E-Participation and Deliberation in the European Union: The Case of Debate Europe

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ABSTRACT

Civic online participation garnered much interest during the last decade relative to the transformation of the concept of democracy in a move from representative to participatory. In the European Union (EU), both the types and the number of online opportunities for citizen empowerment have diversified tremendously with the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT). The present study undertakes an in-depth research of Debate Europe, an online deliberation mechanism initiated in 2008 by the European Commission. A quantitative and qualitative content analysis was carried out in order to examine thoroughly the contributions received from posters for the two most popular discussion threads on the English-language portal in the 2009 EP electoral year. The empirical evidence allowed for the identification of participation dynamics based on two dimensions: interactivity and rationality. Findings suggest that such moderated discussions advanced high interactivity and rationality that could provide valuable input at the EU level. While the prerequisites for a transition from micro-public spheres to transnational civic engagement exist, this is done only partially due to the lack of an adequate infrastructure to feedback opinions into institutional decision-making mechanisms in the EU.

Keywords: Content Analysis, e-Participation, European Union, Participatory Democracy, Public Deliberation

INTRODUCTION

The development of electronic government (e-government) redefined the standards of democratic principles such as access to information or transparency of governmental activities. In light of these rapid changes, the idea of participating online gained more and more ground as soon as personal computers and broadband connection became more accessible. The Internet, allowing “a level of reciprocity and engagement that would be difficult and costly for government institutions to initiate off-line” (Tomkova, 2009, p. 4), also provided new mechanisms and innovative ways of communicating to a wider public.

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This paradigm shift, referred to as the ‘digital-era governance’ (Dunleavy et al., 2006), has influenced significantly not only the way in which politics is conducted, but also the expectations of the governed. Deliberation has become a key tenet of contemporary liberal democracies and is believed to have an emancipatory effect, “permitting citizens to develop a shared logic in relation to the issue at hand” (Niemeyer, 2011, p. 107). It is often seen as the antidote to manipulation based on symbolic politics as defined by Edelman (1985). In the EU, the wider engagement of citizens in processes of policy-shaping and policy-making was initially linked to improving public service delivery; later on, it was connected to the idea of diminishing the gap between the governed and the governors and addressing the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ (Follesdal & Hix, 2005). While there is no agreement over the definition of ‘democratic deficit’, Levinson argues that a democratic deficit occurs “when ostensibly democratic organizations or institutions in fact fall short of fulfilling what are believed to be the principles of democracy” (2007, p. 860).

There is no agreement in the literature as to the best form of deliberation. Paradoxically, the evidence in support of macro-level deliberative processes comes from the so-called ‘micro-publics’ or small deliberative groups (Niemeyer, 2011). The EU offers one of the interesting institutional designs for experimenting with the implementation of large-scale and transnational deliberative processes. As a multi-level governance structure, the EU has been at the forefront of this digital transformation by setting standards for public service delivery via online means in the 1990s. In addition to increasing efficiency and reducing the operational costs, the drive towards computer-mediated communication was principled on the belief that the ICT can facilitate democratic governance (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Radu, 2009; Radu, 2010). A wide range of recent EU documents have recently pointed to the need for strengthening electronic participation (e-participation) through transnational deliberations and discussion fora. Between 2000 and 2007, 544 online consultations were organized in the EU (Quittkat & Finke, 2008, p. 207). As of 2008, a moderated consultation initiative of the European Commission available in 24 languages - entitled Debate Europe - became popular in the period running up to the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections.

This study explores the Debate Europe discussions with a view to comparing the leverage given to the different dimensions of deliberative interactions as part of this initiative. Moreover, the analysis of the discussion content allows for putting into perspective the broader implications of citizen engagement in deliberations mediated by the use of ICT in a transnational environment. The first part of this article scrutinizes the theoretical arguments for the extent to which there is a transition from micro-public spheres to an EU-wide “public of publics” observable in e-participation initiatives. The second part is dedicated to providing the context for the development of the Debate Europe initiative. The research methodology based on content analysis is described in section three, followed by a discussion of the findings and of their implications. The final part concludes and briefly outlines possible directions for further investigating e-participation in the EU.

FROM THE ‘MICRO-PUBLIC SPHERES’ TO THE NEW ‘PUBLIC OF PUBLICS’

Deliberative democracy is understood as a balance between political equality and deliberation, which allows the citizens to “conscientiously raise and respond to competing arguments so as to arrive at considered judgments about the solutions to public problems” (Fishkin, 2009, p. 17). Stemming from the political ideal of a type of democracy that is process-dependent, its deliberative form assumes that citizens and their representatives are actively seeking to present each other acceptable arguments and justifications for the actions they take with the goal of convincing the others of their reason-
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