

# Extended Democratic Space for Citizens' E-Participation

**Andriy Pazyuk**

*Taras Shevchenko National University, Ukraine*

## INTRODUCTION

Having appeared and rapidly developed in all human environments, the computer and telecommunication sphere considerably changed the structure and organization of social institutions and interaction between social actors.

Without national frontiers, free from time pressure and territorial barriers, individuals connecting create network communities, exchange information with each other and all the rest from a virtual world, interact online coordinating their work and everyday life and all together influence social institutions enhancing democratic grounds of society.

Administrative reform of the public sector already realized or under realization in most of developed countries follows the lead taken from private sector conception, of concentration on consumer needs. Therefore, public administration is considered as a process of "public service" delivery to citizens. With information communication technologies implemented in the process of public administration, a new era of *electronic government (e-government)* has started.

What's e-government? For some people, it is an advanced mechanism of public administration service delivery using ICT, "the way public-sector institutions use technology to apply public administration principles and conduct the business of government" (Riley, 2003, p. 3). It is also described as, "the continuous optimization of service delivery, constituency participation, and governance by transforming internal and external relationships through technology, the Internet, and new media" (Gartner Group, 2000, as cited in Bonham, Seifert & Thorson, 2004, paragraph 2).

Others consider e-government more broadly as, "an Internet-driven activity that improves citizen access to government information, services and expertise to ensure citizen participation in and satisfaction with the governing process" (A Global Survey of E-government, 2002, as cited in Riley, 2003, p. 24).

This article examines the nature and scope of the social changes evoked by the online interaction between citizens and government. It also evaluates the usage of special methods for the creation of extended democratic space for genuine citizens' participation in public life.

As presented in this article the usage of ICT in public administration with citizens-centered applications (*e-democracy techniques*) could create the environment for the appearance of *added social value* evoked by wide public participation in decision-making, increased transparency, efficiency and legitimacy of governance.

## BACKGROUND

What is the social nature of the changes in public administration called up with the application of new methods for interaction with citizens in online environment? Whether it's only the advanced instrument of citizens' behavior regulation or advanced type of social relations (new social order), what is the social nature of this change?

Both of the mentioned hypothesizes are covered by the early grown e-democracy concept. Steven Clift (2004), famous activist and e-democracy promoter, defines it as follows: "E-democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage" (p.1).

Some authors describe it using a functional approach: "E-democracy consists of all electronic communication media which give citizens the possibility to make efforts in keeping leaders/politicians responsible for their actions in public sphere. Depending on democracy aspects being promoted, e-democracy can use different technologies for: (1) political process transparency increase; (2) citizens' direct involvement and participation extension; (3) perfection of opinion creation quality through new space revelation for information and discussion" (Evaluation of the Use, 2003, p.10).

While some researchers think e-democracy is a key element of e-government, others consider these notions crucial though not identical to e-government. Brack and Noble (2001) describe e-democracy as the "use of Internet by government, political parties and advocacy groups to provide information, communicate, deliver services or boost participation to generate a more robust debate among citizens." It follows that, "While "e-government" includes information, service and participation compo-

nents, it is generally limited to governmental institutions. E-democratic use of the Internet is broader in nature” (p. 1).

Pippa Norris argues that ICT can increase activity only of those who are active, without touching “the non-participatory, inactive and not interested,” and thus deepening the social gap (Norris, 2001, as cited in Riley & Riley, 2003, p. 20).

Tomas and Cathia Riley have another opinion on ICT’s potential to favor democratic processes: “technology is only a medium and an engine of new and important tendencies in society, a measure to which they follow new ideas, conceptual constructions including innovations and creativity” (Riley, 2003, p.6).

The structural changes in society caused by ICT becomes more visible from the “remote sight” by taking into consideration the internal horizontal relations and interaction of social actors inside the civil society. There is a ground for researchers to prove the appearance of a new advanced democracy type with enhanced possibilities for participation in social relations and public administration. Such an approach would include the following components.

Firstly, it is about ICT applications for self-organization and engagement of socially inactive, remote or disabled groups into public life and overcoming a social divide. These are virtual interest groups, e-citizens’ communities based on electronic communications, which create an e-democracy climate. ICT can transform human networks into powerful forms of social organization.

The second component is that we are witnessing ongoing transformation of public management. It has been found that with the implementation of ICT, public management structure changes. The vertical hierarchy of public administration experiences transformation into horizontal networks accompanied with the redistribution of power (public functions). The advanced ways of interaction between government, business and citizens have been greatly evolved by the application of ICT.

This favors the possibility of citizens’ participation in public life, policy and decision-making processes at local and national levels. Thus citizen direct participation in the political process by using ICT becomes a reality.

## **PUBLIC E-PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES**

ICT makes citizens’ direct participation in the policymaking process possible, unconstrained and more intensive. According to Lenihan (2002), ICT can be used “to *extend public space* in ways that might promote consultation and dialogue and between citizens and their governments. Through such dialogue, citizens and stakeholders might

express their views, ideas, explore differences or participate more directly in decision-making, that is, in governance. It could contribute—perhaps very significantly—to the revitalization of democracy and to the strengthening of government legitimacy” (p. 27).

Democracy has proved its extraordinary vitality and stability as a form of governance through centuries. What was less permanent in its long history are the democratic techniques—“specific mechanisms, which transform its essence principles into everyday practice of voting, representation, decision-making, implementation and its observance by citizens and government officials who changed considerably, and most likely irrevocably” (Evaluation of the Use, 2003, p. 7).

In this extended public space, the e-democracy potential is realized through such techniques as *e-consultations*, *e-petitions*, *e-voting*.

The democratic interaction between government and civil society is an important indicator of government legitimacy. This paradigm is based on the understanding of the public administration process as “communication.” Its vectors are directed not only on an internal process dedicated to regulate public bodies’ activity and the regulatory impact on non-public sector subject activity, but on the dissemination of information in a horizontal direction as well. It crosses the borders of authority domain and encourages citizens and business to communicate with government and each other.

In such communication the dialectical contradiction appears when government has to combine its regulatory power with the function of a contracting party possessing rights and performing the duties of a social contract as equals to citizens and business. It is clear that this partnership equality is one of those factors, which gives grounds to evaluate government legitimacy and the correspondence of government activity to the needs of whole society.

## **E-CONSULTATIONS**

Consultations are one of the most powerful instruments of government interaction with business and citizens. In the past, it required much more in terms of human and financial resources than is potentially available with ICT application. Today, thanks to advanced ICT, it is potentially easier to undertake the process of public consultations. However, similar resourcing problems are observed in the determination of the context/agenda of these consultations and their subsequent implementation in existing administration processes during all phases within the context of defining directions, formulating tasks, making and realizing decisions.

Consultations can be considered in a narrow sense as a process of the evaluation of public administration results with stakeholders. Under such an approach, a public agency initiates and holds consultations using vertical information flows: from authorities to stakeholders and vice versa according to a strictly defined protocol by the public agency scheme under evaluation. Such consultations often use questionnaires with all the advantages and disadvantages of this sociological instrument (as a rule, its main disadvantage is predetermination of desired "correct" answers in questions formulations). Such processes are often aimed at legalizing adopted solutions *post factum* rather than to define real needs and to offer policy options.

A more democratic type of consultation involves a public opinion survey with the possibility of interactive participation for citizens, i.e., answer options include the opportunity to not only answer from proposed options, but to offer one's own unique answer and to put alternative questions for other consultations' respondents-participants. These are interactive and a more pluralistic technique to enhance opportunities for citizens' engagement in policy making. Coleman and Gøtze (2001, p. 6) argue that "methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinize, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options. Such methods encourage preference formation rather than simple preference assertion."

Methods and forms of public engagement in online consultations vary from country to country. They also vary inside the machinery of public administration according to national traditions of communications between government and citizens, culture of information management, level of its transparency, knowledge and experience of government officials and potential participants of consultations, availability of technical environment and many other subjective and objective factors.

In any case, for an enhanced democratic process there must be the option to choose the appropriate consultation technique, which is based on the awareness of its advantages. Clift (2002) provides a range of useful instruments and advices for online consultations.

According to survey results held by Socitm and IdeA (2002), e-democracy initiatives realized in small communities have more chances to succeed than in large ones. For example, in the town of Jesi (Italy), the local community network created an extended democratic space for discussion and interaction between citizens and government. The high rate of Web-site hits and active participation of citizens in online deliberation testifies to the project's success (<http://www.comune.jesi.an.it>). As noted in this project, "The involvement of the citizen, together with consultation and promotion aimed at specific target groups—such as schools, civil associations and enter-

prises—has made an important contribution to the sharing of values and therefore to the success of the initiative" (Socitm & IdeA, 2002, p. 95).

It is worth mentioning some practical questions related to the realization of online consultations. For example, what will provide the possibility to create a more realistic view of the use of this e-democracy instrument and to take into consideration these corresponding factors during project development and implementation? The Estonia's project "TOM: Today I Decide" is of great interest as it provides interactive possibilities for the formation of online preference by the participants. By the end of 2003 "project had around 4,000 registered users and approximately 80,000 visitors per month. In spite of these rather high general indicators of participation, during last two years of project there was a substantial decrease in user activity compared to the rush of demand at the project's beginning. This requires analysis. It is useful to propose the following reasons for the activity decrease: government project administration had a definite political accent; political parties were excluded from interaction process; the passive reaction of government agencies to citizens' proposals; forum rules were not flexible enough; loss of trust among participants due to low rate of implementation of ideas forwarded to government (only 25 ideas from 450 forwarded to government had the beginning for implementation).

It is useful to note that such projects are useful not only for expressing and submitting citizens' opinions and ideas to government, but for creating added social value in the form of education and training on administrative decision-making process, encouragement of ICT usage for every day life and more active citizens' engagement in public life and the decision-making process. In support of this position, the activity of the users was not limited to virtual discussion, and because of the rejection of some of the forum's propositions by Estonian Parliament, new civil organizations for lobbying rejected legislative drafts appeared.

Among practical recommendations for increasing efficiency of public consultations, the use broad media coverage (informing about consultation agenda, schedule and real impact on policy making), liberal moderation, comprehensive planning, and culture of political deliberation have been recommended (Evaluation of the Use, 2003).

Successful usage of consultation requires evaluation of the citizens' initial needs whilst defining the consultation agenda. The establishment of useful partnership relations requires genuine citizens' participation in public consultations and unconstrained bi-directional information flows.

## **E-PETITIONS**

The next valuable tool for citizens' direct participation in public policy making is the e-petition technique. The World Wide Web presents an almost ideal interactive possibility for exploitation of electronic petitions by providing virtual space for initiating communications, association, collection of signatures and submission to responsible public bodies.

Such a form of communication between citizens and the public sector usually has a political backbone and often produces some kind of a social echo. Petitions serve as a form of collective will, expression and submission. They have a direct impact on other social actors and imply certain regulatory function.

Protestors used the e-petition technique on the eve of Quebec Global Summit held on 20-22 April 2001. The author of the petition (Naomi Klein) mobilized the activists as soon as it became known about scheduled security measures including the construction of shielding blocks. The petition titled "People in the Cell" received support from around 4,000 people via e-mail notification and then it was published on Canadians Council site (<http://www.canadians.org>) and forwarded to the prime minister (MacKinnon, 2001, as cited in Borins, 2002).

Another example of the e-petition as effective e-democracy technique was demonstrated by the Parliament of Scotland together with the International Teledemocracy Center (<http://www.teledemocracy.org>). The operational system for starting petitions, collecting signatures and forwarding them to the Parliament online has been successfully developed and used. One of the remarkable examples is the World Fund initiative, which collected 337 signatures for marine parks' inclusion into the National Park System of Scotland.

It is obvious that the use of such democratic instruments requires corresponding legal grounds for legalizing online communication between citizens and public bodies. In the countries where electronic signature infrastructure has yet to be developed, additional measures are required for verification of signatures under petitions (for example, by direct contact with petitioners via analogue communication tools or by checking directories, etc.). The potential of the e-petition technique could be more effectively realized in partnership with private sector and local communities.

## **E-VOTING**

In participatory (direct) democracy, the citizens' will is generally expressed by voting. The ancient Greeks dem-

onstrated classical way of citizens' direct participation in everyday decision-making by voting. The remoteness of the majority of population from administrative center was one of the reasons for the appearance of representative (intermediary) democracy. Contemporary ICT provides the possibility to overcome physical barriers for citizens' direct participation in public decision-making.

E-voting is one of the techniques used for empowered (quantitatively & qualitatively) citizens' participation in policy formation and decision-making at all levels of public administration: local, national and global.

E-voting could be described as, "an election system that uses electronic ballots which allow voters to transmit their vote to election officials over the Internet" (Bouras, Katris, Triantafillou, 2003, p. 257). E-voting technique is aimed to empower direct expression of the citizens' (voters') will with the help of ICT.

In 2004 such argument was taken as a basis for pilot e-voting project of elections to European Parliament. Each country has selected the regions (with population from 50,000 to 100,000) allowing citizens to use an online voting option. The project continues with attempts undertaken at the national level in France, Italy, Spain, UK, Denmark, Belgium and Netherlands. It is notable that in the 1999 elections in Belgium around 49% of population participated in e-voting (Engström, 2002).

At the European level, we can observe several successful attempts to use e-voting for wide consultations with local communities. In 2003, the Greek Presidency realized an e-voting initiative "Vote for the EU YOU Want" which proposed in 19 languages to the Europeans to use virtual space for participation in online deliberations and e-voting on issues to be discussed. To ensure transparency and feedback, all results of the discussions and voting were published online and submitted to European Council, European Commission and European Parliament (e-Vote, 2003). The results of e-participation in this project are very encouraging. More than 500,000 users visited the Web site (<http://evote.eu2003.gr>) and 170,000 votes devoted to 10 topics related to EU internal and external policy were received during e-voting. It proved the people's wish to participate in policy-making using the Internet and encouraged implementation of new creative approaches for broader citizens' engagement.

In August-September 2002, the Andreas Papandreu Foundation undertook a global e-voting initiative devoted to environmental and development issues. More than 25,000 Internet users around the world from 175 countries representing 12 world regions participated in it over a one-month period ([www.netpulseglobalpoll.com](http://www.netpulseglobalpoll.com)). It provides the evidence of the emergence of the global e-citizenship phenomenon.

## FUTURE TRENDS

The examples mentioned of the use of e-democracy techniques provide the evidence that ICT has opened new possibilities for democratization of society and wider citizens' participation in policy-making at local, national and global levels.

Nevertheless, further research on the social changes evoked by the implementation of the interactive techniques of citizens' engagement in public life by ICT usage is required.

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the experience gained from the implementation of e-democracy techniques aimed to increase citizens' participation in decision making. It's clear that we are witnessing the beginning of new evolutionary step of democracy with empowered possibilities for citizens to participate directly in public administration extended by e-democracy techniques in public space.

I believe that the new advanced e-participation methods mentioned show solid promise to be implemented as widely as possible in everyday public administration and should be constituted as integral parts of today democratic governance. Assessment of the proposed and already implemented e-democracy projects has to be based on the evaluation of the additional social values created in the form of more deliberative, participatory and thus more democratic decision-making.

The main question remains: Can we create a more democratic form of public administration by using ICT? Whilst history will find the answer to this question, in such processes the key role to be played is that by all social actors joined with common aspiration for e-democracy.

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## **KEY TERMS**

**Added Social Value:** A positive social effect (main or subsidiary impact on social relations) resulted from goal-seeking activity of social actors.

**E-Consultation:** An e-democracy technique used for research of stakeholders' views, evaluation of proposed rules regulatory impact by ICT usage.

**E-Democracy:** (1) Interaction between public, private and third sectors by ICT usage in democratic processes (2) The way in which citizens interacts with government by ICT usage.

**E-Democracy Techniques:** The ways (methods) of citizen engagement in process of decision-making based

on ICT usage. The main techniques are: e-consultation, e-petition, and e-voting.

**E-Governance:** The process of administration (elaboration and implementation of policy decisions and administration services delivery) based on full-scale ICT usage at all levels of decision-making and all branches of public administration.

**E-Petition:** An e-democracy technique used for citizens' appeal to public bodies by ICT usage (e-mail, online forums, public bodies online interface).

**E-Voting:** An e-democracy technique used for direct expression of voters will in collective decision-making by ICT usage.