

Electronic Democratic Governance: Problems, Challenges, and Best Practices

Athanasios I. Bozinis¹
University of Macedonia
Greece

Eleftherios Iakovou²
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Greece

Abstract

In most Western countries, democratic procedures face many problems in terms of implementation and reliability. It is said that the representative democracy is not able to identify, face, and represent efficiently the citizen/voter's needs and problems. A direct result of this situation, is the enlargement of the democratic deficit, the political apathy, the political jostle of clusters and the disbelief of people and citizens to the governments. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its implementation to the modern democratic procedures seems to represent a new method that will accomplish the enlargement of the democratic participation and the strengthening of the democratic institutions-procedures. This work identifies the current challenges and also the problems that derive from the implementation of the electronic democratic governing, by emphasizing on electronic vote as the basic characteristic of electronic democracy.

Keywords: Electronic Public Sphere, e-governance, e-democracy, e-voting.

Introduction

Within a democratic regime the majority governs, the minority checks and criticizes the majority, the majority protects the minority's rights and the latter accepts the political system and operates within it (Kouskouvelis 1997:158). In modern politics and governing, the direct democracy, like the paradigm of Ancient Athens, has been substituted by the representative democracy, where the decisions concerning the aggregate state are not made by the citizens directly through the conduction of plebiscites, but by representatives democratically elected through national elections.

The problem: The representative democracy system, which prevails in majority today in the western and economically developed countries, has shown many times its weaknesses: there is a continuous conflict among interests deriving from economical and political elites and various social groups as well as an attempt from all the political parties to win the elections and be able to undertake the authority in a state. Don Tapscot (2000:303) claims that: "The democracy in many western countries is static; in some I would say atrophic. The voters cynicism lies to the zenith. The political corruption in exaltations indicates effusion. Governments everywhere seem ineffective and remote."

Traditionally the citizens rely their decisions concerning the political and economical facts (important or not) on information via the traditional mass media, like television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

The new challenge for Democracy: Although in its initial form in 1969 the Internet was created by the funding of the government of the U.S.A. in order to serve military purposes under the name ARPANET¹ (George Beekman 2002:14), today it constitutes the basic tool for the enlargement of the citizens'-voters' participation in public affairs. Since the beginning of the 1990's and until today, the use of electronic computer systems and new technologies resulted in the creation of new forms of communication between the government and the citizens. The use of new technologies transforms the traditional relationship between state and the society of citizens, rendering their communicative relationship from an one-way scheme to a two-way one. In the era of the Information Society, the Digital Face of Government aims at becoming more organized and efficient at a minimum cost through the use of new technologies and information systems. Through the application of new technologies, the government transforms itself into a Learning Organization which will be able to respond to the citizen's demands and thus reduce red tape through the use of official governmental web-pages and electronic red-tape (Andrew Chadwic 2003).

Definition of e-democracy: E-democracy is a term used to describe the use of ICT to all the current political procedures by the democrats, whose main objective is the effective citizens' representation and the state governing. Paradigms of edemocracy can be the generation of electronic open dialog, electronic polls, and in general terms the confirmation of electronic political communication between the political leadership and the citizens.

Main characteristics of e-democracy

Contemporary Liberal-democratic systems are characterized by a number of dimensions such as: the existence of more than one political parties, the open access to political procedures, the open participation, the operation of elections at regular intervals for the election of representatives and the establishment of the citizen's individual rights and freedoms (Alan R. Ball & Guy Peters 2001:104).

Within the framework of the Information Society and e-Governance the information systems and the world wide web strengthen the attributes of contemporary democratic systems:

A) Dissemination of political Information: The open access to political procedures and developments is easier nowadays since citizens can be informed on political happenings through the information provided by the Governmental Web sites. The flow of information is no longer the privilege of political and economic elite within a state. On the contrary, all governmental and party programs and the political decisions of a legislative and executive nature are provided to the citizens. Professor Joseph Nye (2003:116) of Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, reports that "already the first political result of the increased information through the

¹ Defence Advanced Research Project Agency

Internet becomes apparent: the governments have lost part of their traditional control over information within their own societies. In 2001, for instance, many ministers of the Indian government resigned from their position and almost caused the Government's collapse as a consequence of the appearance of accusations for corruption in news web sites". In his book "Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age" (2002: 12), Nye also argues that the principal component of providing information to citizens is the cheap access to information on a global scale, resulting in the increase of access and political participation since the cost of communication and intervention decreases.

The use of new technologies gave the organized citizens' groups the opportunity to directly organize and react to the international problems (environmental, economical, and social). In 1997, when Jody Williams won the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to the international banning of drugs without cybernetics aid and despite the opposition of the five powerful nations, she claimed that her only weapon, in order to coordinate the activities of thousands of groups protecting the human rights in six continents, was the use of e-mail. (Friedman, 2000:41). Paul Kennedy claims that "in a world with millions of televisions, the watchers consume news and ideas in the same way they consume the commercial goods. So the governments of authoritarian states find it even more difficult to keep people in the dark." (Kennedy, 1994:123).

Internet gives citizens the opportunity of a 24 hour access and political information. The political information is interfused and is no longer an exclusive privilege of the politically and economically elite. Respectively, the interactive communication opportunity that the use of internet provides, makes it a basic tool of political communication.

B) E-voting and participation in e-decision making: One of the Internet's principal advantages is the fact that through the use of e-voting citizens can express their view on special issues and simultaneously the governments is able to record public opinion over crucial issues through e-voting and consequently minimize political cost.

Today there are two kinds of e-voting:

1. The official e-voting in which voters can elect their legal representatives with democratic procedures through the use of an electronic e-ballot box. In the recent three-week lasting national elections in India, which is the world's biggest democratic nation consisting of 668 million voters, e-ballot boxes were used for the election of the government.
2. The unofficial e-voting is exclusively conducted through the Internet and every citizen can vote from his house. This voting can reflect public opinion on crucial political, financial and social issues and can be conducted on a daily basis.

Public opinion can be measured by the use of network exit polls in the form of a digital questionnaire, while the recording of the results is conducted at an actual time and the user can see the results immediately after the vote.

Frequently encountered problems in e-democracy

The disadvantage of network voting is that it counts the votes of Internet users who possess not

only the equipment but also the know-how of using a computer and the new technologies in general. In other words, the digital gap creates lines of division among the representative sample between the voters that participate in a digital unofficial voting and those who cannot. More specifically, the results from these votings do not reflect the real picture of public opinion since a large part of the population cannot have access and thus are deprived from the right to vote: for example citizens who are not familiar with new technologies as well as people who are unable to have access to the Internet due to social or financial factors.

This results from the so-called Digital Divide, a term which represents the unequal access and use of the computer and Internet services on a global level. The General Secretary of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi A. Anan (2003), reports that 70% of the citizens who have access to the Internet live and work in one of the 24 richest countries in the world and represent 16% of the global population. However, according to Pipa Noris (2000), professor at Harvard University who conducted statistical studies, irregularities concerning the access to the new technologies and the Internet services do not only exist among the citizens who live within a state but also among the developed states of the West. She therefore came to the conclusion that there is a digital divide between the Northern and Southern European Union countries as well. A report of the United Nations program for development in 1999, demonstrates the digital jostle: representing the 19% of the world's population, the 29 countries of the organization for economy and development cover the 91% of internet users, among who only 50% are Americans. (Boniface, 2004: 177).

E-voting security: The principal disadvantage is the security of informative systems for the conduction of official e-voting. Recently in the U.S.A. the SERVE program that was destined for the conduction of an e-voting for the forthcoming National elections of November 2004 in order to allow all the citizens of the U.S.A. who live and work abroad to vote, was deemed as dangerous and insecure.

The results of an official elective procedure in order to appoint the parliamentary representatives through the use of the electronic poll in public polling centers or through voting via internet, might be misquoted due to a technical problem of poll software system. Moreover, the access potentiality of hackers or political electronic activists to the electronic voting procedure via the internet is considered rather easy, as Kevin Mitnick claims that: "Whatever locks, can be unlocked, since every human creation has the possibility of mistaken construction or assembly." (Mitnick, 2003).

Modern technology annihilates the geographical distance, while it multiplies the variety of means, the catastrophic range, and the number of factors that can hurl violate actions (Brzezinski, 2005:42). The possible use of an electromagnetic bomb by a small terrorist group, that could deaden the computer and communication systems during a formal national electronic poll for the appointment of parliamentary representatives, could misquote the results bringing on political consequences. Within an environment of global concern for terrorist attacks, the modern communication and technology means enable the technologically powerful states to monitor e-mails and the movement in the Internet (Echelon). Consequently, they can also monitor the potential conduction of official and unofficial e-voting and thus the right to secrecy is abolished. Scenarios such as "the thought police" which was encountered in George Orwell's book *1984* about the Big Brother create a series of reactions on a global level.

The establishment of electronic Public Sphere

The creation of an electronic public sphere is ensured not only by the use of internet for the conduction of electronic polls, but also by the citizens access capability to any kind of political information concerning the local, national, and international processes and procedures. Moreover, the creation and operation of chat rooms for politic themes and the real-time communication provides the ability of consolidating the necessary communication among citizens and appointing national actions and reactions as a pressure mean for the problem solving.

Finally, the use of electronic mail by citizens and the democratically elected parliamentary representatives, enables citizens to ask questions, make proposals, and oppose, so that the representation becomes more effective and the democratic deficit is reduced.

On the other hand, Kieron O' Hara (2002) argues that with the use of the Internet the citizens will forget the traditional notion of Agora: there will no longer be a public discussion and no conflicting opinions will be heard as each citizen will focus on reading those particular web sites that reinforce his belief thus resulting in the polarization of beliefs.

Conclusions – Suggestions

In the era of the information society, modern liberally democratic western type states, which are consequently technologically developed, use the new technologies in order to reduce the democratic deficit and to strengthen the democratic values – institutions. Through the use and implementation of electronic democracy to the state governing, modern governments mainly target to consolidate a more effective communication with the citizens-voters, support effectively the decision-making procedure, and create a climate of transparency and cooperation having as an intention the political, economical, and social prosperity. The use of new technologies, having as a general aim the broadening of the citizens' democratic participation and the strengthening the democratic characteristics and institutions, is faced with intense skepticism regarding the way and also the expansion of the use by both the citizens and governments.

The existence of the digital chasm, the technological security and reliability problems, regarding the conduction of exit polls through the internet, as well as the intense citizens disbelief, relative to the goal and usage of electronic democracy, are the basic problems in terms of the effective consolidation and use of new technologies at political-democratic procedures and electronic state governing.

Internet remains an essential and useful tool in terms of access and transfer of the political information and also a mean of political communication between citizens and the political leadership (elected government representatives).

Electronic democracy through nowadays is not considered to be a new type of democracy (direct – indirect), but is considered as basic and fundamental for an effective democratic governing that operates in the framework of globalization and the third technological revolution of the information society. Electronic democratic governing is the answer of governments to the challenges of the competitive and continuously changing international system and is used by

governments as a basic tool for development and effective governing at the current national challenges.

In conclusion, the Internet constitutes a significant tool for the enlargement of the citizens' democratic and political participation to public affairs in various ways. The power of political information strengthens the citizens-voters' updating and their potential reactions. The conduction of official or unofficial electronic exit polls reflects public opinion but also has to face the aforementioned problems of a technological nature.

References

- Ball, A. R., & Guy, B. P. (2001). *Modern Politics and Government*. Athens: Papazisis Publications.
- Beekman, G. (2002). *Introduction to Information Systems – Exploring tomorrow's technology* (4th American Publication). Athens: Giourdas Publications.
- Chadwick, A. (2003). Bringing E-Democracy Back in. *Social Science Review*, 21(4), 443-455.
- Joseph, N. (2003). *The Paradox of American Power*. Athens: Papazisis Publications.
- Joseph, S. N., & Kamarck, E. C. (2002). *Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Kieron, O. (2002). The Internet: A toll for Democratic Pluralism? *Science as Culture*, 11(2), 287-298.
- Kofi, A. A. (2003, December 9). Break the Technology Barrier - The Information Summit. *International Herald Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/news/oss/sg/stories/sg-9dec2003.htm>
- Noris, P. (2000). Editorial: The internet in Europe: A new North-South Divide? *Journal of Press/Politics*, 5(1), 1-12.
- Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics (2003). Iain Mc Lean & Alistair Mcmillan, Oxford University Press.
- Tapscott, D. (2000). *The Digital Economy*. Athens: Leader Books.
- Kouskouvelis, I. (1997). Introduction to the politics science and the politics theory. Athens: Papazisis Publications.
- Friedman, L. T. (2000). *The Lexus and the olive tree*. Athens: Oceanida Publications.
- Kennedy, P. (1994). *Preparing the world for the twenty-first century*. Athens: Livanis Publications.
- Boniface, P. (2004). *Les Guerres de Demain*. Athens: Papazisis Publications.

Brzezinski, Z. (2005). *The choice - global domination or global leadership*. Athens: Papazisis Publications.

Mitnick, K. D., & Simon, L. W. (2003). *The art of deception, controlling the human element of security*. Athens: Oceanida Publications.

¹ Mr. Athanasios Bozinis is International Relations Scientist/Economist and a doctoral candidate at the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece. His research interests include International relations and ICT, e-governance, Internet politics, and digital diplomacy. He can be reached at: Department of Applied Informatics, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: ahbozi@uom.gr.

² Dr. Eleftherios Iakovou is an Associate Professor of Industrial Management and Director of the Quantitative Analysis, Logistics and Supply Chain Management Laboratory at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. He can be reached at: Department of Mechanical Engineering, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, P.O. Box 461, GR54124 Thessaloniki, Greece. Email: eiakovou@auth.gr; Phone: +(30) 2310-995970; Fax: +(30) 2310-996018

Page left blank