# Citizen participation in the digital environment

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# 1    Introduction

According to the European Commission (2012), many people today are losing interest and confidence in the governmental process. At the same time, public apathy and dissatisfaction are also apparent through decreasing turnout rates at elections and party memberships, which further lead to representatives are elected by a minority of the citizen and to a feeling of loss of ownership of the democratic process (Panapoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2009). In this context, citizens increasingly demand greater transparency and accountability from the government, and favor public participation in the shaping of policies that affect them (OECD, 2001). Governments have to find solution to prevent this negative tendency of development in order to improve the efficiency, acceptance and legitimacy of political processes (Sanford & Rose, 2007). Information and communication technology (ICT) such as chat technologies, discussion forums and blogs can make it possible to enhance traditional participation procedures by electronic means. The concept of electronic Participation (E-Participation) uses ICT to reach a wider audience and increase the citizen participation (Tambouris, Kalampokis & Tarabanis, 2008).

This paper focuses on the question whether the E-participation is the appropriate tool to engage citizen in the policy making process and to overcome the progressing development in politic. This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the concept of citizen participation with its different types and the reasons for disengagement and shows benefits of citizen participation. Section 3 presents the concept of E-Participation and discusses the potentials and limitations of E-Participation. Finally, section 4 shows a practical case of E-Participation and identifies lessons learned from this case, while section 5 concludes the paper.

# 2    The concept of citizen participation

Participation can be defined as the ability of citizens to provide input and influence outcomes with regard to issues that concern them (Ona, 2013). To explain the concept of citizen participation, we need a common understanding of citizenship comprising of three core aspects of rights, responsibilities/duties and participation (Hall, 2007).

A citizen as a holder of rights can be viewed as a consumer or a service user, who has the right to receive public services. The citizen requires a certain level of customer service and expects effective and efficient public service. An example of a citizen's rights would be public services such as welfare or health benefits. The citizen with responsibilities or duties is a relatively passive agent, who accepts the norms of behavior or joins in the actions required by

the public administrations. In this case the citizen would be complying with legal requirements such as paying taxes and applying for licenses (Hall, 2007). The participative citizen is one who actively undertakes in political life through a variety of mechanism like public discussion and debate. In this case the citizen is "part of the processes of politics" and public concerns, needs, and values are integrated in governmental and corporate decision making (Creighton, 2005). The participative activities range from membership and active work in political parties, to individual awareness of offerings from public administration like information and discussion events, demonstrations, submission of suggestions in planning process and participation in election (Albrecht et al., 2008).

According to these three aspects of citizenship, Macintosh (2004) suggests three levels of participation in policy making: information, consultation and active participation (see Figure 1). The first one is a one-way information flow, in which governments produce and deliver information for use by citizens. Consultation is a two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback on policy issues identified, managed and defined by government. Participation is a relation based on partnership with governments in which citizens themselves define the process and content of policy making.
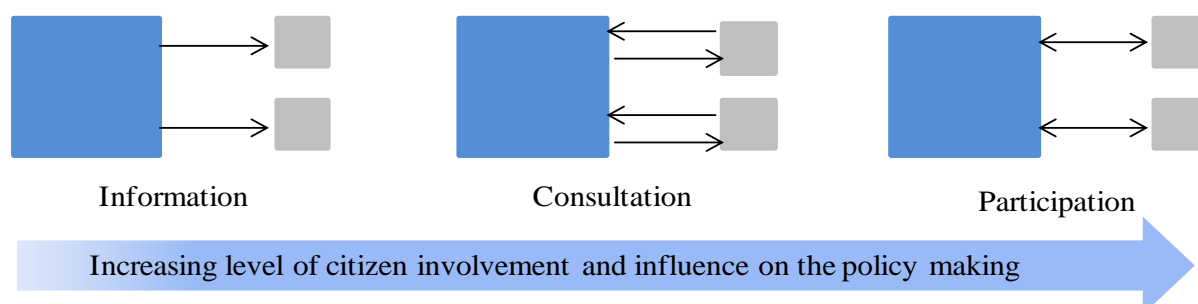


Figure 1: Defining Information, consultation and participation
Source: Own representation, based on OECD (2009), p. 23.

To explain the citizen participation more in detail, Hall (2007) identifies four different types of participation. *Disengaged citizens* are able but unwilling to participate in policy. Indicators for the increasingly disengagement are the declining voter turnout at elections and decreasing memberships in political parties all over in Europe. The most extreme case are the apathetic citizens, which are unwilling to engage, aren't interested neither in voting nor in expression their opinions or in interaction with the government. Whereas the cynical citizens can be seen as more positively, because the cynical behavior assumes that they critically scrutinize the policy making process. The *expert citizens* are recognized as such by virtue of their own experience and they use their own knowledge, skills and strategic judgment to influence others and build up networks. Their aims are to make effective partnerships with politicians, interest groups or media (Li & Marsh, 2008). *Activist citizens* are those involved in

conventional politics, namely, those who are currently engaged in organizations characterized by politics or trade-union activity and use new technologies to initiates or organize demonstrations. The *excluded citizens* are willing but unable to participate for a variety of reasons such as cultural or language barriers, disability or socio-economic status, e.g. lower income groups, older people, people in rural areas or migrants (Hall, 2007). In this paper, we focus on the disengaged citizens and the following section describes the reasons for disengagement and discuss benefits to improve the level of citizen participation.

## 2.1 Political disengagement and participative activities

According to a survey of the OECD (2009), 25 governments report a number of various motivation factors for disengaged citizenship (see Figure 2). Over three-quarters of the respondents say that the lack of interest in politics is the most important reasons for not participate in policy making. Just under a half of the respondents remark that the low trust of the citizen in the use of their input in the policy making process is also an important motivation factor. Over a third of the respondents identify legitimate reasons like that the citizens don't have time to spare to burdensome political meetings and discussion. Another motivation factor for disengaged citizens are that they don't see a personal gain in participating, which a quarter of the respondents believe. Another explanation for the disengagement of citizens is the free-rider syndrome, which states that the citizens know that even without their participation, the political decision are made (Komito, 2005), which also 14 percent of the respondents mention as an important factor. Komito (2005, p. 40) also points out that many people are happy enough with the actual policy making and don't see the need to be engaged, he calls this phenomenon "good enough governance". This is also mentioned in the OECD survey, wherein 5 percent of the respondents mention this problem.
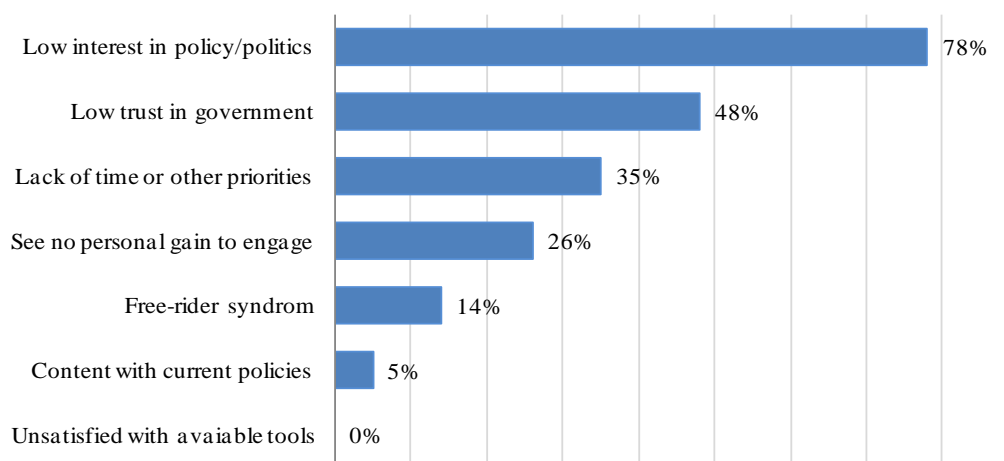


Figure 2: Reasons of citizens not to engage in policy making processes

Source: Own representation, based on OECD (2009), p. 49.

Initiate participative activities has also benefits to the government. The main point is the increasing quality of policy outcomes and the leveraging of the knowledge and resources. Through a participation process, both government and citizen can learn from each other and this result in better outcomes at lower costs by ensuring the more efficient use of public funds (Tambouris, Kalampokis & Tarabanis, 2008). Moreover, the citizens have better knowledge evolving their needs and can deposit this in order to get also better outcomes (OECD, 2009). Citizen participation has not only efficient but also social reasons. By participating, the level of compliance and trust in the government increase, because it leads to a high ownership and transparency of the democratic process and the citizens are prepared to accept and legitimate political decisions (OECD, 2009).

To participate has also advantages for the citizens. It provides a clear move to decentralization of the government, so that the citizen can shape politics by their own and can contribute their ideas, opinions and concerns (Van Dijk, 1999). So the strong top-down strategies are given up and Leadbeater (1999, p. 224) calls this process the "self-governance". Moreover, the citizen participation leads to a truer and more transparent democracy, because it is an enhancement of availability of information. By reason of democracy is about the citizen choice, participation enables to engage in the long-run in the decision making process, not only on the election date (May, 2002). In the next section we get an understanding of the concept of E-Participation and discuss whether this tool is the proper opportunity to enhance the level of participation.

## 3    The concept of E-Participation

E-Participation can be subordinated to the overall topic of E-Government, which compromises the redesign of internal and external administrative processes between government and citizen through the use of ICT (Sanford & Rose, 2007). In addition to that, E-Participation is an integral part of the subsumable concept of E-democracy. E-democracy focuses on the engagement of citizen and is characterized by its use of ICT to involve and to support citizen to the democratic decision making process (Macintosh, 2004). This process can be divided into two distinct areas: E-Voting and E-Participation. The former is viewed as a technological issue and the electronic process at the voting date, whereas E-Participation is the use of ICT to support the information provision and top-down engagement even during the election period (Tambouris et al., 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the connection between the different areas.
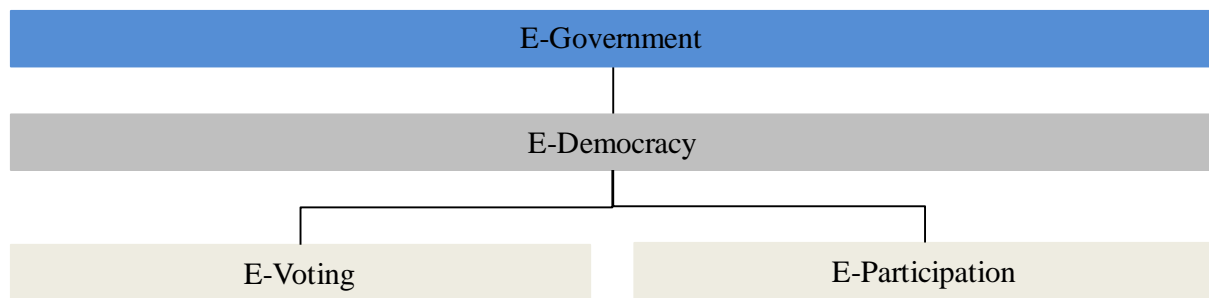
Figure 3: Overview of the field of E-Government

Source: Own representation.

E-Participation offers different communication channels to engage citizen and they can be divided into Government-to-Citizen (G2C), Citizen-to-Government (C2G) and Citizen-to-Citizen (C2C). G2C focuses on the service delivery to citizens as clients and also on requiring suggestions, opinions and critics from citizens (Bruns & Swift, 2011) and is related to information and consultation aspects of Macintosh (2004). Examples include social media pages of politicians, websites with publication of draft laws, search engines with contact details of public bodies, broadcasting of political meetings and web-blogs for debate on public budget or construction projects. According to C2G, citizens communicate their ideas or complaints via online portals, chats or electronic petition (Grimme Institute, 2011), which are initiated by government and this can be seen as the consultation aspect of Macintosh (2004). In contrast to that, C2C don't have a direct participation of the government and it can't ensure that the outcomes are accepted into the policy making process (Bruns & Swift, 2011). Citizens network with each other and exchange knowledge, information and views, e.g. in blogs and on social media pages, organize demonstration or share digital handbills (Grimme Institute, 2011). The C2C communication can be compared with the participation aspect of Macintosh (2004).

Derived from the different communication channels, the overarching objective of the E-Participation is to reach a wider audience to enable a broader participation and also a deeper and deliberative debate. In addition, E-Participation aims to provide information in a format that is more accessible and understandable and fits to the diverse technical and communicative skills of the citizens (Macintosh, 2004). In the next section, we discuss whether E-Participation can meet these objectives and whether it is a solution for the declining citizen participation.

## 3.1 Discussion on E-Participation

On the hand, E-Participation is an easier and faster opportunity of approaching, connecting and interacting with the government. It is uncomplicated to engage a wider audience in the

policy making process, because the citizen aren't depend on the time or space, they can state their personal opinion and ideas whenever and wherever they want (May, 2002). Furthermore, E-Participation uses technology and communication tools, such as chat technologies, blogs and online portals, like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which are usual and popular in the group of the disengaged citizen. So in this point, E-Participation meets the requirement to use a format, which is understandable and fits to the skills of its user. Through participative initiatives, governments provide more information and are willing to communicate more frequently to the citizen. This leads to an increased level of trust and confidence, which reduce a reason for declining participation by fostering the engagement in policy making processes (Komito, 2005). All this potentials of E-Participation can be summarize in the statement, that there is a higher probability to expand the motivation of citizens to engage in the policy making process.

But on the other hand, E-Participation has also limitations to enhance the level of participation. It must be focus on the fact, that E-Participation has the potential to reach a wider audience, but it can't overcome the widespread apathy and can't awake interest in politics. May (2002) determines that the use of ICT enhance the already existing networks, but it can't cause a development of new forms of communication and participation. Regarding to the types of participation that we explain in section 2, it can be stated that E-Participation only works to support activist citizens who are already interested in politics and can facilitates a deeper involvement, but not to awake interest to the disengaged citizens. So it is a mistake to think that everyone is interest in politics and that ICT can awake this interest, you also need a specific audience. Furthermore, Panapoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis (2009) also negatively evaluate the objective of E-Participation to reach a wider audience. Because of focusing on a large audience, the risk is high to generalize the initiative so that it isn't influential and it only employs a one-way communication. On the other hand, the fewer the people targeted in an E-Participation initiative, the more specific this initiative may be, allowing more active participation.

Another important point is that the introduction of new technologies like ICT in politics not automatically produces a political chance (May, 2002). According to this argument, governments initiate participative activities only to make the public service more efficient instead of use the democratic potential of ICT such as find new and innovative solutions together with the citizen (May, 2002). So this can lead to the mistrust of citizen, because their ideas aren't take in the policy making process and as a result the willingness to participate

will decline in the future. In addition, Komito (2005) focuses on the wider access and increasing usage of ICT in the daily life of the citizen and points out that it would be wrong to think the higher amount of usage of ICT in the daily life, the higher the amount of community and involvement. Concerning to the long-term effect of E-Participation initiatives, Panapoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, (2009) argue that government launch initiatives only for a limited period until the problem is solve, so that the citizens drift away, because they see no personal gain to join in another project.

To sum up the discussion whether E-Participation is the right tool to overcome the enhancing level of citizen participation, it can be pointed out that E-Participation has the potential to reach a wider audience through the use of ICT, but on the other hand it would be a mistake to think that E-Participation can awake interests in politic. The discussion shows that E-Participation is very helpful to facilitate the activist citizens and to deepen their political involvement.

## 4 A practical case of E-Participation – VoicE

There are a growing number of examples of government organizations innovatively using ICT to provide policy information and to motivate engagement on national, regional and local level (Macintosh, 2004). In this paper, we focus on European E-Participation initiatives, because the European policy is often criticized to be not transparent (Scherer et al., 2009). A lot of European citizen are unaware of the European Union (EU) policy and the citizen participation is as well limited on the European level such as through language barriers, the lack of knowledge about European legislative policy making and the lack of information about the impact of the EU in their national legislative (Scherer et al., 2009). This section presents a regional model, VoicE, for E-Participation in the EU and evaluates if VoicE is an appropriate means to attract citizens for European politics and motivate them to participate in political discussions and shows lessons learned from this case.

VoicE is a trial project which implements a regional model of E-Participation in the EU. It is established as an internet platform with the objective to promote the dialog between citizens in Baden-Württemberg, Germany and in Valencia, Spain and policy makers from the European Parliament, the Assembly of Regions and other European and regional institutions. The project focuses on the policy field of consumer protection in the EU such as energy, consumer market watch and telecommunication (Scherer & Wimmer, 2010). The platform provides general information on the topic of consumer protection and a news section, a polling function ("Question of the month") and a discussion forum ("Civil forum") are also

included. For the distribution of content, the platform uses RSS feeds, Twitter messages, social bookmarking and newsletters (Scherer & Wimmer, 2010).

Concerning to a survey from Scherer and Wimmer (2010), the VoicE platforms was widely recognized, but the majority of the users only visit the platform short-time. The platform focused on a very wide audience, so there were strong efforts to promote the platform. The online marketing such as through E-Mails and newsletters turned out as the best form to reach the citizen in Baden-Württemberg and in Valencia. The target group was heterogeneous and had diverse age, social background or interests. So the platform wasn't customized for a specific group, which had a negative impact of the attractiveness of VoicE.

Regarding to the offered features of the platform, the "Question of the month", which is a way of G2C communication and is a monthly changing question to collect the citizen opinions by answering with yes/no to this specific question, was the most frequently used application. Social bookmarking and Twitter messages were rather unused and also the "Civil forum", which is the C2C core component of the platform and enables the users to write their opinion and exchange views divided in different topics, was only employed by the minority of the users. So the active participation was too low in comparison to the platform visit. The users missed specific, interactive functionalities and service so the forum wasn't attractive enough for them, e.g. a possible solution is to expand the forum with a kind of petitioning tool. Another explanation of the few forum usage is the fact that the politicians didn't answer or comment in the forum, so this few reactions of the politicians discouraged the citizens to participate in further discussions. Vice verse the few reactions of the citizen participation discouraged the politicians to answer. The politicians justified their behavior through a lack of time to answer. So the project could not achieve the objective that the users voice was really heard in the policy making process.

According to Macintosh (2004) different aspects of citizenship (see section 2), the platform focused on the aspect of information and participation. The VoicE platforms aimed to inform the citizen about the EU, its functions, the EU's influence on national legislative and the decision making process on the European level. In general, the high information factor was underlined by the majority of the user, because of the easy understandable and up-to-date texts in the news section. VoicE has increased the transparency of EU politics by providing simple explanations of the EU legislative procedures, the institutions and consumer protection issues as well as by publishing the latest news on these issues. However, a point of criticism

was that the texts were too long and that the decision making process wasn't transparent and more visible, because it didn't become clear to the user, which information or decisions of the ongoing process are available and where impact or at least influence can be achieved.

According to the participation aspect, the usage of the forum was too low, nevertheless it can be pointed out that the majority of the comments were short (consisting of 3-4 sentences) and almost there were no nonsense comments in the forum. Thus, the discussion consisted of individual positions, put opposite each other or underlined a position and the level of agreement was high. The intervention of the moderators were very good, because they only explained contents, summarized or motivated to questions. But the platform didn't provide an argumentation visualization of options and no technical support to summarize comments. Most users are rather unsatisfied with the influence they reached in the legislative process. They didn't think that their contributions will be further considered. The majority of the user didn't expect higher achievements and they saw the citizens' forum and polls to be a too low medium importance for the politicians.

For further E-Participation projects, we discuss lessons learned from this case. The project shows that it has the potential to help the citizen to recognize the direct effect of European politics on their own life and to attract the citizens' interest. But the citizen participation is very low, so the participation process has to be linked directly with the decision making at parliament, so that the citizen recognize that their voice will be heard. VoicE pursues the one-size-fits-all strategy and focuses on a heterogeneous target group which is hard to reach such a diverse group with no particular address. But for the future it would be better to concentrate on a smaller group, e.g. focus only on younger citizens. Moreover, it is very important that the ICT fits to the target group and the tools have to be adapted on the skills of the target group as well as on the participation process. But the use of new technologies doesn't ensure user participation in spite of how nice ore easy to use they are. The topic of the discussion is essential for the amount of participation, so citizens have to directly concerned by the topics in such platforms. The project also shows that low citizen participation results from the low impact of participation of politicians. So for future E-Participation initiatives politicians have should be trained to comment and moderate in discussion forums. The key for a successful e-participation initiative is that there are well-defined participative processes and that outcomes have an impact. In VoicE, this couldn't be achieved because politicians didn't include users' contributions in their decision making processes.

# 5 Conclusion

This paper provides an understanding of the citizen participation and shows the trend of political disengagement and discuss whether the E-Participation is a possible solution to motivate the citizen to engage in the policy making process. We identify three aspects of citizenship: information, consultation and participation and classify types of participation in disengaged, expert, activist and excluded citizens. The former are able but unwilling to participate because of low interest in the policy, low level of trust in the governmental process and other factors such as a lack of time to participate.

We show that both sides, government and citizens, can benefit by participating as a result of increasing the quality, efficiency and legitimacy of the political outcomes. We discuss whether government should initiate E-Participation to overcome the political disengagement, but it turns out to be not the appropriate tool to increase the level of participation. E-Participation as the usage of ICT can't overcome the political apathy and disinterest; it is only good to motivate activists but not disengaged citizen. So the implementation of E-Participation don't change the political process, this is also confirmed in the practical case of the platform VoicE. To implement a successful E-Participation project, it is essential to focus on the integration of ICT in the political process and on the impact of citizens' ideas in this process.

To take a critical eye to this paper, it must be mentioned that the case of VoicE isn't up to date, so it should be analyzed whether the lessons learned already put into practice and whether the E-Participation development make further progress. Moreover, the case only focuses on the European level, so it would also be interesting to compare the case with, e.g. American E-Participation initiatives. Further research includes also the identification of the disengaged citizen concerning their demographic characteristics and ICT usage. To conclude the paper, E-Participation isn't the miracle cure to solve the political apathy; it is only a good expansion to the traditional democratic process.

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