



Editorial Note

Sustainable E-Participation

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Abstract: *What makes eParticipation sustainable? This special issue of JeDEM summarises existing evidence and introduces some authoritative viewpoints on a theme that is gaining relevance and furthering discussion among theorists and practitioners alike. This Issue comprises three invited papers and six refereed articles, the results of which will be briefly presented in this note.*

Keywords: eParticipation, eVoting, eDemocracy, sustainability, evaluation

Acknowledgement: This special issue was made possible in part by a co-funding of the European Commission to the PEP-NET Project, a Thematic Network of the CIP (ICT-PSP) Programme in the area of eParticipation. However, the opinions expressed here are solely ours and do not involve any of the EU institutions. The authors wish to thank Noella Edelmann, John Heaven, Michael Sachs and Judith Schossboeck for their support in this one-off editorial challenge.

The past decade has seen a significant increase in the number, variety and quality of eParticipation trials, particularly in western and southern European countries. The impulse of the European Parliament – to which the so-called Preparatory Action should ultimately be ascribed – and the European Commission’s financial support have been instrumental in establishing what can now be identified as a pan-European community of practice, made up of academia, governments and solution providers from virtually all EU Member States. At the moment, the PEP-NET Thematic Network (<http://pep-net.eu>) and the MOMENTUM Coordination Action (<http://ep-momentum.eu>) – both funded by the European Commission – are the two most prominent “hubs” of this network.

However, on the evaluative side, many projects that were seen through to their conclusion apparently failed to meet expectations. Their most evident limitations are the low number of active participants and the poor impact of these projects’ achievements.

Although it is often taken for granted that ICT-supported political participation will be of increased importance in the future, the question of how to enhance the sustainability of eParticipation projects has not yet been convincingly answered. In times where most European countries have to cope with a difficult financial situation, eParticipation supporters and particularly Public Authority officials are under even more pressure to show that the required resources lead to tangible results and create real value for citizens.

So what makes eParticipation sustainable? This special issue of JeDEM summarises existing evidence and introduces some authoritative viewpoints on a theme that is of increasing relevance and furthering discussion among theorists and practitioners alike. This Issue comprises three invited papers and six refereed articles, the results of which will be presented in the remainder of this note.

There is no single or accepted definition for the sustainability of eParticipation at the moment. In their contribution to this Issue, Maier-Rabler and Huber define it as the “*successful*

enfranchisement of present people – without the disenfranchisement of future generations – to both participate in and influence agenda-setting and decision-making” (p. 132). This echoes pretty much the literature on sustainable development, which leaves room for alternative definitions such as that of Kaufmann et al. (1994): *“The ability of an ecosystem to maintain ecological process and functions, biodiversity, and productivity over time”*. In a legislative or policy-making environment, this can also become *“the ability of a participatory decision-making process to maintain juridical compliance, legitimacy, social value, efficiency and productivity over time”* (Molinari, 2010). A more refined concept that particularly refers to what has been called *“institutional sustainability”* is the possibility of *“embedding”* participation (with or without an e-) in the legal, organisational, and cultural infrastructures of modern governance systems.

In fact, among the lessons learnt over the past 10 years is that without a permanent change in the existing institutional framework, even the best performing eParticipation tool or practice is bound to remain ‘experimental’ or ‘pilot’. In other words, what has to be further explored – both theoretically and empirically – is the set of conditions under which the migration from self-referential to inclusive decision-making does not endanger the stability of the political and administrative environment. Thus, making institutional change an option that is, at least in principle, viable.

The remainder of this note is structured as follows: Section 1 (State of the art) overviews existing literature sources on sustainable eParticipation and discusses the articles in this Issue. Section 2 draws some conclusions and recommendations for future work.

1. State of the art

Nowadays, European eParticipation cases are collected into different databases, most of which are freely accessible on the Internet, such as ePractice.eu, e-participation.net, participedia.org, vitalizing-democracy.org, partizipation.at, e-participation.it and others. While being a relatively novel research domain, a number of international conferences on eDemocracy take place each year across the EU, for example Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK. The number of scientific articles and volumes dedicated to this phenomenon are also steadily increasing. From this *mare magnum* of initiatives, projects and reports, it is quite hard, however, to get an overview of what the real “success stories” of eParticipation in different countries. To quote the title of Chrissafis and Rohen’s contribution to this Issue, if our goal is to move *“from ad hoc experiences towards mass engagement”*, then the essential question we have to answer is *“how the eParticipation field matures over time and what are the challenges and opportunities for mass engagement”*.

The need for coherent evaluation frameworks employing a range of perspectives and methods on the existing trials was first highlighted by Macintosh and Whyte (2008), who also synthesised the sustainability aspect into the following question: *“How does the project impact on other public engagement activities, especially when they also have an online element?”*

In recent years, the MOMENTUM Coordination Action has developed and deployed an eParticipation evaluation methodology that includes sustainability aspects (see Bicking and Wimmer 2008). More recently, Scherer and Wimmer (2010) presented an iterative design cycle for an eParticipation platform that incorporates a *“layered model”* of eParticipation evaluation. User surveys were employed as a method to address further technical improvement needs and expand the frequency and continuity of online visits.

This section is divided into two subsections: the first gives a brief overview of some of the literature that has explored the various dimensions of sustainable eParticipation; the second subsection tries to identify a “golden thread” running through the articles in this Issue – some of which may appear quite divergent or heterogeneous at first glance.

1.1. Review of prior literature

Sustainability is extensively mentioned as an evaluation criterion of eParticipation trials. This is mostly seen as an approach to detecting the barriers to continuity or replication over time of a successfully achieved pilot (Aichholzer et al. 2008, p. 23). The same scholars (pp. 11-12) report that eParticipation in practice is still experimental and characterised by pilot projects, and mostly unsustainable: *“To move towards more sustainable eParticipation which exhibits transparent and explicit participatory decision-making processes implies an appreciation of when it is appropriate to engage with others, an appreciation of who these others should be, and an understanding of which issues need public discussion”* Further, they argue, without commitment from all stakeholders and a better understanding from the elected representatives of what eParticipation can and cannot achieve, eParticipation will not be sustainable. *“This reflects a need for a better understanding of the meaning of quality as applied to eParticipation which, in turn, should allow sustainable public engagement strategies to be investigated”*.

In their analysis of barriers, challenges and needs of eParticipation research, Coleman et al. (2007, p. 29) come to a similar conclusion, pleading for greater engagement and online visibility on the part of politicians and public servants in order to ensure that citizens trust these processes. Finally, there is a need to ensure a connection between government consultations and other online discussions of the same issues: *“Such sustainable eParticipation processes need to address the inter-connections between government consultations and other, nongovernmental, discussion sites on the same policy issues, and eCampaigning (i.e. examining the use of ICT in protest, lobbying, petitioning and other forms of collective action) in general.”*

Finally, Aichholzer and Westholm (2009, p. 12) locate sustainability among the key dimensions to be analysed in evaluating an eParticipation project. Relevant sub-criteria include the following:

- *“Level of key stakeholder support;*
- *Provision of resources and maintenance;*
- *Stakeholder perception of continuity barriers;*
- *Level of institutionalisation of education and training for government officials”.*

The first and third items above coincide with the qualifications of the sustainability criterion in the seminal work by Henderson et al. (2005). In a similar vein, Panoupoulou et al. (2008, p. 13) define the process of sustainability assessment as: *“The detection of operational and policy barriers in order to ensure the continuity of a case without creating any disharmony and imbalance in a system. Consequently, a case may be defined as sustainable if there are substantial possibilities for future development, enhancement or expansion and ways to overcome potential budgetary implications and funding issues”*.

Making reference to the Stockholm Challenge Award¹, the same authors qualify and integrate this definition, by joining the ‘sustainability’ and ‘future development’ concepts: *“In our framework the sustainability and future development criterion focuses mainly on describing the possibilities for sustainable operation and/or future expansion considering both the time and financial perspective and in combination with the detection of operational and policy barriers”*.

To summarise, sustainability of eParticipation seems to be associated mostly with stakeholders’ ownership, which also ensures continuity over time or the possibility to replicate successful one-off trials. This is a challenging requirement *per se*. In fact, experience shows that it is quite hard to ensure an eParticipation process is “owned by” all the stakeholders involved. Moreover, the link between “ownership” and “replication” can by no means be taken for granted, and should be

¹ <http://www.stockholmchallenge.se/evaluation-criteria>

empirically demonstrated, as the number of possible factors influencing sustainability is normally higher and determined by complex interactions.

Thus, assuming a normative viewpoint for a while, we see prior theoretical reflections as leaving partly unattended what the proper means should be to ensure that the ultimate goal of replication is actually achieved. Putting it differently, *“it would be appropriate at this stage to turn the above drivers of sustainability, from evaluation to appraisal criteria: where the notion of ‘appraisal’ refers to the process of assessing, in a structured way, the case for proceeding any further with a proposed method, process or tool for electronic Participation”* (Molinari, 2010).

1.2. Contributions from this Special Issue

As such important drivers of eParticipation, it is only right to start by mentioning the 20 European Commission-funded trial projects implemented in the framework of the three-year (2006-2008) Preparatory Action under the auspices of the European Parliament. Besides the positive impact achieved by individual projects on the legislative and policy making process at national and regional level in 18 Member States, this has also been the first time that a massive deployment of eParticipation tools and real-life demonstrators was seen on the Old Continent. As reported by Thanassis Chrissafis and Mechthild Rohen (pp. 89-90) from DG INFSO-H2 of the European Commission, the preliminary results of this EU initiative are absolutely impressive: about 30 pilot sites, 100,000 citizens and more than 50 public administrations involved, almost all the national parliaments and about 70 MEPs approached and actively engaged. Not to mention the invaluable opportunity made available to find *“the right combinations for building platforms that could be sustained and would not need major upgrades in the near future”* (p. 94).

Thus, the huge public and private investment – approximately 20 million Euros by our calculation – mobilised by this EC intervention, has marked a real and concrete turnaround in laying the technological and infrastructural foundations for sustainable eParticipation, with the clear aim of achieving a massive engagement of European citizens and stakeholders in ICT-driven interaction with democratic institutions. Not a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather a plethora of electronic applications, ranging from discussion fora to petitioning systems, from webcasting to the semantic web, also reflecting the wide variety of thematic domains, political cultures and participatory inspirations that we see as an integral part of the richness of the EU “material Constitution” itself.

One of the three pillars of democratic governance in the Lisbon Treaty – according to Chrissafis and Rohen – is popular participation. To some extent, the European Preparatory Actions have contributed to *“fighting the fog”* (p. 91) on citizens' awareness that there can be a real space of personal engagement for everyone.

However, the institutions of the European Union are not just among the most important supporters regarding development, research and demonstration of eParticipation methodologies and tools – at the same time they put eParticipation into practice. In his article, Romain Badouard (p. 99-110) identifies the IPM – Interactive Policy Making – and the ECC – European Citizens Consultation – as the most relevant and influential initiatives in that direction. Interestingly, these two initiatives are completely different attempts to gather and integrate public feedback in European policy and decision-making processes. Via the Internet portal *Your Voice in Europe*, which can be seen as the heart of IPM, the *“Commission is to carry out the widest possible consultation on its policies, targeting specific sectors of the public on specific topics, and questioning them upstream of the legislative process”* (p. 100). In essence, *Your Voice in Europe* is an operational and ongoing service to the public, contributing to the “standardization” of public consultations by setting up standards for the information provision, the questionnaires and feedback channels.

Evidently, IPM is of great interest for the discussion of sustainable eParticipation. However, where there is light there is shadow, and the flip side of this *eParticipation as a service model* is that the various Directorates General (DG) of the Commission decide which policies are subject to consultations on their own, choosing at the same time which stakeholders are invited to participate.

In purely methodological terms, *Your Voice* follows a rather traditional approach: contributions are collected by email, no online forums are provided and no deliberation between the EC and the invited participants - let alone the general public - is actually foreseen.

In contrast to IPM, the ECC takes “*the online mechanism (...) rather (...) as a communication tool, than as a ‘policy instrument’*” (102). The topic under consideration has been expressed in the question: *What can the EU do to shape our economic and social future in a globalised world?* Citizens of all 27 Member States were invited to deliberatively answer this question, both online and offline. Although one of the project aims was to help a European public to emerge, the consultations were conducted nationwide and the results aggregated ex post, e.g. at a European citizen summit level. However, these limitations which especially applied to the online discussions, were circumvented by some smart pressure groups, who coordinated their efforts via other online forums, mailing lists and the like. Although the results might have been biased in an unrepresentative fashion, they contributed to the emergence of a pan-European public opinion on the issues raised.

While the ECC suffered from many well-known problems of eParticipation pilots – like the low participation rates – it was one of the few democratic experiments to connect citizens directly with the European institutions. The analysis of European eParticipation instruments allows Badouard to identify two prerequisites for the durability of these participatory mechanisms. The first one is *official recognition* – better still, legal definition – of eParticipation tools as formal components of the governance system in place. The second prerequisite could be summarised as the assignment of *weak restrictions* on user participation: “*these mechanisms must also exhibit a certain degree of openness in the format of the procedures that they instigate: the technology must not constrain uses too tightly, and the sites of eParticipation should provide a space where users can freely express their creativity*” (p. 108).

Another interesting attempt at sustainable eParticipation can be found in Estonia. In her paper describing the Estonian eGovernment experience, Hille Hinsberg (pp. 111-118) focuses on citizens’ satisfaction as the ultimate key to sustainable eParticipation. There are three main prerequisites without which eParticipation – sustainable or otherwise – cannot happen: first and foremost is the policy framework, or the presence of institutional (legal and operational) mechanisms that ensure broad access and improved skills among the population. (Note that engaging citizens in drafting legislation and policy documents is not mandatory in Estonia)

A second prerequisite is of course, technology, namely an infrastructure that must be “*foolproof*” – and possibly fun to deal with. Third comes the creation of a community of “*power users*”, who may well not be representative of the 100% of population, yet with their own “*friends and fans*”, like in Web 2.0 communities, can ensure a rich and diverse wealth of ideas, proposals and comments that have a concrete impact on public decision-making. Thus, the core of Hille Hinsberg’s argument is that sustainability means “*painting the big picture, ensuring that any E-Participation project or intervention contributes to the community of E-Participators by providing users with an experience that they would wish to repeat because they feel their investment of time has made a difference*” (p. 111).

E-Participation experiments have not only been organised by governments or institutions of the European Union, but also by other public or civil society organisations. Alfred Hermida (pp. 119-130) analyses the BBC’s Action Network project, also known as “iCan”, which the author considers one of the “*most high profile and ambitious attempts by a public service broadcaster to foster eParticipation through an online civic commons*” (p. 119). iCan started in 2003 and was shut down in 2008. According to Hermida, the main reason for stopping the project was that it did not have the impact it was initiated for – both in terms of number of participants and the level of engagement. “*At the time of its closure, the site had 687 active users in a month. The highest number of active users for any one month was 2,106 in March 2006 – just under 0.00005% of the 45 million registered voters in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2008)*” (pp. 124f.). Hermida suggests that the comparatively low level of engagement was caused by a “*fundamental tension between the BBC’s desire to empower grassroots civic action and the corporation’s historical and entrenched obligations as an*

impartial public service broadcaster governed by a paternalistic and elitist Reithian ethos" (p. 123). Instead of hosting eParticipation platforms in the narrower sense of the word, broadcasters and other public institutions should embrace Web 2.0 approaches *"that enable citizens to engage on different levels and at different times, depending on contexts"* (p. 125).

But however eParticipation projects or services are designed, the question of how a greater level of engagement can be facilitated depends also on the skills of the prospective participants. The goal of increasing political education among the population lies at the centre of Maier-Rabler and Huber's article (p. 131-144), the only one in this Issue that explicitly provides a tentative definition of sustainable eParticipation. (We have already quoted this definition in the introduction) In the Internet era, new media literacy skills and a new participatory culture are shaping the citizens of the 2020 society quite differently from their parents and elder relations. Virtual communities, affinity spaces, e-activism, are all manifestations of a changing spirit of the times, and the democratic institutions of today are somehow responsible *"to engage with the technologically experienced young citizens in these connected affinity spaces in order to trigger motivation and provide participation experience"* (p. 136). Putting this statement into context, it may sound more or less like this: if we want to move from *"mass participation"* – where individual positions are grouped and quantified as in opinion polls – to *"individual participation"* – where each and every opinion counts by itself – then every citizen of the digital society has the constitutional right to be endowed with the skills and the tools of eParticipation, and *"trained"* on how to effectively use them.

So far, the number of active participants has been treated as one of the criteria for measuring the impact and sustainability of eParticipation trials. The implication of this thesis is that only if a considerable and representative portion of the population uses the opportunity to engage politically via the Internet can eParticipation unfold its potential to improve democracy as we know it. But what if this perspective were inappropriate to assess the benefits of Computer Mediated Communication in modern societies? This question is raised by Ben Li (p. 145-161), who looks at eParticipation from an innovation theory point of view. The addition of an *"e"* – Li concludes after having analysed three international non-profit organizations, the Mozilla Foundation, the Apache Software Foundation, and the American Registry for Internet Numbers (ARIN) – is neither modifying nor improving democracy. Instead, the *"'e-' provides another decision-making toolkit that may be used in place of democracy to achieve similar substantial outcomes via processes absent from the democratic toolkit"* (p. 158). According to Li, this toolkit enabled the Mozilla Foundation to develop one of the most successful web browsers (Firefox), now used by 300 million people, through collecting the feedback of just 14,000 users who proposed changes on discussion lists.

Li emphasises that he does not seek *"to profoundly or generally revise the core concept of democracy"* (p. 158). However, conceptualizing eParticipation as a radical instead of incremental innovation opens up new perspectives and may initiate debates off the beaten track. *"Democratic decision-making implementations routinely expend more resources to produce fewer, less durable, and less timely stakeholder interactions (...) than 'e-' in the three projects studied. Election candidates routinely expend \$10¹ (several dollars) per elector every several years to collect a few bits of preference information on which to make wide-reaching prospective policy decisions about topics unknown in advance, usually to great elector dissatisfaction. The "e-" systems studied expended up to \$10² (pennies) per eligible stakeholder close to moments when decisions are informed and required, generating little stakeholder objection, without reducing sophisticated preferences to 'yes' or 'no'"* (p. 156).

In short, Li's conclusion is that the *"'e-' responds better to at least some types of stakeholder needs in time, cost, responsiveness, and quality"* (p. 156).

Paul Johnston (p. 162-169) from Cisco (Internet Business Solutions Group), does not believe that staring at the sheer number of eParticipants would lead us anywhere either. According to him, we might have come to an end with eParticipatory practices in Europe – at least in the way we have got to know them so far. This is because of a sort of 'prisoner's dilemma' that both policy makers and citizens face. In Johnston's own words, *"Governments have struggled to get the mass participation they would like and where significant participation has occurred, have had difficulty integrating it effectively into existing decision-making processes. Citizens have been unsure what*

to make of this new apparent openness and where they have engaged, have found it hard to know what difference their input made” (p. 162).

As in the prisoner's case, it's lack of information that makes a suboptimal equilibrium appear. One possible way to solve this impasse is therefore to add more transparency to the whole process, Johnston argues. Indeed, technology can help do so, particularly some of the argument visualisation tools that are now becoming widespread – especially in the UK experience. Not only could these be used to publicise the delicate and complex aspects of policy making to a wider audience of politically inexperienced, yet ICT literate, citizens, but the implementation of the tools would also help clarify to policy makers “where citizens stand” (p. 166) in relation to any specific government's proposal. *“The challenge for governments is to open up the whole of the policy process and be prepared to flag up very clearly and explicitly the difference citizen input made. The challenge for e-democracy advocates is to convince policymakers that their ideas can improve the existing policy process rather than simply generating more inputs into it” (p. 162).*

The problem of aggregating citizens' preferences to make the policy process more transparent and the popular participation more effective is also touched upon by Cyril Velikanov's paper (p. 170-183) – sixth in a row for his prolific 2010 – where he specifically tackles with the theoretical issues of self-regulated (i.e. unfacilitated) mass online deliberation when several linguistic communities are asynchronously involved in a mediation or dispute resolution. Velikanov's considerations, by his own admission, *“remain mostly speculative, pending appropriate software realisation and testing in a large scale pilot project” (p.182).* The whole body of reflections from this author, however, testifies the need for a meditated evaluation of behavioural procedures – alongside individual incentives and barriers to participation – starting in the early stages of participatory processes' design.

That sustainable eParticipation requires the integration of citizens in the policy process is also the conclusion of Jose Rodrigues Filho's (p. 184-193) work. The author analyses the implications of a case study on eVoting in Brazil. In a country where voting is mandatory by law, and thus voter turnout cannot be used as evidence of the degree of citizen participation, Filho argues that technological innovation *per se* does not impact on those factors such as vote buying and political corruption, which are responsible for the general disengagement of (particularly) the poorest and most uneducated people from a persistently “opaque” community life.

While it may seem odd that a critique of eDemocracy comes right from the country that is said to have pioneered and disseminated participatory budgeting some years ago, we are nevertheless convinced that the risk of “loose coupling” – or instrumentally adopting the most *en vogue* (e-) participatory techniques, just for the sake of visibility and reputation – is another big risk preventing a “healthy” diffusion of good practice examples to help solve crucial policy and/or legislative *impasses* in real-life communities and societies.

To sum up, the fact that eParticipation is a young research domain is also reflected by the high variance of the contributions received to this Issue, resulting from several projects undertaken in Europe and worldwide to develop, implement and use eParticipation applications in many different contexts. Thus, our attempt to highlight their relevance to the sustainability debate does not make justice of those valuable reflections, and the readers of this Journal are cordially invited to turn their attention to the individual papers to get the full picture of all their possible implications.

A number of prerequisites of sustainable eParticipation have been introduced and discussed:

- A favourable policy and legislative framework (Chrissafis and Rohen, Hinsberg);
- Official recognition from the public decision-makers (Badouard);
- Efficient (Velikanov) and transparent (Johnston) procedures for the aggregation and visualisation of user preferences;
- Trust building on the whole process (Rodrigues Filho);

- A suitable ICT infrastructure (Hinsberg, Hermida) posing weak constraints on users' behaviour (Badouard) and making the most out of the inputs (Li);
- A community of active (Hinsberg) and skilled (Maier-Rabler and Huber) citizens;
- A participatory culture among the population (Li, Maier-Rabler and Huber).

As Guest Editors of JeDEM, we are confident that our stone thrown in the pond may turn further attention on the theoretical and pragmatic aspects of eParticipation impact and sustainability in the near future.

2. Conclusion

So what can we conclude from the above discussion? We pretty much share the view that for a number of reasons – from the persistent financial crisis to the relative lack of impact of previous trials – eParticipation may undergo significant changes in the years to come. These may have little or nothing to do with the progress of technological developments and more with the recognition of the dilemmas and contradictions that have accompanied the previous phase of development and implementation: mass vs. individual participation, informal vs. formal participation, participation vs. representation and bottom up vs. top down.

These opposites are not alternatives but poles inducing the required social energy to give birth to democratic innovations. And the need for these innovations is not specifically caused by computer and internet mediated communication, but has to be seen as a core challenge for modern societies adapting to changing internal and external conditions.

However, we believe that the “e” is not just a redundant prefix but works as a Trojan horse smuggling the participatory spirit into political and administrative areas which proved resistant in recent decades. By doing so, eParticipation helps public administrations transform themselves into more transparent and cooperative organizations, which seems to be the only way to rise to the challenge of meeting the expectations of more state-provided services with ever decreasing resources.

One encouraging feature of the current European and worldwide scenario that was only marginally touched upon in this note, is the plethora of new and independent bottom-up eParticipation initiatives that are being pushed by civil society, voluntary organisations and NGOs, particularly in those countries where representative democracy is ailing (not to mention some plebiscitary variants of it). And also for the third sector the new possibilities of cooperative technologies stimulate and revive the participatory impetus.

eParticipation is still an experimental field and – especially within public administration – the unfolding of its innovative potential often depends on individual advocates and early adopters. This underpins the necessity for an international eParticipation network like PEP-NET, which enables practitioners to exchange experiences, to connect solution providers and consultants with users, and to help the scientific community make progress on eParticipation research. If taxpayers' money is to continue to make a real difference somehow, we dare say that future allocations of European funding should focus more on two interrelated aspects: how public sector demand for eParticipation solutions can be sustained, and how bottom-up experiments can be structured in such a way that they can be brought closer to the market over the long-term.

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