Chapter 8

An Investigation of the Use of Computer Supported Arguments Visualization for Improving Public Participation in Legislation Formation

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that representative democracy, in order to be effective and address the problems and needs of different groups, and also at the same time legitimate and acceptable, should be combined with public participation (both off-line and on-line) of individual citizens and the civil society. However, the participation of citizens (either as individuals or as representatives of groups or any type of collective entities) in political debates in order to be meaningful and effective needs to be informed, which necessitates extensive study of large amounts of relevant material, such as reports, laws, committees’ minutes, opinions expressed by experts, stakeholders, political parties, et cetera. Most of this material is in a legalistic or in other specialist languages, or in a political rhetoric style that hides their substance, making it less discernible. The above problems are putting barriers to a meaningful and effective participation. This chapter presents research on the use of ‘Computer Supported Argument Visualization’ (CSAV) methods for addressing these problems and supporting and enhancing public participation in the legislation formation process. Based on an analysis of this process and its main documents, a comprehensive approach to the use of CSAV in the legislation formation process is designed, which covers

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INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that representative democracy, in order to be effective and address the problems and needs of different groups, and also at the same time legitimate and acceptable by the society, should be combined with public participation of individual citizens and the civil society. This line of thought, in combination with the declining trust of citizens in government and lower interest in politics, gave rise to new model of democracy, termed as “participatory democracy” (Pateman, 1970; Macpherson, 1977; Barber, 1984; Held, 1987; Fishkin, 1991). A key principle of this model is that “the equal right to self-development can only be achieved in a participatory society, a society which fosters a sense of political efficacy, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in the governing process” (Held, 1987, p. 262).

A major value of this model of democracy is public participation, defined by Row & Frewer (2004) as ‘the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making and policy forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development’; they view it as a move away from an ‘elitist model’, in which managers and experts are the basic source of regulations and public policies, to a new model, in which citizens have a more active role and voice. However, the objective of participatory democracy is not the overthrow of the establishment and the implementation of a new order; it aims mainly to function as a remedial and not as a revolutionary measure. It does not foster conflicts among social groups of each society, but tries to feature a practical way of coexistence; the basic idea of this model is the exchange of views among citizens, in order to form a core, a synthesis of their opinions. In this direction Barber (1984, p. 174) argues that discussion among opposing views ‘entails listening no less than speaking, it is affective as well as cognitive...’

Governments of many countries all over the world have attempted to put in practice the above ideas, promote public participation and strengthen their relations with the citizens, regarding them as sound investments in better policy-making and as a core element of good governance (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003a, 2003b and 2004a). The explosive increase of the penetration and use by more and more citizens of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and especially the Internet, gave rise to the development of e-participation. Governments of many countries attempt to extend citizens’ participation in public policies formulation and politics in general through the use of ICT for supporting i) the provision of relevant information to the citizens, ii) the consultation with them and also iii) their active participation (Macintosh, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004b; Timmers, 2007).

It is widely recognized that the above two higher levels of e-participation, aiming at the consultation with the citizens and their active participation, have as basic precondition the first all its fundamental stages and documents, and assists citizens and civil society groups to participate in it in a meaningful and effective manner with a reasonable amount of effort. It is based on the issue-based information systems (IBIS) framework. This approach has been implemented in a pilot e-participation project in the Greek Parliament, which was then evaluated based on the ‘Technology Acceptance Model’ (TAM) with positive results. Based on the conclusions of this evaluation an enrichment of the IBIS framework has been developed for improving the visualization of the main content (articles) of bills and laws.
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