study was commissioned by the European Parliament and was completed in 2017. It has been revised and updated for publication in this volume. The study was a follow-up of a previous investigation into the potentials of e-public, e-participation and e-voting that was carried out on behalf of STOA in 2011 (see Lindner et al. 2016a). This volume provides an update of the review of the scholarly debate on e-democracy and e-participation provided by the 2011 investigation. It also dives deeper into the investigation of practical cases of e-participation in order to draw lessons (especially for application at the EU level) on the potentials and restrictions for it to support participatory decision-making, as well as on its success factors in terms of political framework conditions and practical design and management of e-participatory ‘tools’. We start from the viewpoint that e-democracy, especially e-participation, is one of several strategies to support democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes and spread democratic values. The main objective of e-democracy is the electronic support of legitimate democratic processes and it should be evaluated on these merits. In other words, e-democracy is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with the traditional processes of democracy (Council of Europe 2009: 11). The design of the study consists of three elements that are reflected in the structure of the book.

Part I is dedicated to the discussion of the state of scholarly debate and research on the scope and perspectives of e-democracy in terms of the broad scope of formats of political communication via the Internet. This comprises a discussion of conceptual issues of e-democracy and visible recent trends of Internet-based political communication with regard to its democratic impacts and effects (Chap. 2), followed by a reflection on the state of debate on the necessity for, as well as the possibility of, developing a transnational European public sphere and the potential of Internet-

³STOA (www.europarl.europa.eu) is a panel of 15 members of the European Parliament with a mission to support the European Parliament in matters of foresight and assessment of technological developments and their societal effects and political implications. The authors would like to thank the members of the STOA Panel, as well as the scientific staff of the STOA Secretariat, for initializing and accompanying the underlying research project. It goes without saying that the arguments and opinions purported in this volume are solely those of the authors and do not reflect in any way official positions of the European Parliament.

based communication formats to contribute to public deliberation beyond national public spheres (Chap. 3). Finally, literature on the current practice of e-participation in the context of policymaking is discussed in order to reflect current experiences on the democratic potential of e-participation and lessons learned regarding success and failure. The review covers the broad scope of e-participation in different formats, such as e-information, e-petitions, e-initiatives, e-campaigning, e-deliberation, e-consultation, e-budgeting and e-voting (Chap. 4). Part I is based on a systematic review covering relevant literature that has been published from 2011 to 2016. The systematic review is based on a search for a relevant set of topics with specific search terms using the Thomson Reuters database (Web of Science Core Collection), SCOPUS (an abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature including conference proceedings) and *U::search* (the online library search engine of the University of Vienna). In addition, relevant journals from 2011 to 2016 were examined and a search was carried out via Google Scholar to identify grey literature. As a result of the different search strategies, around 3600 significant references were identified. Via several filtering steps, this large volume of literature has been reduced to a library of the most relevant core literature consisting of around 400 titles. Where necessary, this body of literature has been updated for the publication of this book.

Part II presents 22 case studies on the use of e-participation tools at the local, national and European levels. These were carried out to establish a basis for the identification of best practices and major challenges and problems to be dealt with in e-participation, as well as to reach conclusions with regard to the application of e-participatory procedures at the EU level. The selected cases relate to different political and governmental levels (local, national, European), enable citizen involvement at different stages of political decision-making (agenda setting, decision-making and monitoring), and are possibly suitable for implementation and use at the EU level in order to counteract the deficit in European democratic processes. The case studies are based on desk research and 45 interviews with organisers and researchers of the respective e-participation processes. Detailed information about the selection of cases, the design of the case studies as well as the comparative analysis is given in the introduction to Part II of this volume.

Part III represents the concluding chapters of the book. The first chapter depicts the results of the systematic comparison of the case studies. The case studies are compared in a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). Addressing the main research question, the comparison identifies those conditions under which digital tools can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes. Success means that the citizen involvement has led to either impact on decisions or impact on political or policy agendas. The most important factors for successful e-participation identified in the report are a close and clear link between e-participation processes and a concrete formal decision-making process and transparency about the intended contribution of the participatory processes' outputs to the overall decision-making process. Feedback to the participants about what has been done with their contributions is an indispensable feature of the process. Moreover, a participative process should not be limited to one event but should be embedded in an institutional 'culture of participation'. E-participation

must be accompanied by an effective mobilisation and engagement strategy, involving communication instruments tailored for different target groups. To realise these conditions in practice requires serious investment (in terms of both time and costs) and the commitment of all actors involved: digital participation—as the comparison reveals—is not a quick fix.

The second concluding chapter in Part III discusses options for improving e-participation at the EU level. This analysis is based on the review of the state of research on the use of e-participation delivered in Part I of the book and on the results of the qualitative comparison of the case studies (Part II). Rather than an attempt at systematically presenting and evaluating all logically possible applications of the tools which were analysed in the case studies, the aim was to use the findings from the case studies to identify the ‘low-hanging fruits’, that is those changes or additions to EU-level participation mechanisms that might make a significant difference without demanding changes to existing mandates. In order to support this approach, a group of experts with EU-institutional and non-governmental stakeholder backgrounds were gathered for a day of co-creation, discussing ideas to improve existing participatory tools at the EU level and options for going beyond these tools, for example, by adopting some of the tools described in the case selection in this report. Among the options discussed with regard to improving and expanding the EU’s e-participation practice are (1) to start experimenting with participatory budgeting in relation to the EU Regional and Social Funds, (2) to expand online engagement with MEPs beyond petitions, (3) to create a platform for monitoring member state actions during Council decisions, and (4) to explore the possibilities for crowdsourcing policy ideas for the European Commission. Beyond particular options for innovative approaches to e-participation at the EU level, it was found to be most urgent to overcome the obvious weaknesses regarding follow-up and learning efforts on the side of responsible organisers, in the interest of improving existing mechanisms and the development of new ones. The core question for a strategy of improving participation while staying within existing formal frameworks seems to be: What is the common unifying vision? As long as each of the existing mechanisms and experiments remain stand-alone mechanisms with discrete functions and implementation programs, e-participation will hardly become more transparent to the average citizen. The currently separate efforts of different institutions and services to open up European decision-making should begin to build on one another, rather than carving out separate corners of what might appear to citizens to be yet another bureaucratic universe. Working towards a coherent European e-participation infrastructure, including, for example, a one-stop shop for e-participation to provide synergy between the EU institutions, is regarded as the most urgent task.

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