

Coherent Agenda for e-Democracy - an EU perspective



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ABSTRACT

The European Commission has taken up e-Democracy as part of e-Commission (modernization of internal administration, improved communication within particular Member States and other European institutions and better public services to citizens and business) and as an integral element of its Better Regulation approach. Activities that directly concern citizens include online availability of all legislation and other official Commission documents and the introduction of Interactive Policy Making for input to policy-making (spontaneous feedback and online consultation).

Opinions expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the European Commission. I am grateful for contributions to this paper by Gareth MacNaughton of the European Commission, DG-Information Society.

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http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/egovernment_research/index_en.htm.

The European Commission has taken up e-Democracy as part of e-Commission¹ (modernization of internal administration, improved communication within particular Member States and other European institutions and better public services to citizens and business) and as an integral element of its Better Regulation approach. Activities that directly concern citizens include online availability of all legislation and other official Commission documents and the introduction of Interactive Policy Making for input to policy-making (spontaneous feedback and online consultation).

An example of achieving a more direct impact, enabled by ICT, of businesses on legislation was the consultation process on last year's new legislation for chemicals. An internet enabled consultation period was held over some two months. 6500 contributions were received via the Interactive Policy Making web tool and all responses were published on a Commission website for full transparency to show which organization, company or individual had advocated which amendments. Thanks to the consultation it was discovered that the legislation had a flaw indeed, one that would have increased costs by several billions of Euros, in particular for smaller companies.

European Commissioner Erkki Liikanen compared this way of open consultation over the Internet of a draft law with open source software development. The open source community is based on open online critical scrutiny and dialogue to find flaws in a piece of software ('bugs'). By analogy the chemicals legislation has been debugged².

For the Commission services involved, it was a hard task to analyze the many contributions. The sheer volume, variety of opinions and time constraints were a real challenge and resulted in some firsthand experience with the challenges of openness, transparency, personalization, inclusion and efficiency.

At the EU level, 'YourVoice in Europe' offers a single access point in all official languages for Commission public consultation³. This is further enhanced by improved access to information about the European institutions, through Europa 2nd Generation, a new generation of portals for a complete range of thematic information and interactive services on EU policies and activities, hiding the organizational complexity behind the scenes.

The EU Presidencies have also become interested in making use of e-Democracy tools. An example is the e-Vote website, which was running during the Greek Presidency of the Council in the first half of

¹ "Towards the eCommission: Implementation Strategy 2001-2005", June 2001.

² eDemocracy Seminar, 12 Feb 2004, see <http://europa.eu.int/egovernment>.

³ <http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice>

2003, to achieve broad online consultation⁴.

E-Democracy is seen as an integral part of the e-Government policy as formulated by the European Commission⁵ and supported by the Council of Ministers; a policy that emphasizes that e-Government is a means to enable better government, i.e. better governance in the sense of:

- (1) **Openness and transparency:** governments that are understandable and accountable to the citizens, open to democratic involvement and scrutiny;
- (2) **At the service of all:** inclusive and personalised services;
- (3) **Productivity and efficiency:** delivering maximum value for taxpayers' money.

Nevertheless, beyond good governance principles (that are also applicable to the European Institutions themselves, as formulated in the White Paper on European Governance⁶), the general policy for e-Government, the use of online consultation as part of Better Regulation, and support for e-Democracy research and development in the EU's Information Society Technologies Programme and piloting or implementation where applicable in the related eTEN and IDA programmes, no explicit e-Democracy policy has been formulated as of today at the EU level. In contrast, the part of e-Government that is about using ICT, organizational innovation and improvement of skills to deliver more efficiently and with better quality *administrative services* is rich in specific policy targets and related actions.

There is certainly a question of mandate at the European level: democratic participation, elections, etc. are in the realm of Member States. Proposals for contributions at the European level need to be critically reviewed as to their legal basis, usefulness and justification in line with respect of subsidiarity.

In this respect, the Commission, for example, sets out to apply good governance principles by making its own provision of services more transparent and by improving democratic participation in its policy preparation. It can also address essential conditions for e-Democracy through EU-supported R&D, pilot deployment and implementation projects that deliver common secure platforms and by removing barriers that are also impediments to the Internal Market (for example, recognition of electronic signatures, re-use of public sector information) and by advancing European Citizenship.

There is also the *'quo vadis'* question: there is a need at this moment in time to take stock and reflect on the next steps. The Commission organized in February 2004 a seminar on e-Democracy that set out to bring together experiences and investigate needs for more advanced work in e-Democracy. The emphasis was less on policy

⁴ <http://evote.eu2003.gr/EVOTE/en/index.stm>.

⁵ Communication COM(2003)567, 26 Sept 2003, "The Role of eGovernment for Europe's Future", and Council Conclusions of 20 Nov 2003, see <http://europa.eu.int/egovernment>.

⁶ 2001 White Paper on European Governance, COM(2001)428.

development than on exchange of practical experiences, confronting lessons learned and determining options for future R&D in the EU's programmes.

That seminar addressed both e-Voting and e-Participating and a number of EU-supported projects (e.g. Webocracy, e-Poll) and other experiences presented their results. Good practice experiences in e-Democracy are also made available from the e-Europe e-Government Awards and other sources⁷.

Clearly in the area of e-Voting much activity has been happening over the past years. Remarkably, regarding practical experiences and acceptance opposite views were tabled, from widespread and successful adoption of Internet voting (e.g. in Geneva elections) to profound skepticism. Many technological issues have already been researched and perhaps the pressure for continued technological research has abated, while there is still a great need to obtain better understanding of social and cultural factors in e-Voting. The main issues identified in e-Voting in terms of benefits, technology and design (of solutions) are listed in the table below.

TABLE 1: ISSUES IN e-VOTING

Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-channel access / digital divide • Costs – benefits • Increase turnout and legitimacy • Advanced R&D underway or completed
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verifiability of IT-systems adopted • Security and privacy provisions • Open – closed source • Intuitive multi-modal user interfaces • Mission critical / disaster recovery / failure tolerant backend systems
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variations in participation situations • Main basic voting principles via ICT • Federated systems • ICT modeling of legal processes • Role of third party providers • Standards

E-Participation was seen as a rich area for future exploration, with already positive experiences and concrete gains that have been made in improving the quality of decision-making. The area is wide open in terms of both technology and non-technology research. The main issues in e-Participation identified at the seminar are listed in the table below.

⁷ See the e-Government Good Practice Framework at http://europa.eu.int/egovernment_research/gpf.

TABLE 2: ISSUES IN e-PARTICIPATION

Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-house benefits versus users/ citizens • Positive versus hazards • Elite/ incremental versus divide • Traditional policy cycle for decisions versus online consultations/ debate • Instant evaluation versus ongoing, longitudinal • Aiming for success or experiments
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT-systems adopted not suited/ designed for mass participation • Trust and transparency also at the software part • Log, back-up issues • Scale and innovation in-house and outside
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variations in participation situations • Closed, structured flow versus open, unstructured • Text, voice recognition, visualization • Log files of activities and problems • Transfer of techniques from the off-line participation sphere (dispute resolution)

The potential of further R&D in e-Participation was explored as well during a recent R&D workprogramme planning workshop⁸. Priorities that were defined included 'bottom-up' e-Democracy (starting from citizens initiatives) and new technologies for e-Democracy such as simulation software, information representation and visualization, collaboration technologies. One main issue in this respect remains trust. There needs to be research to understand the public's willingness to develop a remote trusted relationship with government. For example, as regards electronic identification perhaps governments could consider accepting multiple secure identities that suit the general public.

At the e-Democracy seminar of February 2004 former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar suggested to define targets at the European level, for example to use e-Participation to achieve increased interest and participation in the run-up to the European elections of 2009. There is definitely a need for further reflection and suggestions for shared initiatives and target-setting at the European level to give an impetus to best use of ICT-driven innovation for improved democratic decision-making and participation.

⁸ Workshop on the e-Government workprogramme 2005-2006, held 5 May 2004 in Brussels. For report see e-Government R&D website http://europa.eu.int/egovernment_research.