Web Platform for Public E-Participation Management: A Case Study

Carlos Quental, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Viseu, Portugal
Luis Borges Gouveia, University Fernando Pessoa, Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The e-participation can be considered an area under constant focus. This paper presents a brief analysis of e-participation and e-democracy, and proposes a platform for electronic participation based on social media principles, designed to gather teachers and unions in a shared deliberative space. Interaction and collaboration are supported through questions, answers, suggestions, comments, votes, surveys and live debates. This proposal is intended to narrow the communication gap between teachers and unions and encourage teachers to become involved and participate in educational debates and important topics about the profession. The platform presented enables effective participation in formal and informal decision-making processes via the Internet, either as standalone or widgets with full integration into any Website. It is under constant development and will be improved along with this project. The actors in this study were chosen from the National Federation of Teachers due to its representativeness regarding associate teachers and provide an opportunity to assess the platform potential to support participation in a union context. The platform will be used in a trade union linked to teachers of several grade levels to understand their participation in this organization.

Keywords: Digital Mediation, E-Democracy, E-Participation, Teachers, Trade Unions, Union 2.0, Unionism, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

The world has recently witnessed many manifestations in several world countries, the so-called Arab spring, which were boosted by the social networks, and became powerful enough to even lead to the downfall of governments; one such discussion is provide by Farivar (2011) who presents some cases where Internet provides the means to change. For example, WikiLeaks embarrassed several states in the world with the disclosure of secret data (Domscheit-Berg & Klopp, 2011). In Europe, citizens’ manifestations are organized through social networks, which became the main communication vehicle for people, increasingly disappointed with politicians and policies undertaken by governments. Spontaneous use of Twitter and Facebook, as

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well mobile location services, become usual tools for demonstrators and for those who want to protest or just make their own position.

The widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) through Public Administration and citizens led to the development of a more immediate relation between government and civil society, which has also created a new field of social conflict and disputes due to the expansion of citizen’s participation, involvement and social control over the government activities. These issues are already discussed in the context of information society and a networked society by several authors, as the case of Benkler (2006).

The definition of democracy involves many disagreements between the defenders of direct democracy and representative democracy. The direct democracy defenders are considered optimists whereas the representative democracy defenders are pessimists. For the former, the ICT are responsible for revolutionizing the known democratic models since they allow citizens to participate anywhere, on any subject, thus enabling the direct democracy, a decision-making system about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved (Held, 2006, p.4). For the latter, the representative democracy is the best option, as not everyone can participate, leading to the old and most discussed question of digital divide (Benko, 2008).

With the technological revolution, citizens could participate in the public, political and social affairs, and thus, the difficulties inherent in the direct democracy would be overcome. Yet, despite all the technological possibilities that enable an ongoing involvement of citizens in decision making, the direct democracy is hardly adopted by states. The governments insist on not changing their representative structures to revolutionize the use of Internet in the democratic processes, which further increases citizens’ disappointment towards the politicians and their policies. As a result, citizens are becoming uninterested in choosing their representatives, as depicted in Figure 1 about the last elections for the Portuguese Presidency of the Republic, European parliament and Portuguese parliament, which interestingly contrasts with the considerable increase in the real schooling rate, shown in Figure 2. Citizens today clearly more educated, are disillusioned with politics and politicians, and it is necessary to motivate them. ICT can have an important role in public participation, with emphasis on e-participation.

The e-participation is one of the forms of e-democracy presented in the literature, i.e., the use of ICTs for the citizen’s participation in the public administration. It is a form of direct participation. However, an administrative culture of great governance quality is critical to the success of e-participation initiatives. Although obvious conflicts exist regarding the impact of the e-democracy on the e-Government (e-Gov) and e-participation, the e-participation brings great hopes in the community revitalization and promotion of social changes (Girish, Gulati, Yates, & Tawileh, 2010). According to these authors voice and accountability is a prerequisite for e-participation to be effective. Ann Macintosh (2008) suggests that there is a direct link between the democratic reforms and e-participation, although studies in non-democratic countries are not known.

In this study we will use and adapt the Liberopinion platform\(^1\) (explained in e-participation platform section) to the context of the trade unions. Currently, the Liberopinion platform consists of two applications, iLeger, and Governmeter, which is intended to monitor the performance of governmental activity (A. Sousa, Agante, & Gouveia, 2010). In summary, Governmeter is a web application based on the principles of e-participation, specifically designed to monitor and discuss, objectively and independently, the government activity and new laws at national, regional or local level. In a first stage, Governmeter is mainly focused on three aspects: the evolution of conjuncture indicators, the government objectives and government measures. With this application community members will find a place for civilized and structured debate about questions such as: how is the country evolving in different areas (economy, health care, education, justice) in light of the corresponding key statistical indicators? Are
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