Chapter VIII

The E-mancipation of the Citizen and the Future of E-Government:
Reflections on ICT and Citizens’ Partnership

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author considers the notion of the e-mancipated citizen against the background of current trends in social and political participation of citizens. The role of ICTs in shaping these new forms of civic engagement is discussed and the implications of these developments for e-government and e-governance. This chapter argues that in exploring this new frontier, e-government risks seem to take the wrong direction. Up to now, government largely seems to ignore actual developments in citizens’ participation that are taking place both in the off-line and online worlds. In this chapter these trends were brought together under the headings of sub-politics and life-politics and their political character was described mainly in terms of the “empowerment” of citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In the current discussions on e-government we can observe a growing awareness of the need to develop a more citizen-oriented perspective towards policy making. The e-government discourse assumes that modern citizens are well-informed, educated and
thus rational, self-assertive individuals. They are quite capable of framing and expressing
their needs and goals and they are more and more inclined to critically assess government
policies and to be actively involved in the process of policy making. Moreover, modern
citizens now use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to inform and
organize themselves, to scrutinise government actions, and to bring specific issues to
the attention of policy makers. In this view the modern citizen is therefore truly “e-
mancipated.” An example of this discourse can be found in the OECD-publication
entitled, “Citizens as partners”:

“Citizens are increasingly demanding greater transparency and accountability from
their governments and want greater public participation in policies that affect their lives.
Educated, well-informed citizens expect their governments to take their views and
knowledge into account when making decisions on their behalf. Engaging citizens in
policy-making allows governments to respond to these expectations and, at the same
time, design better policies and improve their implementation” (OECD, 2001:9).

The last sentence illustrates how much a citizen-oriented perspective has become
the cornerstone of a debate on “good governance.” However, looking a bit more closely
at this debate, it becomes clear that not only the happy occasion of the rise of the e-
mancipated citizen has stimulated governments to rethink their principles of good
governance. The renewed interest in the citizen results also from market mechanisms in
the public sector, which has pushed governments and public organisations to shift from
a bureaucratic and supply-oriented perspective to a more dynamic and flexible demand
perspective, involving notions such as customer friendliness, flexibility, efficiency and
effectiveness of service delivery. From this perspective, the e-mancipated citizen is
conceived of primarily as a critical customer who wants to be served well. Moreover, the
focus on citizens in the current government discourse can be explained by serious
worries about an ever declining voter turnout at elections, falling membership of political
parties and a loss of confidence in public institutions that is increasingly shown by
citizens. This problem is commonly referred to as the “crisis in democracy” or the
“democratic deficit.” This crisis tends to endanger the legitimate position of govern-
ments in representative democracies and therefore has forced governments to think of
ways to strengthen their weakened relations with citizens. In the e-government debate
there is a slightly desperate tendency to look towards ICTs as the “killer app” for
restoring the more or less troubled relationship between citizens and government and to
cope with an apparent loss of legitimacy. The e-government and e-governance rhetorics
hammer on the unequalled potential of ICTs to improve transparency, accountability,
responsiveness, efficient and customer friendly service delivery and the active involve-
ment of citizens in the decision-making process.

While the notion of the e-mancipated citizen is quite central in this discourse, it is
more complex as it may look at first sight. Especially when focussing on “active
participation” — as we will do in this paper — the e-mancipation of citizens is rather
problematic. Although there is an undeniable tendency towards self-realization and
freedom of individual choice among citizens, it is much less evident that this has also
increased their willingness to actively participate in decision-making processes. The
assumption that modern citizens expect governments to take their views into account and
want to be included in policy-making processes is largely contradicted by the striking
lack of interest in government policies and politics that citizens have shown over the last
decades. Moreover, in spite of the ever increasing access of citizens to ICTs, there is